

Introducing Children  
to the  
Contemporary U.S.A.

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All over the United States today elementary school children are being introduced to most countries of the world in their contemporary setting, usually at the sixth grade level. But pupils are not being introduced in a similar way to their own country--the U.S.A. This is one of the most curious facts about the ~~sssd~~ social studies curricula of American schools. Curious--yet sad.

At no time in their entire school career do pupils have an opportunity to study the United States today in a comprehensive way, drawing upon all the social science disciplines for content and methodology.

What do pupils learn now about the contemporary scene in the U.S.A.? In the primary grades almost everyone learns about his or her local community. Occasionally they then learn about a few other American communities, selected almost solely on the basis of geography. Sometimes children make a study of the United States by regions, usually about the fourth grade. That, too, is a geography-centered course. Moreover, it seems to this writer a poor approach to our nation. Regional differences still exist so far as climate and land forms are concerned, but other major differences among regions are fast disappearing or have already disappeared. To introduce pupils to our nation on the basis of regionalism is inaccurate, inappropriate, and even injurious. It can perpetuate and foster regional rivalries and present a distorted view of our nation, for ours is now a national ~~society~~ rather than a regional society.

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Often pupils also learn something about the contemporary scene in the United States through current events. But current events are likely to present a fragmented picture of our country and to stress its problems, particularly for middle and upper-grade pupils.

### The Importance of Studying the United States Today

It is this writer's contention that every pupil in our elementary schools should study the contemporary United States somewhere in the middle or upper grades. Such a study should be very comprehensive, drawing upon all the social sciences,--geography, economics, anthropology and sociology, and government or political science. Some history would be included but only enough to explain the present.

Such a survey should probably be in the fifth grade and take a third to a half a year. It could be followed by an abbreviated course in U.S. history, taking a few periods of our national development and pursuing them in depth. elementary school

This approach stems from several considerations. One is that pupils are more interested in the present than in the past. A second is that they can cope better with the present than the past in their early years in school. A third is that pupils can learn the skills of studying countries better in an analysis of their own country than by being exposed first to other nations. Having been introduced to such skills in a study of the United States, they can then go on to study other nations much more effectively.

### Some Basic Themes for Studying the Contemporary U.S.A.

What would such a comprehensive study of our country today include? Certainly it would start with the lay of our land and the location of the United States on the globe. Teachers would take pupils, probably, on an imaginary airplane or space-ship trip, seeing the major geographical aspects

of the U.S.A. These might well be limited at first to seven--the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico, the Appalachians and the Rockies, and the Mississippi river. Others can be studied later.

A large flannelboard map of the United States should be hung in the front of the classroom and these major geographical features placed on it, one by one, by the pupils. This could well be accompanied by films, ~~and~~ and pictures filmstrips, of the lay of our land, and by individual map work by pupils. A substitute for such a flannelboard map would be a large oaktag map of the U.S.A. with only the borders of our nation appearing on it at first.

After such an initial introduction, pupils could then explore other aspects of our geography, including the climate, the soil, the major rivers, the desert areas, and our resources.

This would be a geography unit, with much attention to the development of map and globe skills.

A second unit might well be on the people of the United States today. It could be initiated very well with a discussion of where our people might live, drawing upon the data learned in the first unit. Such an approach would utilize the discovery or inquiry mode of learning.

Such a unit might also be introduced by a simple map of the distribution of people in the United States, following up on the map studies of the first unit. Or it could be introduced by pictures, filmstrips, or films on the diversity of people in the U.S.A. today.

The flanneboard map of the United States could be used again to advantage in this unit, with pupils cutting out different sized discs to represent the major cities and placing them on the flannelboard in the appropriate places, discussing why large cities have developed near harbors ,at the mouths of major riv<sup>er</sup>s, and in other strat<sup>eg</sup>etic spots.

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A variation of this approach would be to start a study of the contemporary scene with the 200 million people and to find out where they live--and why. Such an approach would tie the people and the land together in a better way, although it is probably more difficult for teachers to handle as it demands attention to two major ideas at once--the land base and people.

The major focus of a unit on people should be on the pluralistic nature of our society. Through it every child should be able to find himself or herself in the giant montage of 200 million Americans and identify with his or her group as well as with the entire population of our nation.

A third unit might well be on the economy of the U.S.A. today or how people earn a living. This unit would concentrate on economics and through it children should reinforce previous learnings from that discipline and discover new concepts and generalizations. The United States would be presented as a giant workshop with over 100 million people working day and night in a wide variety of jobs, producing and distributing goods and providing carrying on services.

The class might well be divided into groups to represent the major types of jobs. Thus a class of 31 pupils would have 7 manufacturers, 6 tradesmen, 4 government workers, 4 professional people, 3 service workers, 2 farmers, 1 transportation and 1 communication workers, 1 construction worker, and 1 person in finance, real estate, and insurance, and 1 miner. They could work in such committee groups and then as a committee-of-the-whole. Since this would be the third unit, most classes should be ready to do some committee work by this point in the year.

