



Child Life in the New England Colonies

Curriculum Unit 03.02.06
by Jameka K. Sayles

I am a Social Studies teacher at the Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School in New Haven. My teaching assignment this year included approximately 100 fifth and sixth grade students. My subject area is Social Studies with a focus on American History.

Our school is comprised of students from the New Haven Area as well as students from several other districts. My school is very diverse. From the staff to the students, my school is like a microcosm of America. We have people from various ethnic backgrounds, religions, and races. Because it is an Arts school, we also have students who are richly gifted in music, dance, drama, visual art, etc. This beautiful patchwork was very obviously displayed in my homeroom class this year. There were 20 students altogether, 12 boys and 8 girls. I had four Hispanic students, 13 African American, 1 Turkish, 1 Tibetan, and 1 of Jamaican descent.

My desire to write this curriculum unit stems from three major areas. The first is my genuine love of History. I love to investigate things of the past. I wise man once said, "If you don't where you come from you will never know where you are going." My second reason is based on the curriculum standards that have been outlined by New Haven Public Schools. Students will:

- Gather historical data from multiple primary and secondary resources
- Formulate questions and hypotheses from multiple perspectives using multiple sources.

The final area is based upon the natural curiosity of my students. Throughout the school year, I noticed how intrigued the students were to learn about children of the past. The students were usually able to relate to the lives of the children of the past by comparing to their lives today.

My curriculum unit targets the fifth grade students that I teach. As fifth graders there are several adjustments they have to make upon entering school in August. Students must learn to adjust to changing classes, opening lockers, Arts classes, and learning from several different teachers throughout the course of the day. Along with these environmental adjustments, students also have educational adjustments to make. Since there is such a big focus on Reading and Mathematics in the primary grades, students have limited background knowledge in History.

Students will be studying this unit shortly after a unit on the Mayflower. Students will have that background information to build upon as they explore the material of this unit. My unit is a hands-on, interdisciplinary unit. I think that the children will be very excited to know how children in this area lived in colonial times. In previous units where I incorporated the life of children of that time period, students were amazed at the similarities and well as the differences.

Child life in the New England Colonies

In the Puritan communities of the New England colonies, babies were esteemed as reminders of God's grace or on the other hand the strategies of the devil. The baby's delivery would take place at home in what was known as the inner room. In this room, midwives and other experienced women of the community would assist the mother in giving birth to the child. After the birth, the mother and child would remain in that area until the mother was well enough to go out in the other parts of the main house. One in every thirty mothers would lose their lives in the delivery process or in other words one in every five mothers died due to complications of childbirth. (Demos, 131)

From the day of birth, the baby was up against many challenges to his survival. The infant mortality rate was high due to several factors. Laws of sanitation were unknown and viewed as unnecessary. Disinfection was limited to the sprinkling of vinegar. Childhood diseases such as smallpox, influenza, sore throats, or other contagious diseases spread as a result of this poor sanitation methods. (Glubok, 96)

Within days of a child's birth, the infant was named and baptized in the meetinghouse. Summer babies were more fortunate than those born in winter. The ice that formed in the christening bowl had to be broken in order to baptize the child. (Glubok, 96) Puritans took much pride in naming their children. The name of the child held much significance. The significance stemmed from the bible, prophecy, and morals. Parents hoped that the child would live up to the name's meaning.

As babies, they were placed in wooden or wicker cradles. The cradle of Peregrine White, the first child of Plymouth, is one of the authentic surviving artifacts from the Mayflower. Perhaps for a short period of time the baby slept with the parents. After a few months he may be moved with a sibling to a "trundle bed." If the child was from a wealthy family, he might be covered with an embroidered silk blanket inscribed with scripture.

The baby's clothing was limited to linen smock. Boys and girls wore the same clothing throughout most of their early childhood. It was light and did not serve to limit the child's movement. They were also covered in several wool blankets and placed close to the fire for warmth. The baby was entirely fed with breast milk. Therefore the baby was very close to the mother, which created a bond of intimacy. The babies were fed in this manner for up to one year, thus causing the birth of siblings to be spread over two years. Lactation could cause problems with conception. (Demos, 133)

The first year of the child's life was, for the most part, calm and easygoing. A large family probably surrounded him with several siblings.

