

Powerful, Purposeful Pedagogy in Elementary School Social Studies

A Position Statement of the National Council for the Social Studies

Rationale

The advancement of “liberty and justice for all,” as envisioned by our country’s founders, requires that citizens have the knowledge, attitudes and values to both guard and endorse the principles of a constitutional democracy. Beginning to build this knowledge at an early age involves educators who are well grounded in social studies educational practice. Social studies at the elementary level should provide students with purposeful and meaningful learning experiences that are challenging, of high quality, developmentally appropriate, and reflective of contemporary social and diverse global realities.¹

The marginalization of social studies education at the elementary level has been documented repeatedly.² According to a report by the Center on Education Policy, since the enactment of the “No Child Left Behind” federal education policy (NCLB), 44 percent of districts surveyed have reduced time for social studies. That percentage rose to 51 percent in districts with “failing schools.”³ Denying students opportunities to build social studies vocabulary and background knowledge by engaging in social studies activities can lead to lower literacy levels and, ironically, increase the achievement gap.⁴ In many states, reading and math test scores become the sole measurement and focus of learning. Even when social studies is included in high-stakes testing, both novice and veteran teachers tailor teaching to the content requirements of the test, rather than to meaningful learning of core concepts.⁵ As a result of educational practices steeped in the “teach to test” phenomenon, teach-

ing and learning are reduced to that which is necessary for students to do well on state tests rather than providing a well-rounded program to ready students for life as active citizens in the context of a global society.⁶

If the young learners of this nation are to become effective participants in a democratic society, then social studies must be an essential part of the curriculum throughout the elementary years. In a world that demands independent and cooperative problem solving to address complex social, economic, ethical, and personal concerns, core social studies content is as basic for success as reading, writing, and computing. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for informed and thoughtful participation in society require a systematically developed elementary program focused on concepts from the four core social studies disciplines: civics, economics, geography and history.

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards offers a viable approach to disciplinary and multi-disciplinary instruction by positioning inquiry “at the heart of social studies.”⁷ The C3 Framework emphasizes concepts and tools in civics, economics, geography, and history as children investigate compelling questions that deal with social studies topics. By engaging in social studies inquiry, young children can begin to see themselves as capable problem-solvers and active contributors to their communities and beyond.

Both the United States of America and the world are rapidly changing, creating a far more multiethnic, multiracial, mul-

tilingual, multi-religious and multicultural context for elementary education. Thus, elementary educators have to be prepared to value and to serve a far more diverse group of young learners and families than at any time in the past. Social studies must be a vital part of elementary curricula in order to prepare children to understand and participate effectively in an increasingly diverse world.

Our global community owes children opportunities to explore the variety and complexity of human experience through a dynamic and meaningful education. When children are grounded in democratic principles, immersed in age-appropriate democratic strategies, and engaged in meaningful inquiry, they construct the foundational skills that prepare them to participate respectfully and intelligently in a nation and world marked by globalization, interdependence, human diversity, and societal change.

Purpose of Elementary Social Studies

The purpose of elementary school social studies is to enable students to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world. Social studies content allows young learners to explain relationships with other people, to institutions, and to the environment, and equips them with knowledge and understanding of the past. It provides them with skills for productive problem solving and decision making as well as for assessing issues and making thoughtful value judgments. Above all, it integrates these skills and understandings into a framework for responsible citizen participation locally, nationally, and glob-

ally. The teaching and learning processes within social studies are uniquely organized to develop these capacities, beginning with the youngest learners in our schools.

The “expanding communities” curriculum model of self, family, community, state, and nation is insufficient for today’s young learners. Elementary social studies should include civic engagement, as well as knowledge from the core content areas of civics, economics, geography, and history. Skills that enhance critical thinking, socio-emotional development, prosocial skills, interpersonal interactions, and information literacy are more meaningful and useful when developed within the context of social studies. The infusion of technology into elementary social studies also prepares students as active and responsible citizens in the twenty-first century.⁸ Digital citizenship must become a priority in our schools, even for the youngest learners.⁹

Position on Powerful and Purposeful Elementary Social Studies

Teaching and learning in the elementary classroom should be meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active.¹⁰ These qualities of powerful social studies learning are foundational to the development of children’s knowledge, skills, and dispositions as participating citizens in a global society.

