

## LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Social Studies

## Improving History Instruction in the Social Studies Classroom

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**“You see the future of this great country depends entirely on the coming generations and their understanding of what they have and what was done to create it, and what they must do to keep it.” Harry S. Truman, 1958**

President Truman understood the importance of teaching our children history and an understanding of the past in order for them to have a context for the present and future. When children make these connections between the past and present, they are better equipped to carry on important traditions of civic pride and responsibility. (“Teaching History Across the Elementary Curriculum,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, Nov./Dec., 1989)

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The two major concepts of social studies are *space* and *time*. Children develop these concepts slowly and systematically during the elementary school years. *Space* includes the immediate environment, such as



home, school, neighborhood, and city, which children learn about through direct experience. The concept of *space* then expands to include the child’s remote environment, that of the state, nation, and world, areas which are learned about largely through vicarious experiences. *Time* consists of the past, present, and future. Elementary children relate primarily to the present, and the effective elementary social studies teacher should focus mainly on present experiences in the immediate environment. However, the teacher can help children begin to understand the past or “history”

through a variety of strategies and activities.

History is a story, and who doesn't like an interesting story? In the early grades, children begin to read stories of heroes and heroines and events of the past. They are intrigued as they listen to stories about times past and places unknown, but they rely upon the teacher to help them connect these to the limited experiences of their young lives.

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For example, after reading about the trek across the country of a young child on an Orphan Train, a visit to the classroom by a person in the community who has had this experience or who is a descendent of an Orphan Train rider would bring life to the drama. Another way to help children relate to the Orphan Train children is to utilize the class's own experiences. With the increased transience of the American family, there is probably at least one child in the class who has had to move to a new destination, perhaps leaving behind a parent or a sibling. The teacher can lead the class in a discussion using questions such as: What does it feel like to move to a different place? How much can be packed for the new life when there is limited space in the car? in a moving van? on an airplane? or on a train? Personal experience about moving will help the young learner expand knowledge and connect to a new experience which will likely be remembered because of the sharing of common experiences. Charting contrasting lifestyles in different parts of the country or in different social/family settings further enhances the learning experience. These activities bring history “alive” for the children. Bringing it

alive opens the mind to a higher level of cognition.

Content representations that “put students at the scene” of historical developments, and learning activities that engage them in active inquiry, critical thinking, and decision making will aid elementary children in constructing meaningful historical understanding. Elementary history instruction that only features parades of facts to be memorized and shallow coverage of content areas will lead to bored, uninvolved, and non-thinking students. (Brophy and VanSledright, 1997)

One excellent means of putting children at the scene of history is an excursion to an historic site or living museum. It requires a lot of preparation on the part of the teacher and the students, but almost always proves to be a memorable experience. The visit becomes much more valuable than simply reading the account in a book or discussing the sequence of events. An unforgettable experience increases student interest and expands the child's knowledge by putting that part of history into perspective when studying other events in that time period. The follow-up in the classroom can include sharing impressions of the experience, applying its lessons to other time periods, and anticipating what may be learned in future lessons. Perhaps, the field trip is to the home of a former president. When the children return to the classroom, they could compare and contrast that person's life to their own. What kinds of games might he have played? What subjects did he learn in school? Did he have brothers and sisters? Asking children to make comparisons to their own reality—in terms of education, entertainment, dress, family traditions and community practices—adds dimension to historical figures and helps children make connections that increase understanding.

A stroll around the neighborhood after viewing historical photographs from the community's archives can be a valuable learning experience. As children visit the neighborhood, draw their attention to different features. Do the houses seem old fashioned or modern looking?

How can you tell an old house from a recently renovated or rebuilt house? Are the trees larger than in the photographs? Why? What is different about landscaping near recent construction? Are there businesses in the neighborhood? Have they changed from those in the photographs? Is a corner grocery store now a video store? What might have caused the change in the business? Are the people in the neighborhood older citizens, are there a lot of young people, or is there a mixture? Have the cultures in the neighborhood changed? Students can discuss the changes that have taken place and draw conclusions about what life was like for the children who lived in the neighborhood in the past.

Developing a sense of history by placing events on a time line helps a child to begin to understand chronological relationships. For the young child, putting very specific personal life events such as his or her birth date, first day of preschool, kindergarten, or first grade, memorable holidays, and special school days on a simple time line begins the process of building sequence, with one event coming after another. Older children could put additional events on their time lines, such as their first ride on a bicycle or an airplane. Displaying a class time line that includes some events

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that will occur in the near future, such as assemblies, student council activities, or spring break, will help children plot the passage of time. Periodically, throughout the school year, the teacher should refer to past events on the class time line and elicit from students the impact one event or occasion has had on another. For instance, the teacher could ask the class to look at the time line and tell the date on which a new

student first came to the classroom or when Labor Day was celebrated. Children should be asked what they remember about the event and assign a time frame for when it happened to understand sequence and passage of time.

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From personal time lines, the children can proceed to making historical time lines. "Time lines in the classroom can be powerful educational tools. They are useful in showing trends in the human experience, causes and effects, eras and their characteristics. For example, students asked to make a time line of the eighteenth hundreds will understand that slavery issues preceded the Civil War, and that slavery in the United States ended after the Civil War. Without memorizing dates . . . (students) will see causes and results." ("Teaching Time Lines to Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Graders," Social Studies and the Young Learner, Nov./Dec., 1989)

Role-playing, historical simulations, and visits by resource people are additional tools to foster empathy and understanding of the people and times children are studying in their classroom. (Brophy and VanSledright, 1997). Students in a fifth grade class could research life in colonial times and the different trades that were open to men and women. Dressing in colonial costumes and staging a colonial fair for the younger children in the school offers the older children the opportunity to become teachers and experts. They teach what they have learned about colonial trades, clothing, and tools. They can also teach the younger children the steps of a colonial dance or engage them in a game of the time period.

The use of music, art, and literature related to certain historical time periods immerses the students in the culture of the era. Puppetry gives voice to historical characters and allows the children to breathe life into historical events. Reading primary sources such as letters and diaries, examining clothing, and manipulating artifacts all aid in making predictions and reflecting on the lives of the people who wrote, wore, and used the items. Historical persons who are the subject of research projects might be impersonated throughout the school day by children in period clothing who model some of their characters' behaviors. Craftspeople and artists from the community are usually pleased to be able to showcase and demonstrate their skills and products such as quilting, cooking, rope making, woodcarving, and so on. Many could teach some of the simpler skills to students.

For young learners, an important goal of history instruction is to make the past seem real and to help them gain an insight into how their own lives and also current events have been shaped by the events and people of the past. Studying the past can help explain the present. It is the challenge of every elementary teacher to pique each child's imagination and help students understand their part in keeping our heritage alive and well, as President Truman's quote at the beginning of this essay so ably stated.