Social Studies and the Young Learner 20 (4), pp. 18–21
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Becoming Conscious of Different Perspectives

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How do middle-school students become effective citizens in a multicultural democracy within a globally interconnected world? Learning to appreciate human differences as well as to value (if not always agree with) the views of people from diverse cultures is a great first step. We want our seventh graders at Phoenix Middle School in Worthington, Ohio, to develop "perspective consciousness," the ability to recognize how culture and experience shape people's ways of making sense of events and issues, their worldviews. The formation of human perspectives is complex, and often our students may not yet be conscious of how their reactions or interpretations may differ from those of others within our community, let alone across the planet.

We all know how easy it is for students to react negatively to people who act or think differently from themselves. To counterbalance our students' often egocentric and ethnocentric views (which are normal for this age), our teaching team collaborates to integrate voices from the world across the curriculum. We want our students to be learning constantly from diverse points of view; we want to place them in environments where they can imagine themselves "walking a mile in another's shoes."

We have developed a series of activities that scaffold this development of perspective consciousness across our courses in global cultures, language arts, and world history, and in a course called "connections" (as explained below). In this article we share with you some of these activities and reflect on what we are learning.

Our Assumptions

There are several assumptions that we share as educators. We believe that students need to identify their own cultural beliefs, values, and norms of behavior before they can appreciate those of others. We assume that in order for our students to develop "worldmindedness" (and realize the United States is not the center of the world), they need geographic and historical knowledge of the importance of other places and other peoples across time and space. We believe that students need to develop skills in critical thinking, so that they recognize the power of words and take responsibility for basing their arguments on evidence. Finally, we understand the value of teachers working together to develop and teach a common vocabulary in all of the classes that a student will attend. These assumptions are infused into the activities we share below.

We are unable to describe here all activities aimed at developing perspective consciousness and its related goals of cultural awareness, empathy, and resistance to stereotyping. These activities are samples from the long-term strategies that we are creating as a team.

A Common Language

To effectively discuss how people understand and treat each other in the world, it is crucial that students develop a common vocabulary that helps them identify their own cultural beliefs, values, and norms. In global cultures class, we began the year defining terms such as "culture, " "cultural universal," "cultural component," and "surface culture" versus "internal culture." This gives students some tools to talk about their own backgrounds as well as cultures that may be new to them. To explore the universals of human behavior further, we used vocabulary from "Developing A Common Language" in *Close the Book on Hate: 101 Ways to Combat Prejudice*.[1] With terms such as "bias," "bigotry," "stereotypes," "racism," and "diversity" precisely defined, we had the beginning of the vocabulary needed for the study of the Holocaust in language arts (see below). Creating a classroom glossary of terms not only fosters richer discussion, but legitimizes the formal study of human nature for middle school students, elevating it from "just talking about what people do" to an academic discipline worthy of their attention.

Literature on Intercultural Themes

One way to foster worldmindedness in our students is through quality multicultural and global children's literature that focuses on intercultural interaction and themes of marginalization and acceptance. In global cultures class, students read Paul Fleischman's novella *Seedfolks*, a collection of interconnected short stories.[2] *Seedfolks* tells of a community garden in urban Cleveland using the voices of 13 diverse characters, many

of them immigrants to the United States. With a book from the classroom set in hand, students listened to the audio version of the book as read by actors with age-appropriate and authentic voices. For example, the voice of Kim on the recording is that of a young Vietnamese girl. Hearing English spoken by non-native speakers is a subtle yet powerful introduction to the global diversity in contemporary American society.

Seedfolks draws upon the universal themes of leaving home, feeling accepted, building community, risk-taking, and trust—ideas that are at once pertinent to our students and also applicable to understanding people across the planet. This book helped prepare students to begin to empathize with one who is outside mainstream society by virtue of culture, class, ethnicity, nationality, or age. Accompanying activities included discussion and written and artistic responses to the book.[3]

Prejudice and Protest: The Holocaust

Both historical fiction and non-fiction historical accounts can present an authenticity that enhances the emotional connections between the reader and the human situations in the story. In language arts class, we used stories of the Holocaust from varied sources (drama, poetry, picture books, film, documentaries, historical novels, and autobiographical accounts) to give our students many opportunities to experience such powerful content in a variety of ways.[4]

A highlight of the Holocaust study was a visit by Alfred Tibor, a Holocaust survivor who lives in Columbus. He spoke with Phoenix students and their parents, as he has in one of our local middle schools for the past 15 years. He is man of exceptional character and compassion who speaks of the need to embrace one other and to eliminate hate from the world. Our students were riveted to their chairs as he told of his amazing life, which included profound moments of both pain and hope. They were not only fascinated by his stories, but were deeply affected by his willingness to forgive and capacity to love.