As the child was learning to walk, he was placed in a go-cart standing stool. These walkers helped babies take their first steps but could only travel back and forth.

"Surely there is in all children (though not alike) a stubbornness and stoutness of mind arising from natural pride which must first be in the first place broken and beaten down so that the foundation of their education being laid in humility and tractable ness and other virtues may in their time be built thereon" (Demos, 135)

-The Reverend John Robinson, a mister at Plymouth.

The above quotation is the basis upon which most of the "philosophy" of child rearing was based upon in the New England colonies, namely Plymouth. Adults believed that children were to be humble and submissive. Adults believed that children were born with a sin nature that must be broken. This nature was based upon the original sin of Adam and thus has been passed along to every generation. Temptations were all around and therefore children needed to fit against the sin nature in order to strive to improve themselves at all times.

Parents and other adults began to "break the child's will" beginning somewhere around the age of one and two years. (Demos, 135) Also at this time, the child was being weaned from the mother's breast milk. Parents began to establish limits all in the effort to break the child's aggressive and assertive nature. Just before this time period, parents were very eager and nearly forceful to make the child walk. They believed that by the child being on all fours, he was too close to the animal kingdom. Parents were diligent in training the children to walk as soon as possible.

As the baby entered childhood, strict lessons on behavior and courtesy were taught. The biblical commandment of "Honor thy father and mother..." was taken very seriously. Children were admonished to have the utmost respect of their parents in the presence of other adults. Adults began teaching children courtesy in order to prepare them for their future lives as adults in the community. There are several accounts of lawsuits for the seeming petty reasons of slander, lying, name calling, jeering, etc. (Glubok, 104)

Whippings and beating were used in extreme cases. Just as the child was to respect their parents, parents also had several responsibilities to their children. Parents were to meet the basic needs of the children in the areas of physical health, welfare, and education. (At various levels) If parents did not follow through on their responsibilities they were subjected to fines or in some instances children were taken away and placed in the care of some else to become an apprentice.

Children were expected to contribute to their families in the form of working. Children began working as early as age four or five. Small children helped by weeding flax plants. The work of girls was closely related to the home and the work of her mother. Girls learned to sew, knead bread, and assist in the childcare of younger siblings. Boys worked mostly outdoors by way of caring for animals and crops. Boys also used jackknives to carve wood into spoons, bowls, and breadboards.

Formal education was not available for every child in colonial New England. For the children that did attend school, it was very different from today. Children that did attend went after early morning work was completed. The Puritans thought that learning was very important. They believed that the devil tricked people by keeping them in ignorance. Education was a tool to fight the temptations of evil. (Samuel, 27)

In Massachusetts, reading was viewed as being so necessary that early laws were put in place to see that each community taught this basic skill. The Massachusetts law of 1642 stated,

"...See that all youth under family government be taught to read perfectly in the English tongue, have knowledge in the capital law, and be taught some orthodox catechism, and that they be brought up to some honest employment, profitable to themselves and to the commonwealth."

(Frost, 51)

A dame school was common during early colonial days. A woman, usually a widow, would gather a few children in her house to teach them reading and some writing while she continued to complete her daily household work. In the one room school, there were no blackboards, maps, or globes. Lead pencils were not introduced until 1761. Children wrote with feather pen using ink made from walnut oil. Every child was expected to bring a log to keep the fire burning. The log was a way of paying the teacher for her services and also to keep the classroom warm.

Paper was so scarce that students learned their fundamental skills by using a hornbook. The hornbook was a wooden paddle with a piece of paper tacked to it. The paper contained the alphabet, simple combinations of

vowels and constants and a prayer. A thin layer of cow horn protected the paper. Students traced over the letters with a sharp stick until they memorized each letter. Children learned mathematical concepts with a game called ninepin.

After the students mastered the hornbook, they moved on to The New England Primer. It was used throughout New England for over one hundred years. The book began with the alphabet. The letters were illustrated with a biblical reference. The letters and pages were filled with biblical advice to help children lead a virtuous life.

