

SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE: TEACHING GEOGRAPHY AT THE PRE-POLLY STAGE

by Angie Epps, Riverbend Academy

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”

When God inspired Paul to include these sentences in his letter to the church at Philippi (Philippians 2:3-5), He knew that we all have a tendency to make things all about us (Me! Me! Me!). At the root of this self-centeredness is, of course, our sinful nature forever fighting to keep us from looking outside our own needs and desires to the needs and interests of others.

In a classical, Christian school, teaching and demonstrating the idea of putting other’s needs ahead of our own should be a primary goal in the academic setting. Imagine what a classroom would be like if all the students and the teachers had “the same attitude of Christ Jesus” when it came to how they viewed themselves. Think about how much more classwork could be accomplished! We as teachers have so much information that we want to pour into the brains of our students before they leave us at the end of the year

that we sometimes forget about teaching them to love others and Christ more than themselves and learning. This endeavor should be at the top of our lists in order to accomplish the whole academic picture.

This makes the role of a pre-polly teacher so important. We set the foundation and guide the students’ thoughts and abilities towards a view of school and teachers in general, a love of learning, a foundational knowledge, specifically, in math, phonics, reading and handwriting, but most importantly a working knowledge with a biblical worldview. As pre-polly teachers (kindergarten through second grade) we *get* to set that foundational thinking of “others first, me last.” Though pre-polly classes can sometimes be known as the classes that do crafts and take naps and wipe noses and tie shoelaces, we should also be known for so much more!

I take the time I have with my kindergarten class very seriously. Yes, we do crafts. We don’t take naps. I do wipe the occasional nose, and I definitely can tie shoelaces in my sleep, but if you walk into my classroom on any given day, you will find my students “experiencing” school. I want them to use all their senses when learning, so much so, that they don’t even realize they are learning. I want

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to encourage other pre-polies, like myself, that we are more than just about the ABCs and 123s (though that's very important).

Teaching geography is a sensational way to begin to show children at the pre-polly stage that they are more than just who they see in the mirror. Who would imagine that by the end of my forty days of teaching geography to a bunch of five- and six-year-olds that, among other things, they can tell you about the poverty level of many families on the continent of Africa; tell you about the homeless children of Brazil or the many orphans in China due to the one child per family rule; name all seven continents and the four main oceans; can read a basic map and follow a basic map key; count to ten in Spanish, Swahili, and Russian; or tell you that Japan is north of Australia on a map?

Coming from this biblical worldview that we are all egocentric in our thoughts due to man's Fall in the Garden, I begin prepping my children for their studies of geography (taught after Christmas) on the first day of school by showing them their place in this world. If you don't believe that even young children are egocentric in their behavior and attitudes, then step into a kindergarten class on the first day. Before proper classroom training (and sadly sometimes after) each child comes into the classroom with the idea that the universe revolves around them. They are still "babies" essentially with a preschool mindset and have parents that usually think that whatever they do is genius. Don't laugh! You know we've all thought that about our own children. It's my job as their teacher to take these twenty or so children and teach them that there are others around them that are just as important in my eyes and most importantly in God's eyes. This is where we begin talking about what makes each of us special—how unique God has made each of us—while at the same time balancing that with learning manners, proper classroom behavior, and self-control.

THE PROCESS

My first unit in science deals with the body systems, the five senses, personal hygiene, nutrition and exercise. This helps them to grasp what an amazing creation they are in Christ. We then move into discussing our classroom community and how we should treat others around us, which then leads to discussing our school as a community with each class functioning as a separate entity while still being a part of a bigger unit. Finally, I take that as a lead into our community of Ormond Beach, Florida, and how our school, Riverbend Academy, fits into it.

We take lots of field trips at this point. What better way to learn about your community than by visiting it? I find that as we visit each location (fire station, a working farm, grocery store, post office, hospital, etc.), the students really begin thinking about themselves in a new way: How can I contribute to my community? What can I do to help others with the job I choose?

This idea of taking the students from thinking about just themselves to a more broad picture of how they fit into this world is continued with a brief study of American history followed by a "Celebrate America" program that we perform at a veterans' nursing home close to Veteran's Day. Again, this field trip gets the children to think outside of themselves.