A unit on transportation and communication would be a natural outgrowth

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of the unit on earning a living. Such a unit might well stress role-playing as a major method. Pupils would be "given" mines, forests, farms and factories and asked to decide about various problems connected with transportation and communication. Considerable map study could also be done in such a unit, including the major highways, waterways, railroads, bus lines, and even pipelines.

A fifth unit might well be on government in the U.S.A. today. It is suggested at this point ~~for~~ because concepts and generalizations about government are needed for several <sup>successive</sup> ~~other~~ units. Possibly the best way to start such a unit would be to imagine a community (or state) without any government. "What might happen?" children would be asked. This should help pupils to see the functions of government. The stress in such a unit would be on the services and problems and costs of government rather than upon the structure of government. Of course some structure is necessary to help children to understand the functions of various units of government, but the <sup>structure</sup> ~~structure~~ should be kept to a minimum. This, incidentally, is in line with the recent emphases of political scientists.

The next unit might well be one on food, health, and safety, with constant references to the part which the government plays in these three aspects of our lives. This might be a short unit, considered in a period of only ten days or two weeks.

Another short but important unit would be on education or on schools. This, too, comes quite naturally after the unit on government. For some strange reason, the school as a unit of our society is never taken up after the primary grades, even though it is of utmost importance in our nation and of importance to pupils.

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The eighth unit ~~might~~ might be on the role of religion in the U.S.A. or on religious groups. This, too, is a much neglected topic in our schools. It is a difficult theme to handle but of utmost importance. Inasmuch as religious differences sometimes lead to intolerance, misunderstanding, and even hostility, the school as a public institution has a responsibility to help promote tolerance or, hopefully, understanding and respect. The basic theme might be that there is room for all religions in the U.S.A. Children could be helped to understand how different people and different groups find different answers to important and baffling questions. Such a treatment is not contrary to any court rulings and is undoubtedly a part of learning to live in a religious pluralistic society. Such a unit should only take a few days, with priority to the question of values and to the development of attitudes.

The ninth unit might then consider the question of Leisure in the U.S.A. or Our Spare Time or Fun and Beauty. It might start with an hour-to-hour schedule kept by each child of activities over a weekend and be followed by a study of some of the opportunities for spare time activities in the local community. This would be followed by a broader study of leisure time in the country as a whole and by adults as well as children, with some attention to the part played by governments as well as private organizations. This should really be a "fun" chapter.

The tenth and final unit in such a study of the United States Today could well be on Living With Our World Neighbors. This would be an introductory unit on international relations. In some instances it would lead very well into a study of other nations. In other cases it would be the final unit before the study of U.S. History is undertaken. It could be introduced in a number of ways, such as by a study of current news in the newspapers and ~~xxxx~~ in television programs, through a discussion of the term "neighbor" -leading to the study of our three billion neighbors today, or through a good film or filmstrip.

These suggested units certainly cover the most important aspects of life in our nation today. They draw upon all the social sciences, providing opportunities for pupils to discover concepts and generalizations from those several fields and giving them a chance to experience a really integrated "social studies" program. The units vary in length, with those on the land, the people, the economy, and living with our world neighbors the ones on which teachers will probably want to spend the most time. Through such units, or variations on them, pupils should learn a great deal about their own country and about the methods of the various social sciences.

#### Some Suggestions on Methodology

Scattered throughout the foregoing paragraphs are several suggestions on methodology. Many different methods should be used in conjunction with any study of the contemporary scene in the U.S.A. They are needed because different aims demand different methods. They are needed because pupils learn through different methods. And they are needed because variety sometimes adds to the process of learning as well as <sup>being</sup> the spice of life.

Teachers and pupils and parents, as well as librarians, should seek as many pictures as they can find and mount them on cardboard for the best use by individuals and groups and by the class through opaque projectors. A magazine drive should yield many good illustrations and pupils can learn as they <sup>find</sup> discover pictures and sort them into categories <sup>for mounting</sup>.

Films and filmstrips should be used frequently. Many of these should be available in the school audio-visual library, in the system's instructional materials library, and/or in the state university's <sup>loan</sup> collection. Many such items should be purchased or borrowed.

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The use of a large flannelboard has already been highlighted but might be mentioned again for emphasis.

Map study should certainly be stressed with the pupils preparing large maps for use by the entire class in many instances. Maps can be made on forsted glass slides. They can be made on oaktag paper. They can be made for use with the overhead projector. Jig-saw maps can be made by pasting maps on cardboard or plywood and cutting them out with a jig-saw. And many maps can be obtained free from the local service stations.

