

TEACHER'S GUIDE TO LEARNING ACTIVITIES: GRADES K-2

Janet Brown McCracken

People of Our Nation by Carole Skog McGeehan

Introduction by Carol Brunson Phillips



Americans All® A National Education Program

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- An entry-level activity providing an essential background for understanding later concepts presented in the Americans All® program. Appropriate for kindergarteners and very early readers.
- ■ Generally appropriate for first graders and older groups in which children have had previous experience with Americans All® entry activities and are beginning to read.
- ■ ■ More in-depth suggestions primarily for second graders and older children who have completed the one- and two-square activities and who are more experienced readers.



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INTRODUCTION

All across the United States children are learning in pluralistic classrooms, just as they have done for generations. More than one-third of our nation's schoolchildren are from diverse families—African American, Hispanic American, Asian American or Native American. From the inner cities to small rural communities, young children enter their classroom doors speaking Spanish, Russian, Hmong or one of about 150 other languages. In addition to their home language, children also bring their own unique personalities, expectations and behaviors to school.

This national diversity is somewhat akin to a tossed salad, a savory stew or a colorful rainbow. Unlike the past, today's cultural and ethnic heritages are viewed as world treasures to be preserved for future generations. We are "Americans All," and the early formative years are prime times for helping children build an appreciation for—and knowledge about—the richness of the variety of people who live and work in our nation.

Young children, families and teachers together can celebrate this diversity by playing traditional games, preparing favorite foods, listening to stories about real people and, most of all, by getting to know and getting along with one another. The skills, attitudes and knowledge children acquire in their early years will form the foundation for them to gain more skills, solve more problems together and study issues in depth as they grow up to be tomorrow's parents and leaders.

The Americans All® activities and materials provide teachers with an intriguing collection of resources and ideas for celebrating our country's diversity. This unique curriculum contains suggestions to tailor these materials, along with those already in every classroom, to children's developmental levels, cultures and individual styles. Older children can use the Americans All® program to explore the people and events that shaped our nation through an abundant selection of historical readings and photographs, as well as through relevant group and individual learning activities.

The Americans All® resources for teachers of young children are also developmentally appropriate. Primary schoolchildren want new responsibilities. When they succeed with these tasks, they are eager to try new challenges. Young children are sticklers for fairness and accuracy, so your questions can spark intense discussion or immediate action: Why is it not fair to say we sit like Indians? How can you work out a solution that satisfies both of you? What did those names you heard really mean?

Especially in children's first eight years, curriculum is what happens all around them; a name-calling incident on the bus or playground, a picture on a holiday greeting card or even a seemingly innocent movie can spark intense interest about culture. They may ask potentially embarrassing questions about people. Through everything that



goes on around them, even classroom rules, children begin to forge new understandings about themselves and one another.

This classroom guide is designed to strengthen and expand teaching strategies that facilitate children's thinking and problem-solving in pluralistic directions. In addition to building on what children already know and can do, children can become engaged in a wide range of projects that more fully establish their sense of personal, community and national history. Stories, games, field trips, the Americans All® Photograph Collection, families, art activities and songs all play a part in celebrating the diversity of your classroom —and of America.

Carol Brunson Phillips
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Establishing a Culturally Relevant Classroom

Children will learn to see themselves as successful when they realize the rewards of their own competence. Feelings of “I am capable” grow when the children:

- exhibit genuine pride in themselves and others for accomplishments and personal attributes;
- gain greater self-control;
- solve real problems using their budding skills;
- see their families involved in education; and
- sense they are an important part of their community.

Children empowered by an atmosphere of personal and community involvement become committed to democracy, truth, fairness and other ideals shared by all Americans. These children *are* readers and writers, mathematicians, scientists, musicians, artists, anthropologists, poets and decision-makers. They can absorb what they are able to understand now, and build on their experiences to hold them in good stead in the future.

Every community and classroom contains a wealth of resources for learning, even when school budgets are mere shoestrings. People — students, families, teachers, administrators and area residents — are the sparks who will make learning come alive! Teaching in developmentally appropriate, culturally relevant ways can be a welcome change from the more impersonal, mechanical approaches that dictate the same approach for every teacher and child.

