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Noreen Teachout

Bloomington Public Schools

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Geography: The Child and His World

NOREEN TEACHOUT
Bloomington Public Schools

ABSTRACT — A program of teaching geographic concepts to first graders is presented in nine project groupings, each consisting of three steps geared to the comprehension level of the students. The steps are orientation, explanation, and discussion with questions. Related social studies accompany each project. The basic concepts have been found to be comprehended by first graders. By expanding the depth of inquiry, the program has equal validity at other grade levels.

For years, individuals and groups have been experimenting with teaching the young learner advanced ideas, and have recorded great successes. It is now apparent that one can teach the young almost anything, provided that the teacher is willing to break down the material into simple concepts and to build from there. The major problem, then, is determining what concepts it is desirable to present at the bottom of the ladder of learning, and what concepts are understandable, meaningful, and useful to children at that level. Such a determination can be based on the following questions:

1. Can we start with material with which the child is already familiar?
2. Can the child see his own association with the material?
3. Can each segment of the lesson be built upon to broaden the child's interests, background or horizons?
4. Will the child find the material useful?
5. Will the child be able to associate the material with other areas of learning?
6. Is the material basic enough to be considered part of a learning framework?

I contend that we can easily include Geography in the list of basics to be taught. It meets all the requirements listed above: It is a science; it is social; it is political. It can become a stepping stone to five other social studies disciplines — anthropology, civics, economics, history and sociology — and a stepping stone, also, to astronomy.

The young learner begins with himself as the center of all existence. He must be coaxed into examining his immediate environment and into noticing what is around him in his classroom and their relations, sizes, shapes, and directions. At this point, the child lacks the ability to translate what he sees and what he comprehends to paper or to a model of any kind. To aid him, the teacher can introduce into the classroom a sand table of appropriate size, perhaps 3 ft. x 4 ft., with colored paper precut in stripes and shapes to represent the components of the room: counters, coat racks, tables, desks, walls, etc. The children are told that the sand table represents the floor of the classroom and that they may use the colored strips and squares to show the locations of objects in the room.

In the next step, the class instructs the teacher on the drawing of a large map of the classroom on the blackboard. Usually at this point the children can hardly wait for an opportunity to copy the map, although some may need the additional help of a line by line directed writing. The children are given as large a piece of paper as can be conveniently used on the desk top. (Succeeding maps should be done on the same size of paper to introduce the children to the idea of scale.) This first map is fun. The children get themselves into position, walk up to the blackboard map to study details and begin making lines on their papers to represent the room. Some can be seen studying the room itself. Most, however, are content to copy the board map.

All products are good. Even a child dissatisfied with his ability to draw a reasonable map can be praised for some representation. The maps are done in color crayon,
pencil, or both. Since the blackboard map is colored in, most of the children will want to use color.

A few days later, during class, the teacher may paint on a large piece of paper a map based on the blackboard map. This should be done in front of the children under casual circumstances so that they can simply observe her technique. She paints this map to be used as a more permanent reference throughout the year. Some children may want to make another crayon map at this time, and time permitting, may be allowed to do so.

These then, are the basic steps in map making with first-grade children. We develop interest, desire, and background; we orient the children, question each other, and discover answers; we discuss, experiment, and demonstrate.

The second map is one of the school building. The essential background is a series of walks around and through the building prepared models are sometimes available. Before the walks, the children should be given a chance to examine a dittoed map of the building. As they make their tour they may follow their progress on this map. Thus, they will have seen and used a map similar to the one they are to reproduce. After the walks, the children will be ready and eager to draw their own maps, and the teacher can draw both the blackboard map and the painted map while the children do theirs.

Now the teacher can suggest to the children that if they walk by the homes of all the members of the first-grade children of places they know or have heard of. There will be times when you will want to tell them why you are locating something where you are. For instance, as you extend a particular street you may point out where it turns and why. Now draw in the rivers or other landmarks and, finally, show them the outline shape of the greater metropolitan area. This city shape can be traced on the tape. Now the children are able to handle a paint brush well enough to do the large painted map themselves. This is most successfully done by groups with one person working and then explaining what he has added to the next child.

The next project takes in a much greater area and involves a great broadening of the child's environment. Up to this point he has been learning a technique of reproducing his surroundings. Now he will learn of things beyond his daily sphere before he goes out to examine them. Begin by continuing the main streets in your area, literally drawing the lines longer. Have the children recall places they have been shopping with their families, as well as parks, lakes, and rivers. Each site recalled by a member of the class is located accurately on a large blackboard map that will occupy a section of the blackboard for several weeks. Each main street is shown in a different color, the freeways in still another color, and all buildings located are indicated with an additional color. The children live with this map for many days, always adding to it. Pictures of many of the locations noted can be found in local Chamber of Commerce publications. These can be clipped out and along with map shots from home, taped on the map in the appropriate spots.

