



Linda Bennett

Culturally Conscientious Classrooms

The theme of this issue of SOCIAL STUDIES AND THE YOUNG LEARNER is “the culturally conscientious classroom.” Teachers are obligated to develop and implement curriculum that includes multiple perspectives in elementary social studies. Teachers are also expected to communicate effectively and sensitively with children and family members from diverse cultures. To be successful, we must make informed decisions about inclusion or exclusion of content and lessons related to individuals or groups in history and in today’s society. A culturally conscientious classroom is an open learning environment that maintains a balance of perspectives from the school, local community, nation, and world.

In the lead article, “Essential Characteristics of a Culturally Conscientious Classroom,” Omiunota Ukpokodu enumerates characteristics that encourage “connectedness, relevance, and meaningfulness” for all students in the classroom.

More and more children of migrant workers are being included in classrooms across America. The article “Children of Migrant Workers: Exploring the Issues” challenges teachers to continue the journey of understanding cultural and social issues related to this fact. How can we as teachers and citizens accommodate this newest wave of immigrants in American history? Such questions are posed by the authors of this article: Lynne Bercaw, Susan Colby, Linda Pacifici, Sandra Oldendorf, Robin Groce, and Eric Groce.

The struggle over whether to observe the law and protect one’s family, or to obey one’s conscience, is the subject of “What is Good Citizenship? The Story of Chiune Sugihara.” Activities suggested by author James A. Bryant, Jr. help teachers and students consider the choices that citizens might confront when a society (in this case, Lithuania under Nazi occupation) fails to respect basic human rights.

In “Bringing Cultures into the Classroom: An Invitation to Families,” the authors utilize the fact that family members are the first teachers of children. What better way to connect lesson content with students’ interests than to include students’ relatives? Authors Susan Pass, Jane White, Emma Owens, and Julia Weir state that, as teachers, we should critically consider the prior experiences of children to determine how to address their learning needs.

Critically analyzing historical perspectives is important in promoting a culturally conscientious classroom and historical

thinking. Mary Beth Henning, Jennifer L. Snow-Geron, Diane Reed, and Amy Warner in the article “Listening to Children Think Critically about Christopher Columbus” provide examples of critical thinking and historical questioning skills as students look at the career and achievements of Christopher Columbus.

Steve Barrett works with indigenous peoples in Guatemala. For the Pullout, he has written “Mayan Culture Today: Using Multiple Resources to Learn about a Living Culture.” In this lesson, he invites students to study Mayan culture with the use of art, music, children’s literature, drama, and writing.

Children’s literature allows teachers to select content about cultures and provide rich opportunities for students to analyze literature from multiple perspectives. In “From Theory to Practice: Teaching for Social Justice,” Cynthia A. Tyson and Sung Choon Park give teachers extensive ideas on how to have students read about social realities, make connections, and take social action.

In a short review, “When War Plays Us: A Different Childhood,” Raymond C. Jones describes a book that challenges the reader to think about what it means when children “play war.” Books about war and children can broaden our perspective on the events in society that affect the lives of children around the world.

In “The Changing Landscape: Constructing the Concept of Urbanization,” Beverly Milner Bisland provides the structure for students to learn the concept of urbanization. As students view a place over time and follow the steps to concept formation, the term “urbanization” develops meaning. The inclusion of geographic terms such as urbanization can enhance a culturally conscientious classroom by broadening the world for students in different geographic locations.

Culturally conscientious classrooms do not happen without teachers who actively engage in understanding their students and adjusting the learning environment to meet students’ needs. I hope this issue inspires teachers to challenge themselves and the students in the classroom to gain a richer understanding of the human condition. 🌍

ON THE COVER

Students at Lee Expressive Arts School in Columbia, Missouri.

Photo by Jessie Estelle King.