

Elementary Students in Substantive Culture Learning

Merryfield, Merry M., Social Education

In today's culturally diverse and interconnected world, elementary teachers have a primary responsibility for opening students' eyes to the world and its peoples. Without understanding diverse cultures locally and globally, young people cannot make sense of issues and events that affect their lives nor can they make informed economic, political, and environmental decisions.

Yet there are conflicting pressures that often obstruct culture learning. Time constraints--such as a curriculum mandate that reduces the teaching of Middle Eastern cultures to one week--often lead to superficial treatment of complex cultures. Monetary constraints often mean students see films or read library books about people as they were twenty to thirty years ago without ever realizing how different those people's lives are today. To create student interest, teachers may focus on the most strange and bizarre customs or the most "primitive" people of the region. This approach not only teaches students that other cultures are only of interest because they are "weird" or exotic, but it also does little to help them understand the majority of the world's peoples. When students focus on the Masai in a unit on East Africa, they are learning as much about Kenyans and Tanzanians as Africans would learn about the United States by studying the Amish. And finally, many hands-on activities--learning a dance or song, eating food or trying on clothes--trivialize cultures. If Japanese students made quilts, ate Southern fried chicken and Boston baked beans, and sang "Old MacDonald had a farm," would they have acquired information that leads to understanding of Americans today?

Content of Substantive Culture Learning

Substantive culture learning can teach students to understand the norms, beliefs, values, and actions of diverse people. It also gives young people the intercultural skills and habits of the mind for lifelong interaction with people whose norms are different from their own. Based on appreciation of insider perspectives, students learn how people in the selected culture perceive work, time, space, roles (based on gender, age, religious beliefs, inherited position, etc), the importance of the group versus the importance of the individual, social hierarchies/class/status, and parents' expectations for their children. These topics provide teachers with a structure for knowledge that moves beyond the superficiality of dress, holidays, food, or a focus on the exotic and bizarre. Substantive culture learning also teaches the bases of cultural similarities and differences, such as how people (1) categorize, (2) differentiate, (3) make in group/out group distinctions, and (4) how people attribute or judge the causes of behavior. (1)

These ideas of substantive culture can be used to develop culturally relevant pedagogy for new immigrants or refugees. Available at www.interculturalpress.com, are the books, *Experiential Activities for Intercultural Living*, *Living with Strangers in the USA* and *Cross-Cultural Dialogues*. (2) These provide teachers with insights into culture learning and ideas for teaching the ways in which diverse cultures make judgments, ask questions, and perceive appropriate behavior, body language, conflict and cooperation, and so forth. Elementary teachers would find such materials useful in teaching intercultural skills.

Pedagogy for Substantive Culture Learning

Below are several instructional strategies that can contribute to substantive culture learning in kindergarten through sixth grade classrooms. Collectively, they develop in students the skills and knowledge needed to construct a foundation for life-long learning about the world's peoples and develop cross-cultural competence in interacting with people different from themselves. The strategies also address the NCSS

standards on culture and global connections. Table 1 lists some of the choices teachers have in how they make decisions on both content and methods along with a comparison of instructional activities and resources teachers commonly use.

1. Teach perspective consciousness

Even kindergarten students recognize that people in their families and neighborhoods may view ideas and events quite differently. Skills in perspective consciousness help students recognize how people interpret events and issues in quite different ways based on their backgrounds and experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and values. When we hear children comment "He thinks I can't play right," or "She says I'm not old enough," we know they recognize that a sibling, parent or classmate can see things differently than they do.

In developing skills in perspective consciousness with P-1 students, teachers often begin by asking the students to identify differences in ways that people they interact with think about daily decisions (who can I play with, what does my family do differently from another family I know) or the ways they perceive local events (a conflict in the neighborhood or a new family moving in next door) or issues in the classroom (what does sharing mean, what is proper behavior during recess). Building on student responses, teachers ask students to generate reasons why those other people have different viewpoints with questions such as: "Why do you think your Mum doesn't want you to leave your backyard?" and "Why might some students think that is unfair?"