The schoolmasters were very strict disciplinarians. When he entered the room, all of the children were to rise from their seats. His authority was never questioned. He disciplined the children freely in various ways. Children were whipped with hickory or willow branches. The teacher often used forms of humiliation. They were forced to wear cards that stated their crime. A boy who did not complete his math assignments was labeled as an idler. A girl that turned around to talk to a child behind her was called a "Pert-Moss-Prat-a-Pace."(Samuel, 28)

Between all the work, bible lessons, and schooling, children still found time to just be kids! They played games like marbles, flying kites, bowling, ring toss, walking on stilts, sack races, Blind Man's Bluff, and spinning tops. There was really no such thing as being an adolescent/teenager. The word adolescent has only been used for about the past 75 years. (Demos, 145)

Children were expected to follow their parent's footsteps. Children usually left school once they were able to read, write, and do basic math. At that time, many left to become apprentices. The child was bound legal to serve under his master for a number of years. The apprenticeship lasted about four to five years but could last until age twenty-one. The master was responsible for teaching a trade. Boys learned to be blacksmiths, printers, shoemakers, or cabinetmakers. Girls learned trades like weaving and dressmaking.

A few young men were able to continue on to higher education. A man was thought to be educated if he had a knowledge of Latin and maybe Greek. Boys were required to recite long passages even if they had no idea of the meaning. The study of these languages was seen as improper for girls.

Lesson Plans

Students will use their textbooks, *Our United States* Chapter 5 Lesson 2, for most of the background information.

Lesson 1- Stages of life

Objectives:

- Formulate a list of significant events in the life of a child

Lesson Description

Students will work together in cooperative groups in order to brainstorm events that occur in a child's life from prenatal to age twelve. Students will make a chart to record the age and events that go on in a child's life at those times. After the students have time to organize their ideas in the groups, we will collaborate as a class to make a chart. As the unit progresses, we can make comparison between colonial children and children today. If the students have difficulty, here are some questions to ask:

1. How are babies treated before they are born? (Mom receives a lot of attention, Lamaze classes, baby shower, etc.)
2. When do babies sit up, crawl, walk, talk, become potty trained, etc.?
3. What church related activities to children participate in? (baptism, christening, communion, confirmation)
4. At what age do children attend school?
5. When do children begin to help with chores?

Lesson 2-What's in a name?

Objectives

- Research the meaning and significance of the student's name
- Research the meaning and significance of the name of a Colonial child

The night before this lesson students will research the meaning of their names. Is the name biblical? Are you a Jr., III, or IV? Is your name a combination of your mom and dad's name? We will have a class discussion on how the Puritans named their children. They were named and baptized just days after their birth. Children's names held much significance. The significance was usually formulated from the bible, prophecy, and morals. Students will also choose a name that was common during colonial times, research its meaning, and tell why they choose it.

Lesson 3-Childhood diseases

Objectives:

- Use research methods to examine the causes and the nature of diseases in Colonial America.
- Examine methods of vaccination and prevention of diseases

Infant mortality rate in colonial American was high due to diseases such as smallpox, influenza, sore throats, contagious diseases, and the spread of infections due to lack of proper disinfections methods. Students will use the Internet and other secondary resources to research some common child hood diseases from colonial America. The students will also research to find out how those diseases affect children today.

Lesson 4- Objects of babyhood

Objectives:

- Compare and contrast the baby objects of today with those in Colonial America

The night prior to this lesson students will use newspapers and magazines to cut out objects that represent babyhood, such as, cribs, walkers and clothing. In class we will look at pictures of artifacts from colonial America and make comparisons. We will also see how the objects have evolved and/or remained the same. Students will then chose one item from colonial America and describe how it was used, how it is used today, and how it looks today.

Lesson 5- Work

Objectives:

- Describe the types of work children did in the past and those of today
- Compare and contrast the work of today with those in Colonial America

In this lesson students will describe the work that colonial children did as well as what children of today do for chores. Students will describe the ages and the chores according to gender. Small children helped by weeding the flax plants. The work of the girls was closely related to that of their mothers and the household. Girls of age six were able to operate a spinning wheel. They also sewed, kneaded bread, and helped care for younger siblings. Boys worked mostly outdoors to care for animals and crops. Boys also used jackknives to carve wood into spoons, bowls, and breadboards. Students will also make comparisons with the chores of today and the ages that children do them.

Lesson 6- School Days

Objectives:

- Analyze primary sources in order to formulate conclusions of what school was like in Colonial America.

