1997

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Children’s Literature in the Social Studies Classroom

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Something happened recently that brought back memories of my teacher education days—more specifically my social studies methods classes. My experience was not unique. It consisted of designing bulletin-boards and instructional units, with heavy emphasis on the bulletin boards as a way to reinforce the concepts taught in those units. Subsequently, finding myself in the role of beginning teacher, I took the social studies text selected by the district and plodded along, chapter by chapter, spicing things up with a few film strips and, of course, some bulletin boards. Little contemplated at the time was a rich reservoir of literature for children that touches upon the very themes designated in the curriculum. This literature, and how it can be used, is what elicited these memories of earlier social studies classes.

I am observing a social studies methods class taught in the David O. McKay School of Education at Brigham Young University. It is taught by Professor Lynette B. Erickson, and she has just read excerpts from Alan Arkin’s The Lemming Condition. The answers come slowly at first. However, it would be a mistake to take the silence for reticence. These are students thinking before they respond. They have been asked to draw from their own life experiences an analogue to a situation the instructor has presented to them. First, one offers a response, then another, and a momentum is established that gives the instructor an opportunity to build and summarize.

The class is focused today on one of the ten thematic strands set forth in Standards for Social Studies Teachers by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The strand is “Individual Development and Identity.” The Lemming Condition is an appropriate choice to generate interest in this theme. The young protagonist, Bubber, has the disturbing revelation that all his relatives are preparing happily, and dutifully, for a mass suicide. He must confront this issue personally and make a choice himself (which the other lemmings seem incapable of doing). This obviously lends itself to a discussion of peer pressure, cultural expectations and their ramifications. Professor Erickson consistently uses children’s literature to introduce and discuss these thematic strands in the Social Studies curriculum. She points out that using literature in social studies is not a recent phenomenon, just one that has had varying degrees of focus over the years. She states, “. . . though literature has taken on a variety of roles through the decades, almost always it has been promoted as a source for providing the details needed to elaborate key concepts, make effective connections for young readers, and convey social studies learning in a more palatable and meaningful way.”

There is something else going on here, however. In sharing these stories with her students, she models the way they can share and discuss them when they enter the elementary classroom. She continues: “In teaching my social studies methods course to preservice teachers, I have found that modeling the methodology of teaching that I would hope they would use in the classroom is necessary for them to understand how to do it themselves. Simply giving my college students a book list of what books could be used . . . doesn’t help them know how to incorporate the literature into the curriculum.”

To this end, Professor Erickson takes the students through some guided instruction that consists of common experience, expression, labeling, and application. In this lesson the instruction breaks down this way:

1 Those interested in an online working version of these standards can find them at http://www.ness.org/online/standards/2.1.html
Common experience: Excerpts from The Lemming Condition are read to the class.

Expression: This is a chance to share reactions and feelings to the shared experience. Professor Erickson guides this discussion with questions that stimulate exchange and help students label the concepts they are discussing.

Label: The concept that is quickly labeled is “peer pressure.” The line between these four categories is not hard and fast. Expression can lead to labeling and, in turn, this can bring out more discussion that can be focused into a new label. The students seem to resonate with this idea of “peer pressure.”

Application: This can take many forms. Today, after discussing various examples, the students are asked to pause, reflect, and write an experience from their own lives that would be an example of “peer pressure.” This results in some interesting examples, both positive and negative, from their own life experiences.

Professor Erickson has found this technique to be an effective method of teaching how to integrate children’s literature into the social studies curriculum. Students are assigned short activities (as in the above example), research papers, and civic service in order to apply the concepts they have identified.

All these applications can be duplicated profitably in the elementary classroom. One can see the great potential for using children’s literature to bring these social studies concepts to life for young students. Erickson’s elementary education students seem to agree. Although only required to use a children’s book in one of their practica lessons, many students have used them consistently in the other lessons they are required to teach.

Most concepts and topics that are outlined in social studies curricula are regularly dealt with in children’s literature. These books have the wonderful potential to truly engage young people at their own level and in non-didactic tones. What a great way to make the “effective connections” that Erickson refers to! A quick survey of the themes and titles that follow should elicit many ideas in this regard. These are titles that Erickson has used successfully. There are many more, surely, that could be used.

Bibliography
Selected Books Used to Teach
NCSS Standards of the Elementary Grades
Compiled by Lynnette B. Erickson
Professor, David O. McKay School of Education

Culture


Time, Continuity, and Change


**People, Places, and Environments**


**Individual Development and Identity**


**Individuals, Groups, and Institutions**


**Power, Authority, and Governance**


**Science, Technology, and Society**


**Global Connections**


**Civic Ideals and Practice**


