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ABSTRACT

This article details a project for teaching elementary school students to understand and accept multicultural differences. This task is made easier by involving actual international visitors. Students need a considerable amount of background information before an international visitor comes to class. In preparing for a visitor, students can develop their skills in several areas of the curriculum, including literature, writing, oral reports, research, interviewing, geography, and art. It is important to give students understanding of the country being studied, such as its location, culture, and unique characteristics. Hosting an international visitor to the classroom will improve students' skills in researching, working cooperatively, speaking publicly, and organizing and analyzing information. The international visitors and students appreciate and enjoy the experience while learning a great deal from each other. (EF)

Teaching Multiculturalism: Focus on People.

by Deborah A. Wallace

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Note: After reading this article, please visit the transcript of the discussion forum to view readers' comments.

Abstract

This article details a project for teaching elementary school students to understand and accept multicultural differences. This task is made easier by using the most powerful resource available to teachers -- people. In preparing for an international visitor, elementary school students can develop their skills in several areas of the curriculum, including literature, writing, research, geography, and art. Students need a considerable amount of background information before an international visitor comes to class. It is important to give them some understanding of the country being studied -- such as its location, culture, and unique characteristics. Hosting an international visitor to the classroom will improve students' skills in researching, working cooperatively, speaking publicly, and organizing and analyzing information. The international visitors and students appreciate and enjoy the experience while learning a great deal from each other.

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Introduction

Multiculturalism and diversity have become important issues in many classrooms around the world in recent years, and educators have provided helpful methods and ideas for developing the skills children need if they are to contribute to and survive in an ever-changing and diverse society. James A. Banks, for example, through his writings has taught classroom teachers like me how to broaden our curricula to include ethnic studies and how to design lessons that focus on the diversity among our students (see Banks, 1993, 1994, and 1996). He has provided numerous exercises and lessons aimed at making the often marginalized members of a classroom feel more welcomed and secure. Several years ago, however, I taught in a classroom with no true diversity. In fact, every student in the room was Caucasian and of European descent. It was for this reason that I devised a plan to bring the world to my students. As a teacher of second graders in a parochial school in the United States, I developed a project to bring foreign-born visitors into my classroom and to prepare my students to welcome their guests. Bringing visitors to the classroom helps students recognize the expansiveness of the world around them, become familiar with other cultures, and develop understanding and acceptance. Once students study cultural differences and meet people from other countries, they will have a greater knowledge of how differences actually can enhance their own lives as well as the lives of others.

Like any new idea or lesson, diversity can and should be taught in relation to real life and connected with other subject areas so that it is more meaningful and easier to understand. *Telling* students to be more sensitive toward others or to respect the world's cultures is not as effective in achieving the goal of awareness as, for example, introducing them to the intelligent, interesting, and admirable characters in the literature of other countries. One of the most effective ways to further increase awareness is to bring the classroom to life by making use of the most powerful resource available -- real people. Specifically, bringing into the classroom people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds can help connect the curriculum to the "real" world.

In preparation for these visitors, students engage in cooperative learning and improve their skills and knowledge in various areas of the curriculum. This article details my international visitor project and includes numerous resources available to teachers, including where to find them and how to use them. To illustrate this project, I have explained the process from start to finish using one country we studied, Japan, as an example.

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Finding International Visitors

The first step in bringing an international visitor to the classroom is finding someone willing to come. Look first within your own school. Find out if students or their immediate family members are from another country and ask them if they would be willing to talk to the class. With so many schools becoming cross-cultural (I currently teach students from the Dominican Republic and Mexico), students or their parents or grandparents might be able to visit your classroom to speak about their experiences in their homeland and about the similarities and differences between their native land and the United States. It is important to remain sensitive, however, to your students' and their parents' attitudes toward this invitation. It is possible that some parents will be reluctant to speak and, in fact, may believe it necessary to deny their heritage in order to fit into the culture or society where they have now chosen to live. My Mexican student's parents are very reluctant to discuss their heritage and homeland and refuse to let their child speak his native language. If this is the case, it is important not to push the child or parent into active participation, especially because one of

the purposes of this project is to show children that people of all nations have a great deal to offer and should be treated with respect.

