



Teaching Young Children Social Studies

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Gayle Mindes

TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN

Doris Pronin Fromberg and Leslie R. Williams

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To my family and friends with big ears and bigger hearts . . .

With many thanks, gayle

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Foreword

Doris Fromberg

If meaning is the center of learning, then social studies sits at the center of content in education. The study of social life and learning about the social sciences is a natural realm in which to integrate a variety of disciplines.

This comprehensive book fulfills the promise of social studies as an integrator of knowledge and the experiences of young children by presenting the broad scope of the social studies field. The field of social studies resides in a time when meaning sometimes takes a back seat to isolated drills. Dr. Mindes deals not only with defining the field but also with relating it to current issues concerning standards-based and skills-based movements. She also provides many strategies, activities, and resources for teachers to use with young children. Both meaningful content and the tools of the social scientist that are relevant for the young social scientist are included within the scope of this book.

There is particular attention to integrating curriculum in ways that provide culturally relevant instruction for diverse groups of children and that include multicultural educational considerations. Although a focus on meaningful learning is a central characteristic of this book, the discussions and suggestions throughout reflect a sensitivity to developmental concerns about young children.

Thus, this book is both comprehensive and detailed. Its scope encompasses the nature of society and the components of citizenship. It is a book for many seasons and helps illuminate the teaching and learning of social studies for the benefit of young children.

Preface

At birth, young children begin the exploration of their social world. As infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and young school-agers, they interact with people and the environment to learn about the world and their place in it. Gradually they become community members and acquire the skills to be effective citizens in a democratic society. The precise nature of the learnings and the ways in which they learn about the social world, with its customs and rules for engagement, will depend upon the developmental stage as well as family, child care, and school environment. However, all young children will face the demand of policy makers, who require an enlightened citizenship equipped with the tools for problem solving in the twenty-first century.

Using the processes of social studies, teachers facilitate the acquisition of the tools and concepts appropriate for learning the social studies that will serve young learners lifelong. Such tools are raising questions as well as, gathering, analyzing, discussing, and displaying data. These are the open-ended, inquiry-based learning strategies ideally suited for child investigations of topics and themes that appeal to young children. Example themes developed through the exploration of “big ideas” include the following: Who am I? Where do I live? Who are my family members? How do people travel? The themes are timeless and children explore them in the context of their lives, using their previous knowledge and the currency of their lives now. Thus, Who am I? explored at various ages varies in complexity and is influenced by the cultural context of the learner.

So part of social studies is the academic content of the social studies, which includes the traditional fields of history, archeology, anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, geography, and philosophy. This academic content is appropriately scaled for investigation through learner projects. Investigations might begin with a child question such as *Where does my food come from?* Using the academic tools appropriate for the age of the child, teachers provide learning environments and activities that will enhance the children's understanding of the fundamental questions that they raise. In the pages that follow, this curricular approach is described and applied. As well, the book shows how to develop and enhance the social aspects of learning as part of the processes of social studies.

This text pulls together the disparate, but intertwined, content of the social studies and discusses the processes of social studies that promote social learning, self-concept development, and character development. Issues of culture, classroom community development, and parent collaboration are other vital aspects of the social studies discussed. It offers an integration of this content and a significant examination of issues underpinning it to provide a whole-child orientation to the curricular area of social studies for young children. The approach recognizes that the themes of social studies—culture, time, continuity, and change; people, places, and environments; individual development and identity; individuals, groups, and institutions; power, authority, and governance; production, distribution, and consumption; science, technology, and society; global connections; and civic ideals and practices (NCSS, 1994)—rely on social interactions and child-constructed meaning to support acquisition of the required academic material proposed by state and national standards. Finally, culture and community are inextricably linked to the teaching and learning of social studies.

