

Planning for Social Studies Learning Throughout the Day, Week and Year

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IMAGINE A CLASSROOM where during their free time children choose to talk with each other about maps they are examining together, play games that they know originate from other countries, make decisions in a small group about which “research topic” to pursue at the school library, or dress up in clothing typical of colonial times. These children are connecting ideas and reinforcing for themselves the social studies lessons that their teachers have consciously taught about how people live together. Social studies journals are filled with examples of ideas from teachers who have demonstrated their ability to make their classrooms centers of powerful teaching and meaningful learning in social studies. They have made exploring the subject matter exciting for students. Such outstanding elementary school teachers believe in the power of their own creativity and professional autonomy, using their imagination or original ideas to foster students’ thinking about how people live in the world both within and beyond periods set aside for official social studies instruction.

The most devastating effects of the implementation of “high-stakes” standardized testing are those that undermine such autonomous professional behavior. Currently many elementary level teachers are being told to focus on reading and mathematics instruction. Others are being told to use their social studies periods to prepare students for standardized testing using highly structured strategies and materials that help students learn unrelated bits of information. In both instances one of the most important qualities and causes of satisfaction and motivation in exemplary teachers is being disregarded: the right to exercise imagination and autonomy when creating a lesson or a unit of study.¹

Seizing the Opportunity to Plan

In this article, I focus on planning because it allows teachers to make the best use of their time with students, especially under these pressures. Time is a precious resource for teachers and that is why careful planning is extremely important. Even before the advent of intensive test preparation, children in many schools had days that were fragmented by pullout programs, “special” subjects, and larger school activities. With the addition of enforced test preparation and oversight, they have even fewer opportunities to spend “quality time” with their teacher, exploring connections between ideas and building networks of knowledge about their world. Teachers are feeling pressured to narrow or even eliminate social studies in their classroom. In this article I will show how planning in social studies can help counter such pressures.

We might consider, for a moment, classroom practices advocated by teachers of a related area: language arts. The national standards for English language arts emphasize daily practice and attention to the skills

of reading, writing, speaking and listening in the elementary grades.² As well as using officially sanctioned periods for Language Arts instruction, young teachers learn of the importance of reading to and with students, as well as planning to give students a chance to read books of their choice, silently, on a daily basis. The standards state that it is important to give children opportunities to talk and write informally each day; that young students need opportunities to share what they have written, regularly; that teachers should make the classroom environment language rich; that children and parents should be encouraged to read at home together. These are only some of the aspects of a comprehensive Language Arts program, yet they are enough to demonstrate how a similarly focused social studies program can be planned.

Meaningful lessons and units are at the heart of a classroom social studies program. Numerous examples of exemplary social studies lessons and units have been described over the years in this journal. However, designing a sophisticated social

studies program also includes planning for learning through: 1) focusing on social studies concepts across the curriculum, 2) making “Social Studies Moments,” 3) practicing the skills of critical thinking and inquiry, 4) designing a concept-rich physical environment, and 5) exchanging ideas between home and school.

Social Studies Concepts Across the Curriculum

The goal of social studies in the early grades is to help students understand their world and how they participate in it. As they select focusing ideas for their language arts or science program, teachers can refer to social studies standards, concepts, and content. This is not a call for wholesale integration of social studies and (for example) language arts, for this can be fraught with problems.³ Instead it is a suggestion that students can be provided with information and knowledge in language arts lessons that can scaffold understanding of concepts taught explicitly in social studies lessons. The teacher can also get insights into students’ thinking in

language arts lessons that can inform her planning of social studies lessons.

During the time designated for writing, topics offered by the teacher can encourage students to share their observations of daily life and their beliefs about the world. Students have opportunities to write about what they know and at the same time offer the teacher insights into their lived realities and perceptions of the world, insights that inform her planning of formal social studies lessons. Imagine the insights into students' lives learned from a writing session that focuses on "Spending time with my mother/aunt/grandmother" written around Mother's Day. Finding out that a child uses the term "goodies" to describe candy bought on outings with adults may alert the teacher to the need to define her economic terms very carefully when talking about "goods and services" in social studies.

