

How Elementary Teachers Teach for Transformative Citizenship:

Investigating Articles in

SOCIAL STUDIES AND THE YOUNG LEARNER

Sherry L. Field and Antonio J. Castro

The teaching of social studies has long been considered an important avenue for promoting citizenship in the public schools. In *The Nature of the Social Studies*, the authors noted that the transmission of citizenship values and beliefs have served as a principle method of creating loyal citizens.¹ In the elementary school, instilling these values, skills, and knowledge helps to socialize the next generation of citizens. However, others have observed that this personally responsible notion of citizenship, whereby students are taught to be obedient and exhibit good moral character, dominates most classroom activities and discourse.²

Rahima C. Wade, a frequent contributor to NCSS publications, has stressed that the public schools must not only socialize students to be productive members of society, but also provide students with the abilities to change that society as needed.³

Drawing on the work of John Dewey and George Counts, William B. Stanley elaborated further (in *Social Education*) on the tension between transmission and transformation. Transformative citizenship education, according to Stanley, referred to types of “education that are critical of the dominant social order and motivated by a desire to ensure both political and economic democracy.”⁴ In other words, transformative citizenship education is about helping students grow into citizens who tackle barriers to greater democracy, like poverty, racism, and ignorance, to promote a more just world.

As we enter the second decade of the millennium, we wondered what evidence of teaching for active citizenship, transformative citizenship, and social action in elementary school social studies existed in the literature. We examined issues of *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *The Social Studies*, *Social Education*, and *Social Studies and the Young Learner* from 2000 to 2008. Our research yielded 37 articles, of which 20 were published in *Social Studies and the Young Learner* during the period studied.

A Review of the Literature

The findings of our review of the literature suggest that elementary teachers can teach for transformative citizenship. The lesson plan activities and ideas that represented transformative citizenship education occurred in grade 1-5 classrooms. Jennifer James warned

that, unfortunately, many elementary teachers have inherited a “discourse of protection,” in which teachers avoid engaging students in interpretations of the historical past or teaching inquiry-based lessons as a way to protect their innocence and prevent interaction with potentially disconcerting ideas.⁵ As an observer in an elementary classroom for a semester, Omiunota N. “Nelly” Ukpokodu referred to many missed opportunities in which the teacher could have taken the lesson in the direction of transformative citizenship, but did not.⁶

Elementary teachers and preservice teachers need to be more aware of opportunities to engage in transformative citizenship. We hope that our work in this area will inspire more critical citizenship education and prepare our children for a changing and diverse global world. The 20 articles found in *Social Studies and the Young Learner* present promising practices and highlight challenges for teachers. In them, three themes emerged: citizenship education for perspective consciousness, citizenship education for fostering community awareness and global mindedness, and citizenship education for social action. In each category, we report what teachers and researchers did and provide additional possibilities for teachers.

Developing Perspective Consciousness

Merry M. Merryfield defined perspective consciousness as being able to “analyze the perspectives of others as part of understanding how different people view events and issues.”⁷ For example, Jonette Ford and Eryca Neville described how they challenged their fifth-grade students with questions like, “Whose voices are heard and whose are missing?” and “Is hearing more than one side of a story important?”⁸ Likewise, while advocating issues-centered teaching, Kim E. Koeppen stressed that teachers should “facilitate critical thinking about alternative viewpoints.”⁹ Hence, being able to see different perspectives of issues in society emerged as a significant component of teaching for transformative citizenship.

What the Teachers Did

- Brought critical literacy consciousness to the study of the Civil Rights Movement that leads to the understanding that

history may be shaped by average citizens; assessed students by having them write about what multiple perspectives means and its importance in the study of history.¹⁰

- Provided frequent opportunities for students to learn from literature and real life via community members about their perspectives.¹¹
- Studied historical and current events to learn about the power held by collective efforts of citizens who work together to solve problems in the community; second grade children defined and identified models of citizenship.¹²
- Involved students, teachers, administrators, staff members, and members of the community in “Citizenship Councils” to identify and support the character education curriculum of the school.¹³
- Developed democratic understandings and dispositions through a study of ways the various forms of government are an integral part of the lives of children.¹⁴

Additional Possibilities for Teachers

- Use multiple biographies about a single person and study the various perspectives portrayed by the authors.
- Create role-playing activities where individuals take on characters with various viewpoints.
- Research many perspectives surrounding a local issue, utilizing primary and secondary sources.
- Use newspapers from different countries to study perspectives about international issues.
- Teach about bias and/or media “spin” on events (current and past).