The book presents social studies content and processes holistically. Beginning in Chapter 1 with a focus on the historical foundations of the social studies, it goes on with current emphases and the importance for strong consideration of culture in the social development of young children. Chapter 2 continues the elaboration of social development and social learning, with a focus on moral development and character education. In Chapter 3, the focus shifts to the particular strategies and methods that facilitate acquisition of knowledge as well as strategic tools for the exploration of the social world. Chapter 4 picks up the discussion of cultural issues and priorities as these interface with the lives of children and families—moving beyond the antibias curriculum. Global issues are explored in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, the media and methods

of instruction are discussed in practical terms. Chapter 7 focuses on the alignment of assessment practices with curricular goals and interventions. The final chapter discusses bringing the social learning and the social studies content together, with pragmatic examples of lesson and thematic investigation planning.

Key Features of the Text

- Focus questions, study questions, reflection prompts
- Suggested further readings
- Internet resources to support both teacher and child learning
- An integrated approach to social learning and social studies education
- Examples of holistic instructional approaches

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Power of Social Studies

The modern world needs people with a complex identity who are intellectually autonomous and prepared to cope with uncertainty; who are able to tolerate ambiguity and not be driven by fear into a rigid, single-solution approach to problems, who are rational, foresightful and who look for facts; who can draw inferences and can control their behavior in the light of foreseen consequences, who are altruistic and enjoy doing for others, and who understand social forces and trends. (Robert Havighurst, in Cohen, 1972, pp. 346–347)

Terms to Know

- Social Studies
- Social Knowing
- Theme-based Approach
- Constructivist

Overview

Early childhood educators agree that the foundation for all curricula in the birth to age 8 range is thorough understanding of child development in a multicultural social context. That is, teachers must understand how children learn to move and navigate physically and how children use fine-motor and gross-motor skills in different ways as they grow. They surely must understand the multiple ways that children communicate with each

other, their families, and with the people in child care, school, and community settings. Knowledge of this communication development includes perspectives on the evolution of language, speech, and the development of early literacy skills and competencies. Teachers also concern themselves with the personal and social development of their students.

Where do the social studies fit within this foundational knowledge of child development theories? How then do teachers decide upon the content and processes for day-to-day activities, strategies for implementing a social studies curriculum in programs for the various ages? How do teachers choose important overall goals for the social studies curriculum? What exactly are the social studies? In the book that follows, these important considerations will be explicated. To begin, a consideration of the definition of the social studies precedes the investigation of social studies content and processes in early childhood education.

Focus Questions

1. What are the social studies and where do they fit in the early childhood curriculum?
2. What is the content of social studies and what are the processes of instruction?
3. What do young children learn through the social studies?
4. How does culture influence development and knowledge?
5. What is the power of social studies in the curriculum?

Social Studies Explored

The content of social studies emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century as a holistic approach to citizenship education. Policy makers at the time were concerned that large numbers of immigrants coming to the United States were not prepared to live in a democratic society. They would need, according to the policy makers, to be shown how to be citizens. Schools were the best place to ensure that citizenship education began. Thus, historically, social studies content met the educational needs of society for the preparation of citizens. Early policy makers concerned themselves with the curricula of the high school, urging teachers to use the techniques of social science: raising questions and gathering, analyzing, discussing, and displaying data. Elementary schools in the beginning of the 20th Century focused on basic education—reading, writing, arithmetic. As elementary schools trickled the content of social studies down

from the high school objectives, i.e. citizenship education and social mores appreciation, teachers read stories about the early formation of the United States and focused on children's development of the virtues exemplified in moralistic stories (such as those in the McGuffey readers).

The "subject matter" for this school subject was to be drawn from the most influential social sciences of the time—history, geography, and civics—and blended together as one school subject for the purpose of helping children understand our American heritage and acquire the skills and sensitivities basic to constructive participation in our nation's democratic society. (Maxim, 2006, p. 13)

The Social Studies Defined

The primary purpose for the study of social studies content is "to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens in a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world." Social studies investigations promote "civic competence" and draw upon such disciplines as "anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences" (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 1994, p. 3).

In the early childhood years, then, social studies takes place in such diverse activities as when children decide together which imaginary roles to play on the jungle gym, which structure to plan to build in the blocks corner, or how to interact when meeting a person in a wheelchair. As well, social studies take place when young children learn about the community where they live and investigate questions of interest to them using social science techniques.

