

# Social Studies are Relevant to the Education of Primary Students



by  
Janet Miller

**P**rimary education curriculum that omits the teaching of social studies lacks depth and the understanding of humanity for both students and teachers. Social studies teach about "human beings who live together as a group in a situation in which their dealings with one another affect their common welfare." That Webster definition defines a classroom. Often social studies are overlooked as teachers focus on other academic areas such as reading, writing, math and science.

When Jim Ross Lightfoot, Republican candidate for governor for the State of Iowa, spoke of returning to the basics of education he neglected the area of social studies, which is appalling. He did not omit social studies for primary grades; he omitted it, period.

Primary teachers often start the school year with units to heighten the self-esteem of their young students. Units such as "Marvelous Me" or "All About Me" focus on self-

esteem and also present information about students to the teacher. However, except for the introduction of classroom rules, after that, little is taught regarding how all of those "marvelous children" could work together.

Recently I realized the need to stop all studies planned for the first semester and concentrate on our very own classroom community, so we could function as a classroom and work together toward a peaceful coexistence in a group situation. Primary children are very egocentric. Before I could teach any basic academic subjects, including social studies, each child identified himself/herself to know what he/she brought into the classroom so they could successfully work and play together.

Students needed to know the need for classroom rules. Manners, respect and tolerance were taught. This was done through integrated learning rather than teaching concepts in isolation. I feel that integrated learning and teaching with thematic units is stimulating for both students and teachers. The concepts previously mentioned were taught through literature, songs, role plays and various hands-on experiences. Cooperative learning exercises were not enough. Books about feelings helped students share their own feelings which were expressed through art, creative drama and writing.

While I was teaching "Classroom Rules," I discovered that the classroom community must be explored and developed throughout the year, not just as a unit. It must not be assumed that young children will come to school knowing how to work together.

This, I realized, was the essential nature of social studies to me as a professional educator of primary students. I disagree with Lightfoot and anyone else who would omit social studies as a "basic" in education. It is essential that people are taught to relate to others in their own families, classrooms, and neighborhoods before they can relate to other cultures.

Many school districts in Iowa have a sketchy social studies curriculum, yet others use textbooks with rigid presentations. In either case, to quote John Adams, "The textbook is not a moral contract that teachers are obliged to teach...teachers are obliged to teach children." Teaching children is what I do.

Many well known educators have proven that young minds are not "developmentally ready" to learn about maps, timelines,

and special concepts. These proclamations are sound. However, these young minds are like sponges and need to be exposed to history, civics, maps, and geography. Why wait until the students are in intermediate grades to introduce these ideas? Each student absorbs the information presented in his/her own way and reflects on his/her prior knowledge as he/she advances to upper grades.

With advances in technology and the use of computers by young students, it is even more important that these students learn to relate to others all over the world.

I returned to teaching after raising two children to explore their surroundings and to seize opportunities that come their ways. It seemed only natural to incorporate this philosophy into my classroom. I discovered I was known as "the teacher who makes the world come alive", and the classroom was "where you do all those social studies things."

My self-designed social studies curriculum ventures into the local community, then to the study of Iowa as a territory and eventually a state. This offers a rich history of the Native Americans and early settlers. Students learn a lot during the simulation of Chief Poweshiek who gave the land on the Iowa River near Iowa City to the settlers. The class decides on who will represent the settlers and the Native Americans. The chief and the governor are elected and we go on to "live" the history. Primary students formulate their feelings and share them with each other.

As a member of the Geographic Alliance of Iowa and a graduate of their National Geographic Society Summer Institute in 1992, I have a keen interest in teaching geography as well. Studies show children of the United States rank poorly in the mastery of geography and social studies when compared to foreign students.

Recently I visited a college lecture on geography and heard a young woman profess that all she ever learned in geography during her K-12 education were the states and their capitals. She was overwhelmed by the study of the world! A former Marine in that class shared his approach to this frustration. He purchased an inexpensive world map and tacked it on his wall to become more familiar with the world. My own children always had maps to gaze upon and my students are immersed in the study of the world, its continents, oceans, mountains and plains. Within the school year, we study the exploration of the New World, why people

settled in areas surrounding rivers, and why the Colonists had to find more room in which to live which led to Western expansion.

Current events are studied when possible and adaptable to my curriculum. A multi-aged group of 1st and 2nd graders learned about the Berlin Wall in 1989 through a guest speaker who had been to the Wall. A simulated wall of masking tape and building blocks formed the wall in the classroom. Those in "East Berlin" could not leave their sector for recess or lunch nor could those in either sector visit friends on either side (because of the limited understanding of the age group, details of working permits, etc. for the West Berliners were omitted). Students in the "Eastern Sector" had to surrender their personal school supplies and use only those provided for by the "government".

Primary aged children talked and wrote about their experiences and developed feelings which were quite deep. The impact of this experience can be seen and felt clearly from written comments of a first grade student:

"We, meaning the class, built a Berlin Wall, which was in Germany. It was called die Mauer, and you would know which side I was on! I was on the Eastern side that didn't have freedom. I didn't like it at all and I'm glad it was only for one day!

My best friend in our class is Johana. She was separated from me and that was the worst part of it all. Of course, she was on the other side, which of course was the Western side, so she got freedom. The Wall wasn't very big, so there, and we still got very little!"

Social studies are essential. They must be taught starting with young children. I have a desire to make these studies come alive for young children so they may become increasingly aware of life skills, history and geography throughout their lifetimes.

## Biography

*Janet White Miller* is currently a first grade teacher at Penn Elementary in the Iowa City Community School District where she has written and presented social studies curriculum. In 1994 she was named the Social Studies Teacher of the Year by the Iowa Council of Social Studies. Other professional interests include the conflict resolution education, state and local history, and the continued effort to instill enthusiasm into social studies for young children.