

WHICH COUNTRY SHOULD BE STUDIED?

Leonard S. Kenworthy

In his provocative article in the Spring, 1967 issue of the *Social Science Record*, Professor Leo J. Alilunas raises some important questions for administrators, curriculum specialists, social studies teachers, and parents in New York State—and beyond its borders, about the selection of countries to be studied in elementary schools. His stimulating remarks regarding the new, proposed curriculum in New York State in the social studies for grades five and six merit wide discussion by everyone concerned. Particularly appropriate is his plea for wide experimentation, remembering that this proposal is not a state-wide curriculum mandate.

As a part of this hoped-for wide discussion, the writer would like to posit several propositions on this important topic.

First, it seems to this writer that it is impossible to discuss the themes for any grade or group of grades without reference to the entire proposal. Certainly the choice of countries to be studied in the fifth grade and sixth grade depends upon what is studied by children before and after that period in their school years.

Why, for example, do we still postpone the study of the world outside the United States even to the fifth grade? In an era of jets, space exploration, and television, children are exposed to the world even before they enter school. Relatives and friends are serving in the armed forces abroad, working abroad, or travelling abroad. Some children have even been in other parts of the world before their fifth year in school. They are picking up odds and ends of information—and mis-information—constantly. They need help in sorting out what they have seen and heard and they need help in putting the separate pieces of the global jig-saw puzzle in their minds into their proper place. Must this be postponed until the fifth grade except for an occasional period of current events?

Could they not be introduced to some carefully selected families in various parts of the world by the second grade, after studying some local families and some selected families in various parts of the United States in the kindergarten and in grade one?

Could they not explore several selected communities in various parts of the world in grade four, after they have explored their own community and the larger region in which it is located, in grade three?

With such a background, the job of studying countries would be much easier in the fifth or sixth grades. Skills learned in studying these smaller units of society could then be utilized in studying countries. Attitudes formed in these earlier studies could then be reinforced. From all the available research in attitude formation, it is evident that attitudes are formed at least by the time children are "six, or seven or eight". The first introduction of children to the people of the world in grade five, as now proposed, seems too late in the light of such evidence.

Another curious point which is raised by this program is why we ask children to study other countries of the world, largely in their contemporary setting, but with some attention to their past, and yet we never use this

Dr. Kenworthy is Professor of Education at Brooklyn College.

approach to our own nation. The entire fourth grade year in this new proposal is devoted to a biographical approach to United States history. Grades seven and eight are also devoted to our history. When do they learn about the United States *today*? This is certainly not done in the community studies proposed for grades two and three.

Would it not be possible—and indeed advisable—for boys and girls to study their own nation before they are introduced to other nations? Again, skills and attitudes developed in studying the U.S.A. Today could be used in studying other lands and their people.

For some curious reason or reasons, the proposed study of nations around the globe in grades five and six omits Asia and Africa. The reason this is done is presumably to cut down on the number of countries studied and to limit the study to those which are most like “us”.

But again, can such reasoning be defended in today’s world when more than half of the world’s people live in Asia and when much of our current news is coming from that part of the world? Can such a basis of selection be defended in a period when we are attempting to improve the self-identity of Negroes by helping them to become proud of their past? And can it be defended at a time when white children need to improve their image of Negroes? Such a course of action might have been acceptable in the 1930s or 1940s, but it is open to grave questioning in the 1960s and certainly will be a more vulnerable position to take in the 1970s.

Inasmuch as two years are suggested for world cultures and world history in grades nine and ten, every country of the world certainly does not need to be explored in grades five or six—or wherever the study of various countries of the world is eventually placed.

With at least 120 nations in today’s world, excluding territories, and only 180 days in a school year, or 360 in a two year period, some selection is obviously necessary if any depth is to be achieved.

This writer would opt for a new look at the entire elementary sequence in social studies, with consideration to a program which moved back and forth from the U.S. to other parts of the world, with the study of various segments of society in our own country before they are studied in more distant places. Thus children would study individuals and families in their local community and other parts of the United States in the kindergarten and first grade. They would then study a few families in other parts of the world in grade two. In the third grade they would examine in some detail their own community, following that with a study of a few other communities in our country. In the fourth grade they would then examine a few communities (including villages and cities) in a few parts of the world. In the fifth grade they might well spend a third to half of the year on the contemporary scene in their own nation and then devote the rest of the year either to a “post-hole approach” to our history or to a study of Canada and Mexico, our near neighbors.

Some Criteria for Selecting Countries

The problem still remains, however, as to which countries should be studied in grade six or in grades six and seven. Probably we need to set up several criteria for selection. Here are ten criteria, which should be “weighted” differently by curriculum planners.

1. *World Powers.* Certainly at some point the United States and the U.S.S.R. should be studied by boys and girls. Hopefully the study of the U.S.S.R. would be delayed as long as possible because of the difficulties in understanding its complex and different economic and governmental structure.

2. *Countries of the Future.* Countries which will play an important role in the future might well be a second consideration in selection. In addition to the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., such nations as China, India, Japan, Canada, Brazil, and Australia might be considered, together with the Western European Community, which may well become more and more like a country in the foreseeable future.

