# The Impossible Subject: Social Studies

I read many years ago an article stating that over 90 percent of American high school seniors could not locate Paris on a world map. I could not believe it. Having now lived and taught in the US, I not only believe it, I know that this is barely the tip of the iceberg.

   A few years ago, I decided to figure out what was wrong with Social Studies in elementary schools. I started the year with a Pre-test to find out how much my 5th and 6th grade students knew in Social Studies. For geography, I asked them to name five countries in each continent and their capitals (only three for North America). No one managed to answer all questions correctly. Someone even answered, “Phoenix” for capital of the USA. Most of the students could not name the three countries in North America. The best answer for Europe came from a little Albanian boy who had immigrated to the US via Italy and France. For history I asked them to name only three famous persons from each continent, from any time in history. Those pages were even blanker than the geography ones. After glancing through all the answers, I asked the class collectively, “All right, give me just three countries in Europe!” One said, “France! -- Good,” I replied, “capital?” Someone else said, “Paris!” So far so good. “One more,” I demanded, “a second country in Europe.” A little voice shouted enthusiastically, “Japan!”

   Now, I wondered what made a student say such a thing. Surely, they knew what a Japanese looked like. Then, the answer hit me. Their knowledge of continents and countries was limited to words and maps. There were no images associated with those names! So I pulled the little Albanian boy to the front of the class and pointed at his face and said to the class, "This is a typical European face." Then I pointed at my own Chinese face and said, "This is a typical Asian face." Then I asked the class, "So, is Japan in Europe?" Everyone answered in unison, "No! -- What continent is Japan in?" All shouted back, "In Asia!" They knew very well I was of Chinese and not Japanese origin, but now they were able to associate certain facial features with a continent.

   I thought about this issue after class and came to two conclusions. The first possibility is that America is a melting pot and children in the US see all races and colors at school and in the streets. They therefore do not associate specific physical characteristics with specific regions, countries or continents. The other possible cause for this lack of imagery in their minds is that despite the beautiful photo-studded textbooks, the curriculum is so wide and shallow that the resulting images form a crazy merry-go-round in their mind. Consider the typical "World History" textbook in Grade 6. From the cavemen to the Cold War through every continent in nine months! Even an adult's mind would be spinning!

   Most teachers get away with this crazy curriculum by skipping much of it; others stick to it but give students a "study guide" prior to tests and exams. For those of you who do not know this typically American piece of scholaria, a study guide is a handout that "reviews" the material to be tested in the form of test questions. Next day, lo and behold, the same material appears on the test but in a different reincarnation. The true and false question has been changed to a multiple choice one, and the fill in the blank question to a match the columns, and so on. A week later, not a single student remembers anything.

   Some schools have recognized this ridiculous exercise for what it is and so use an alternate method for providing grades: the portfolio. This consists of a folder filled with work done by the student: certainly a great improvement on the joke of a test. However, very often the student still does not recognize facts, dates and names a few weeks later, let alone recall them.