Once students are able to distinguish their own perspectives from those of others and recognize that people may have legitimate reasons for seeing things differently, they have the foundation for studying more complex and significant differences in perspectives, such as those of the new refugees moving into the community or Iraqi students they are seeing on television. The instructional goal is teaching students the

habit of the mind of examining other points of view. Perspective consciousness has applications in conflict management as students learn to appreciate the insights gained from seeing events and issues through the eyes of others even when they do not agree with the other people's points of view.

2. Teach students to challenge stereotypes and exotica and recognize cultural universals

American students come to school with amazing stereotypes and misinformation about people in other world regions. Recently I visited a third grade classroom where the teacher was beginning a unit on South Africa. She began by asking, "What do you know about South Africa?" The students' hands shot up and their replies were grouped on the board into these generalities: there are lots of wild animals, people don't wear clothes or live in houses, it is jungle/hot, and people are starving/ poor. When she asked them, "Why would you like to visit South Africa?" over 80 percent of the responses were related to seeing wild animals. Other responses focused on seeing people who eat bugs, carry spears, play drums, etc.

To counter their stereotypes, the teacher provided the students with activities that both addressed their misperceptions and taught mandated content. The students worked with visuals of diverse South African families and their homes in rural and urban communities in the 1980s and today, vegetation and climate maps that revealed to the amazed students no "jungles!" A video shown by a local resource person of tourists visiting animals in game parks, and menus from some restaurants in Durban and Cape Town provided more challenging information. The students also visited websites of some South African elementary schools and looked at some sections of online South African newspapers. (3) They compared *Journey to Jo'burg* with *The Day Gogo Went to Vote* to learn about apartheid, economic inequities and political change in South African children's lives and then discussed the books with two South African students

who were attending a local university. (4) By the end of the unit the students had identified many commonalities that they shared with South Africans and understood the danger of stereotypes and exotic images.

3. Use primary sources from the culture under study

Perhaps the most important resources in substantive culture learning are primary sources from the culture under study. Children's books, stories, and magazines written by people in other cultures are rich resources. Websites can provide both information and interaction. Sites allow students to view everyday life as they watch people walk down the street (see Japanese cities live at www.hbc.co.jp/news/hbc-news-e.html), visit children in other countries (www.oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet/kidsweb/wakeup), learn from children's cultural or religious organizations (such as www.palestine-child.org or www.islam4kids.com), or develop projects with people in other countries (www.orillas.org/welcomee.html). Creative Connections (www.ccph.com/schools.html) provides online field trips for students. Check out school sites such as the Mokaleng R.C. Combined School in Aminuis, Namibia in the Kalahari Desert (www.ccph.com/mokaleng) or The Amazon River Elementary School Project (www.ccph.com/ares/site). The International Education and Resource Network (iEARN at www.earn.org) connects students and teachers to people and projects around the globe. Finally there are people from other countries in American communities who are willing to provide students with knowledge and cross-cultural experiential learning.

4. Teach about intersections of power and prejudice

"Why are they so poor?" a boy asks when the class is shown a film on student workers in rug factories in Pakistan and India. "They are dirty," a girl chimes in. Unfortunately many teachers let such comments slide instead of using them as teachable moments to help students understand the intersections of power and prejudice. Students need to

understand why some people continue to be discriminated against locally and globally and how people around the world continue to resist oppression and work towards equality and rights.