If you are unable to find anyone from your school to speak to your class, or if you would like to expand on the existing list of visitors, you can turn to your local college or university for help. Many colleges and universities have international students who can provide valuable information for students in an elementary classroom. To determine whether international college students are available for visits, contact someone at your local college or university who can help. It may be the director of international students, the facilitator for the international program, or the English as a Second Language (ESL) director or teacher. The public relations department at the college or university should be able to point you in the right direction, so start there. Of course, if you are a graduate of a local college or university, one of your former professors might offer some assistance. However, if you decide to contact the school, explain your objectives and ask if you might be permitted to meet with several international students. After contacting a college official in my town, I was introduced to students from Japan, Spain, Peru, Russia, and the Bahamas.

If the resources of a university are not available to you, there are several other possibilities for finding visitors for your classroom. From the International Visitor Program Web site [*editor's note:* since the time of writing, this page has been removed from the U.S. State Department's Web site] you can link to the National Council for International Visitors (NCIV), which provides a list of volunteer-based community organizations in 44 states in the United States. At this site you can locate the International Visitors Program nearest your city. For example, if you live in Pennsylvania you can go to either the International Visitors Council of Philadelphia or the Pittsburgh Council for International Visitors to learn about international visitors in your community. Part of the work of these councils includes conducting work-exchange programs, in which, for example, an engineer from Russia meets an engineer from the United States. Therefore it is possible that if you are not from the United States, one of the councils may be able to put you in touch with a U.S. citizen visiting your country.

The Peace Corps has created a program, Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs), through which Peace Corps volunteers, after returning to the United States, visit classrooms in their communities to discuss their experiences in the country they served. You can get a list of RPCVs speakers in your community by accessing the RPCVs Web site. Although this method is not as effective in bringing foreign-born visitors to meet your students, individual Peace Corps volunteers will have exhilarating stories to share and may even be able to help you contact citizens of the country you are studying. Teachers from countries other than the United States might consider contacting the Peace Corps to locate U.S. citizens currently working abroad who would be willing to speak in a foreign classroom.

Finally, by contacting the Organization for Cultural Exchange Among Nations (OCEAN) teachers can find exchange students from around the world. Through this program you can receive information from the director of OCEAN about any international exchange students in or around your community who might like to come to your classroom and give a presentation to your students.

When you have your final list of all willing participants, you will need to meet with them and discuss your project, expectations, and possible dates for their visits. Once you have gathered this information and you know what countries will be represented, you can begin preparing your students for the first visitor.

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Preparing for the International Visitor

Before each visitor comes to your classroom it is vital that you prepare your students to welcome their guest. In fact, this step in the project is in some respects more important than the visit itself because unprepared students will benefit very little from the visit and might, in the worse cases, make the visitor uncomfortable.

By having the students conduct interviews, study maps and geography, do research, give oral presentations, read literature, and complete ethnic art projects, you can help them make the most of their guest's visit.

Interviewing and Reporting

Once you have established a list of visitors, you can choose a country and begin. Ask your students if they have any knowledge of the country being studied: What have they heard? What do they know (or believe they know)? What have they seen on television or in movies? Do they know anyone from the country? Keep a list of any ideas they share that can be used later to confirm or contradict information when they do actual research on the country. Although my students knew very little about Japan, most of them had heard of the country. Some students knew vaguely where it was located, a few showed that they thought it and China were the same thing, and one student claimed that rice came from Japan.

Tell your students they will be responsible for interviewing their parents about the country, that they will be conferring in small groups the next day about their findings, and that their group will be responsible for presenting what they discovered. Before the students can begin their interview they need to decide what information they want to acquire. Have the class discuss what they would be interested in discovering about this particular country. Then formulate some specific questions that may help them find these answers. If your students are in a primary grade, you may want them to limit their questions to five or so. It is important to tell your students that when they are recording answers from their family members they should focus on specific details and not attempt to write down every word they hear. They also can try to get a feel for any emotions or impressions exhibited by their family.