Fostering Community/Global Mindedness

In addition to promoting perspective consciousness, teaching for transformative citizenship also requires teachers to foster a sense of community and global awareness. A critical sense of awareness about issues impacting the community is an essential precursor for affecting change in society. Elementary school teachers can help foster students’ connection to their community and neighborhood by inviting neighborhood guests speakers and by carrying out inquiry-based projects, where students learn about the histories and issues that characterize their community.¹⁵

In addition to community awareness, Merryfield and Duty suggested that “if our neighborhoods and nations are affecting and being affected by the world, then our political consciousness must be world-minded.”¹⁶ A sense of global mindedness or global awareness must also be promoted in the elementary school. Teachers can encourage students to learn about other cultures and groups through a variety of avenues, such as teaching children about cultural universals, or “basic human needs and social experiences found in all societies, past and present.”¹⁷

What the Teachers Did

- Introduced thoughtful deliberation as a nonviolent bridge across difficult situations; introduced Seven Steps of Deliberation; provided examples from the works of Vivian Paley and Tarry Lindquist.¹⁸
- Investigated Roger Soder’s Conditions of Democracy with second grade children; found real-life connections that second graders could enact.¹⁹
- Began the school year by developing a community that recognized the diversity of students and honored where they were from; made students the starting point for learning.²⁰
- Found global examples across the curriculum to share throughout the year; linked literature such as *Wake Up World! A Day in the Life of Children Around the World* and *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* to enhance global perspectives; learned about inspiring social action projects around the world.²¹

Additional Possibilities for Teachers

- Have pen-pals or e-mail pals with other children in the U.S. or abroad.
- Study childhood in other countries.
- Follow an international story through a variety of media.
- Have a dialogue (using SKYPE or other multimedia) with children in a classroom in a different country about how they are helping their communities.



Encouraging Social Action

For articles representing aspects of transformative citizenship, teaching for social action surfaced as a dominant mode for citizenship education. Social action referred to the ability of students to advocate for a social issue and/or take specific actions in the community on behalf of that issue or concern. For example, Cynthia Tyson and Todd W. Kenreich²² and Gary Fertig²³ suggested using children's literature or biographies to provide illustrations of social action and advocacy. Other articles described different kinds of social action, such as community service or resolving community or local issues.

What the Teachers Did

- Shifted one-time charitable projects into opportunities to bring about social justice by analyzing the social problem through research; became involved in addressing the cause of the problem and not just the immediate issue. For example, teachers can turn a litter pick-up activity into a larger project with a social justice orientation.²⁴
- Provided the framework to investigate children's literature with a teaching activity to identify and understand social action. A seven-step plan for an initial lesson was included.²⁵
- Utilized a biographical study to explore social justice in American history. A graphic organizer to aid the study was provided.²⁶
- Defined discrimination and segregation to frame a study of the desegregation of the South; utilized literature and other media to personalize the study of a child, Ruby Bridges, and her personal confrontation with inequities during the Civil Rights era.²⁷

Additional Possibilities for Teachers

- Facilitate an inquiry project in which students investigate issues of inequity in the community and determine how they can participate in solving the problem.
- Invite community organizers and leaders as guest speakers.
- Show social action leadership evidenced by children around the world via film, books, or children's literature.
- Connect school character education programs with social action goals.
- Facilitate democratic classrooms in schools.

Next Steps

In sum, we have reviewed how teachers and teacher educators represented citizenship education in *Social Studies and the Young Learner* during the first decade of the new millennium. Particularly promising, in the articles we looked at, is the emphasis on social studies content for life in a democracy. The elementary teachers and researchers showcased above offer wonderful possibilities for teaching transformative citizenship in elementary classrooms. While challenges persist, we envision continued growth in elementary social studies for transformation in the future. 🌱