Social studies content learning also occurs when children observe purchases and deliveries at a supermarket, when they see their parents voting during an election, and when they watch a caregiver consult MapQuest (<http://www.mapquest.com/>) for the best route to the swimming pool. Curricular investigations of social studies happen in a project-based learning environment that permits children the opportunities to see the shared roles of construction workers at a job site, or the wedding photographs of their grandparents. Children also expand their social learning when they meet and play with children whose first language is different than the one they speak.

Social learning and social studies clearly pervade life in any classroom community. The child care and school experiences in the early years thus

help prepare each generation to function as citizens in a civil society. So, the ways in which rules are established in the classroom, the choice of thematic investigations to include ecological conservation or other important societal matters, influence the perceptions that children will have about citizenship.

The primary method for incorporating social studies in curricular activity is investigation of content using the processes of social scientists. In this way children construct understandings, develop skills, and acquire dispositions that serve them as lifelong learners. “Teachers can help children develop social perceptions, social skills, a sense of community, and knowledge by adding props to blocks and other sociodramatic play areas that represent different times and places. Teachers can also add transparent pipes to blocks, water, and ‘pouring’ areas in ways that support collaborative play” (Fromberg, 2002, p. 87). Teachers also facilitate learning by engaging children in thematic topics derived from their curiosity about the world around them.

The Curriculum of the Social Studies

As a result, topics for the investigation of social understandings and the content of social studies come from child experience, mandates of various state and federal agencies, and teacher knowledge of the traditional disciplines of the social sciences—history, geography, political science, economics, anthropology, and sociology. In the course of building content knowledge about social studies, children interview elders, visit a variety of community sites, read biographies, stories about people, and observe the interactions of other people. They glean through direct observation and interactions a great deal of information about people and the function of goods and services in their community, as well as much social studies content. In the course of their direct curricular experiences, young children interpret what they see on television. Children increase their vocabulary, see signs and other printed material. They learn to compare quantities, to measure, and to display the results of their various explorations. As well, children consider how their social lives and communities are affected by natural phenomena such as storms and floods.

The tools for social studies inquiries are hypothesis development, data gathering and summarization, as well as interpretative displays and summarization. For preschoolers this can mean investigation of such questions as, How does a letter travel from Cleveland to Peoria? Where does email come from? How come it is still light when I talk on the phone to my grandmother and it is dark where I live?

At the primary age, hypotheses investigated may include questions:

Should families rebuild homes on marshland after they are lost in a hurricane? Where exactly is Iraq? What will happen to families in our community when the plant closes?

Through the investigation of these questions, children will utilize early literacy skills, problem-solving techniques, and the skills of knowledge representation such as pictures, charts, graphs, maps, oral and written presentations. In this way, social studies functions as an integrator of curriculum.

Social Studies as Curricular Integrator

Building on real-life experiences, the study of social studies facilitates young children's knowledge of the social world as well as influences their capacity to function socially and emotionally in the classroom and the world at large. Often, social studies investigations begin with a profound current event that perplexes adults and shakes the very foundations of child life. Consider, for example, the following:

It is September 13, 2001, in a New Jersey public school. Nolan, age $6\frac{1}{2}$, sits at his seat in his first-grade classroom. He is a vivacious and talkative child, yet he now is quiet and he stares vacantly ahead. Nolan knows something is terribly wrong in his world. The Twin Towers have fallen down and it had something to do with "bad men on planes"—but he has seen those buildings and cannot comprehend how they could fall down. They are so big. He knows that several of his friends are not in school today because they have a parent who will not be coming home from the Twin Towers. He heard his mom crying and talking about the Towers falling on the phone. He also knows his own father is not home. His mother said that Daddy cannot get back from California because no planes are flying, but a part of him is worried:

