



Reflecting on Our Work

For this 20th Anniversary issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, current and former editors of the journal and one editorial board member wrote about topic of their choosing relating to social studies teaching.

A Thirst for Comprehension

Linda Bennett

Throughout time, comprehending the world around us has been as fundamental as having a drink of water. Children need water to sustain life, but they also need social studies to understand the world. As inquisitive learners, young children are intrigued by purchasing ice cream at the grocery store, listening to an elder tell a story, or following the markers on a park trail. In elementary classrooms across the country, students are investigating community issues and contributing to the betterment of humanity. The natural flow of water and the power of the inquisitive mind must both be tapped to sustain our children.

Nearly all children in the United States have easy access to safe drinking water, but that has not always been the case.¹ As recently as 1985, only 68 percent of rural Americans had reliable access to safe drinking water. Do all elementary students in the United States have access to quality social studies education today? Sometimes I think the figure might be closer to 68 percent. Just as access to potable water is not a given, neither is access to knowledge about the world. It is up to elementary teachers to move forward by including social studies within their daily lessons.

Having a cup of water and understanding the world are basic human needs, and the two come in many shapes and forms. In different U.S. locations, people may serve tap water with ice in a pitcher, or they may hand out bottled water. Children who travel or use the Internet to learn may have broader views of the world than a child who does not have these opportunities. Access to the world of information is important so that students can gain the knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions. For example, we can learn from Internet sites about the environmental costs of



Humans need clean water to live. Children play with water dripping from a UNICEF tanker truck during a distribution in a camp for people displaced by a drought, near the small village of Hartisheik, Ethiopia, in 2005.

buying water in a plastic bottle as opposed to simply serving it from the tap.²

Our role as elementary social studies teachers is to quench each child's thirst for comprehending history, geography, economics, and government. From 1988 to 2008, the world's access to water has generally improved. In that period, has social studies education improved in the United States, or is it being marginalized in the curriculum?³ We hope that *Social Studies and the Young Learner* consistently aims to enthuse elementary teachers across the country and provide useful information about the teaching of social studies to elementary students.

As elementary teachers, let us be determined to take advantage of each child's natural curiosity to learn. May our children's cup of knowledge overflow with understanding of the world.

Notes

1. "Table 3, Access to Safe Drinking Water, by Country, 1970 to 2002" Pacific Institute, www.worldwater.org/data.html.
2. Bottled water consumes much more energy per serving than does water from the tap because of manufacture, packaging, refrigeration, transportation to the store, recycling of bottles, and recovery and disposal of litter. Jennifer Wilkins, "Forgo Bottled Water—and Soda—to Save the Planet" (Cornell Perspectives), *Chronicle Online*, www.news.cornell.edu/stories/Aug07/bottled.water.sl.html.
3. Tina L. Heafner, Katherine A. O'Connor, Eric C. Groce, Sandra Byrd, Amy J. Good, Sandra Oldendorf, Jeff Passe, and Tracy Rock, "A Case for Advocacy: Building A.G.E.N.T.S. of Change," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 20, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 26-29.

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Teaching Socially Responsible Social Studies

Gloria T. Alter

What matters most in social education? Our responsibility "to respect and support the dignity of the individual, the health of the community, and the common good of all."¹ The underlying values of social education are reflected in this mandate. Social education is about people, first and foremost.

What we teach and how we teach, what we are committed to and how we live—these things reveal our concern for others. We address the common good individually and collectively through the classroom and through multiple and complex interconnections with the community (for example, in our homes, schools, community, professional organizations, government, and various media. In these many contexts, formal and informal social education has a far-reaching influence.

In our world today, we are faced with critical choices. We can choose to teach "torture or nurture." We teach torture if we allow bullying in our schools, embrace a degrading and violent media and popular culture, or accept the torture of alleged national "enemies." We teach nurturance through social skills programs, social services for students and their families, and equitable education across diverse socioeconomic groups. We teach human dignity and hope when we model respect for all, even for our real or imagined enemies.

We can choose to teach killing or healing. We teach killing when we promote war in schools through a blind patriotism and military recruiting at the expense of peace education, and when we glorify military history, downplaying the importance of social movements for the greater good. We teach killing when we do not admit our mistakes as a nation and do not work toward healing the damage we have done to so many others. We teach healing when our schools and curriculum are centrally concerned with care, valuing others domestically and globally. We teach healing when we begin to resolve conflicts nonviolently, whether they are interpersonal or international.

We can choose to teach hate or compassion. We teach hate by manufacturing enemies where there are none, making false assumptions about other people or nations, and failing to con-

sider points of view that challenge our own. We teach compassion when we expose the many ways that hate manifests itself in society and how it can be overcome. We teach compassion by caring equally about the diverse groups we serve; by supporting our students' spiritual, moral, and ethical development; and by rewarding caring behavior as much as we do academic and extra-curricular achievement.

