

Mapwork

By Malkin Dare

The year that my daughter was in grade 6, I educated her at home. During that year, she learned many things, but the area in which she felt she made the most progress and about which she was proudest, was – mapwork!

Near the end of the year, my daughter happened to be playing a board game that required some knowledge of world geography. Her fellow players were public school students and, not to beat about the bush, she slaughtered them. Her victory made her feel really smart, and she later confided to me that she used to feel stupid because she didn't know where things were in the world. She had assumed this was the sort of thing that smart people just naturally knew.

These days, amazingly few public schools teach kids where things are in the world. The general feeling seems to be that it's unimportant to waste time on memorizing mere facts since they can always be looked up in reference material, like atlases and maps or on the Internet, whenever a specific bit of information is needed,

According to the dominant philosophy, the optimum way to teach geography is to teach students how to find information, as opposed to actually learning it – and, to the extent that geography is taught at all in public schools, research skills are mostly all there is in the curriculum.

As a reading tutor, I daily witness an almost total lack of geographical knowledge on the part of my public school students. Few of my students, for example, can find Canada on a globe.

Even though my students' new-found phonics skills enable them to read fairly sophisticated words and stories, their ignorance of geography (along with a lot of other areas of general knowledge) means they are frequently handicapped in terms of comprehension. For example:

- Because my students have no idea where Spain or India is, they have no way of understanding why Christopher Columbus sailed west or why he was so surprised.
- Some place names, like Mediterranean (middle of the earth) and Mesopotamia (between two rivers) have a rich meaning which is lost on my students.
- My students' comprehension of planetary phenomena, like the destruction of the rain forests or high tides in the Bay of Fundy or earthquakes, is shaky because it depends on geographical understanding.
- The importance of many human artifacts, like canals and time zones and the Great Wall of China, can't be appreciated by my students because they lack the background.

A Systematic Approach

To give your program structure, I suggest that you use one of the excellent books available, such as *The Reader's Digest Children's Atlas of World Geography* or *The Kingfisher Children's Atlas* or *Children's World Atlas* (available at major bookstores for \$20 - \$30). It may also be possible to borrow a good beginning atlas from the public library (you can usually renew library books two or three times).

The idea is to find an atlas that systematically introduces the oceans and the continents and gives an overview of the countries in each continent. In addition to being an aid to teaching the political and physical features of the world, these books typically also explain useful conventions such as lines of longitude and latitude, scale, legends, gazetteers, etc.

Daily, or at least frequent, short sessions are best. You might be surprised by how interested your student becomes in the material and, ideally, you will frequently end the day's session with him begging for just a few more minutes.

A globe is another excellent teaching tool. Kids enjoy fooling around with globes, and they are superior to maps in conveying the physical reality of our world – its roundness, its features like oceans and mountains, the continents' true proportions without the distortions forced by two-dimensional representations.

There are lots of teaching aids on the market. If you google "map games", you'll find a wealth of on-line resources. Many stores, for example Scholar's Choice, carry map jigsaw puzzles, geographical board and card games, map quizzes, and so forth.

As you progress through the various countries, be on the lookout for ways to enrich and supplement what you are learning. For example, you might rent a movie set in the country du jour. Or borrow a picture book from the library. Or dress up in the country's national costume for Hallowe'en. Or look for news items about that country in the newspaper or on the television news. Or, if you really like a particular country, why not plan a trip there and involve your student in the planning?

Your goal in teaching geography, as in other curriculum areas, is to create Velcro in the student's brain for new knowledge to attach itself to. The more cross references and connections, the more likely the student is to remember the information. And, of course, you may pick up a thing or two yourself in the process!

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