

# Social Studies: Incorporating All Children Using Community and Cultural Universals as the Centerpiece

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## Abstract

This article features an elementary teacher who has worked with the authors for the past 10 years in research on building a classroom community and using *cultural universals* as the centerpiece for elementary social studies for all children. Cultural universals are basic human needs and social experiences found in all societies, past and present, and include food, shelter, clothing, transportation, communication, family living, money, childhood, government, and so on. Actions related to cultural universals are experienced by all children regardless of their cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, achievement levels, or special needs, so teachers can connect to these experiences as bases for developing historical, geographic, political, economic, sociological, psychological, or anthropological understandings. The ultimate goal is connected knowledge about how the social system works, how and why it developed over time, how and why it varies across locations and cultures, and what all this might mean for personal, social, and civic decision making.

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The setting described in this article for taking a close look at social studies using learning community and cultural universals at its core is a lower middle class suburban school of choice. We begin with a description of Barbara Knighton, a first-grade teacher who elected to have all first graders with special needs join her class and become active members of a learning community. Her classroom includes the special education first-grade students for the entire district. These students have a variety of learning problems, including learning disabilities (LD).

### Establishing a Learning Community

Barbara describes the ways in which she creates a classroom community in which all students will feel welcome and valued:

Building a community in my classroom begins before I even know which children will be my students.

All throughout the previous school year, I stop by the kindergarten classrooms at least once a week. I make sure the children see me, talk to me, hear my name, and begin to plan for their first-grade year. I toss out comments like "Wow, I'm so excited to see kindergartners that already know how to listen to the teacher!" and "I wonder which one of these terrific almost first graders I will get to have in my class? I can hardly wait!" These comments are designed to share my excitement about their upcoming first-grade year, show some expectations for behavior, and most of all, to begin developing relationships.

Barbara also begins to make home-school connections, an important foundation for developing the cultural universal of family structure, prior to the start of the school year.

About a week before school starts each year, I send a letter to the families in my classroom. The letter contains general information needed by parents as well as specifics about the first day and information that will

help every child be successful right from the beginning. It is important to give special needs children as much information and structure as possible. By letting them know what to expect the first day, they will be more confident, ready to learn, and successful.

An important element of Barbara's community building is the development of a classroom community in which all students have a unique identity. All students are also expected to contribute to the well-being of the community:

I assign each of my students a magic number to identify his or her work and belongings. In the before-school letter, I tell them their numbers. When they walk into the room for the first time, that magic number is part of our first conversation. Children are so excited to tell me that they already know something—their magic number—that pertains to our class. Every child I've ever had, including cognitively impaired, autistic, and emotionally impaired children, has been able to tell me his or her number upon walk-

ing through the door. It is a quick and easy proof that they are members of our community. We share something that no one else does. Even I have a magic number (zero) that I use to identify my things. The magic number also shows my students things and spaces in the classroom that belong to them.

Barbara uses an activity structure, labeled *Morning Meeting*, to reinforce students' roles in the classroom community and to help them think about their roles in the society outside the classroom:

A crucial part of that first Morning Meeting is our conversation about hopes and dreams about how the year will be. This begins our journey working together, and everyone participates in those conversations. The attitude from that very first conversation is that we are together creating a community that will include all of us. I make sure that we all share our hopes during that discussion. Some students repeat ideas that others have shared, which is acceptable, but everyone must respond. From that point on, all children begin to understand that their input and participation are important and expected. We record our hopes on a poster that we reread and refer to throughout the year.

As a prelude to students' understanding of the roles they will play as participants in a democratic society, Barbara helps her students develop a sense of their own agency within the classroom community:

After the first day, we continue to create a common vision of how our class will be during our Team Time. It is crucial for all students to be present for these conversations. Although students are often pulled out of the general education classroom for various services, I make sure all students are present for our team discussions. They need to have the chance to contribute as well as hear what their peers say. It is important for the class to create a shared set of values, and everyone should be a part of that.