In a classroom where the teacher is constantly encouraging children to voice their thoughts and express their ideas in the language arts, they may write journals in response to images the teacher places on the board. Exposing children to photographs of people in different times or places or artworks from different cultural groups is easy to do in such a situation.

At some time during the day a typical first grade teacher reads aloud to her students. She can choose books that are connected to the current social studies theme. For instance, at the beginning of the year she might choose to read Allen Say's *Grandfather's Journey*, which tells of one family's immigration story and the idea that you can feel an affinity to and connection with many places. Alternatively, she might help the students to think about extended family relationships by reading *The Relatives Came* by Cynthia Rylant or to consider the people who love them by reading *Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea* by Joyce Carol Thomas. Apart from sharing illustrated books with students, familiarizing students with carefully selected prose and poetry can help scaffold understanding of concepts being taught in social studies. Lists of trade books from recent years that are especially suitable for teaching social studies are available free at the NCSS website

(www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable/).⁴

Many teachers have their students read silently after one particular recess time each day. By adding books on topics currently being studied in social studies to the regular classroom library, the teacher can guide individual students to resources that scaffold their learning in social studies. Given the differences in experiences that young children bring to school, this may enable some students to build up background knowledge on a particular topic. Other students will become knowledgeable well beyond teachers' expectations. Such efforts on the part of the classroom teacher do not need to be exhausting. Most media specialists, in schools and in community libraries, welcome calls upon their expertise and resources to provide reading materials for students. Building relationships with these specialists can enrich the social studies program in ways that benefit everyone involved.

Making Social Studies Moments

As far back as the 1960s, when there were far fewer interruptions in the school day than there are now, the elementary school classroom was called the place where children spend hours waiting.⁵ Transition times or times when students are waiting for others such as when students are lining up to change classrooms for special subjects or recess can be used strategically for reinforcing social studies instruction.

When students move from the classroom for recesses, subjects taught elsewhere in the building, and lunch breaks, many children wait on a few individuals who consistently take longer to shift from one activity to another. These environmental (as opposed to curricular) transition times are often wasted precious moments. They can become important instructional times, especially for revisiting ideas raised during official social studies time, and when the students see the activities as fun they may all be motivated to "get ready" more quickly. Games can be played that refer back to social studies content. These include games such as "twenty questions" to identify people, places or things, or "word analogies," in which the teacher prompts the students' expression of relationships between ideas

using social studies content (For instance, doctor: hospital; teacher: school) can be played. Other games that can scaffold future learning include "globe toss," in which students name the place where their thumb lands, or "state quarters," in which students are given a quarter as they line up, then must rearrange themselves in date order of entering the Union, alphabetical order, or geographic location. Other games that can build up general knowledge and world awareness include "categories," in which the teacher starts a list of objects or ideas that are similar and students add to it, such as car, bus, truck; mayor, governor, senator; or tacos, tamales, salsa, etc. In a variation of this game they would label the categories. Other games can sharpen intellectual skills, encouraging students to note similarities and differences in photographs or artwork from around the world (such as the pictures of families found in books such as *Material World* by Peter Menzel) or from different time periods. Large wall maps (available for free from many tourist bureaus and government agencies), placed where students usually line up, can be used as ready references for practicing relative and absolute location. "We are living in Lansing, Michigan. Which direction would we go to get to Detroit? Which lake would we need to cross or go around to travel to Chicago?" These are just a few of the dozens of activities that can make transition times so valuable for social studies teaching.⁶

Practicing Inquiry and Critical Thinking

Inquiry skills are important in social studies as well as in science. In social studies hypotheses, data and conclusions focus on issues pertinent to the social, economic and political worlds of the students. Inquiry skills are often used in the study of issues during prescribed social studies lessons.⁷ However they can become part of the "incidental" curriculum too. Imagine an international visitor coming to a class of third graders and, embedded in a description of his homeland, explaining to the students that in his country thousands of children do not own a single pair of shoes. The following day one of the children comes into class and declares that he has

shoes that are too small and that he wants to send them to a child who needs them. Suddenly an inquiry and service learning project emerges: students have hunches that many children in their community have shoes that they no longer wear, and that they can help children in other parts of the world. They gather data concerning the number of shoes they each own. The project proceeds with the children contacting the editor of the local newspaper about their ideas and to enlist the participation of others, composing their letters during language arts time. The teacher helps them to understand some of the causes of poverty and organizes a class project to collect and ship gently used shoes overseas. They share their findings and activities with the newspaper's education reporter.