This leads us to discuss our city and pray for our mayor. We then take that knowledge of a city and I show the children how many cities make up the state of Florida. This opens their eyes to how many mayors there are that need prayer, which leads to a discussion of our one governor of Florida and how he is in charge of all the mayors. The picture broadens even more with a study of our state of Florida and a great class project to learn all we can about where we live. This, of course, leads to where our state fits into the whole United States of America and that there are fifty governors we need to pray for, who, in turn, are led by one president of the United States who also needs our prayers.

By starting very specifically at the first of school and broadening the students' views of where they fit in, it prepares them for when I finally get to teaching about the world as a whole. The children now see how small they are on such a huge earth. Lord willing, it deepens their understanding of what a great and mighty God we serve that could create everything with just one word but knows each of them by the very hairs on their head. It's awe-inspiring to teach and it's amazing to see the children begin to really see where they fit in, in the grand scheme of things.

INTEGRATING GEOGRAPHY

I know that seems like a lot of preparation for an eight-week unit on geography, but I have found it to be so helpful for these little, literal thinkers. When we return from Christmas break, I begin our studies of the world. This helps the children to understand that there are other children around the world just like them who love to play and learn just like they do. It also gives me the opportunity to present the gospel to my students again by reminding them that these other children around the world need a Savior just like they do, and that they were born into sin as well. Children everywhere need to know that Christ died for those whom He called in every country, tribe, and tongue. We know this because Revelation 7:9–10 says,

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They

were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

These verses, along with many others throughout our lessons, are a great way to also show the children a need for missions to all countries in the world. In fact, as I teach each continent and country, I make sure to include a missionary (past or present) that they can learn from. This, again, is taking the children outside of themselves to think about others.

I have two special songs that I teach the children to help them remember the continents and the oceans.



The continent song gives me a guideline as to which continent I cover from first to last. I choose one unique country to teach about from each continent so that after we have discussed one, each child gets to fill in their own passport page. I pre-make my passports for kindergarten to fill in with the countries' flags, and handwriting lines to write the countries' names, plus a short activity for them to complete, but in first and second grades they can easily do more with their passports.

During my presentation at the 2014 ACCS conference, I presented the teachers with ideas for each country my students study that allow me to integrate each subject

with a small bit of the culture of that country for the week. For example, when studying Brazil, I do an activity during math time that goes along with the idea of spearfishing which is a very popular and necessary way of fishing on the narrow parts of the Amazon River. I create “fish” with math facts and answers and the children get to “spear” the answers together with wooden skewers. This activity reinforces what we learned during social studies the day before and keeps Brazil “alive” during math the following day.

Integrating each country studied on each continent can be as simple as playing music from that country when the students are doing silent seatwork (depending on the style of music) to as complicated as playing organized games on the playground like “Last One Standing” which is a gladiator-style game we play when studying the country of Italy.

The point to all of my geography studies is to immerse my students in the culture we study each week throughout all my subjects—math, grammar, science, social studies, art, music, reading, recess, and even snack time. Doing it this way takes a good deal of planning ahead but it’s truly worth it when you hear the students discussing each country and its culture with one another during their free time. Some of the sweet examples I’ve heard in my classroom include, “I wonder if boys in Italy know we call football soccer over here?” or “We should hold our pinkies up while we drink our CapriSuns today like the Queen of England does with her tea!” or “I think it would be awesome to go on an African safari!” or “I don’t need blubber like the penguins in Antarctica because I live in Florida,” or “Mrs. Epps dances the Mexican hat dance like a Mexican lady” (that one makes me laugh), or “If no one tells those boys and girls in Australia about God what will happen to them? Maybe we should tell them!” (That’s my favorite).

At the end of the eight-week study, we have a huge celebration that we call an International Feast. We invite parents to join our class as we eat kid-friendly food from

around the world. I hang international flags around the room and we decorate with props we’ve used throughout the study. The students are also encouraged to bring in an item from home that is from another country for a show & tell time. The students love it! The parents love it and, of course, I love it!

If you don’t study geography as a pre-polly teacher, I would highly encourage you to give it a try! It’s just another way to expose your students to the uniqueness of each person God has created—regardless of what country they are from. As we know from Genesis 11:1–9, it was God who confounded the languages of the people of Babel so they would spread throughout the lands, be fruitful and multiply. As a teacher, I want to take all those wonderful differences and use them as an opportunity to teach the children to think outside of themselves, beyond their family in their little homes, past their kindergarten class at their school, through their community, city, state and country, and into all the world through their study of geography.

For more specific and detailed information about how you can apply this in your classroom, please feel free to contact me at caepps@gmail.com.