Barbara employs specific activities to define expectations for participation in the classroom community for all students. An important element of setting clear expectations is involving students in their development:

After finishing the list of our hopes for the year and our class, the second step is to describe the ideal classroom, student, and teacher over the course of several days. (Yes, I give my students the chance to tell me how I should behave if I want to be a quality teacher!) These conversations are the beginning of setting expectations for behavior and asking students to self-evaluate their performance. After a week of talking about hopes and expectations, we are ready to begin writing our class pledge. It will become our set of rules and guiding principles. Together, we brainstorm ideas, review the list, delete, add, and then agree on the final product. Again, it is important to have all students present and take part in these sessions. All throughout the year, we will refer back to the pledge and all students must believe and support the document we create.

We hold a special ceremony to formalize our adoption of this shared document. We invite the principal to attend, and each child stands up and promises the entire class that she or he will follow our pledge. Then they sign their names to it. We talk about similar promises that students will make as adults, such as home loans, wedding vows, or driver's licenses. Every child participates in this ceremony, and we invite the adults who work with us to sign the pledge too.

Barbara emphasizes each student's roles and responsibilities as members of the classroom community, underscoring the importance of each individual's contributions in maintaining the quality of life in the classroom:

After we've created a common picture of what we want in our community, we're ready to move on to more practical matters. We will create a list that shows our respective responsibilities. I take a large poster and divide

it into four parts to show what I am responsible for, what I'm not responsible for, what the students are responsible for, and what they are not responsible for. Teachers often assume that children understand what we expect from them. This outlines exactly what I expect them to do. Even the neediest students will be successful if they know what the expectations are. We also create a list of classroom jobs. We talk about taking care of our classroom, and the students help to decide what needs to be done. When it comes time to do the jobs, students are self-motivated and they check on each other because they feel ownership for the tasks we chose.

As we discuss later, narrative structures are a natural way for all of us to organize our thinking about society and the place of others and ourselves within that society. Barbara uses a narrative structure she calls *social stories* to help students better understand and organize their thinking about community:

Social stories are another way for students to know and understand expectations during the day. These stories consist of several parts, including what students are expected to do during social settings, why they need to do it, and what will happen if they fail to behave appropriately (i.e., natural consequences). For example, failure to complete assignments will put you behind in your reading. Social stories always end with a reiteration of appropriate behavior. They provide frameworks for students to use in assessing their own behavior. They usually are used with individual students but they can be used with an entire class to promote appropriate choices and create a positive environment.

Finally, Barbara emphasizes the interdependence of students within the classroom and the importance of working together in productive ways:

The final strategy that I use to develop our classroom community is carefully selected team building games. Each morning, instead of playing outside,

we play inside games to get to know each other better. The playground during the first three weeks of school is often chaotic. Students have not yet developed a clear understanding of recess rules and routines. Therefore, many students struggle to behave appropriately. This plan prevents those problems, while encouraging students to develop relationships with one another. One game is called "That's Me!" One student stands and tells something true and unique about him- or herself. Any students that share the same characteristic shout "That's me!" and stand up. Students begin to see connections to classmates while learning about one another.

Barbara reports that these activities take at least 3 weeks to set the stage for a thoughtful, collaborative, and responsive classroom community. She is convinced that her investment in these activities yields important dividends throughout the school year in improving students' behavior and performance, in addition to their understanding of community. The classroom community provides a forum for living informal social studies in a safe, orderly, and enjoyable environment. It serves as a natural way to connect cognitive, socioemotional, and moral development. It also facilitates Dorsett's (1993) concept of a good curriculum as one that respects and balances the need to educate three people in each individual: the worker (in this case, the student whose work is to attend school), the citizen, and the private person. As Barbara says,

Like other communities around the world, we work together to create a common vision of norms and acceptable behavior. All of these dimensions can be experienced firsthand in a laboratory-like setting in your classroom community.

Barbara Knighton's story illustrates powerful teaching and learning opportunities that employ knowing, understanding, appreciating, and applying a hands-on approach to democratic life in the classroom as a microcosm of society. The learning community and

the strategic moves that the teacher makes in developing it pave the way for building an environment for addressing social studies and its foundational academic disciplines. For example, every child in the community has a place in space (*geography*); a cultural background (*anthropology*); a set of experiences across time (*history*); needs and wants (*economics*); roles and norms, expectations, and so on (*sociology*); the need to be guided or governed (*political science*); and a developing personal identity (*psychology*). Through structured discourse, students will begin to realize that social studies is a dynamic and integral part of their lives across the school day—even without leaving the classroom.