3. *Neighboring Nations.* Certainly Canada and Mexico merit special attention as our nearest neighbors, in addition to other factors which would place them on any list of high priority nations to study.

4. *Countries Which Represent Cultural Areas.* Geographers and other social scientists are beginning to use the cultural regions approach to dividing the world more and more, in addition to anthropologists, to whom this has always been a natural approach. There are many ways of dividing the world even in this fashion. One is to think in terms of eight major cultural areas—the Anglo-Saxon world, the Germanic-Scandinavian region, the Latin world, the Slavic areas, the Indic zone, the Moslem world, Africa—south of the Sahara, and the Sinitic (or Chinese) region. At least one, and in some instances two or three nations, should be selected from each of these cultural areas for study by elementary school children.

5. *Countries of Ancestors of the Class.* A fifth criterion might be the countries from which the ancestors of any given class came. This would vary, therefore, from school to school and classroom to classroom.

6. *Countries Representing Emerging Nations.* With more than 50 new nations in today's world, this criterion seems a reasonable one, although some of the emerging nations might well be chosen on other bases.

7. *Countries Against Which the Class Has Prejudice or Little Up-to-Date Information.* If education has as its chief purpose the development of informed individuals, as free as possible from prejudice, this is a point worth considering in the selection of countries to be studied. Which nations would this mean with your pupils—or with you? The Soviet Union, China, some African nation, Israel or Egypt—or some other Arab country,—or what?

8. *Countries Representing Our Western Heritage.* Since so much of our heritage comes from England, or the United Kingdom, it would seem to be a natural selection under this category. But there are others that might well be considered—such as France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, or Greece.

9. *Countries Representing Different Forms of Government, Economics, and Religion.* By the sixth grade, pupils should be able to wrestle in an elementary way with the differences represented by forms of economy and government, and even of religion. So these, too, should be considered among the criteria for selecting the countries to be studied.

10. *Countries on Which Adequate Materials Are Available.* A very practical criterion is the availability of materials for pupils. There is adequate material on most nations now but there are some on which there is

not enough up-to-date, objective material. So this criterion enters the picture to some extent at least.

Some Suggestions on the Countries to be Selected

Persons and committees using these 10 criteria will not come out with the same lists. Nevertheless they will have gone through a process of selection which seems to this writer a judicious one. No list will satisfy every teacher, of course.

One way to handle this situation is to have a list of countries which must be taught and a list from which teachers can select if they care to teach about other nations. Another way is to provide alternatives from which teachers themselves can select. If the emphasis in studying any nation is on important concepts, generalizations, or "big ideas" to discover, then the choice of countries is not a "now or never" proposition. It is important to remember, too, that many nations will be studied under the general rubric of world cultures or world history later on in school,—in the ninth and tenth grades according to the proposed social studies program for New York State.

Here is a list of nations which might emerge from the process of selection which has just been proposed. If two years are devoted to such a study, then the list is not too long. If one year is devoted to countries, then further refinement will be necessary. If Mexico and Canada have been studied in the fifth grade, prior to a full year's work on countries, then the list will automatically be reduced somewhat. It is assumed that at least a part of a year will be devoted to the U.S.A. Hence it is not included in this list.

The countries on this list are arranged by cultural areas rather than alphabetically. Israel does not fit into any of the existing lists of cultural areas, but it is considered important enough to include for a variety of reasons. Greece does not fit easily into any existing pattern of cultural areas but it should certainly be included for consideration. Here, then, is one list which might serve as a starter for discussion and curriculum planning:

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. Canada or Australia | 9. The U.S.S.R. |
| 2. The United Kingdom | 10. Nigeria or Kenya |
| 3. Germany or Sweden | 11. India |
| 4. France or Spain | 12. Thailand or Indonesia |
| 5. Italy or Greece | 13. China |
| 6. Argentina | 14. Japan |
| 7. Brazil | 15. The United Arab Republic or Turkey |
| 8. Mexico | 16. Israel |

It is assumed that in the study of each country, a total approach will be undertaken, including the people and the land, the value systems, the institutions of that country, the creative activities of the people, and their contacts with other nations. In each country one or two basic themes, however, would be stressed, such as the long struggle in Egypt of land (or sand) versus water or in Nigeria or Kenya the problems of a new nation.

*Some of the material in this article has been drawn from a forthcoming volume by the author on *Social Studies for the Seventies* (Blaisdell).

Please return to
JHJennings

SOCIAL SCIENCE RECORD

Volume V

Fall 1967

Number 1

Commentary

Which Country^{ies} Should Be Studied?

Leonard S. Kenworthy

Introducing the Arts into a History Course

Orville T. Murphy

A Brief History of Legal School Segregation in a
Northern City: Buffalo, New York, 1837-1880

Arthur O. White

The Social Studies and the Dissident Press

Departments

Local Council Directory

Editor Without Portfolio

Resource Review

A Publication of the

New York State Council For The Social Studies