

# Connecting Children to a Bigger World: Reading Newspapers in the Second Grade

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During a recent graduate class on teaching social studies in the elementary school, the instructor, Sandra, lamented the national trend towards the marginalization of elementary social studies due to high stakes testing. One of the second grade teachers in the class became animated and announced that social studies was not marginalized in her classroom, but in fact it was the centerpiece. According to the teacher, Annie, “As I begin the year, my goal is to raise my students’ awareness of the human impact on global issues and to involve them in projects so they can see that as second graders they can make a difference.” In her classroom, she focuses on social studies through use of a daily regional newspaper. She not only teaches social studies but also science, reading, writing and mathematics from the information she finds in the newspaper. As a teacher educator and classroom teacher, we decided to examine what was happening in Annie’s classroom and provide a rationale and additional ideas for connecting children to the larger community through use of a newspaper.

We teach in a state that tests every major discipline except elementary social studies, and this testing mandate translates to little time allotted for social studies.<sup>1</sup> When social studies is taught, we have both observed that teachers often focus on the holiday curriculum, especially Thanksgiving, or a version of the Expanding Horizons curriculum that never seems to expand beyond the local community. Annie, however, has taken a much more global approach to the social studies curriculum. “I have



endeavored to teach students connections between their town and other communities across the globe through use of a daily paper.” Her second grade classroom is a model for addressing NCSS curriculum standards **III PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS**, **VI PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION**, and **IX GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**.<sup>2</sup>

## Second Grade Discussions

Annie meets with her students each morning during “calendar time” to not only review the days of the week and months of the year but also to discuss the news of the day. While her second graders love performing their jobs as the weekly helpers, Annie looks forward to helping them connect to each other and also connect to the larger world community. She uses the opening activities time to enrich and guide the curriculum:

We talk about a variety of issues including the war in Iraq in social studies, concerns about water shortages in science, professional football statistics in math, and the television and movie listings to understand the concept of elapsed time.

The children receive their own copy

of the newspaper each Monday. Annie introduces her second grade students to reading their newspaper “like the boss”. Her students look at her in wonder, “You mean it is OK for us to put our feet on the desks?” “Yes,” she replies. “Editors in Chief put their feet up when reading the newspaper”. On occasion she must demonstrate to convince the students that leaning back in your chair with your feet up on a desk is a very inviting way to read a large newspaper.

To set the stage for using the newspaper as a main text for social studies, Annie shares the story of the birth of the newspaper. The children learn about the importance of a free press and that the first American newspaper was published in Boston in 1609. They discover that in these early days without a free press, that authorities from England saw newspapers as dangerous propaganda and seized and destroyed them. However, by the eve of the American Revolution some two-dozen newspapers flourished in the colonies. Through this history, the children learn why the First Amendment to the Constitution states that Congress cannot create a law that abridges freedom of the

press. They also learn that well-reasoned editorials changed many readers' minds from a loyalist position to the movement to support independence. These second graders learn that the availability of affordable, interesting reading material contributed mightily to not only literacy in America, but also to the American ideal that every voice is important.<sup>3</sup>

As part of the history lesson on the newspaper, Annie explains that by 1830, advances in printing and paper manufacturing made newspapers available to the majority of people with the introduction of the "Penny Press." She then introduces a series of lessons in which the children actually create their own newspaper. They are put into mixed ability groups, and each child is given a choice of roles such as interviewer, biographer, researcher, and layout artist. Because of both the children's and teacher's interest in environmental issues, the newspaper is called *The Green News*.

### **A Rationale for Using Newspapers in the Early Grades**

Reading a paper version of a newspaper may well become a lost art. Today many major newspapers are downsizing, and fewer Americans read a daily newspaper to get their news. Newspapers on line, news blogs, radio news on the hour, and television news where every story is billed as "breaking news" have become the more popular venues.<sup>4</sup> The pros and cons of these trends may be discussed elsewhere, but a strong case can still be made for using actual newspapers as a resource in elementary social studies. Newspapers provide an engaging, visual, hands-on resource to introduce young children to a world beyond the one they know and to help them become literate, well-informed citizens.