Notes

1. Robert Barr, James L. Barth, and S. Samuel Shermis, *The Nature of the Social Studies* (Palm Springs, CA: ETC Publication, 1978).
2. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, "What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy," *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (2004): 237-269.
3. Rahima C. Wade, *Social Studies for Social Justice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).
4. William B. Stanley, "Social Studies and the Social Order: Transmission or Transformation?," *Social Education* 69, no. 5 (2005): 282-286.
5. Jennifer H. James, "Teachers as Protectors: Making Sense of Preservice Teachers' Resistance to Interpretation in Elementary History Teaching," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 36, no. 3 (2008): 172-205.
6. Omiunota N. Ukpokodu, "Multiculturalism and Critical Thinking," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 14, no. 4 (2002): 20-23.
7. Merry M. Merryfield, "Elementary Students in Substantive Culture Learning," *Social Education* 68, no. 4 (2004): 270-273.
8. Jonette Ford and Eryca Neville, "Making Democracy an Active Force in Students' Lives," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 1 (2006): 8-11.
9. Kim E. Koeppen, "Issues-centered Social Studies: Promoting Active Citizenship in the Classroom," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 15, no. 4 (2003): 15-17.
10. Ford and Neville.
11. Koeppen.
12. Andrea Libresco, "Nurturing an Informed Citizenry: Three Lessons for Second Graders," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 15, no. 1 (2002): 11-16.
13. Maria Sudeck, "Building 'Character' into Education: A Partnership takes Shapes," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 1 (2003): 6-8.
14. Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy, "Introducing Children to Democratic Government," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 1 (2006): 17-19.
15. James A. Banks, *Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
16. Merry M. Merryfield and Lisa Duty, "Globalization," in J. Arthur, I. Davies and C. Hahn, Eds., *The Sage Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008): 80-91.
17. Janet Alleman, Barbara Knighton and Jere Brophy, "Social Studies: Incorporating all Children Using Community and Cultural Universals as the Centerpiece," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 40, no. 2 (2007): 166-173.
18. Walter C. Parker, "Practicing Deliberation in School," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 1 (2006): 12-15.
19. Karon N. LeCompte, "Conditions of Democracy: Elementary Perspectives," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 1 (2006): 28-31; R. Soder, J. I. Goodlad, and T. J. McMannon, *Developing Democratic Character in the Young* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 1-113.
20. Omiunota N. Ukpokodu, "Essential Characteristics of a Culturally Conscientious Classroom," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 2 (2006): 4-7.
21. Elizabeth E. Heilman, "Including Voices from the World through Global Citizenship Education," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 20, no. 4 (2008): 30-32.
22. Cynthia Tyson and Todd W. Kenreich, "Studying Social Action through Children's Literature," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 14, no. 1 (2001): 20-25.
23. Gary Fertig, "Using Biographies to Explore Social Justice in U.S. History," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 1 (2003): 9-12.
24. Rahima C. Wade, "Beyond charity: Serving Learning for Social Justice," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 12, no. 4 (2000): 9-12.
25. Tyson and Kenreich.
26. Fertig.
27. Angelo V. Ciardiello, "Tolerance and Forgiveness: An Interdisciplinary Lesson in Civic Efficacy," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 14, no. 1 (2001): 26-29.

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Submit Your Classroom Activity to *Social Studies and the Young Learner*!

Anybody may submit an article to *Social Studies and the Young Learner*. The editors especially look for manuscripts co-authored by classroom teachers and professors, or authored by K-5 classroom teachers alone.

What are Good Topics?

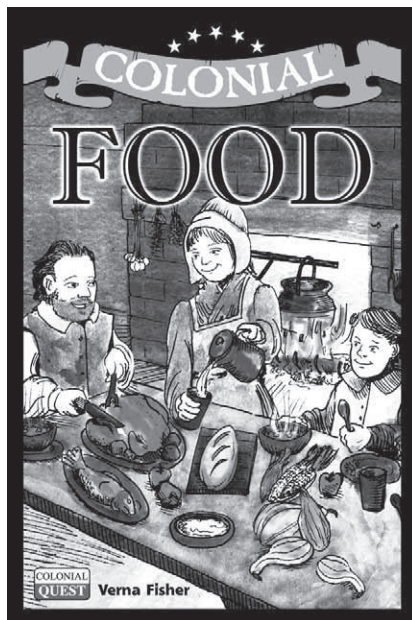
Articles in *Social Studies and the Young Learner* show how social studies (history, geography, civics, economics, anthropology, etc.) is taught in the pre-K-6 classroom. It's great if you have examples of student writing and/or artwork that demonstrate how students learned, and what they learned. If you wish, you can submit an idea for the Pullout, which usually includes a lesson with handouts.

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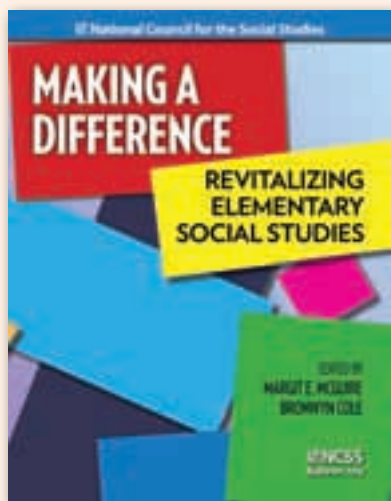
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Edited by Margit E. McGuire and Bronwyn Cole

NCSS Bulletin 109, 87 pp., 2010

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The contributors advocate a vision of social studies that engages students, incorporates best classroom practices, and results in demonstrable educational accomplishments. One of the principal thrusts of the book is to emphasize the potential of children's literature and stories on social studies topics as a means of promoting literacy goals as well as an authentic social studies education. Contributors demonstrate the value of using cultural universals—basic human needs and social experiences found in all societies—as a framework for teaching

developmentally appropriate social studies in the early grades. The book also emphasizes the importance of well-constructed and imaginative service-learning projects as a way for students to "live their civics."

Written by experienced and expert social studies educators with a keen eye for distinguishing practices that work in classrooms from those that do not, this book is an important contribution not only to social studies instruction, but to elementary education in general.

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