A. Meaningful

In order for social studies instruction to be meaningful, teachers must understand and meet the needs of their students. At every grade level, teachers should capitalize on the diversity and natural interests of their students in the world around them.¹¹ By building on students’ skills and experiences, teachers can design learning events that challenge students to make meaningful connections and expand their knowledge and viewpoints.

In social studies, as in any knowledge domain, learners benefit from having a variety of ways to understand a given concept. Increasingly, elementary teachers

have students of diverse backgrounds and differing abilities in their classes, making differentiated instruction and culturally relevant pedagogy necessary in order to meet individual needs. Successful early childhood/elementary teachers possess both a command of the subject matter and the ability to engage students in the learning process through a variety of developmentally appropriate instructional practices and methodologies.

The elementary social studies curriculum should be more than a collection of enjoyable experiences. A piecemeal approach to social studies programming can result in a disconnected conglomeration of activities and teaching methods that lack focus, coherence, and comprehensiveness. Exclusive focus on food, fun, festivals, flags, and films is not an effective framework for social studies teaching and learning. Meaningful teaching requires reflective planning, instruction, and assessment around specific social studies concepts, skills, and big ideas.

B. Integrative

Social studies is integrative by nature. Powerful social studies teaching crosses disciplinary boundaries to address topics in ways that promote social understanding and civic efficacy. It also integrates knowledge, skills, and dispositions with authentic action.¹² When children pursue a project or investigation, they encounter many problems and questions based in civics, economics, geography, and history. With teacher guidance, children can actively explore both the processes and concepts of social studies while simultaneously exploring other content areas. Specialized social studies academic vocabulary and concepts should be developed and integrated into the curriculum. Students cannot internalize vocabulary for use unless teachers model it and use it in classroom discussions.

Effective practice does not limit social studies to one specified period or time of day. Rather, teachers can help children develop social studies knowledge by capitalizing on teachable moments throughout the day and across the curricu-

ulum. Children’s everyday activities and routines can be used to introduce and develop important civic ideas. Integrating social studies throughout the day eases competition for time in an increasingly crowded curriculum. With a strong interdisciplinary curriculum, teachers find ways to promote children’s competence in social sciences, literacy, mathematics, and other subjects within integrated learning experiences.¹³ Learning experiences reach across disciplinary boundaries (e.g., integrating history and geography) as well as subjects (e.g., social studies and English Language Arts). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) annually publishes an annotated bibliography, *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People*, which helps teachers build literacy connections to social studies topics.¹⁴

As valuable as integration is within elementary curriculum, it is not an end in itself. Teachers should ensure that the social studies experiences woven throughout the curriculum follow logical sequences, allow for depth and focus, and help young learners move forward in their acquisition of knowledge and skills. The curriculum should not become, in the pursuit of integration, a grab bag of random social studies experiences that are related marginally to a theme or project. Rather, concepts should be developed to assure coherence and meaning.

The development and implementation of purposeful and powerful integrative social studies is dependent on teachers who have been given the time and resources necessary to engage in the decision-making process essential to thoughtful planning. This will allow for a better selection of content, resources, activities, and assessments for the classroom.

C. Value-Based

Young learners do not become responsible, participating citizens automatically. They need to engage in frequent opportunities to make daily decisions about democratic concepts and principles that are respectful of the dignity and rights of individuals and the common good. They

need to participate in learning experiences that involve core values of democracy, including freedom of speech and thought, equality of opportunity, justice, and diversity.¹⁵ In other words, the voices of elementary students must be heard and taken seriously. This learning transcends the simplistic “character virtues” approach to values education in elementary schools. Thoughtful and deliberate classroom engagement related to controversial or ethical issues provides opportunities for elementary students to practice critical thinking skills while examining multiple perspectives.¹⁶ Elementary teachers should create opportunities for students to discuss values, engage in real-world problem solving, weigh costs and benefits, consider opportunity costs, and make rational and reasoned decisions.

D. Challenging

Challenging elementary school social studies can pave the way for lifelong learning and active citizenship.¹⁷ Teachers should provide students opportunities for in-depth investigation of concepts that challenge and engage them. Challenging social studies instruction includes research, debates, discussions, projects of all varieties including the arts, and simulations that require application of critical thinking skills. Instead of simply reading and answering questions from textbooks, elementary students should be taught to inquire, question, evaluate, and challenge informational sources. Teachers should ask young children compelling questions that stimulate decision-making, problem solving, and issue analysis.