At last the day comes when the class is to take a bus trip around the town. In Bloomington, our trip was quite long, taking in the boundaries of our city, historic sites, schools, main traffic arteries, Metropolitan Stadium, lakes, farm and park land, and the Minnesota River. After your trip the sand table is brought out again. High and low areas may be put in first. The teacher may help by placing a large piece of paper over the table, painting in the highways and cutting them out one at a time so that the children will have the puzzle parts to work with. Other streets can be cut out by the children from colored paper. On our sand-table map, the main streets were all done in the same color so that the children would realize that specific colors were not a factor in map making. Either on the day of the trip, or the following day, each child drew his map of Bloomington. They were, of course, copying the teacher-made map, but re-collection of the trip was evident in many details included by some of the children. Again groups paint large maps.

Before embarking on the next series of maps, it seemed most important to give some attention to the concept of scale. Bloomington was the most recent map we had done, and since it appears on commercial maps, it was an ideal subject for the idea of scale. About four maps of Bloomington were made from colored construction paper. These maps were all of different sizes, but by their shapes recognizably Bloomington. It took the children a surprisingly short time (accompanied by many charming revelations and side ideas), to reach the conclusion that all these maps were indeed Bloomington, and that size made no difference. At this point take a map that is appropriate in size and fit it into a map of your greater metropolitan area. This is taped to the blackboard and is extended with suggestions from the children of places they know or have heard of. There will be times when you will want to tell them why you are locating something where you are. For instance, as you extend a particular street you may point out where it turns and why. Now draw in the rivers or other landmarks and, finally, show them the outline shape of the greater metropolitan area. This city shape can be traced and cut out of construction paper. Fit your town map into it and tape both to a large piece of paper. Now again we have a puzzle type of map with removable parts. During this portion of our project it seemed a good idea to take a trip into the larger area we were discussing, so we went to the Como Park Zoo in St. Paul. Before leaving, we traced our route on the map and located the Zoo. (Here is another good chance to review scale. Lo-
cate the destination on at least two maps of different sizes. Have a shape representing your destination, in a size appropriate to your map, cut out and ready to insert upon your return.) While you are working on the several segments that make up this project the children may begin to make their own maps. They can be large or small and the children do not always wait for the day appointed to begin. There will, of course, be some who will not participate and who will need to be given a specific time to make their maps. The teacher may want to paint a large map from which the groups of children may notice shapes and corresponding sizes.

As the children go on to make maps of ever broadening scope, but always returning to the best known area, they can literally see their world grow. When we made our map of Minnesota, we began first with Bloomington and then added the greater metropolitan area, the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, and concluded with other places in the state the children knew or had heard of.

Our map of the United States followed the same pattern. We began with Bloomington and the Minneapolis-St. Paul area; we drew in the rivers and extended them; we drew the shape of the United States and located the places in it that the children were familiar with through travel and news reports.

On our map of North America, the outline of the continent and the countries were drawn, but again there was special notice given to the location of Bloomington, the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, and Minnesota.

We concluded our study with a paper-mâché globe. The outlines of the continents were very general, but again we were careful to note the location of Bloomington, the rivers, Minnesota, and the United States.

The colorful, large painted maps may be hung around the room. Along with the globe they make an excellent review, an impressive display, and a source of pride for the children.

At the conclusion of each of our projects the class became involved in related fields. When the classroom was being mapped we also examined human relations in the classroom and the necessity of good housekeeping. During the school project we observed the individuals involved in the functioning of the school and their various roles. Our neighborhood map led us to look at our families, their relationships to each other, and their jobs. We also took note of the stores and the process of buying and selling. At this point, a store was set up in the classroom to further enhance this portion of our study. The map study of Bloomington introduced the subject of transportation and jobs for parents, and the interdependence of jobs and buying power. After we mapped the Twin City area, an introduction to the early history of the area and its pattern of growth was given. At the conclusion of the Minnesota map making, we gave some attention to our state's products, both natural and manufactured. The State Capitol was also mentioned and a short comment on government made. In connection with the map of the United States we studied the Mississippi River, its role and destination. We also noted that the larger unit or country also has a government and commented on it briefly.

After we completed our globe, the children saw what a large place the world really is. In this segment I stressed the similarities of children in other places and living in different family patterns but with the same emotions felt within the families. We discussed differences in jobs and homes, similarity of needs, and the necessity for all people to know and understand each other so that we may love one another and work together.

Based upon my experience with first-graders, I feel that geography can supply an excellent structure within which five of the social studies disciplines may be organized. With geography as the underlying base it becomes easy for children to discover the relations between man's activities at different times and places that are linked to each other by a common geographic situation.

In teaching these concepts, any method of presenting the material that leads to greater understanding should be used. Obviously the learning-by-doing method remains predominant, and will probably be emphasized more with the younger learner than in a secondary-school course.

By extending this program to three or four years, still more enrichment studies may be added. Ultimately then, the child will have an orderly framework into which he may fit much information he will accumulate in the years to come.