It should be noted here that some information your students bring to the class may not all be positive. There are many misconceptions about other countries that some people may still believe to be true. Teachers should be prepared to recognize these misconceptions and stereotypes and explain why they exist and how they can be changed. For U.S. students, studying a country like Japan may be an instance in which the student's family will relay personal opinions based on their war experiences. These discussions actually can help your students to have a better understanding of people who are different and to know why it is important to be accepting. Students are never too young to be taught why and how misconceptions are formed and passed along.

When your students return the next day, put them into small groups to discuss what information they were able to gather. Each group then will go before the class to present its information. It is possible that some students will have discovered no information or that some information may be incorrect. Explain that even if some information is contradictory they will be conducting research to find out the facts about the country. Even if some of the students' questions remain unanswered after their research, your visitor may be able to provide some clarification.

Geography

After they have gathered personal information and before they begin their research, students first should locate the country on a world map. The Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection on the University of Texas Library Online is a spectacular electronic source for maps, but a classroom wall map also will serve the purpose. Make sure that countries, continents, and oceans are labeled so students can identify them easily. Ask if anyone can point to the country on the map. I asked for volunteers to come to the map and find Japan. Then we discussed its location and size relative to the United States and looked at other countries and oceans nearby. Closely examining a map gives students a base with which to work and helps them think about other questions concerning population and lifestyles.

Research and Oral Reports

Once you have discussed some aspects of the country, your students can begin to research information. After giving your students some initial facts about the country, separate them into groups of three or four and assign an area of study -- such as major cities, urban life, vital resources, ethnic foods, arts, and cultural creations exported to the other countries -- for each group to focus on. Students can use children's encyclopedias, encyclopedias on CD-ROM (Encarta, for example), or a search engine on the Internet to gather this information. Working cooperatively, students will have an opportunity to learn from one another and will

have the benefit of a helper if needed. They will learn more because they are actively involved in the learning process.

After each group has compiled the information, group members might give an oral presentation to the class to enable all your students to learn about more aspects of that country. This is an excellent opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge of their specific topic as well as to practice expressing their ideas and findings in an accurate and coherent way. After each area has been discussed, students will be responsible for making a booklet of at least five fascinating things they learned about the country. They might want to illustrate each fact and add a few sentences about its meaning. Additionally, because many young students have a fascination with flags, students can construct the flag of the country being studied by creating a replica from construction paper. These flags can become the cover of their booklets.

Literature

Because literature tells a great deal about a country's culture and people, it is very important to expose your students to the literature of and about the country you are studying so they can get a feel for the characteristics of the country and its people. The books, whether translated from the original language or originally written in your students' native tongue, should be displayed and easily accessible for the children to look at and to read silently or to a partner. You also should read the books to the class and discuss the themes, topics, and any unusual terms. Your students will find that there are many similarities and differences between international children's literature and that of the United States. Some excellent Japanese literature that I used included *The Boy of the Three-Year Nap* (Snyder, 1988), *The Bicycle Man* (Say, 1982), *Hana's Year* (Talley, 1992), and *Sheep in Wolves' Clothing* (Kitamura, 1995). Literature from or about other countries can be difficult to find, but some excellent resources that exist outside your local library or school library include the following:

The Children's Literature Web Guide

Children's Literature and Language Arts Resources

Multicultural Resources

Art

Art, another important aspect of other cultures, can be part of your students' preparation. Your students can create authentic arts and crafts representative of the country that you are currently studying in order to get a feel for its history, values, and beliefs. While studying Japan, my students made paper egg figurines and paper uchiwas (fans). Have a few students make an extra piece of art to be presented to the international visitor. Other art and craft ideas can be found in *The Kids' Multicultural Art Book: Art & Craft Experiences From Around the World* (Terzian, 1993).

Once students have researched the specific country, demonstrated that they can locate it on the map, sited several important aspects about it, and familiarized themselves with the country's literature and art, they are almost ready to meet the international visitor. The final step is to encourage students to come up with a number of questions for their visitor. Students might return to their original, unanswered questions, prepare questions concerning their personal hobbies or interests, or formulate questions reflecting differences between the life of an elementary school student in their own country and a student in a similar grade level in the country being studied. My students wrote numerous questions -- some clever, some unusual -- on topics such as the sorts of spiders and snakes that inhabit Japan and the length of the school day.