Critical thinking skills are important for citizens in a diverse world to have. K-12 teachers work daily on mediating students' problematic interactions. Some schools have instituted conflict management programs while others have posters listing the steps involved in problem-solving. Developing students' skills of critical thinking and deliberation outside of the heat of a playground or classroom altercation helps create a classroom community that is conducive to learning for all students and is a fundamental part of social education. Identifying problems and deliberating the value of multiple alternatives can help develop empathy in students and provide practice in stating or refuting evidence-based arguments, in listening to different points of view, and ultimately in making decisions. Many teachers in the later elementary grades do this by coupling a "problem box" with intermittent class meetings. Students write down their problem on pieces of paper that have the date and time written on them. When the problem is solved they write that on another note. Before each weekend the teacher reads the notes then talks with individual students if situations are unresolved. Recurring issues of concern to multiple students become agenda items in class meetings.

Planning the Physical Environment

The teacher can structure the physical environment of the classroom so that students' independent or incidental learning within it is shaped by her goals for social studies learning, such as by placing books on the current social studies theme in the classroom library. Many local and state libraries have resources apart from books that they are willing to offer teachers for classroom use also. Culture kits or collections of artifacts (such as those described at www.famearts.org) are collections of materials students can handle. There is a plethora of archived documentation of local history now available to the public. Typing in "local history collection Michigan" to a search engine brings up dozens of resources housed in both large and surprisingly small libraries around the state. Even more astonishing is the number of resources that are accessible online. Becoming aware of such resources, and people in the community who are willing to support their use, can make bringing the community into the classroom and in turn extending a social studies program into the community seem very natural.

A common practice is the "Student of the Week" presentation when each student has the opportunity to share his or her personal history with the class during "Sharing Time." This acknowledgement of the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of the students can be used to identify family members and people in the community who can enrich the social studies program. If students photograph artifacts and write down stories, their work can be collected on posters or collated into a class book. Such books or posters can then serve as a reminder of personal histories, and the teacher can refer to them throughout the year.

The physical environment of the classroom can provide numerous opportunities for students to learn social studies without even realizing it. Through strategic placement of resources a teacher can consciously shape students' incidental learning, create resources that will enable her to use transition times as instructional times, and make her room look very attractive. We have already considered temporary additions

to the classroom library. Books made by the class using information they have collected can be added to the library. "Student of the Week" posters can be displayed for more than the week that the child has special status. Maps of the local county, state and world can be laminated then annotated with stickers or string and index cards throughout the year. Bulletin boards and displays of artifacts from collections related to social studies can be assembled. A center with on-going interactive conversations about different artifacts such as vinyl records, WWII medals, or a washboard can be set up. Students are expected to examine the artifact at some time during the week and complete the sentence "I wonder..." before having a discussion as a class about it.

A timeline is an essential part of a classroom where social studies teaching is being taken seriously. While timelines might not be commonly found in K-2 classrooms, they should be. Through television and the media children are being bombarded with images of people and places that are imaginary (Harry Potter and Hogwarts School) or real (Tutankhamen and the pyramids of Egypt) and that are distant in time and place. Teachers have an opportunity to build upon children's vicarious experiences to discuss what is real and what is not and then to construct a concrete representation of world history that demonstrates the connections students can make to the past. Imagine a room where numbers denoting each century run around the top of the wall where it meets the ceiling. Through the year children's drawings, notes, and illustrations from various sources are added to the timeline. Below the numbers on the timeline we could see baby pictures of the students themselves around the year 2000 C.E.; pictures of artifacts from different civilizations such as Native American, Aztec, Chinese, African or European would appear under 1300 C.E., for example. The ships of Columbus would be added to the timeline near the date 1500. During transition times between activities, students can be encouraged to discuss what they are thinking about these changes over time.

