

LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Social Studies

Personalizing Social Studies for Young Children

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All of us learn better and retain information longer when we experience connections between our own lives and what is being learned. Children in elementary grades need to see personal relevance in what is being learned, because that is how they make essential neurological/social connections. I call this process of making connections “personalizing learning.” Recent research on brain-based learning shows such connections are necessary before optimal learning can occur.

Social studies presents many opportunities for students to experience connections between their own lives and what is being learned. A great deal has been written in recent years about how young children develop social studies understandings. Many teachers are interested in knowing how they can help children explore connections between the home or community and content presented

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in social studies textbooks. This leadership letter brings together research implications from the professional literature, national social studies curriculum standards,



and recommendations for implementing these in elementary classrooms to help you personalize social studies for your students.

Research on Children and Social Studies

Why Study Social Studies?

Adults often think of social studies as a never-ending stream of names, dates, and events to be memorized. Children study social studies in schools for purposes far more vital than simple memorization. Studying social

studies helps students develop into well-rounded persons equipped to understand the world around them. Social studies also helps students comprehend their own abilities to contribute to and shape their environments—whether these environments be social or geographic. Social studies permits connections with people of other cultures and makes students aware of their own personal involvement in the chain of events and circumstances linking the past to the future.

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The purposes and potential outcomes of social studies instruction are important to students' lives. Teachers and other educators should give social studies a place of honor throughout each school day, not simply relegate it to Fridays or “when there is time.” In fact, many experts urge schools to significantly increase the time currently devoted to social studies in elementary classrooms. Researchers also agree elementary teachers should include social studies in their curriculum “in ways appropriate to the capabilities and interests of the students” (Crabtree and Nash, 1992).

Children’s Understanding of the Past

All children have some idea that life was different in the past, but not very many of them have a clear understanding of what *history* means. When social studies in the early elementary school curriculum is ignored or neglected, children sometimes have not encountered history at all prior to fourth grade. In studies of young children’s learning of history, researchers found children usually associate history with famous people or events—rarely realizing they themselves are a part of history, or even that they have a personal history (Levstik

and Barton, 2001). Current research on children’s historical thinking also demonstrates teachers should begin children’s exposure to social studies by focusing on students’ own lives and the lives of their family members (Barton, 1994; Levstik and Barton, 2001).

Young children’s intuitive sense of the past tends to be of a very personal nature. Things from the past children are most interested in include themselves and their families (Elkind, 1981). Students’ ethnic and cultural backgrounds provide fertile starting points for making personal connections with new social studies learning. When teachers use strategies and plan lessons that build on prior knowledge by incorporating the child’s own cultural learning and experiences, children are empowered as learners. Students in classes such as these have been found to demonstrate improved skills, abilities, and sense of self-worth (Campbell, 1996; McAdoo, 1993). When teachers incorporate children’s personal and family history into the social studies curriculum, and empower children to become participants in the history-gathering process, their thinking and reasoning skills improve, their academic achievement increases, their sense of self-worth is enhanced, and their curiosity is piqued.

And if in the process teachers portray social studies as experience instead of simply facts, children learn to value the personal aspects of history—an attitude that may help increase their abilities to make sense of the world around them.

Personalizing the Past Brings History to Life

The idea of teaching history through attention to personal experience and primary sources is not new. “History is never either a neutral force or a complete world view; history is always someone’s history,” Appleby and colleagues (1994) suggest. Barton and Levstik (1996) remind us that “all of us start with our own diverse social histories—the story of who we are as interpreted through the experiences of daily living, family stories, pictures and artifacts.”

Children can and should use primary sources for historical inquiry in the early grades (Brophy and Alleman, 1995; Levstik and Barton, 2001). The research literature also suggests teachers who engage their students in active investigations of family and community history, who “build on what young children already know and address their misconceptions,” help children develop meaningful historical understanding (Barton, 1997, p.16).

Teachers who effectively personalize social studies instruction facilitate children’s recognition of their own relationship to history and help students realize their actions and lives contribute to a history not yet written.

In his review of the research about how young children learn history, John Hoge focuses on another important purpose of social studies: making the past real to students “instead of remaining an untouchable abstraction held only in adult memories or in hollow textbook passages” (Hoge, 1988). When teachers at the elementary level make the past real, they personalize social studies instruction in ways that enable young children to begin to build insights into their own lives and current events. The past becomes a tool to illuminate the present. Teachers who effectively personalize social studies instruction facilitate children’s recognition of their own relationship to history and help students realize their actions and lives contribute to a history not yet written. Appropriate brain-based instruction (such as personalizing social studies) also helps prepare students for the more formal and complex social studies instruction they will receive as secondary school students.

Social Studies Is Integrative

Social studies in Grades K–6 should be taught as an

integrated, rather than discipline-based, curriculum. For example, geographic learning is essential to the teaching and learning of history. Effective K–6 social studies teachers combine elements of geography such as location, place, and region, with historical understandings, such as time, historical period, and events studied. Social studies taught in this fashion enables students to understand “how events and places have affected each other across time, how people have influenced and have been influenced by their environments in different periods of the past” (Patrick, 1993).