Using newspapers in the classroom is certainly not a new idea, but it is more often seen as a strategy in middle school and high school classrooms than in elementary school. However, using the newspaper as text with young children can help them become better readers; to analyze and think critically about content; to interpret images that connect to

the stories of the day; to understand the importance of a free press; and to connect with a world beyond the one in their immediate community.

Newspapers articles and pictures can motivate young students to develop literacy skills and lead to questions that indicate they "want to know more."<sup>5</sup> And newspapers provide an authentic source of reading materials connected to life long learning. A newspaper's featured articles can be used to help children clarify dif-

ferent points of view, and address current events that may concern them such as war, earthquakes, and fires.<sup>6</sup> In addition, advertising can be used to develop critical thinking and numeracy skills. Reading weather maps encourages literacy in science. Vocabulary development is more authentic and meaningful if it is based on words that are part of the daily news such as "election", "Iraq", and "habitat" as opposed to presenting the class with words from a pre-selected list. There

### **Figure 1: Activities that Use Newspapers in the Primary Classroom**

1. Maintain a bulletin board of newspaper clippings and current events about what is going on in the local, state, national, and world news. Invite children to contribute to this by bringing articles and pictures.
2. Create a classroom newspaper with the children having different responsibilities such as writing, editing, drawing, and layout.
3. After reading a news article aloud, have students draw a picture about what they think happened.
4. Look for new and unfamiliar words with the children. Write them down and find the definitions based on the context. Use these to develop a newspaper "word bank."
5. Share a story about someone in the news that children would like to know more about, such as a public figure. Do a mock interview with the teacher taking the role of the person and the children asking questions.
6. Use the entire newspaper to find pictures or stories of five people who have different jobs. Paste each on paper and then brainstorm with the children a description of their jobs. Ask about what kind of training or education these people need.
7. Have the children identify their favorite foods (meat, vegetables, fruit, or bread). Follow the food ads in the paper to watch for changes in price during the school year. Discuss the implications of increased cost of food in this country and elsewhere.
8. Using advertisements for goods or services, cut out words or pictures that express wants or needs by completing the following sentences: I want..., I have ..., I need...
9. Show the children featured pictures and ask them to compose their own headline and share what they think the story is about.
10. Show children the city, state or country after the by-line in news stories. Help them find these places on the map and discuss how location is important to understanding the story.

Sources for this figure are listed in Note 7.

are more ideas for using newspapers in primary grade classrooms discussed elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> (Figure 1)

### Connecting to Current Events

Annie developed a thematic unit on the environment based on newspaper articles about declining animal habitat and the drought their state was experiencing. The children's interests and questions guided this process. They asked questions such as "Is there going to be enough water for us?" and "Are the polar bears going to die?" Annie found two valuable books, *A Life Like Mine* and *Ryan and Jimmy*,<sup>8</sup> to help the children understand water shortages. The vivid photographs in these books provide students an opportunity to appreciate the scarcity of water in other parts of the world and the difficulties faced by children who must walk to a well each day to get their supply of water.

To simulate how children feel who do not have an adequate supply of daily water, each student receives a cup, and each morning for one week the class walks across the school campus to fill the cup. After losing some water on the way back to the classroom, the students place their cup in the window. Just before lunch, each student takes their cup and uses their supply of water to wash their hands. This activity prompted one student to ask Annie about the amount of water that is used during the flush of a typical toilet. This question launched a series of inquiries about how much water it takes to do other daily activities such as wash clothes or take a shower or bath. It gave students a sense of the daily challenges faced by groups of people who do not have access to adequate water. For most of her students, having adequate water was something they had taken for granted.

During these lessons the newspaper continued to report on the widespread drought in our state and region. Shifting the focus to the water cycle, Annie chose to use the daily weather charts to track the amount of rainfall. Using the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration archives website to observe the changes in the precipitation maps over a two year period, students collected data about

their own area of the country, created a spread sheet, represented the information into a bar graph, and made predictions about the future possibilities of drought (ie, there seemed to be a cycle of rainfall that plays out over a one-year period).<sup>9</sup> Thus, Annie was able not only to raise the children's awareness of an environmental concern in their region and the rest of the world, but also to integrate math, social studies, and science concepts and skills into this thematic unit.