Cross-Cultural Experiences

Another way to expand our students' worldview (short of traveling to another country) is to involve them in cross-cultural experiences that invite them to meet face to face with people from other countries. We have a parent who works as an aide at a local high school that helps new immigrants get settled in Columbus. Through this connection, we arranged for our Global Cultures class to meet periodically with groups of students from Kenya, Somalia, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala. These meetings give Phoenix students an opportunity to learn about similarities and differences between cultures, but they also give the immigrants (who are high school students) a chance to use new skills in conversational English. The depth of these conversations has evolved over the months, from discussions about basic questions such as, "What kind of food do you eat in your country?" to more complex topics, such as, "How do adults treat teenagers in your country?" and "What do you think of the way American kids are raised here?"

As the visiting students have become more comfortable in these dialogues, they have raised questions for the U.S. students that have sparked fascinating discussions. One such exchange began when a young woman from the Dominican Republic asked the Phoenix Middle School students whether they truly appreciate all the things their parents do for them. She had recently observed teens in local stores whine and plead with their parents for things. She said she was shocked at how disrespectful kids in the United States are toward the adults in their lives.

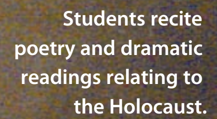
Needless to say, our students were taken aback at first; then, a little reluctantly, they began validating aspects of the young woman's observations, while making sure to add, "Not all American kids are like that." It was a perfect moment to illustrate how stereotypes develop and may be reinforced. A lively discussion followed on how parenting as a cultural universal plays out in different cultures. No classroom presentation of hypothetical examples could be as powerful as the real conversations that happened in class that day.

Developing Relationships: The Socratic Method

Student discussion, designed not only to build perspective consciousness but also explore an endless variety of topics, is a cornerstone of our curriculum. Most of our students have little reluctance to speak; the challenge is to move them to listen and to respond to one another rather than to simply blurt out what is in their heads. We require students to explain, elaborate on, or defend their position to others. We believe that students need to develop skills in critical thinking so that they recognize the power of words and take responsibility for basing their arguments on evidence. So, how do we tackle this with seventh graders?

Explorations of one's own understanding are essential in developing empathy.[5] We find that linking students' understanding of self with their awareness of the feelings of others provides essential scaffolding in cultural awareness. The Socratic method can help students develop and understand their own voice and their relationship to others. The "Connections" course at Phoenix is designed to develop basic techniques of analysis with principles and concepts involved in clear thinking. We want students to use critical reasoning to examine topics they are studying in other courses. In addition, we engage each other through the Socratic method in sustained discussion of these issues.

The Socratic method is different from lecture, question-and-answer, or other "sage on the stage" teaching methods. Rob Reich, author of *The Socratic Method: What It Is and How to Use it in the Classroom*, explains that students are active investigators, not passive recipients, of knowledge.[6] Conversational guidelines are set during the first class meeting. We explain



Students recite poetry and dramatic readings relating to the Holocaust.

to the students that these guidelines apply to Phoenix Middle School classes, not just connections. We explain that the Socratic method involves a shared dialogue between teacher and students. The teacher leads by posing thought-provoking questions, and all students are expected to engage actively by asking questions of their own. The discussion goes back and forth. We are always mindful that the Socratic Method should demonstrate complexity and uncertainty about the world.

The goal of the questioning is to probe underlying beliefs and assumptions upon which each participant's statements are built. The questioning proceeds with no pre-determined goal. We tell our students from the beginning that we do not have all of the answers. Most important, the focus of discussion is not on the students' statements, but on the ideas that underpins their beliefs, decisions, and actions. This forces students to examine why they hold certain beliefs and to become responsible for what they say and do.

The Socratic method is most effective when it is used across all subjects consistently. Our student-run Middle East Summit was a beautiful example of an activity team-taught by the World History and Connections teachers in which we integrated history, geography, current events, research skills, and the Socratic method to develop the perspective consciousness of our seventh graders, thus expanding their view of the world in which they live.

Bringing It All Together: A Middle-East Summit

How can a twelve year old relate to what goes on in another part of the world? How can a student understand the need to study the past to better understand current situations? The Middle East Summit experience was an opportunity for students to put their developing perspective-taking skills into practice.

Preparation for the summit began with the study of monotheistic religions and early civilizations of the Middle East region, focusing on historical forces that continue to influence societies today. Students also completed an activity comparing their experiences in their home and neighborhood to those of different groups in the Middle East. By discussing the dynamics of cooperation and conflict, students started to make connections between their own lives to events playing out on the world stage.

We asked our kids to "think with the mind of a diplomat" about situations in their own neighborhood as compared with the Middle East. How are land, water, and other resources used and paid for? Who determines how a household is run? A neighborhood? A city? If a dispute arises, how and where is it played out? Who gets involved in determining rules and making changes large and small?[7]

Final preparation for the summit came in the form of researching current news articles from online news sources based in various Middle Eastern nations. Reading about the same event as reported in different sources was an eye-opening experience for our students, who are accustomed to learning from a single televised news report. Students began to seek out where the "real" story was in the assortment of news reports they encountered. We

hope this is the beginning of a life-long practice.