In this lesson students will begin to explore what it was like for colonial children to attend school. Education of American colonial children depended on several factors such as gender, class, and location. Formal education was not available to every child in colonial America. Children went to school after the early morning chores were completed. Every child was expected to bring a log for the fire. The log was a way of paying the teacher for her services and to keep the room warm. Students that did not bring the log had to sit away from the fire. Education was directly linked to religious and moral instruction. Students will read excerpts from Going to

School in 1776.

Lesson 7- School Days Part II- Hornbook

Objectives:

- Describe the purpose of a hornbook
- Construct a replica of a hornbook
- Observe and analyze samples of hornbooks

In this lesson students will make a hornbook. In the one-room schoolhouses, there were no blackboards, maps, or globes. Lead pencils were not introduced until 1761 but were still uncommon in schools. Paper was so scarce that students learned the fundamentals by using a hornbook. The hornbook was not real a book. It was a wooden paddle that has a piece of paper tacked to it. The paper contained the alphabet, simple combinations of vowels and consonants, and a prayer. A thin layer of cow horn covered and protected the paper. Students traced over the letters with a sharp stick until they memorized it.

To make the hornbook you will need: cardboard or oak tag, wax paper, and regular paper. Students can cut the oak tag into the shape of the hornbook. Then they will write information that is important to know in Social Studies class, such as, continents, oceans, presidents, etc. They may include a prayer or proverb (wise saying). Then they cover the paper with the wax paper to protect it. They also staple or glue the wax paper to it. Then they can punch a hole in the handle and put a string through it to tie it around their necks.

Lesson 8- Fun and Games

Objectives:

- Describe the games that were played by colonial children
- Play some of the games

Between all the chores, bible lesson, and schooling, children found time to just be kids. They played games like marbles, flying kites, bowling, ring toss, walking on stilts, having sack races, Blind Man's Bluff, and spinning tops. In this lesson students will experience playing some of the common games of colonial times. Students will also make comparisons with popular games of today.

Lesson 9- School Days Part III

Objectives:

- Simulate a day of school for a colonial child

This lesson is a combination of lessons 7 and 8. A representative from the New Haven Historical Society will visit our class to do a reenactment of a school day in a colonial school. The representative will take them through activities, such as, spelling, writing with a quill pen and ink, and playing games. This is an excellent hands-on activity that will allow students to experience a glimpse of school life in the colonies

Adult Bibliography

Axtell, James. *The School Upon a Hill* . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974. An excellent reference book that covers birth to adulthood in colonial America

Cremin, Lawrence A., *American Education: The Colonial Experience 1607-1783* . New York: 1970. A detailed account of the educational structure in the colonies

Demos, John, *A Little Commonwealth: Family life in Plymouth Colony* A detailed reference to the structure of the home and community in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Frost, S. E. Jr., *Introduction to American Education* . New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1962.

Glubok, Shirley, *Home and Child Life in Colonial Days* . New York: Macmillan Publishing Company Inc., 1969. (Adapted from Alice Morse Earl's book) An excellent book that explains in details the home and child life.

Loeper, John J., *Going to School in 1776*. New York: Atheneum, 1973. A journal-like book that gives entries from students and their school experiences.

Children's Bibliography

Isaacs, Sally S. *Life in a Colonial Town* . Chicago: Heineman Library, 2001

The book tells about people who set up the first colony in the United States. It also discusses their homes, shelter, food, schools, communities, and everyday actions.

Kent, Deborah *How we lived in Colonial New England* . New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2000.

Explains various aspects of life of early settlements in New England including homes, schools, religion, work, and community

McGovern, Ann *...if you sailed on the Mayflower*. New York: Scholastic, 2000.

The book proposes questions that children of today might ask about the Mayflower. The questions are answered by the author in words and pictures.

Massof, Joy *Colonial Times 1600-1700* . New York Scholastic Magazines Incorporated, 1969.

Illustrated with photos from the American Living Historical Museum recreates early American settlement by describing in words and pictures various aspects of colonial lives, such as, work, food, clothing, shelter, and relations with Native Americans.

Washbourne, Carolyn Kott *A Multicultural Portrait of Colonial Life*. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2000.

Describes colonial history from the point of view of minorities and women

Wilmore, Kathy *A Day in the Life of a Colonial Schoolteacher*. New York: Power Kids Press, 2000.

A day in the life of a colonial schoolteacher including that attended, what they learned and what chores they did.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>