

A Child's Place in the World - PART I: Using dual language books as a tool for teaching social studies in elementary school

Guest writer: Heather Leaman

Elementary schools in the United States typically use the expanding environments approach to teach social studies in grades K-5. Under this curriculum plan, children learn about self and family in Kindergarten and first grade. In second and third grade, children learn about neighborhood and community. As they progress through the upper elementary grades, children expand their understanding of the world by learning about states and the nation.

During the past decade, the National Council for Social Studies has suggested that children's learning be extended beyond our country to include an understanding of the world. Publishing companies have responded to this initiative by creating materials that help children learn about themselves in relation to the world. Using this worldview, students in primary grades learn about families, neighborhoods and communities globally. In upper elementary grades, children learn about their state and nation in relation to other states and other countries. This movement provides children the opportunity to connect to their world.

Social studies is an ideal subject to help children understand their environment, to learn about others and to celebrate their own unique culture. However, with the influence of No Child Left Behind, schools often leave behind social studies instruction in elementary classrooms. Some schools report spending less than an hour every two weeks on social studies.

This doesn't have to be the case for American schools. There are outstanding tools, such as dual language books, which enable teachers to integrate social studies with reading and writing instruction. By using dual language books as a tool for teaching social studies, teachers can increase a child's awareness of their place in the world through experiences with diverse languages, culture and geography. They can expose children to the world around them and honor the diversity of their classroom. The following examples illustrate ways in which teachers bring social studies back into the elementary classroom.

Oral Reading: Incorporate dual language books into oral reading routines. Read the story in English. Then share the same story in a second language. Teachers can read, play the audio recording or invite linguistically diverse guest readers to share in the task.

Independent Reading: Make dual language books and audio CDs available for student independent reading. Children can read the text in their primary language and listen to the story in new languages; an invaluable activity for emerging readers as well as for students of differing reading abilities.

Expanding Reading Materials: Select stories, poems or folktales originating from various diverse cultures to read aloud or for student independent reading. Select books with characters or settings representative of diverse cultures and languages.

Investigating Other Cultures: Place students in groups of three or four. Assign each group a dual language story, each group representing a different language. Have

children locate countries where their assigned language is spoken, learn about the geography and people of the countries and present their findings to the class. Extend this to a year-long study of other cultures, and current global events.

These activities are effective and simple ways to include social studies in the elementary classroom using dual language books as a tool for learning. Social studies, learning about people around the world, can help children appreciate cultural diversity and celebrate their own culture, language and family.

Families can provide assistance by volunteering to be guest readers, making the school PTA or PTO aware of dual language books and multicultural resources and by advocating for social studies instruction in elementary classrooms.

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