Using process drama, students chose countries to represent in their Middle East Summit based on interest and information discovered in preparation activities. "Process drama" refers to a teaching method that involves children in imaginary, unscripted, and spontaneous scenes, in which the meaning is made from the engagement and transactions between the teacher and students.[8] Students learned basic debate procedures from *Roberts Rules of Order* and ran the summit for three class periods. "Hot button" topics on the docket included water rights, nuclear weapons development, and the Palestinian struggle to have an officially recognized country.

Discussion skills were crucial to the success of the summit. Students were forced to think before speaking and to back their opinions with reasonable statements, supported by fact. We continually reminded them to embrace their roles, to play the part of a delegate from the country. The shift from third-person ("He would say this … ") to first-person ("Therefore, I say …) was initially difficult for students, but the effort paid off. Students engaged emotionally in the debates and worked to clearly state another person's point of view. This led to insights as to why relations among Middle East countries are fraught with conflicts and complexities.

Student reactions to the experience were positive. They inquired about U.S. involvement in the region. They wondered about the long-term consequences of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. For example,

> "I never even knew half of these countries existed."
> "Wow this is a complex issue!"
> "Why don't we hear of some of this on our news stations?"

We understand that dinner-table discussion with families at home that week took an interesting turn as well. Our kids not only studied the Middle East; they began to feel what it might be like to do the work of diplomats, grappling with the really tough issues and trying to discover workable solutions.

Conclusions

We see the outcomes of the strategies discussed above in how students have become interested in the world and make global connections to coursework or to their own lives. Recently, we heard, students say, "Did you see what happened in Kenya? Could elections here lead to violence, too? What about Pakistan? Can we learn more about Bhutto? Can we ask Pakistani immigrants what they think about events there? And does President Bush really think a peace treaty between Israel and Palestinians will be signed in a month?"

We see our students getting beyond stereotypes and surface culture and asking questions about beliefs, values, and cultural norms. In a recent discussion with a guest from Sierra Leone, students asked what he thought would resolve conflict over diamond mining and what his family in Freetown valued most about their quality of life. These questions are a far cry from the usual things often asked by twelve year olds such as, "Do you see lions in your backyard?" or "What clothes do people wear?"

Developing perspective consciousness is a long-term goal. But almost every day, we find ways to deepen our students' understanding of other cultures and to offer insights into their own beliefs and values. Over the last few months, we have watched our 80 students become more engaged in the world as they open their minds to diverse cultural perspectives from around the world. Our students are motivated to learn by walking a few steps in the shoes of others.[9]

Notes

1. Anti-Defamation League and Barnes and Noble, "Close the Book on Hate: 101 Ways to Combat Prejudice," www.adl.org/prejudice/default.asp.
2. Paul Fleischman, *Seedfolks* (New York:Harper Collins, 1997). Audio from www.audible.com.
3. Harper Collins, "A Guide to Teaching Paul Fleischman's Seedfolks," www.harperchildrens.com/schoolhouse/TeachersGuides/seedfolks.htm; Brigham Young University English Department, "Seedfolks," english.byu.edu/Novelinks/; David Lieberman and J. Yagmin, "Seedfolks by Paul Fleischman," www.bookrags.com/ Seedfolks.
4. Pierre Sauvage, director, *Heil Hitler! Confessions of a Hitler Youth.* HBO Project Knowledge, 30 min.(New York: Ambrose Video, 1991.); "Poster Set on Rescue: Traits that Transcend" (New York: Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, 2005). See www.jfr.org. See also the theme issue of *Social Education* on "Teaching about the Holocaust," October 1995, edited by Samuel Totten, Stephen Feinberg, and Milton Kleg: Roberto Innocenti. *Rose Blanche* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985).
5. Steve Hein, "Empathy: Emotional Intelligence," eqi.org/empathy.htm.
6. Rob Reich, "The Socratic Method: What It Is and How to Use it in the Classroom," *Speaking of Teaching* 13 (2003), ctl.stanford.edu/Newsletter/socratic_method.pdf.
7. The *Promises* educational package includes a 50-page study guide and a 106-minute DVD or VHS, $195 at www.promisesproject.org/help2.html; Sox Sperry and Chris Sperry, "Israel/Palestine: Histories in Conflict" (Ithaca College/ Project Look Sharp), www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/mcmeU2.php. Teacher and student materials are available free online, or order at cost a CD/DVD package with a hardcopy of the teachers guide at the Ithaca College Bookstore. The Teacher Guide is 256 pages, a 13-megabite PDF; "Resources for Empowering Educators to Teach on the Middle East Region," Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies, cmes.hmdc.harvard.edu/outreach.
8. J. J. Schneider and S. A. W. Jackson, "Process Drama: A Special Space and Place for Writing," *The Readering Teacher* 54, no. 1 (2000), 38-51; Brian Edmiston. "What's My Position? Role, Frame, and Positioning in Process Drama," *Research in Drama Education* 8, no. 2 (2003): 221-229.
9. Along with Jeff Tewart (math), Judy Harn (science), and principal Jeff Maddox, the authors initiated a proposal in 2006 to create Phoenix Middle School, which opened its doors to 80 seventh graders in August 2007. See www.phoenixms.org/index.htm.

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