

Teaching about a Growing World with a Good Book and a Geographic Perspective

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Despite wars, natural disasters, fears of epidemics and pandemics, and other catastrophic events that are vividly featured in media outlets, the world's population continues to rise. In fact, the world recently passed another demographic milestone: a human population of 7 billion people. The number of people on Earth has tripled since around 1930, and by 2045 it is estimated that there will be 9 billion people inhabiting the planet. Cities have grown at an especially rapid pace. As Robert Kunzig, senior environmental editor of *National Geographic*, noted in a recent article, there are 21 cities throughout the world that have a population of at least 10 million people.¹

Factors that have improved living conditions worldwide have also contributed to the rapid growth of the world's population, including effective healthcare (both preventive and treatment), the green revolution (combination of high yield seeds, irrigation, pesticides, and fertilizers that produce an abundance of grains), better access to clean water, and improved waste water disposal **technologies** and policies. Although the population explosion has multiple implications, this article focuses on **what it means for elementary** teachers, and it provides ideas for addressing the topic of population (in terms of both its growth and characteristics) in the curriculum.

Needed: A Geographic Perspective

While the increase in the world's population might be cause for concern, it is also a call to action. How people consume resources, dispose of products, and generally interact with

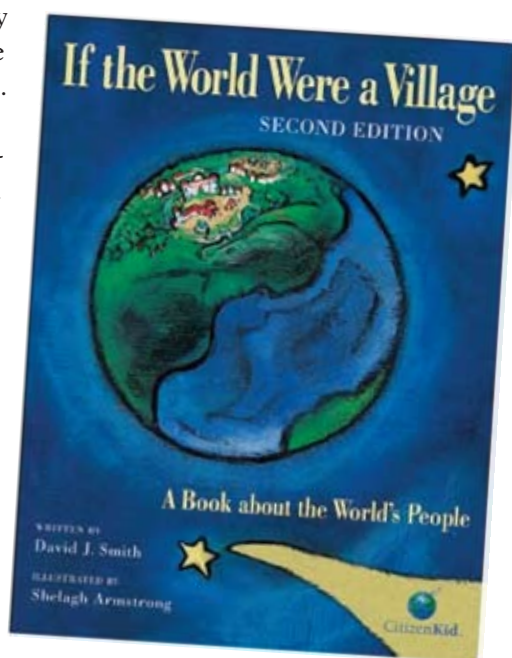
each other and the environment must be brought into greater scrutiny if we are going to continue to thrive on this planet. In a 2004 article, Clark University Professor Emerita Susan Hanson refers to “the geographic advantage,” which describes the unique capacity of geography to confer an understanding and perspective of the world that other disciplines do

not.² Geography is the only discipline devoted to providing an understanding of the relationships among people and the environment. Geography also focuses on scales, spatial variability, and other spatial analyses, but the geographic advantage that is pertinent to this article concerns human interactions with the environment.

Teaching students to see the world from a geographic perspective, that is, thinking like a geographer, is a necessary step in understanding the world's demographics, and is a feature of good social studies curricula. Geographic thinking is also a prerequisite for resolving some of the issues associated with increased population, as well as recognizing opportunities and benefits that a large population offers. Despite the importance of a geographic perspective, a problem (that has now been well-documented) is that the teaching of social studies in general and geography in particular is not afforded much time in the elementary school curriculum.

Sad Irony

While all educators and concerned citizens agree that there is a need to increase awareness of issues surrounding human conditions as well as the need for a geographic perspective in a heavily populated world, the sad irony is that many elementary teachers are unable to teach geography. Time for geography instruc-



tion has been cut, while the importance of students coming to understand geographic concepts and engage in spatial thinking and world-mindedness (two aspects of geographic education) has increased. In addition, many teachers are unprepared to teach geography given the emphasis on reading/language arts skills in professional development opportunities and teacher education programs.

Headlines about “global climate change” and the “global market” along with popular books such as *The World is Flat* by Thomas L. Friedman and *Why Geography Matters* by Harm de Blij point out growing interest in matters of global import.³ People of all ages are taking note of the impact of such issues as world economic markets, global climate change, energy needs and possibilities, and world politics. Good teachers recognize the importance of these issues, but still have to scramble to find time to squeeze such vital matters into a curriculum that focuses on reading and writing skills. The good news, though, is that help is available.

Help for Geography Teaching

There are a number of ways that teachers have found to keep geography content in the elementary curriculum. Curriculum integration is one method that is often touted as a way to increase time for social studies teaching in general. Curriculum integration is defined as

A curriculum approach that purposefully draws together knowledge, perspectives, and methods of inquiry from more than one discipline to develop a more powerful understanding of a central idea, issue, person, or event.⁴

There are a number of models for integrating the curriculum that include correlating material from one subject to another, the thematic model where the curriculum surrounds a particular theme, the fusion model where subject matter is merged to form a new field of thought, and others.⁵ Whatever the method of integration that teachers use, it is important to keep in mind that the main goal of curriculum integration is to help create people who will be able to incorporate knowledge of the disciplines into their own thinking process. That is, the purpose of curriculum integration is to create integrated thinkers. An integrated thinker is a person who is able to access knowledge of the disciplines to help them confront issues and problems in society and the world.