### Classroom Context for Social Studies

Establishing a productive context for powerful social studies involves articulating and following through on expectations relating to both teacher-student and student-student interaction patterns. A learning community atmosphere is an open and supportive one in which students are encouraged to speak their minds without fear of ridicule of their ideas, criticism for mentioning taboo topics, or voicing forbidden opinions. Students appreciate that the purpose of reflective discussion of the meanings and implications of content is to work collaboratively to deepen understanding. Consequently, they are expected to listen carefully and respond thoughtfully to one another's ideas and to work together to solve problems collaboratively.

In a learning community such as the one built by Barbara Knighton and her students, both in advancing their own ideas and in responding critically to others, students are expected to build a case based on relevant evidence and arguments and to avoid inappropriate behavior. They are challenged to come to grips with controversial issues, to participate assertively but respectfully in group discussions, and to work pro-

ductively with partners or groups of peers in cooperative learning activities. They are expected to assume individual and group responsibilities for managing instructional materials and tasks and to develop an ethic of caring for the personal, social, and academic needs of every child and adult who is part of the classroom.

The need to ensure that all students are present for conversations associated with building the learning community is obvious, but we also emphasize the importance of embracing a "full house" for social studies—the one core subject where multiple experiences and responses should be an integral part of the curriculum and serve to enrich almost any topic. Using cultural universals as the content base is particularly useful, because it allows teachers to create units based on things that are a part of every student's daily life. Consequently, all students come to the lessons with a great deal of relevant information and personal experiences. They are also very intrigued with the idea that they will be learning more about familiar things in their lives.

### Cultural Universals

Anthropologists and other social scientists often refer to cultural universals (sometimes called *social universals* or *basic categories of human social experience*) as useful dimensions for understanding a given society or making comparisons across societies (Banks, 1990; Brown, 1991; Cooper, 1995; Payne & Gay, 1997). *Cultural universals* are domains of human experience that have existed in all cultures, past and present. They include activities related to meeting basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter, as well as family structures, government, communication, transportation, money or other forms of economic exchange, religion, occupations, recreation, and perhaps other factors as well. The term implies that activities relating to each cultural universal can be identified in *all* societies, but not that these activities necessarily have the same form or meaning in each

society. On the contrary, it recognizes variations among societies (as well as among individuals within societies) in their orientation toward or handling of common life events associated with each cultural universal (e.g., family structures are universal, but different cultures and individuals within cultures have different notions of what constitutes a family).

Cultural universals have special importance for the early elementary social studies curriculum because, although it is usually described as an *expanding horizons curriculum* or *expanding communities curriculum*, much of its basic content actually focuses on the universals. The traditional reasoning has been that teaching students about how their own and other societies have addressed the human purposes associated with cultural universals is an effective way to establish an initial, predisciplinary knowledge base in social studies, preparing the way for the more discipline-based courses of the middle and upper grades.

Organizing early social studies around cultural universals provides a sound basis for developing fundamental understandings about the human condition for several reasons. First, human activities relating to cultural universals account for a considerable proportion of everyday living and are the focus of much of human social organization and communal activity, so a curriculum organized around cultural universals provides many natural starting points for developing initial social understandings. Until children understand the motivations and cause-and-effect explanations that underlie these activities, they do not understand much of what is happening around them all the time. As they develop such understandings, the previously mysterious behavior of their parents and other people who are significant in their lives becomes comprehensible to them, and they acquire intellectual tools for developing efficacy in these domains.

Second, children begin accumulating direct personal experiences with most cultural universals right from

birth, and they can draw on these experiences as they construct understandings of social education concepts and principles in the early grades. This is true for all children, regardless of their family's ethnicity or socioeconomic status. If cultural universals are taught with appropriate focus on powerful ideas and their potential life applications, students should develop basic sets of connected understandings about how our social system works (with respect to each cultural universal), how and why it got to be that way over time, how and why related practices vary across locations and cultures, and what all of this might mean for personal, social, and civic decision making.

Third, because the content associated with cultural universals is inherently about humans taking action to meet their basic needs and wants, it lends itself well to presentation within narrative formats. Bruner (1990), Egan (1988), and others have noted that an implicit understanding of the narrative structure is acquired early, and this structure is commonly used by children to encode and retain information. Narrative formats are well suited to conveying information about human actions related to cultural universals (including developments over time in technology and culture).