E. Active

In effective social studies programs, elementary teachers use a variety of approaches, strategies, technology, and materials to support children’s interests and abilities. As new information or skills are presented, teachers facilitate discourse and students consider new ideas and assimilate multiple perspectives.¹⁸ Processes such as problem solving, debates, simulations, project-based learning, and role-playing are active strat-

egies that can lead to new opportunities for student discovery and engagement.¹⁹ Teachers decide when to take the lead during instruction and when to support the students’ leadership in learning. They guide and facilitate rather than dictate learning.

Recommendations for Implementing Powerful and Purposeful Elementary Social Studies

Effective elementary social studies instruction requires continuous support for successful student learning. Teachers need adequate preparation and professional development, daily instructional time, ample resources, and assistance at the local, state, and national levels.

A. Enhance the effectiveness of elementary teacher preparation and continuing professional development

If the status of elementary social studies education is to improve, then the education of teachers who have the responsibility for teaching those children will be a critical factor. Elementary teachers need sufficient content knowledge in the core disciplines and processes of social studies, skill in using a variety of teaching and assessment strategies, and the ability to locate, evaluate, and use appropriate resources. Examples of active learning projects that are rich in content and exciting for children are published in the NCSS journal *Social Studies and the Young Learner*.²⁰ Teachers also need to understand the characteristics and abilities of young children and how to differentiate social studies content and skills for diverse learners.²¹ Elementary teachers also need the ability to integrate social studies with other curricular areas.

As essential as all of this is, social studies can be brought to life only when teachers themselves have positive attitudes about social studies. If teachers understand the importance of social studies in the early years, they are more likely to transfer their enthusiasm for social studies to their students.

Ongoing professional development is also necessary for teachers to develop and monitor the curriculum. Resources are needed to support teachers’ involvement in professional conferences, college courses, summer institutes, webinars and podcasts, and visits to educational sites. Effective professional development should model the kind of flexible, interactive teaching styles and instructional strategies that work well with children.

B. Devote time and resources to instruct elementary students in social studies

A specific daily block of time should be allocated for social studies equivalent to that provided for other core content.²² To support effective teaching and learning, social studies enriched classrooms require a wide array of materials for young children to explore and manipulate. Equity requires that all programs have these resources, including visual images of diverse people and materials representing multiple perspectives.²³ Twenty-first century skills and technologies should be utilized to further enhance student learning.²⁴

C. Collaborate on developing well-aligned systems of appropriate high-quality standards, curriculum, and assessment

In an era of accountability, developing quality elementary social studies curricula and assessments requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders including teacher leaders, administrators, school districts, professional organizations, and government education agencies. Effective standards-setting efforts involve coupling social studies standards with opportunities for children to learn in developmentally appropriate ways, not just with expectations for their performance. Toward this end, two NCSS documents are invaluable resources: *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* and *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social*

Studies State Standards.²⁵ Both formative assessment that enhances student learning and summative assessment of student learning should align with curriculum and standards.

D. Advocate for quality social studies education at local, state, and national levels

Elementary teachers must be explicit in advocating for social studies inside and outside of the classroom or school. Teachers need opportunities to be involved in the decisions that determine dedicated instructional time by grade level and what is taught in social studies, how social studies is taught, and what resources will be used.²⁶ They should be encouraged to participate in local, state, and national discussions on the future of elementary social studies education.

Conclusion

Success in the twenty-first century requires the ability to make rational decisions both independently and collectively. These abilities are not innate but are nurtured and developed through intentionally and carefully planned experiences. Students must have ample opportunities to practice social studies skills and concepts in multiple contexts. The social studies are as basic for success as reading, writing, mathematics, and science. If the young learners of this nation are to understand their roles and become effective participants in a democratic society, social studies must be an essential part of the elementary curriculum. State and district policies must provide the time, resources, and professional development necessary to support exemplary social studies education. The democratic tradition of this country deserves an equal place in the elementary classroom. The founders of this country would expect nothing less. 🌍

Notes

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