We can choose to teach wisdom and diplomacy rather than revenge and domination. The world needs mature, humble, and intelligent leaders and citizens. We can demonstrate these qualities in the classroom through our relationships with students, our study of world events, and our action in the world. In the end, students must come to understand how their beliefs, decisions, and actions affect others.

If we are to achieve the moral mandate set before us, we need to reframe the elementary-middle school social studies curriculum and refocus our instructional decisions on what matters most: social responsibility and social justice, democratic education and human rights, global education and global perspectives, and a multicultural education that addresses oppression and discrimination against diverse groups in our society. We need to provide children and young adolescents with a strong, positive vision of their future and prepare them to play a role of healing in the world.

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994), 6.

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Seeing the Elephant: Facing the Challenges of Teaching Social Studies

Huber M. Walsh

In his book for young readers, *The Oregon Trail*, author/illustrator Leonard Everett Fisher notes that few of the immigrants traveling west had much of an idea of what they were facing before they started the journey.¹ On June 1, 1856, pioneer Amelia Knight wrote: "It has been raining all day long ... the men and boys are soaking wet ... and comfortless ... and all this for Oregon." In the jargon of these pioneers, "Seeing the Elephant" meant encountering difficulties—like quicksand, insects, rattlesnakes, stampeding buffalo, mountain lions, grizzly bears, cholera, measles, thirst, and starvation—and dealing with them.

Despite limitations on teaching social studies resulting from the No Child Left Behind federal law and other legislative and administrative mandates, many teachers are "seeing the elephant" and surviving. They do this by keeping social studies alive in

their classroom and by advocating for wise educational policies at the state and local level.

Teachers in the Classroom

The work of resourceful educators who teach vital social studies lessons was described in a 2003 article in *Social Education*.² We recall a couple of examples in this journal to show how elementary educators face the challenge.

Barbara Knighton, a primary-grade teacher at Winans Elementary School, in Lansing, Michigan, stated, “The impact of the No Child Left Behind initiative can be seen at my school on a daily basis ... social studies, science, and social skills are often put off to the side and forgotten.” Some teachers find themselves spending more time developing test-taking skills and preparing students for state and national testing. They must sacrifice social studies teaching time to provide sufficient time for literacy and math instruction. Barbara and others answer this challenge by combining lessons on reading and writing skills with social studies and science content. She has students respond to social studies topics in writing, more often than previously, and they do more cooperative book writing together as a class. Students make entries in home/school journals several times a week to share with parents what they have learned, and quite often students write about social studies and science.

Carol Warren, a third grade teacher at Sacaton Elementary in Sacaton, Arizona, developed a plan (along with her fellow teachers) to integrate social studies with the teaching of skills needed for taking standardized tests. In one series of lessons, students learn about immigrant trails through Arizona in the 1880s. Carol focuses on plants and animals that immigrants encountered on the Gila Trail and wrote about in letters and journals. Students read excerpts from journals, trace the Gila Trail on a map, study a plant or animal found on the trail, study a technical illustration of it, and write a letter “to the folks back east,” describing a new plant or animal. Subjects studied in this activity included reading, language arts, science, geography, and history.

Teachers in the Public Forum

The work of educators who advocate publicly for quality education was described in a recent issue of *The Social Studies Professional* newsletter.³ A bill had been introduced in the South Carolina House of Representatives to eliminate social studies from the accountability system for that state’s schools—with an attendant loss of funding. Members of the South Carolina Council for the Social Studies hand-delivered boxes of tea bags to all members of the state House and Senate with a tag that read, “Please don’t throw social studies off the USS Accountability Ship.” Legislators picked up on the historical allusion to the Boston Tea Party and re-wrote the bill to include social studies. Teachers in Florida and several other states have been fighting similar battles, and sometimes winning them, as reported in this journal in the article “Advocating for Social Studies: Becoming A.G.E.N.T.S for change.”⁴

21st-Century Challenges

As educators, creative teachers are striving to find a middle ground between what is important for them to teach and what is required by various mandates that sometimes seem to follow the logic of an enraged, charging elephant. As citizens, assertive teachers (working with their state councils for the social studies) are making sure that social studies is given priority status in educational legislation and budgets.⁵ These teachers are trying to engender responsible and capable citizens in the 21st Century. They are “Seeing the Elephant.”

Notes

1. Leonard Everett Fisher, *The Oregon Trail* (New York: Holiday House, 1990).
2. See the interviews in “No Child Left Behind: The Impact on Social Studies Classrooms,” *Social Education* 64, no. 4 (2003): 291-5.
3. “Advocacy Update: Recent Actions by Members of NCSS that Advocate for the Social Studies Profession,” *The Social Studies Professional* no. 205 (May/June 2008): 1.
4. Tina L. Heafner et al., “Advocating for Social Studies: Becoming A.G.E.N.T.S for Change,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 20, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 26-29.
5. Visit www.socialstudies.org/advocacy.