The Americans All® program offers an opportunity for everyone to get involved in a spirit of creating caring communities inside and outside the classroom. *Caring Communities: Supporting Young Children and Families* (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1991) describes ways that communities can support children’s education and development. Families are often willing to loan objects or share their expertise. Community groups contribute to school resources and encourage field trips. Teachers may need to look no farther than their own backyard for everything needed to create a culturally relevant classroom.

The Americans All® program for early elementary children is designed to meet the criteria for developmentally appropriate learning materials and activities listed in Table 2. These criteria help ensure that children’s activities are culturally relevant and provide children with the skills and information they need to function in a diverse world community.

“Yes” answers indicate a greater potential for children to learn in culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate ways. “No” answers probably mean the item or activity should be skipped in favor of better opportunities to shape a curriculum anchored on more professional knowledge.



Table 2: Criteria for Learning Materials and Activities

- 1. Do children learn primarily by extending their own experiences and gaining insights from one another? Does the activity or material make sense to them?**
- 2. Can the children carry out nearly all of the activity by themselves?**
- 3. Do culture and history come alive?**
- 4. Are people's real experiences—clothing, habits, music, homes, families and foods—accurately portrayed? Are people viewed as unique individuals within a culture?**
- 5. Are various cultures portrayed, with an emphasis on the peoples who live within the children's community?**
- 6. Is pride in each child's heritage fostered?**
- 7. Are principles of democracy instilled?**

Welcome to Our Room

In classrooms that celebrate diversity and foster authentic self-esteem, children will encounter people, objects and ideas that make them feel at home from the moment they walk through the door. Inexpensive, everyday cultural artifacts, such as those listed in Table 3, can be purchased or borrowed, and the collection can grow with each passing year.

Table 3: Items that Increase Cultural Relevance

- Pillows, rugs and wall hangings
- Baskets made from many materials
- Lacquered boxes and wooden bowls
- Wind chimes, drums and other authentic musical instruments, plus recordings of various types of choral and instrumental music
- Sculpture and fine art prints
- Jewelry made from wooden beads, shells, turquoise, seeds and other materials
- Ethnic puppets and dolls made from fabric, wood, china and plastic
- Stuffed, rubber and wooden animals
- Books, pictures, magazines, dictionaries, telephone books and newspapers in several languages
- Eating and cooking utensils (chopsticks, flour sifter)
- Coins and paper money
- Games, puzzles and blocks from many cultures
- Maps and globes
- Items used by people with various abilities (crutches, glasses frames)
- Things used at work (hard hats, fishing nets, calculators)
- Plants and plant materials from different climates, such as cacti, ferns, rice, nuts and cotton
- Tools for everyday living



Education Is a Family Affair

Families can be the most enlightening resource of all because they always want the best for their children. Each year offers a fresh opportunity to welcome families as partners in their children's education.

Before the school year opens, or shortly thereafter, meet with the children's family members to get to know one another, exchange information and find ways to work together on behalf of the children. Family members can be invited to informal meetings in writing or by telephone. Use the families' home languages and interaction styles consistent with their culture, and offer choices of day and evening appointments to accommodate work and school schedules.

Before each meeting, teachers can collect samples of the child's artwork, photos of the child engaged in activities in the classroom and other relevant materials to share with the family. Likewise, encourage families to bring along a sample or two of something important to the child. They might choose the child's favorite book, show a family photo or provide information about something that represents one of the child's favorite activities or interests. This will help focus the discussion and ensure that information is exchanged in both directions.

Prepare an area of the room with adult-sized chairs casually arranged in a circle or semicircle. Families might be pleased to find light refreshments. Locate interpreters if needed to facilitate the discussion. Teachers can also anticipate how best to respond to difficult questions.

Meet the family members at the main door and briefly tour the facility on the way to their children's classroom if they are new to the school building. As with the children, teachers should greet family members warmly in their home language and introduce themselves. Also ask family members how they want to be addressed. For example:

Hello! I'm Mark Wellington, Imani's kindergarten teacher. I'm so glad you could come to King School today. Imani's classroom is down this way, past the library. Before we begin, I'd like to know what names you would like me to use for you as we talk together.

Immediately begin to address family members in their preferred styles, and jot this down at the earliest convenience for the future.

Most families are curious about the classroom, so explanations might be offered as they browse around:

This is our block area, one of the children's favorites. They can build ships, farms, cities or the moon if they'd like. There are small carts, little bicycles, lots of different animals and miniature people the children can pretend with as they learn, too.