Healthy integration leads to students who can think according to the disciplines (i.e., geography, history, economics, political science, etc.). Teachers who are successful at creating students who can think geographically or historically, for instance, use reading and writing as vehicles for creating integrated thinkers. The goal is that these students will eventually become productive citizens who will always be able to think geographically, for instance, and therefore be aware of matters of global import, such as population.

Scaled for Understanding

Understanding that the world’s population is expanding is one important aspect of geography education to which elementary students can be introduced. A more important aspect, though, is learning about who makes up the world’s population. Helping students understand the cultures and locations of the world’s people is a key step in attaining a geographic perspective and addressing issues while recognizing possibilities.

An example of a book that vividly describes the population of the world while entertaining readers is David Smith’s *If the World Were a Village: A Book About the World’s People*.⁶ This delightful book has helped countless teachers advance the goals of social studies throughout this country and even the world. In fact, the book can now be found in at least 19 countries and has been translated into 17 languages. Through this book, teachers have been able to apply concepts in math, reading, and language arts, while providing students with a geographic perspective.

Smith, a former seventh grade teacher, came up with the idea for the book after a student asked him how many people he would be able to talk to in the world if he spoke French instead of Spanish. (He was trying to decide which foreign language class he should take.) As a result, Smith and his students started to think about global demographic statistics and characteristics. Using simple calculations, Smith estimated general demographic characteristics of our world if its total population was scaled to 100 people. So, in this imaginary village, one villager represents approximately 67 million (67,000,000) people from the real world.

Beautifully illustrated by Shelagh Armstrong, the book describes a global village where 61 of the villagers are Asian; 14 are African; 11 European; 8 South American, Central American, or Caribbean; 5 are from Canada and the United States; and 1 is from Oceania. There are more than 6,000 languages spoken in this village of 100 people, but most people speak just eight of the languages: 21 speak a dialect of Chinese (mostly Mandarin), 9 speak English, 9 speak Hindi, 7 speak Spanish, 4 speak Arabic, 4 speak Bengali, 3 speak Portuguese, and 3 speak Russian.

The village is also described according to other statistics. For instance, there are pages that describe religion (33 are Christian, for instance), literacy (17 cannot read or write), age (37 are under the age of 19), wealth (10 earn less than one dollar a day), schooling and literacy (of the 72 people over age 15, 13 cannot read at all), and much more.

The lesson plan ideas for this book are many. One teacher in North Dakota, created a similar “village” that showed students what North Dakota would be like if it only had 100 people.⁷ Students learned about the ages of the North Dakota population, types of and number of animals, which languages are spoken, and even such things as number of children living with grandparents. Using data from Census.gov and other information readily available on the Internet, creative teachers are able to describe their own community and better understand the

characteristics of people around them, using methods similar to those applied in *If the World Were a Village*.

Conclusion

In this time of global population expansion, coming to understand the populations of the world and the interactions between humans and the environment is increasingly vital. The relationship between people and the environment is an aspect that is unique to the field of geography, making it a “geographic advantage.”⁸ The sad irony is that during this critical time, when human impacts upon the environment threaten to engender large-scale crises, geography is being left out of the curriculum.

Curriculum integration is often suggested as a way to insert social studies perspectives into the curriculum. Integration is only effective, though, if teachers strive to create students who are able to access disciplinary knowledge when facing issues and opportunities at local and global levels. That is, the goal of integration should be to create integrated thinkers, not just to insert social studies facts here and there into other disciplines. For that reason alone, social studies deserves its own place in the curriculum.

If the World Were a Village is a book that adeptly integrates social studies disciplines—like geography and civics—with math, science, visual arts, reading, and language arts. Now it’s up to teachers to use this book in truly integrative ways in their classrooms. 📖

Notes

1. Robert Kunzig, “Population 7 Billion,” *National Geographic* 219, no. 1 (January 2011): 42-63.
2. Susan Hanson, “Who Are ‘We’? An Important Question for Geography’s Future,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, no. 4 (2004): 715-722.
3. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005); Harm de Blij, *Why Geography Matters: Three Challenges Facing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
4. Walter C. Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education* (Columbus, OH: Pearson Merrill, Prentice-Hall, 2006): 252-253.
5. Elizabeth Hinde, “Fractured Social Studies or Integrated Thinkers: The End Results of Curriculum Integration,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 4 (2009).
6. David J. Smith, *If the World Were a Village: A Book About the World’s People*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 2002).
7. Elizabeth Hinde, “Reading Our World: If the World Were a Village,” *The Geography Teacher* 6, no. 1 (2009): 17-22.
8. Hanson, 720.

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