Fourth, narratives focused on humans engaged in goal-oriented behavior provide frequent opportunities to introduce basic disciplinary concepts and principles, to explore causal relationships, and to make explicit some of the social intentions and economic or political processes that children usually do not recognize or appreciate. Units on these fundamental topics ordinarily include sociological and economic content in lessons on contemporary American society, historical material in lessons on developments through time, and geographical and anthropological material in lessons on variations across places and cultures. Material from civics and political science often appears in these units as well, and is the focus of a unit on government. Stories about how key inventions make qualitative changes in peo-

ple's lives or about what is involved in producing basic products and bringing them to our stores can incorporate process explanations (of how things are done) and cause-effect linkages (explaining why things are done the way they are, and why they change in response to inventions; Brophy & Alleman, 2007).

Although this approach was initially designed for elementary social studies students in general, we have observed very positive responses with special needs children in particular. Part of this might be explained by the bonuses that the approach offers. First, precisely because it focuses on people taking actions to meet basic needs and pursue common wants, students are likely to view its content as meaningful and relevant and to appreciate follow-up activities as authentic (because they will have applications to life outside of school). Thus, it offers motivational as well as cognitive benefits. Second, the approach makes it easy to attend to diversity in natural and productive ways. When lessons deal with life in the past or in other cultures, they focus on commonalities (people pursuing familiar needs and wants), so they highlight similarities rather than differences. This helps students to see the time, place, and situation through the eyes of the people under study, and thus to see their decisions and actions as understandable given the knowledge and resources available to them. Such promotion of empathy about diversity in general also helps to counteract the tendencies toward presentism and chauvinism that are common in young children's thinking about the past and about other cultures (Brophy & Alleman, 2006; Davis, Yeager, & Foster, 2001).

### **A Childhood Unit as a Vehicle for Teaching Social Studies**

Childhood is one of the cultural universals that we recommend for launching formal social studies after teachers have set the stage for their learning

community. The topic of childhood fits nicely with the development of the classroom community, because it focuses on the idea that all people share some common experiences as they grow from a child to an adult (Alleman & Brophy, 2003, 2004). It is particularly useful for promoting ideas of diversity and tolerance. As the class learns and talks about children growing, it is easy to see that everyone is unique. It personalizes learning for both the teacher and the students in multiple ways; it can be adapted to a range of grade levels (for upper grades, shifting the focus to adolescence); it provides an array of learning opportunities for all students to experience, value, and apply; it introduces students to geographic, historical, economic, cultural, and other aspects of their lives that will be revisited throughout the year and lead to more sophisticated understandings; it affords opportunities to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar; and it appeals to students because they are at the center of the content.

Early in the unit, there might be a lesson on the elements of childhood, underscoring the idea that children everywhere experience many similar physical, behavioral, and intellectual changes in their early years. Creating a classroom bulletin board depicting these changes with photographs of student members of the community will stimulate interest in the topic and visually underscore the big ideas. Students usually love to see photos of their teacher's childhood. Students will learn a lot about one another and, through planned lessons, begin to construct understandings of networks of ideas associated with childhood as a cultural universal.

Whereas children all over the world are alike in many ways, each is unique (e.g., fingerprints, voice, cells of the body, face, thoughts and feelings about things, talents). Lessons addressing inheritance, culture, environment, and other factors that contribute to specialness or uniqueness provide good opportunities for conversations about appreciating diversity and avoid-

ing prejudice—topics that need to be revisited regularly in authentic ways instead of only on designated holidays or when there is reference to the term in a sidebar in a textbook.

A host of children's literature sources might be considered as teachers develop and implement lessons about children around the world. *To Be a Kid* (Ajmera & Ivanko, 1999), *Wake Up, World! A Day in the Life of Children Around the World* (Hollyer, 1999), and *Children Just Like Me* (Kindersley & Kindersley, 1995) are great examples for illustrating how children's lives everywhere are alike in many ways, yet different in other ways, due to culture, geographic conditions, economic resources, personal choices, and so on. Authentic children's literature laced with interactive narrative, electronic pen pals, or resource people in the community can be used to deepen children's thinking about culture, especially as these resources connect to their own lives. Attention to chauvinism will occur naturally as the class engages in conversations about cultural borrowing, prejudice, specialness, and so forth.