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Peering Into the Future of Elementary Social Studies

Sherry L. Field

I am very hopeful about the future of elementary social studies. In fact, I am more hopeful today than I was 12 years ago when I became editor of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*. In that role, from 1996-2006, I saw numerous changes in the ways that the elementary social studies curriculum is constructed and in the ways that elementary social studies is taught. A decade of high-stakes testing reduced the time and attention given to social studies in many elementary schools. There are, however, resilient and determined teachers who still bring social studies to the center of their instruction, enriching the lives of their students along the way. I see four areas that hold immense promise for elementary social studies over the next twenty years: standards, the curriculum, instructional technology, and social action.

Standards

The social studies curriculum standards were first published in 1994.¹ The ten curriculum themes and accompanying suggestions for use have been adopted nationwide and are an integral part of the majority of state social studies standards documents, nationally-published textbooks and instructional materials, and elementary social studies methods textbooks. A committee working on revisions to the standards plans to report at the Annual Conference in Houston this November. So far, revisions are along the lines of enhancements and applications. The basic standards ❶ through ❷ remain unchanged, which attests to their wide utility and durability.²

Curriculum

Elementary social studies textbooks have improved dramatically over the past decades by strengthening content; increasing the number, quality, and diversity of photographs, graphs, and other visuals; emphasizing more contemporary issues; and developing high-quality supplementary materials for classroom use. At the same time, state curriculum guidelines supplementing textbook curriculum have been developed. Researchers in elementary social studies have been paying close attention to classroom applications of big ideas;² content from specific disciplines such as history, economics and geography;³ active citizenship;⁴ culturally diverse children's literature;⁵ and social action.⁶

Technology

The promise of technology to bring about widespread change in elementary social studies has not yet been fully realized due to challenges such as inequity in schools' funding and resources, lack of training for teachers, and limited maintenance and upgrades to existing fleets of computers. Counter to the challenges, however, educational technology provides a vast array of resources for teacher planning and instruction. It energizes numerous elementary classrooms across the country through the use of technologies designed for active learning and discovery in social studies (such as webquests, software packages, and online collections of primary historical documents), as well as new media that call upon students to create their own new materials (such as the making of short digital documentaries).

Social Action

Finally, I see teachers emphasizing social action in their social studies classrooms. Teaching children to care about humanity, to know about others around the world, and to have the knowledge and skills to take a stand on pressing social issues is becoming a prominent goal in many elementary schools in the United States. For example, first grade students learn about aging and partner with a nearby nursing home. They visit regularly, sharing their artwork, poetry, and songs--and listening to people who can give first-hand accounts of recent history. Similarly, fourth grade students learn about the community surrounding their school and lobby their city lawmakers to get a nearby park cleaned up. These aspects of social studies teaching fuel my hope for elementary social studies in the future.

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
2. For an update on the standards revision process, see communities.ncss.org/standard-revision.
3. Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman, "A Reconceptualized Rationale for Elementary Social Studies," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34, no. 4 (2006): 428-454.
4. For example, see Sarah W. Bednarz, "Nine Years On: Implementation of the National Geography Standards," *Journal of Geography* 102, no. 3 (2003): 99-109.
5. Walter C. Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education*, 13th ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2009).
6. Sherry L. Field, "Using Children's Literature and the Universals of Culture to Teach about Mexico," *The Social Studies*, 94, no. 3 (May/June 2003): 123-127.

6. Rahima C. Wade, *Social Studies for Social Justice: Teaching Strategies for the Elementary Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

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Perpetuating Democracy in the Next Generation

Kim D. O'Neil

As an elementary teacher I always began the year by discussing the five ways to be a good citizen: 1) Obey laws, 2) Keep informed, 3) Respect your country, 4) Help others, and 5) Vote.

After three days of activities to help students explore and memorize these five points, we were finished. Slam, dunk, each student was now "an American citizen in the making." Upon reflection, however, I realized that the majority of my students were already citizens by the nature of their birth. They were American citizens now, and I could expect them to begin performing their responsibilities. As elementary social studies teachers, it is our role to develop authentic activities in which to engage all of our students to help perpetuate democracy.

First, students must feel they are stakeholders in the community, not just in school, but within the village, town, or city in which they live. Teachers can engage the students in a community-based activity by contacting a local historical society, senior facilities, etc., to collaborate efforts to better the local community. A service learning project can help students to feel empowered and begin to try out a variety of roles that citizens partake in a democratic society.

Second, we must provide opportunities for our students to work in diverse learning groups where they may learn to share their viewpoints and to listen to those that may differ from their own. In this way, students can learn that freedom of expression comes with the responsibility to listen to others as well as to share well-informed thoughts. Students can practice critical thinking while at the same time standing true to their convictions.

Third, we can expose students to global situations on a daily basis. Making connections and noting similarities and differences between cultures is a foundation of knowledge. Students can gain an understanding of other people's histories, beliefs, cultures, and life situations. Tolerance is a prerequisite for dialogue and the peaceful resolution of global problems.

As elementary social studies teachers, we must commit to providing our students with opportunities to participate as active and engaged citizens in our American democracy. By learning at an early age just what it means to be a citizen of a democracy, our students might grow into adults who are ready to enjoy the rights—and wield the responsibilities—of citizenship. 🌐

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