Finally, classroom computers are places where it is possible to have teacher-guided incidental learning happening. Educative

sites can be placed onto the “Favorites” menu for students to explore when they get to choose what to do. Sites can be related to social studies topics, such as www.nationalgeographic.org/kids/ or www.americalibrary.gov, or they can help students learn more about current news items such as at www.timeforkids.com, www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/ or www.unicef.org/videoaudio/. Use of such resources can move conversations in social studies about how society functions, and our rights and responsibilities within it, far beyond the walls of the classroom.

Exchanging Ideas Between Home and School

Reading is generally an activity on the homework schedule for all elementary aged children and homework and newsletters from the teacher are generally the route through which members of the community learn what is going on in the classroom. However it is generally a one-way street. Children take information from school home. They do not take information from home to school in a deliberate way. It doesn't need to be like this, especially when we know that much of what children learn about the world they learn from their families and the social groups with whom they affiliate, such as religious communities or interest groups such as soccer teams or Girl Scouts. The creative social studies teacher can include a question related to social studies for children to ask other members of their household—at least once a week. This is not a burdensome project that requires hours of adult assistance with physical materials. Instead it is a simple question to stimulate conversation around an aspect of life or citizenship, such as: what types of toys did they like when they were in first grade; or where the water in the kitchen comes from; or who determined the speed limits on the roads; or how they decide whom to vote for in elections. Upon the children's return to school the teacher can collate and use this information to make connections during social studies time to resources that are more generic or situated in places far from the students' immediate environment.

Criticism could be made that these are middle class questions and that children

whose parents don't vote might feel badly about admitting this if they thought that the teachers were checking up on them. However, if the teacher's goal is to encourage civic participation and dialogue around the democratic process then any conversations her students have at home enrich ensuing discussions at school. Imagine the child of immigrants who knows that his parents don't vote but has not thought about it. Perhaps he might find out that they have not yet obtained citizenship so they are not allowed to vote. This opens up wonderful curricular opportunities for the teacher. Alternatively, the child might find out that his parents don't vote because they don't think that voting will make a difference in their lives. Knowing this, a teacher might make a point of sharing with parents her students' communications with local policy-makers over the course of the year.

Questions that raise awareness of the world around them, such as inquiries into their access to clean water or laws that adults must obey help everyone to realize how connected our lives are. Such conversations remind us that elementary school teachers don't only teach young students. Through homework assignments, messages home, and celebrations of student achievement they teach the families of their students also. As key people in nurturing awareness and understanding of the democratic process they have an important role to play in society. They teach children and remind adults of their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Planning Ahead

Social studies is about preparing our children to be active participants in the social, economic and political worlds of adults in the future. It is also about making children aware that they can influence the choices that people around them make and that their current decisions have consequences too. Their responsiveness to issues that are important to them can make their worlds better now and in the future.⁸ Society cannot afford to allow the political agendas of people outside the classroom to push social studies and social education from the center of the elementary school curriculum. Careful planning can enable teachers

to maintain enthusiasm for teaching social studies and to make students' lives in the classroom enjoyable as they do it. Weaving social studies ideas through the curriculum is one strategy; using transition times strategically is another; creating a dynamic physical environment is another. Creative social studies teaching and learning must be done to nurture the democratic values and thinking of students. Children are already important to our economic and social worlds. They will eventually have adult responsibilities and rights. The sorts of citizens they become is in the hands of those who choose to educate them. 📖

Notes

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2. National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, *Standards for the English Language Arts* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1996).
3. Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy, “Is Curriculum Integration a Boon or a Threat to Social Studies Elementary Education?” *Social Education* 57, no. 6 (October, 1993): 287-291.
4. The list of Notable Trade Books for the current year is available online for NCSS members only.
5. Philip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968).
6. Kathryn M. Obenchain and Ronald V. Morris, *50 Social Studies Strategies for K-8 Classrooms* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002).
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8. Barbara A. Lewis, *The Kid's Guide to Social Action* (Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit, 1998).

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