Early Childhood in the Social Studies Context

A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies

As young children engage in their play and daily activities, they show a natural interest in the world around them. Early childhood educators may capitalize on these interests and carefully plan a variety of experiences with social studies in mind, cultivating and extending young children’s diverse skills and abilities to form and voice opinions, identify and solve problems, negotiate roles, perceive diversity and inequality, and recognize the consequences of their decisions and behaviors on others. Social studies is a vital part of the early childhood curriculum, since children’s formative experiences shape their attitudes as “citizens of their classroom, their schools, and of the larger community” (Mardell, 2011).

Given the importance of early years educators in creating learning environments and experiences that foster young children’s skills as active citizens committed to inclusion and equity, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) affirms pedagogic practices in the early years that support young children’s progression of social studies learning in early childhood settings. This includes a focus on the materials, resources, and interactions needed to support young children’s skills and dispositions. NCSS recognizes the developmental continuum of social studies learning, and this statement focuses primarily on young children from age 3 through preschool/prekindergarten. This document complements the NCSS position statement on Powerful, Purposeful Pedagogy in Elementary School Social Studies (NCSS, 2017).

Early Childhood Experiences

The foundation of early childhood education is built upon relationships that children develop in their homes, communities, and schools. In these settings, children meet new friends, learn to get along with others, share their opinions, engage in decision making, and contribute as a member of a group. Young children develop an understanding of the roles that they enact as citizens of a democratic society as they participate in activities that allow them to express their compassion, caring, and desire to help others (Project Zero, 2016). Numerous examples showcase the capacity of young children to discuss, debate, and think critically to solve important problems as they interact with others to accomplish goals together (Haywoode, 2018; Ardalan, 2017; Krechevsky et al., 2016; Krechevsky, Mardell, & Reese, 2015; Mardell & Carpenter, 2012; Hall & Rudkin, 2011).

Social studies learning offers many valuable components in supporting early learners as they identify real world problems and participate in creating an inclusive and caring democratic society. Through the social studies, children explore and ask questions about social systems, the abstract societal norms and values affecting human relationships and interactions in everyday life. These include nonverbal yet observable social cues that reflect subtle forms of bias, discrimination, and inequity. Young children take note of these early on, both through implicit and explicit means, throughout their daily experiences and interactions.

Additionally, social concepts represent what most educators would call the content or disciplinary areas of social studies. Social concepts are introduced and embedded in children’s learning through various means, ranging from read alouds, classroom centers, and/or explicit instruction and conversations on topic areas. Social concepts should focus on topics or themes that are representative of real-world situations and/or problems children face in their classroom and community as well as current events (Mindes, 2015).

Teachers serve a direct role in how young children are exposed to social studies, both the systems and concepts. This includes providing a nurturing environment as well as intentional topics focusing on self, the family, the center or school, and the local community (Mindes, 2015). Best practices include providing learning opportunities that are developmentally appropriate (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009); offering contributions to the school/program culture; and supporting specific skills reflective of social emotional expectations, approaches to learning, and social skills as appropriate (Mindes, 2015).
In the early childhood classroom, social studies content is best presented as part of inquiry-based learning experiences that put children's interests at the heart of learning. Inquiry-based learning is a common instructional practice that capitalizes on opportunities supportive of social system and social concept learning. This includes offering topics of study that focus on child interest, social context, and real-world problems in an effort to connect learning to authentic experiences that engage children. Project-based learning offers such an opportunity (Helm & Katz, 2000). A project is an in-depth study of a real-world topic that typically occurs over a period of weeks or even months. Projects provide a context for young learners to apply their growing academic knowledge and skills in authentic ways (Katz, Chard, and Kogan, 2014). Through engagement in inquiry-based learning, young children are provided opportunities to explore and interact, which both influence and shape their knowledge and skills across social studies domains as well as other integrated curricular areas. As children share their receptive and expressive understandings of the social context, they represent what they are learning in a variety of ways (e.g., writing, drawing, painting, dramatic play, 3-dimensional construction, music and movement, and graphics). Inquiry-based learning also provides group learning opportunities that serve a common goal and purpose, which offers children ownership and belonging through a collaborative situation (Mindes, 2005).

Additionally, language and communication skills, critical thinking, and learning behaviors (i.e., approaches to learning) such as engagement and persistence are supported as children interact and work through various experiences. Teachers can then build on the naturally occurring learning through intentional efforts to scaffold dialogue to present various perspectives and offer evidence of different arguments, while also modeling respect for different opinions and viewpoints.

In the early years, inquiry emerges and is enacted through play-based modalities. Through structured and free play, children establish meaningful relationships with peers and educators, and engage in physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional aspects of learning. This process of learning through play is age-appropriate and naturally occurring for young children (Epstein, 2014; Gronlund & Rendon, 2017; Mindes, 2005, 2015). Dramatic play learning centers provide such an opportunity for child-directed, creative experiences, and early childhood educators often intentionally utilize the dramatic play center as a setting in which children explore and address topics of study related to social studies (Epstein, 2014; Gronlund & Rendon, 2017; Mindes, 2005, 2015). Accordingly, early childhood programs should furnish materials and sustained periods of time that enable children to engage in projects that allow for rich and deep social studies learning.