Trips, too, are a "must" for such a study. There are scores of places in most communities that should be visited, ranging from the highest point in the environs (so that pupils can see the "lay of the land" ) to such places as radio and television studios and newspaper plants in conjunction with the study of ~~xxx~~ communication.

The use of current events magazines, newspapers, and radio and television programs will enhance the study of the contemporary scene immeasurably.

And of course there should be much reading in books, about which we write will ~~speak~~ later on in this article.

#### Some Ways for Teachers To Gain Background ~~on the~~ on the U.S.A. Today

If you are planning to visit or study India, Indonesia, or Israel, there are a great many books you can read about life in those countries today. Strange as it may seem, there are only a few books about the contemporary scene in the United States, written for adults. Three outstanding volumes are John Steinbeck's America and Americans (The Viking Press, 1966), the Life World Library volume on The United States (Time Incorporated, 1965), and Ben J. Wattenberg and Richard S. M. Scammon's This U.S.A.: An Unexpected Family Portrait of 194,067,296 Americans Drawn from the Census (Doubleday, on 1965). There are scores of books more specialized topics which should prove helpful to teachers desiring more background than they now have.

Here are a few ideas of ways in which you can prepare for a study of the United States Today with your pupils. Perhaps it can serve as a checklist for you to determine what you have already done or what you want to do next to prepare for such a program on the U.S.A.:

1. Start folders on various topics about the U.S.A.
2. Save current events magazines dealing with the U.S.A.  
and magazine
3. Save newspaper clippings on the U.S.A. for your files.
4. Collect maps on various aspects of the U.S.A.
5. Take at least one trip this year to a place  
in the U.S.A. which you have never visited.
6. Send to state Chambers of Commerce for materials.
7. Make a list of parents, teachers, and other adults  
who know about other parts of our nation.
8. Make a large flannelboard ~~ex~~map of the U.S.A.
9. Start a collection of 3' by 5' cards on books  
for children about our country.
10. Start a similar collection of cards on films and  
filmstrips about the U.S.A.
11. Buy at least one good reference book such as ~~the~~  
Information Please or the World Almanac.
12. Collect as many pictures and travel folders  
as you can obtain on the U.S.A.
13. Obtain a booklet on Free and Inexpensive  
materials and send away for some of the  
items listed.
14. Hunt second hand book shops for books about  
the U.S.A. today.

Materials on the U.S.A. Today  
for Pupils

As yet there is no textbook for the elementary grades in social studies which gives a comprehensive picture of our country today. There are sections, however, in a few of them which would be useful in the study of the current scene in the U.S.A. In the Allen-Howland volume on The United States of America (Prentice-Hall) there is a brief introductory section on the geography of the United States. In the Fibling, King and Harlow book on Our Country's Story (Laidlaw) there is a final section devoted to Our Country Today with sections on geography, <sup>VN</sup> transportation, communication, inventions, and related topics. A lengthy part of the Patterson-Patterson-Hunnicuttt-Grambs textbook on This Is Our Land (Singer) ~~is~~ treats in detail the geography of our country. In the Preston-Tottle book on In These United States (Hentle) are two introductory chapters on the land and the people.

Teachers wishing to develop a course of study along the lines presented in this article will find a good many books for children listed in various bibliographies for boys and girls in elementary schools. The writer of this article has drawn together a 30 page document listing such volumes for children under such topics as land, people, religion, schools, transportation and communication, earning a living, and working with our world neighbors in a mimeographed bibliography which may be obtained by sending \$1 to the author at Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11210. This is probably the most comprehensive list of its kind now available.

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The best single volume for children on the United States today is probably Joseph B. Gielawski's My Country, U.S.A. (Golden Press, 1967), illustrated with black and white and color photographs. This book has 18 chapters under three sections on "Many Nations in One", "A Land of Contrasts", and "Our Way of Life".

There are a few series of volumes which are important in the study of the United States today. One is the Men at Work series of Putnam, devoted to jobs in various parts of the United States. A second series is on rivers, published by the Garrard Press in Champaign, Illinois. A third is the U.S. Government Departments books published by the Meredith Press in Des Moines, Iowa. A fourth is the Professions and What They Do series of the Franklin Watts Company in New York City.

Teachers will find the large colored chart of "Makers of the U.S.A." sold at \$1 by the Friendship Press (475 Riverside Drive, New York City 10027) very useful as well as the large pictures on "America the Beautiful" sold by the U.S. Government Printing Office (Washington 25, D.C.) for \$5 for a set of 52 pictures very helpful. There are scores of similar items which you will find if you keep your eyes open in professional magazines for such materials.

Studying the U.S.A. Today should be a "must" in every elementary school in the United States today. If you aren't teaching about the contemporary scene in this country, perhaps you should consider this and take steps to include it in your program. If you are already teaching along the lines indicated in this article, perhaps there are ways in which you can extend and/or deepen this study. Which ever is true, good luck to you in introducing children to the contemporary U.S.A.