Birthdays and rites of passage are other useful topics. Children all around the world have birthdays, although they may have very different celebration customs from ours, and there are places in the world where individual birth dates go unnoticed and instead people have communal birthdays when everyone becomes one year older. Also, people all over the world celebrate major happenings in their lives. Creating lessons that focus on these ideas builds empathy and appreciation and goes a long way in ridding the classroom community of prejudice.

Lessons on children and work can add both a historical and a cultural perspective. For example, in pioneer times, children in America worked to help support their families; later, some worked as apprentices, and still later, some worked in factories. Today, however, there are laws against this, and children go to school, which is considered their work, until they reach at least age 16. Most go on to complete

high school. Children also go to school as their work in many other parts of the world, but there are places where, due to limited resources, children work at least part time in factories or fields. Exposure to these ideas will broaden students' thinking and foster empathy and appreciation for children around the world in new ways. Subsequent lessons might address early schools and schools today, focusing on changes over time and how economic resources are a major factor everywhere in determining the amount and quality of schooling available to children.

A series of lessons on toys and entertainment might also be included, again using historical, economic, and cultural threads to build meaningfulness. Main ideas might include (a) children and their families long ago often combined work and entertainment (e.g., husking bees, cabin raisings); (b) families made most things themselves, including toys; (c) toys and entertainment have become big businesses in our country, but in places where resources are limited, children's games and entertainment are still much like those enjoyed by American children long ago.

These lessons would provide an ideal place for building empathy with people of the past. For example, as teachers share their own family story about toys and entertainment, perhaps beginning with their great-grandparents and using an interactive timeline accompanied by drawings, photos, or props, they could talk about changes that have occurred—including many during their own lifetime—and the tradeoffs associated with them. They could explain how technology and new resources trigger change, bringing both progress and new challenges. After the change, we still have most of the things we had in the past, but the older things are used or played with less frequently. They are sometimes collected by a few people, and the best specimens are treasured and put on display for us to observe in museums. A related big idea is that availability as well as values and personal

preferences influence one's choices of material resources and products.

Other thematic strands that might be woven throughout a childhood unit include children as consumers (they play a role in making choices regarding the goods and services that their families purchase) and children making a difference. Citizenship can come to life in the classroom community if it takes on a project to help a local family who has a need due to insufficient resources, a crisis, and so on. A lesson on childhood talents and interests could provide a beginning look at potential careers.

We also suggest creating home assignments that link the main ideas developed in the classroom to out-of-school settings. These assignments will allow applications of the content that feed back into the development of the classroom community, especially if the teacher also completes them. Examples might include, "Interview a grandparent, neighbor, or friend about toys and entertainment when she or he was a child, as compared to today," or "Talk with a family member about one new feature you would like to add to your next birthday celebration, given what you have learned about birthdays in other cultures. Ask family members about how they celebrated their birthdays as children."

In sharing their responses and talking about how they experienced the big ideas in out-of-school settings, teachers and students will learn about one another and their families. This creates intimacy within the classroom community and fosters the appreciation of diversity. An added bonus is that what the teacher learns about each home situation creates opportunities for personalizing school content in the future by relating it to the jobs, hobbies, and cultural backgrounds of students and their families.

After emphasizing the self through a unit on childhood and continuing to build community through structured content and strategic instructional practices, food and clothing are compelling topics for all students, and es-

pecially for students with disabilities. All students deal with food and clothing daily, and units on these topics feature concrete products for students to see and touch. Also, in many cases, elementary students have a certain amount of control over these two universals, whereas at their age they do not have very much influence on shelter, transportation, or government. Of course, they can relate to all of these universals and become very engaged with them (see Alleman & Brophy, 2001, 2002).