Through these authentic experiences, teachers may rely on systematic instruction, responsive instruction to child-initiated play, and teacher-guided instruction to align children’s outcomes to early learning standards and support skills that are foundational for the C3 Framework (Gronlund & Rendon, 2017). Although state early learning standards for social studies may vary, they most commonly reflect elements of learning in both social systems and social concepts areas such as: (1) membership in a democratic classroom community, (2) location and place relationships, (3) similarities and differences among personal and family characteristics, (4) basic economic principles relative to the lives of young children, and (5) an appreciation of one’s own and other cultures in a diverse society (Epstein, 2014).

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Early childhood educators may either diminish or exacerbate social inequalities in the classroom, based on how they approach children’s socio-cultural, ethnic, religious, and gendered diversity. As teachers utilize instructional practices that are child-driven and based on interest, equally important is staying attuned to culturally relevant pedagogy and practices (Durden, Escalante, & Blitch, 2015; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Basic tenets of these include “attention to the achievement of [all] children including those ... minoritized and marginalized; constructing curriculum and instructional practice in ways ... including the knowledge, histories, and communicative styles of those [both inside] and outside the dominant culture; and developing children's abilities to ... use learning to affect social change" (Goodman & Hooks, 2016, p.34).

Critical to the notion of culturally responsive teaching is the daily environment of young children, where they learn about and experience social studies systems and processes. This environment is not only a physical space, but a social one, ripe for interactions and learning opportunities in relation to social systems and concepts. The environment conveys both nonverbal and verbal messages to both inhabitants and visitors about those things valued and coveted by society. For example, early childhood educators must prioritize the correct pronunciation of children’s names, which provide powerful links to young learners’ individual identity and ancestral heritage. When young children see themselves represented and acknowledged in their environment, their notion of belonging and membership in the classroom community are positively supported (Catalino & Meyer, 2016; Mindes, 2015).

More directly, the social system and concepts viewed in the environment matter. This includes not only the vocabulary children hear, but also children's exposure to visual representations, play materials, and literature genre reflective of the various family structures, languages, and racial/
Early childhood is a time when the foundations of social studies are established, and curricular standards should explicitly attend to engaging and developing young children’s capacity for citizenship, democratic or civic activity, and participation in decision-making, as well as critical disciplinary literacies. As teachers tap into children’s interests to plan open-ended, inquiry-based explorations, young learners’ formative experiences will constitute the basis for ongoing growth of the social studies content and process skills defined in the NCSS National Curriculum Standards and in the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2010, 2013). Although many states explicitly attend to social studies knowledge and skill development in the early years (e.g., see the Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards at http://flbt5.floridaearlylearning.com/standards.html#d=VII and the Illinois Early Learning and Developmental Standards at www.isbe.net/documents/early_learning_standards.pdf), early childhood practitioners are encouraged to draw from the local context in which they teach and children’s interests to guide their planning and instruction.

As teachers set the tone for children’s social studies learning, it is critical that curricular and instructional decisions embrace diversity and social justice while intentionally contesting bias and inequity. Providing a classroom explicitly focused on diversity among children’s cultures and languages is integral to ensuring that social systems and social concepts are represented in a learning environment that fosters inclusion and equity. Also critical are efforts by teachers and providers to intentionally embed diverse languages, materials, and experiences in the early childhood classroom (Durden et al., 2015; Gay, 2000; Goodman & Hooks, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Young children need multiple and varied opportunities to engage in social studies inquiry. To build understanding of social studies concepts, young children need opportunities to engage in extended investigation of topics of interest, drawing on a variety of materials that offer multiple perspectives and foster classroom communities built on inclusive and democratic values.

Early childhood educators should receive social studies-specific professional development that includes guidance on how to teach social studies to young learners to cultivate bias-free and discrimination-free communities. Many educators underestimate the capacity of young children to have an opinion and engage in the cultural and civic life of a community. Lack of appropriate preparation may cause both preservice and experienced teachers to fail to see social studies as a priority for young children and to lack confidence in their ability to teach social studies effectively. Thus, both pre-
service education and continuing professional development experiences need to place greater emphasis on encouraging teachers’ repertoire of pedagogic practices, materials, and resources for building positive social studies attitudes and dispositions, valuing the contributions of young children as citizens who enrich their communities now and in the future.

There is a need for the social studies community to engage in further research on early childhood social studies curriculum and instruction. The ways in which early childhood social studies is conceived and citizenship is enacted in practice with young children are under-researched areas of scholarship, and the existing research is typically highly contextualized. To advance the available evidence about young children, it will be necessary to conduct empirical research across diverse contexts and investigate how instructional practices can enhance young students’ historical skill development and associated civic competencies, including children’s perspectives on the choices and challenges they experience, their reactions to the experiences of others, and their developing responses to matters of social justice, participation, and agency.

References


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