When a Columbus, Ohio, sixth grade teacher heard such comments, he told his students about people who have organized to combat child labor. He showed *Free The Children*, (5) a documentary that tells the real-life story of two 12-year-old boys, Iqbal Masih in Pakistan and Craig Kielburger in Canada, who fought to improve the lives of child workers. Other teachers begin with baseballs, running shoes and additional goods familiar to their students to teach about how global inequities affect children's lives across the planet. (6)

5. Teach dynamic change and global interconnectedness

Unfortunately many mandated curricula pigeonhole cultures so that they are taught as though they never change. For example, most students learn about American Indians as they were 150 to 250 years ago. Even when they live in the same state or community with Native Americans, students are rarely taught about their lives today or critical issues facing Native American communities.

One excellent way to help students understand cultural change is to have them look at lives of people across three generations. What were the norms of behavior when your grandmother was a little girl? When your mom and dad were your age? What has changed and what has stayed the same for Alek's family in Russia, Mbula's family in Kenya and Lucila's family in Brazil?

Finally, culture learning needs to teach students to connect cultures and understand how they influence each other. In our globally interdependent world, students need to recognize how decisions they and their families make every day affect the lives of

people around the planet and how people in other countries impact the way Americans live and think.

An Illustration

These five instructional strategies come together naturally in integrated social studies units. In the months following September 11, 2001 I observed a team of fourth and fifth grade teachers rethinking their previously taught units on Arab cultures. The previous year classroom instruction consisted of reading the section on Arabs in their cultural geography book, discussing a video on Islam, mapping different countries where Arabs live and visiting a Lebanese restaurant near the school. This year the students became involved in researching patterns of belief and behavior. Groups of three students worked on topics such as cultural norms of work, time, space, social roles and status based on gender, age, religious beliefs, inherited position, etc, beliefs and values about family and marriage, the expectations parents today have for their children, and the importance of the individual verses the group. The students collected data from the library, the Internet, and interviews with a diverse group of Arabs living in the community to learn how beliefs affect behavior. They learned about both Christian and Muslim Arabs. They also read some books and websites popular with Arab youth. By the end of the project the students not only understood some the diversity of contemporary Arab cultures, they came to view Arabs as more than "school work." Arabs were real people, key-pals, and friends they wanted to visit someday. When a mosque across town was vandalized later in the year, the students responded purposefully to show support and join others in their community to educate Ohioans about Muslims. Unlike many the previous year, these students understood the global interconnectedness of Arab and American cultures.

Cultures are complex and instructional time is often short. The key is using that time to teach knowledge and skills that create understanding. As seen in Table 1, from

kindergarten on elementary teachers make choices that can either lead to globally-minded citizens interested and engaged in diverse cultures or to young adults who know little about the world beyond our borders and have no interest in people different from themselves. The instructional decisions teachers make in teaching world cultures are especially critical given the influence of the United States in the world today.

Table 1 Substantive Culture Learning

Focus content and pedagogy	Practices of non-global educators
<p>Developing skills in perspective consciousness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Teach one mainstream point of view. * Teach that other viewpoints are wrong. * Imply that other people are inferior so that there is no need to understand * Assume that Americans know why people in Africa, Asia or the Middle East behave the way they do (so there is no reason to ask them).
<p>Using skills in recognizing stereotypes, exotica, and cultural universals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ignore stereotypes their students may have. * May teach all people in a culture or region are the same. * May use exotica to motivate students. * May ignore or play down commonalities. * Do not teach cultural universals.
<p>Using primary sources from cultures/regions under study</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Use only American sources to teach about other cultures.
<p>Understanding of the intersections of prejudice and power</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Do not teach how cultures change. * Allow students to think a culture is static. * May use images or content about a culture that are out of date. * Do not teach global interconnectedness. * Allow students to assume that the U.S. is

	not dependent upon other nations or people in other countries.
--	--

Focus content and pedagogy	Practices of global educators
Developing skills in perspective consciousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Teach students to recognize and understand underlying assumptions and values in their own perspectives and how they change over time. * Teach students to analyze the perspectives of others as part of understanding how different people view events and issues. * Have students develop the habit of examining the experiences, knowledge, beliefs and values that shape people's world views.
Using skills in recognizing stereotypes, exotica and cultural universals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Identify stereotypes students bring to class. * Address stereotypes directly. * Teach students to recognize how exotica may interfere with cultural understanding. * Aim for a balance between cultural differences and commonalties. * Teach students to examine cultural universals.