The food unit gives the teacher many opportunities to bring examples into the classroom for students to see and taste. It might begin with the teacher creating some common understandings about food groups and healthy choices. Students then can begin to have conversations at home about food and record the foods they eat. This home assignment is one that every student and family can complete successfully. Other assignments might call for conversations and decisions about where to eat, where to purchase certain foods, how foods can be preserved, where foods come from, and so forth. Feedback from these home experiences can become data for classroom graphs and discussions, in which all students will want to participate. Teacher comments such as, "Thanks for bringing back your homework so that we can use it during social studies today," and "Could you bring your assignment tomorrow so that we can add it to our graph? We're counting on you to help us finish this" encourage students to complete the activities and bring the results to school.

Early lessons give the teacher the opportunity to begin developing vocabulary that will be used throughout the unit, especially with examples to see or taste. Key terms are used in phrases that are repeated several times to help children put these into their memory. An example might be, "Nutrition is the way that food helps your body to be healthy," or, "All bread is made with flour and water." Early in the unit, and indefinitely for struggling learners, those phrases give students a

way to recall information. Later, they begin to phrase these ideas in their own words to match their understanding of the terms.

The food unit can include information that may relate to the health goals for the year. By combining this unit with health lessons, teachers can help children make connections between two subject areas.

Returning to Barbara Knighton's experiences, she describes the way in which she combines social studies and literacy instruction in the context of a unit about food:

There are so many children's books, both fiction and nonfiction, about food that can easily be used during literacy instruction to support your social studies lessons. All students love to point out information during a literacy time "read-to" that matches information that they have heard in social studies class. During one food lesson, we discussed breads from countries around the world. One title that is perfect for a read-to is *Everybody Bakes Bread* by Norah Dooley (1996). In this fictional story, a girl spends a rainy day visiting friends in the neighborhood. At each home, she tastes the bread that has been baked by the family while she plans for a kickball game. In a prior lesson, we had discussed the types of bread featured in a book *Bread, Bread, Bread* by Ann Morris (1989). In this case, we did not use the text but instead focused on the photographs. I gave the students information about how and why bread differs from place to place around the world. When students saw and heard about kneading bread in the fictional story, they easily made connections to the previous lesson. Comprehension of the fictional story was improved, and the big ideas of the social studies lessons were reinforced.

Starting with factual information and then moving to fiction or the fanciful is a key to making sure that students solidly understand and connect with the big ideas. If teachers begin with fiction, or only use a fictional story to teach with, they run the risk

of creating or perpetuating misconceptions.

The clothing unit can be equally successful for young or struggling learners. Again, clothing is a very tangible part of children's everyday lives. In this unit, teachers can motivate even the most reluctant learner by making the familiar unfamiliar. Barbara describes how she implements such a lesson in her classroom:

In an early lesson, I talk with children about the information on the tag on a piece of clothing. As soon as I begin, students want to check out the tags themselves. Cries of "Read mine next" or "What does this mean?" fill the air as all students explore this instant teaching resource. A home-school assignment where students go on a "closet hunt" allows families to support and encourage this excitement at home by talking about what clothes are made from and where they were manufactured. Imagine the interesting conversation at dinner the night the students learn about tags!

The history strands within units on cultural universals focus on developments over time. Improvements in clothing are dramatic enough that young children can create a visual handle that will last as they compare outfits from long, long ago (cave people), long ago (pilgrims), and today (modern children). They can see the differences easily and yet also discuss how clothing serves similar functions across time. Also, many children have had an experience with someone sewing or knitting clothes. Therefore, they are able to grasp the big idea that in modern times, people have all the choices of the past along with new inventions and innovations.

Another particularly powerful set of lessons from my clothing unit involves answering the question, "Where does it come from?" The land-to-hand lessons encourage students to explore the origins of cotton, wool, linen, and silk fabrics. The storytelling style of teaching helps children to hear and organize the sequence of these les-

sons. These lessons also give the students a chance to apply information from earlier learning. Deciding which fabric is best for protection versus decoration allows the teacher to see if past big ideas are still solid and shows students ways of connecting new learning to existing knowledge.

### Pedagogical Practices

Cultural universals lend themselves nicely to helping students formulate big ideas by building networks of connected information that they can access and use in their lives outside of school. Instruction needs to focus on the important ideas and explain the connections among them as well as the ideas themselves. When this approach is used, students actually remember more facts as well, because they are tied to something that makes sense (Brophy & Alleman, 2007).

