

Our Conversation with You about “the Holidays”



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You may recall that in our inaugural issue as editors (September/October 2011), we began a feature designed to foster interaction with our readers by posing a question or two, prompted by articles in the issue, to which you can respond online at **CONNECTED**, the NCSS social network (click on **CONNECTED** at the home webpage, www.socialstudies.org).

The theme of this issue, “What are You Doing for the Holidays?,” has already produced some feedback, even before the journal’s publication. One potential author who received our “Call for Articles” instantly shot back an e-mail with the message, “Good G-d! Are we still doing the damn holiday curriculum? Yikes and gadzooks!”

We appreciate this writer’s concern. We, too, are apprehensive about letting the holidays dictate the elementary social studies curriculum. With precious little time devoted to social studies these days, we worry that the focus on holidays will leave little opportunity for other social studies content. Additionally, we are concerned about the possible episodic nature of careening from holiday to holiday, and the potential for lack of in-depth study of topics, as they may get “covered” only a day or two prior to the actual calendar date of the holiday. Not to mention the danger of students learning the same content and doing the same activities year after year if teachers at different grade levels focus on the holidays dictated by the calendar.

Perhaps the best example of the potential pitfalls of a holiday curriculum can be found in the ways in which Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday is commemorated. Devoting only a day or two to this national holiday can result in lessons that focus exclusively on the “I Have a Dream” speech, with students formulating their own dreams. This leaves out discussion of how King and many others used civil disobedience to work toward their dream, and what actions students might need to take to realize theirs. Using only that speech also omits King’s other less popular dreams, including his work to eliminate poverty and militarism.

These concerns notwithstanding, we are aware that many elementary teachers do address holidays as they come up in children’s lives and in our public culture, either as a major or minor part of their curriculum, and we wanted to acknowledge that. But we also wanted to suggest “the holidays” don’t need to be set by the federal government. In other words, just as the

standard periodization in history textbooks, often dictated by political and military events, is too narrow a way to categorize history, so, too, are the standard calendar holidays too narrow a construct for our multicultural democracy. We believe that lots of dates not designated as official holidays may be opportunities for upper level exploration and analysis of our public culture and history; for example, February 15 is Susan B. Anthony’s birthday; and March 22 is World Water Day. In addition, lots of days already on the calendar as holidays may be re-purposed; e.g., the Thanksgiving holiday encompasses the National Day of Listening, which is on November 25.

If we don’t have to be locked into the traditional dates and celebrations associated with a “holiday curriculum,” neither do we have to be directed by past educational practices of our districts with regard to the holidays. The articles in this issue amply demonstrate this point.

Ann Burke writes about her sixth grade students’ participation in an oral history project in her article “National Day of Listening Comes to Midland, Michigan: A StoryCorps Project.” Ann and her students were inspired by the Storycorps conception of the Thanksgiving holiday as an opportunity to conduct interviews, which they did by meeting with veterans.

Elizabeth Crawford and **Thea Monsion** and their first graders tap into an international holiday, World Water Day, as described in the article “Drop by Drop: First Graders Learn about Water, Sanitation, and Conservation.”

Sarah Montgomery and **Eric Christie** seize the opportunity presented by the tradition of making New Year’s resolutions when they challenge their students to craft resolutions that will benefit not only themselves, but their community as well. Their article, “A New Take on New Year Celebrations,” is followed by a Pullout with three suggested classroom activities, “New Year Celebrations in the USA and Around the World.”

Brigitte DuBois and her kindergarteners’ study of Marian Wright Edelman’s life story turned out to be a call to action for her students to do something in their own community. Brigitte’s article, “Young Children as Activists: Celebrating Black History Month and Marian Wright Edelman’s Work,” expands the traditional pantheon for Black History Month and reminds us

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that there are many individuals in a social movement who are worthy of deeper analysis.

Deeper analysis takes time, a lesson not lost on **Debby Chessin** and her first and second graders, as they spent over a month on their Earth Day projects, designed by the students, to clean-up their community. Debbie's article, "Exploring Civic Practices and Service Learning Through School-Wide Recycling," describes how children and adults can work together to effect change.

Dale Weiss and her third graders' study of the school budget reminds us that issues of work and the allocation of public funds are worthy of study, perhaps as part of a yearly Labor Day unit. In her article "Budgeting Time to Teach About the School Budget." Dale invites students to comment about events that are affecting their own school experience.

We believe that teachers can and should apply the same attributes of thoughtful instruction to a holiday that they bring to their other social studies instruction, namely that it be meaningful and structured around enduring understandings, essential questions, important ideas, and goals.

So ... What do YOU think about using the holidays as part of a meaningful social studies curriculum?

- Are you satisfied with the choices your school makes regarding the holidays—with respect to both which holidays are addressed and the way in which they are addressed?
- Are there any holidays that you would add to or subtract from the curriculum in your school?
- Do we still need constructs like Black History Month and Women's History Month to guarantee that these histories are taught?
- How do you ensure that your students are not receiving the same type of instruction around certain holidays that they received in an earlier grade?
- How does your curriculum and instruction around holidays compare to your other social studies curriculum and instruction? Are you satisfied with its depth?

We look forward to the public conversation around teaching about our public culture at NCSS **CONNECTED**. Please join us!—Andrea & Jeannette 🌐



At a World Water Day event in 2011, students on the track at Stillwater Junior High School in Stillwater, Minnesota carry jugs of water in recognition of the many people on Earth (usually women and girls) who must carry the water they use to drink, cook, and bathe. (Jean Pieri / www.H2OforLifeSchools.org)



A woman and a girl draw water from a pump set up in a tent camp for people displaced by the tsunami in the seaside village of Mudtukadu, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India, in 2005. (Ami Vitale/UNICEF)