Using primary sources from cultures/regions under study	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Use primary sources such as literature, documents, newspapers, websites, etc. from the culture under study.* Have students interact with people from the culture.
Understanding of the intersections of prejudice and power	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Teach the dynamic nature of cultural change and diffusion.* Help students understand how cultural norms change over time in real people's lives.* Help students understand how cultural changes affect minorities and indigenous peoples.* Teach the economic, political, cultural, environmental and other connections between their students and people in other cultures.* Provide learning experiences to connect students with people in other countries.

Notes

(1.) Richard Brislin and Kenneth Cushner, *Intercultural interactions: A Practical Guide*, second edition (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996); Kenneth Cushner, Averil McClelland, and Philip Safford, *Human Diversity on Education: An Integrative Approach*, third edition. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).

(2.) H. Ned Seelye, *Experiential Activities for Intercultural Living* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1996); Carol M. Archer, *Living with Strangers in the U.S.A.* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1991); Craig Storti, *Cross-Cultural Dialogues* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1994).

(3.) Websites for schools, online newspapers, and other media can be found in the Connections modules for five world regions at www.coe.ohio-state.edu/mmerryfield/global_resources/default.htm.

(4.) Beverly Naidoo, *Journey to Jo'burg* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985); Elinor Batezat Sisulu, *The Day Gogo Went to Vote* (Boston: Little Brown, 1996).

(5.) The video *Free the Children* (\$16.95 plus shipping) and other materials are available through www.freethechildren.org. The organization, Free The Children, was begun by a 12-year-old Canadian boy and has grown into an international network of children helping children at a local, national and international level through representation, leadership and action.

(6.) See materials from *Rethinking Schools* and the Resource Center of the Americas,

Recommended Resources

Africa Access

www.africaaccessreview.org

Excellent database on children's books and other resources for teaching about Africa.

The American Forum for Global Education

www.globaled.org

Newsletter, publications, networking in global education.

Ask Asia

www.askasia.org

The Japan Clearinghouse

www.indiana.edu/~japan

Two outstanding resources for teaching about Asian cultures.

Global TeachNet

www.rpcv.org/pages/globalteachnet.cfm

Newsletter, listserv, study tours, awards.

The International Education and Resource Network (iEARN)

www.learn.org

Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections

www.iecc.org

These organizations connect teachers and students with projects and people in other countries.

Ohio State University

www.coe.ohio-state.edu/mmerryfield

Listserv, online graduate courses for teachers, and extensive online modules of web, print, and media resources on Africa, East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Slavic and Eastern Europe.

Resource Center of the Americas

www.americas.org

Children's books and other resources on Latin cultures, issues, daily life.

Rethinking Schools

www.rethinkingschools.org

Journal for teachers, publications on teaching for equity and justice, globalization.

Teaching for Change

www.teachingforchange.org

Videos, children's books, and materials for teachers on diverse cultures and countries, issues of inequity, prejudice and conflict.

Teaching Tolerance

www.splcenter.org/teachingtolerance/ttindex.html

Journal for teachers, teaching ideas, videos, book reviews.

MERRY M. MERRYFIELD is professor of social studies and global education at the Ohio State University. She can be reached at merryfield.1@osu.edu.

Questia, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning. www.questia.com

Publication information: Article title: Elementary Students in Substantive Culture Learning. Contributors: Merryfield, Merry M. - Author. Journal title: Social Education. Volume: 68. Issue: 4 Publication date: May-June 2004. Page number: 270+. © 2008 National Council for the Social Studies. COPYRIGHT 2004 Gale Group.

<http://www.questia.com/read/1G1-118278692/elementary-students-in-substantive-culture-learning>