When teachers focus on big ideas, their lessons become more accessible for special education students and struggling learners. A set of big ideas that drives the lesson helps a teacher keep instruction focused. This supports struggling learners because all the teaching, examples, and resources will be more connected and purposeful. Also, each new piece of information supports the big ideas. Therefore, the big ideas get mentioned several times throughout the lesson. This can be even more powerful if they are phrased in repeatable, memorable summary sentences. For example, if one of the big ideas is that "people all over the world eat foods from the same basic food groups," the teacher can repeat that phrase several times throughout the lesson and support it through examples, book resources, and co-constructed learning materials. Repeating this familiar phrase will help all children to connect to prior information as well as retain the new learning. They can also readily see how the ideas apply to their own lives.

Although it is important for teachers to offer curricula featuring networks of knowledge structured around

big ideas, elementary teachers cannot do this through lengthy presentations of content organized as systematic explication of concepts, principles, logical arguments, or other advanced disciplinary structures that younger students and special needs students are not yet prepared to understand and use. Instead, they need to stick to aspects of a domain that can be made meaningful to students because it can be connected to the students' existing knowledge and especially to their prior experiences. Moreover, it helps to convey information using discourse genres with which the students already have some familiarity (and, preferably, some fluency). As discussed earlier, the narrative structure is particularly useful because even the youngest students are already familiar with it through exposure to stories (Bruner, 1990; Downey & Levstik, 1991; Egan, 1988). The narrative format provides a natural way to remember a great many of the details used to fill out the story, organized within the goal-strategy-outcome "story grammar" (Brophy & Alleman, 2007).

During interactive discussions that typically follow narratives, teachers want students to listen, participate, and answer questions thoughtfully and correctly. There are several easy ways to engage students and improve the likelihood that they will be able to respond successfully. After posing a question to the whole class, teachers can allow students to orally rehearse their ideas. "Table Talk" is one way to have students do this. Have the students sit in groups of three, four, or five and share their answers before the teacher chooses one or more to answer to the whole class. This gives the teacher a chance to eavesdrop and help students formulate good answers. Also, students who do not have an answer can listen to the thoughts of others in their group and begin to create an answer.

Examples are important for students to make connections to new information. We recommend that teachers begin by using themselves and

their own lives as examples. Students can see how the information connects to people without focusing too much on themselves. Then, as teachers give examples from their community or the world, students can begin to generalize the big ideas. Finally, teachers should focus students back on themselves for more examples. "Teacher, world, self" gives a full spectrum of examples to examine so that students can understand the big ideas.

Co-constructing learning materials is another strategy that supports all students. As they teach, teachers can create posters, charts, and lists to show the information that they want the students to remember the most. They can create some of these graphics in collaboration with the class, using students' own language and ideas. Colors help organize the display and help students know where to look for information. Students will feel important as they help create these materials and will be more likely to use them as resources later. For example, students can use information included on a timeline as a resource for journal writing or for answering a question about long, long ago. If they helped to create the timeline with the teacher, they understand its information more than if it had been presented to them readymade.

Pedagogical approaches influence students' attitudes about the content, their desire to learn about it, what they learn, their retention level, and the impact on their lives. In selecting approaches for specific units and lessons, we encourage teachers to begin with their major goals and big ideas. First, ask, "What do I want my students to know? Understand? Appreciate? Apply to their lives?" Next, ask, "Which teaching approaches best fit my intentions, given the nature of the content and the learner profiles of my students?"

## Conclusions

Establishing and maintaining the classroom as a collaborative learning

community provides an ideal context for motivating *all* students to learn and for developing attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions to action that reflect the goals of preparing students for citizenship in a diverse and democratic society. Approaches to teaching that contribute to the development of the classroom community and participation by all members include modeling and explaining key attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Beginning the year with a social studies unit on childhood provides a host of opportunities for students to learn about all their classmates' personal characteristics, including any learning, physical, or emotional challenges that children might possess, home backgrounds, and so forth. Expanding the social studies curriculum to include other cultural universals enhances the motivational value of content's worth and application to students' lives, thus promoting meaningfulness. Because the content is so much a part of students' daily lives, all members of the class can participate in the lessons, including classroom conversations and instructional activities as well as homework assignments. It establishes a forum for the natural incorporation of diversity and serves as one social studies model for inviting all children to participate and meet with success.

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