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Classroom Visit

After the students have formulated their questions, they are ready to meet their visitors. If possible the international visitor should try to bring items from his or her homeland for your students to see and touch, such as flags, money, books, and pictures. When Eriko Takahashi came to our classroom she told the students what it is like to live in Japan and explained some of the major differences between Japan and the United States. She showed the students a video of a typical day in the life an elementary school student and provided various pieces of literature including Power Ranger magazines. My students were very surprised and fascinated to learn that the Power Rangers originated in Japan.

Be sure to consider your visitor's comfort. Try to limit the visit to an hour and interject questions and comments if the conversation lulls.

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Follow-Up Activities

After your students have studied the new country, you can follow up with activities to help them reinforce what they have learned and enhance the skills they have developed.

Writing

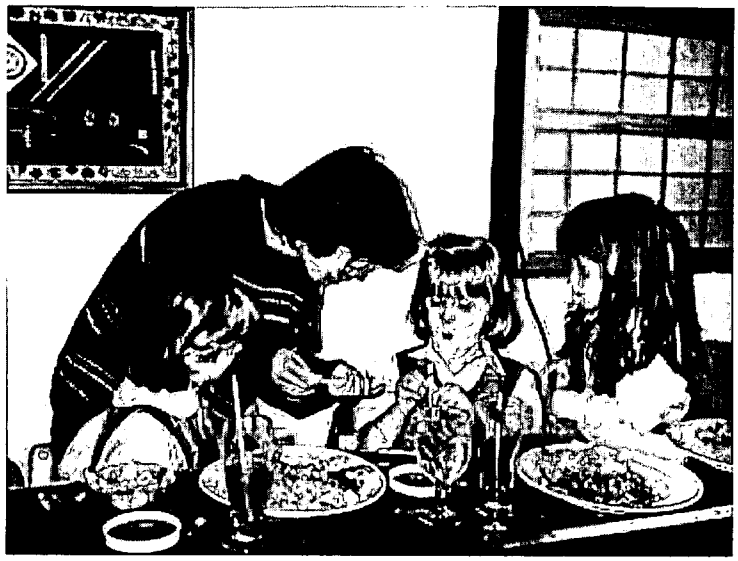
After students have read literature from various countries (if you cover more than one) they can choose their favorite book and write a book report. They will give a brief summary of the book and evaluate it based on their knowledge of the country it is from, how well they believe it is written and illustrated, and how well it conveys its theme.

Students also can write thank-you cards to the international visitors, mentioning some of the things they learned. This will help them work on their writing skills, especially writing for a specific audience, and will remind them of the importance of thanking someone properly.

Finally, you can find pen pals for your students through the Internet. They can write to other students from the countries you have studied. A resourceful Internet site for reaching teachers in a specific country is Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections. This provides an additional way for your students to communicate with real people from around the world.

Ethnic Foods

Finally, students might be able to participate further in the culture of a foreign country by visiting a restaurant that serves the food of the country you have studied. If possible, you might take your international visitor to lunch. For example, my class took our guest to a local Japanese restaurant and learned first-hand what the food is like and how it is eaten in Japan, and we were able to meet and talk with more Japanese people. The children really felt as though they were a part of the Japanese culture. If it is not possible to go to a restaurant, your class can make some ethnic foods before or after your international visitor comes. You can find some authentic recipes in *The Kids' Multicultural Cookbook: Food & Fun Around the World* (Cook, 1995). Both the multicultural art book mentioned earlier and the cookbook can be found and purchased at Williamson Publishing.



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Conclusion

The entire project -- preparing for and hosting our Japanese visitor -- took 2 weeks. Over the course of the year we were visited by all of the international college students I mentioned earlier. Many of the activities and exercises discussed in this article can be modified depending on the teacher and the classroom. For example, the writing activities can be conducted throughout the project or at the end.

By entertaining international visitors in their classroom, my students improved their skills in reading and evaluating literature, researching a topic, working cooperatively, speaking publicly, and organizing and analyzing information. I often have used literature to teach diversity and believe now that when students have a chance to see their reading "come to life," they are left with a more lasting impression. Most important, they learned something about the world they live in and the people of that world. And, finally, they enjoyed it. Frankly, so did I.

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