### Creating "What Can I Do?" Citizens

Keeping the students at the center of the activities and using their curiosity as a guide led Annie's students to ask one of the most important questions in social studies, "What can I do?" Annie's students now make a difference by recycling newspapers, cans, bottles, plastic, selling T-shirts in support of the rainforest, and use only one paper towel when they wash their hands. They are beginning to exemplify what social studies educator and researcher Walter Parker had in mind when he said, "Civic-mindedness is a virtue—a habit—that must be cultivated". Parker states that teachers can help promote that goal with an "ongoing program of instruction involving daily news and issues."<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion we want to connect to Thomas Jefferson's famous words, written over 230 years ago, on the importance of newspapers in a democratic society: "[W]ere it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them."<sup>11</sup>

Although we doubt that Thomas Jefferson was thinking about seven year olds having access to and learning from newspapers, we believe that creative teachers can capture the spirit of his words when they use this everyday tool to introduce children to a world beyond their own immediate surroundings. By using the newspaper, teachers can help children become literate citizens, become aware of issues people face in other parts

of the world, and learn that young people can have a part to play in helping to solve those issues. 🌍

### Notes

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2. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Standards for Social Studies Teachers* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1997), [www.socialstudies.org](http://www.socialstudies.org).
3. "Newspapers: A Brief History," World Association of Newspapers (2004), [www.wan-press.org/print.php3?id\\_article=2821](http://www.wan-press.org/print.php3?id_article=2821)
4. Eric Alterman, "Out of Print," *The New Yorker* (March 31, 2008), [www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/31/080331fa\\_fact\\_alterman](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/31/080331fa_fact_alterman)
5. Mary Ellen Bafumo, "Real-World Reading," *Teaching Pre K-8* 35, no. 8 (May 2005): 8-9.
6. Jeff Passe, "A Counter-Intuitive Strategy: Reduce Student Stress by Teaching Current Events," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 20, no. 3 (Jan-Feb 2008): 27-31.
7. Strategies for using newspapers can be found in Jim Cornish, "Newspapers in the Classroom," *Connected Newsletter* (February 2004), [www.cdli.ca/CITE/newspapers.htm](http://www.cdli.ca/CITE/newspapers.htm); Newspapers in Education (Troy, Michigan: NIE, 2008), [www.nieonline.com](http://www.nieonline.com); David Lund and Deborah Sanderson, "From Printed Page to Multimedia: Evolution of a Second-Grade Class Newspaper. Reading On-Line" (Electronic Journal of the International Reading Association), at [www.readingonline.org](http://www.readingonline.org); Laurie Henry, "Creating a Classroom Newspaper," *Read Write Think* (IRA and NCTE, 2008), [www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=249](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=249); "Newspapers in Education," *Times Herald* (Olean, NY, 2008), [www.angelfire.com/ny3/NIE/sample.html](http://www.angelfire.com/ny3/NIE/sample.html)
8. *A Life Like Mine* (London: DK Publishing, 2002) in collaboration with UNICEF; Herb Shoveller, *Ryan and Jimmy* (Toronto, Ontario: Kids Can Press, 2006). Both are Notable Social Studies Trade Books.
9. Resources on water issues include National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "Advanced Hydrologic Prediction Service," (Washington, DC: NOAA, 2008), [water.weather.gov](http://water.weather.gov); The Southeast Regional Climate Center (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2007), [www.sercc.com/climateinfo/drought.html](http://www.sercc.com/climateinfo/drought.html); "Water Facts," (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University, 2001), [www.ncsu.edu/chass/extension/ci/swimdog/waterfacts/index.htm](http://www.ncsu.edu/chass/extension/ci/swimdog/waterfacts/index.htm)
10. Walter Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2009), 188.
11. Thomas Jefferson in a letter to Edward Carrington, 1787, in Table of Contents under Freedom of the Press at e-text website, [etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/](http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/).

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