His father worked in a tall building in New York sometimes too. His Mom has packed the car with supplies and blankets, "just in case," and he isn't too sure of what that means exactly. The teacher notices Nolan's distraction and asks, "Are you OK?" The boy quietly answers, "No." "Are you sick?" she probes. He nods affirmatively and then adds haltingly, as if trying to put this new feeling into words, "I feel sick . . . inside my heart." (Davey, 2001, personal communication)

The ways in which teachers in New Jersey and elsewhere facilitated children's coping in response to this tragic period, paired with parental guidance, and media coverage at the time and currently influence the child's *social knowledge*—"knowing that comes from experiences that build social perceptions, social skills, a sense of community, and knowledge" (Fromberg, 2002, p. 87). More recently, teachers and young children come to understand societal interpretations of the War in Iraq, international tragedies such as the tsunami that struck Thailand, Hurricane Katrina that disrupted children's lives and education in New Orleans and elsewhere. The direct effect of these events on children's social understandings depend in part on the proximity of the event to the immediate lives of children; that is, children in Manhattan, New Jersey, were more likely to know a family member or friend directly affected by 9/11. Young children with relatives in Thailand or those who knew vacationers would be more directly affected by the tsunami than those viewing the events on television. Finally, young children in New Orleans who survived the Superdome experience are more directly influenced by parental attitudes, school responses, and media portrayal of the events as they interpret these major life events.

Thus, young children begin to learn about their social world from birth. The messages they receive in their early years are both vivid and lasting. In the investigation of major life-altering events, as well as the seemingly more mundane explorations, such as, What toys did my grandparents play with? What will happen if they serve tilapia in the school cafeteria? require that teachers facilitate a *theme-based approach* to curriculum—one that addresses broad questions of social understandings and learning. Thus questions appropriately explored such as Who am I? How do people move from place to place? as well as those growing from child experience permit the learner to acquire significant understandings about the world and the way in which it works. This is the approach to curriculum that considers developmentally appropriate practice caveats:

- Build on what children already know.
- Develop concepts and processes rather than focusing on isolated facts.
- Provide hands-on activities.
- Use relevant social studies content throughout the year.
- Capitalize on child interest. (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997)

Such principles tell us that young children understand the world from their particular vantage and build knowledge, skills, and dispositions

through their diverse home, community, child care and school experiences.

Such an approach validates that young children learn best from teaching practice that fosters multiple ways of knowing. This approach is informed by integrated interdisciplinary experiences that promote understanding, cooperation, and caring in context, in ways that relate to children's knowledge and experience (Fromberg, 1995, p. 77). While some of the disciplines that make up the social studies may seem complex and beyond the capabilities of young children at first glance, thematic investigation of the social studies applies children's immediate lives and appeals to their imagination.

The traditional content for social studies in the primary grades, as defined by the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS):

- Kindergarten—awareness of self in the social setting
- First grade—the individual in school and family life
- Second grade—the neighborhood
- Third grade—sharing the earth with others in the community. (NCSS, 1984, pp. 376–385)

These same topics are often part of preschool curricula, as well. The depth of investigation varies accordingly. For example, awareness of self in preschool may begin with focuses such as I am a boy or I am a girl. I can play with friends. I live with my family. In kindergarten, the focus builds to include reflection on competencies such as writing, ability to work cooperatively in a group, and so on. In preschool, a study of sharing the earth might revolve around an exploration of Where does the trash go when it leaves the wastebaskets in the center? By third grade, the same topic may explore Why do we need oil? Where in the world is oil located? Why do some people want to drill for oil in Alaska?

Thus, the early childhood curriculum relies less on traditional disciplines, as artificial divisions of knowledge categories—mathematics, literacy, science, social studies, and relies on the insightful teacher to help children make connections to learning. In this way, teachers help young children become effective citizens of the world. Such citizenship, it is important to note, is expected to respect multicultural perspectives and values while helping children find common ground with each other (Edwards & Queen, 2002, p. 19). This approach to social studies provides children with an introduction to the ways of a democratic society as well as guiding them through intrapersonal relationships. In addition, the method provides children with approaches to problem solving such