Curriculum Goals and Standards: National Council for the Social Studies

Effective teachers plan social studies learning experiences that are defensible in light of national- and state-level curriculum standards. In 1994, the Task Force on Teaching and Learning for the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) published *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*. This document identifies ten thematic strands that build upon the NCSS definition of *social studies* as the “integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence [with the primary purpose] to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an independent world” (1994).

An annotated listing of these ten thematic strands will facilitate elementary teachers’ social studies planning and help them develop defensible lessons to personalize social studies learning. The ten themes include:

Culture

The study of culture prepares students to answer such questions as: What are the common characteristics of different cultures? How do belief systems, such as religion or political ideals, influence other parts of the culture? How does the culture change to accommodate different ideas and beliefs? What does language tell

us about the culture? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with geography, history, sociology, and anthropology, as well as multicultural topics across the curriculum.

Time, Continuity, and Change

Human beings seek to understand their historical roots and to locate themselves in time. Knowing how to read and reconstruct the past allows students to develop a historical perspective and to answer questions such as: Who am I? What happened in the past? How am I connected to those in the future? Why does our personal sense of relatedness to the past change? This theme typically appears in history courses and others that draw upon historical knowledge and habits.

People, Places, and Environments

The study of people, places, and human-environment interactions assists students as they create their spatial views and geographic perspectives of the world beyond their personal locations. Students need the knowledge, skills, and understanding to answer questions such as: Where are things located? Why are they located where they are? What do we mean by "region"? How do landforms change? What implications do these changes have for people? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with area studies and geography.

Individual Development and Identity

Personal identity is shaped by one's culture, by groups, and by institutional influences. Students should consider such questions as: How do people learn? Why do people behave as they do? What influences how people learn, perceive, and grow? How do people meet their basic needs in a variety of contexts? How do individuals develop from youth to adulthood? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with psychology and anthropology.

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Institutions such as schools, churches, families, government agencies, and the courts play an integral role in people's lives. It is important that students learn how institutions are formed, what controls and influences them, how they influence individuals and culture, and how they are maintained or changed. Students may address questions such as: What is the role of institutions in this and other societies? How am I influenced by institutions? How do institutions change? What is my role in institutional change? In schools this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, and history.

Power, Authority, and Governance

Understanding the historical development of structures of power, authority, and governance and their evolving functions in contemporary U.S. society and other parts of the world is essential for developing civic competence. In exploring this theme, students confront questions such as: What is power? What forms does it take? Who holds it? How is it gained, used, and justified? What is legitimate authority? How are governments created, structured, maintained, and changed? How can individual rights be protected within the context of majority rule? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with government, politics, political science, history, law, and other social sciences.

Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Because people have wants that often exceed the resources available to them, a variety of ways have evolved to answer such questions as: What is to be produced? How is production to be organized? How are goods and services to be distributed? What is the most effective allocation of the factors of production (land, labor, capital, and management)? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with economic concepts and issues.

Science, Technology, and Society

Modern life as we know it would be impossible without technology and the science that supports it. But technology brings with it many questions: Is new technology better than old? What can we learn from the past about how new technologies result in broader social change, some of which is unanticipated? How can we cope with the ever-increasing pace of change? How can we manage technology so that the greatest number of people benefit from it? How can we preserve our fundamental values and beliefs in the midst of technological change? This theme draws upon the natural and physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, and appears in a variety of social studies courses, including history, geography, economics, civics, and government.

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Global Connections

The realities of global interdependence require understanding the increasingly important and diverse global connections among world societies and the frequent tension between national interests and global priorities. Students will need to be able to address such international issues as health care, the environment, human rights, economic competition and interdependence, age-old ethnic enmities, and political and military alliances. This theme typically appears in units or courses dealing with geography, culture, and economics, but may also draw upon the natural and physical sciences and the humanities.

Civic Ideals and Practices

An understanding of civic ideals and practices of citizenship is critical to full participation in society and is a central purpose of the social studies. Students confront such questions as: What is civic participation and how can I be involved? How has the meaning of citizenship evolved? What is the balance between rights and responsibilities? What is the role of the citizen in a community? How can I make a positive difference? In schools, this theme typically appears in units or courses dealing with history, political science, and cultural anthropology, and in fields such as global studies, law-related education, and the humanities.

Making Social Studies Instruction Meaningful

Tarry Lindquist, recipient of the Elementary Social Studies Teacher of the Year Award and author of *Seeing the Whole Through Social Studies* (1995), believes “making learning meaningful is the core of teaching.” If young students cannot connect what is happening in the classroom with their own homes and lives, she writes, “then it seems to me that not much learning is going to occur.”

How, then, can we know when social studies learning is meaningful? In 1993, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) disseminated a vision statement with essential recommendations for making social studies teaching and learning meaningful. According to the NCSS vision statement, social studies is made meaningful when:

- Rather than memorizing disconnected bits of information or practicing skills in isolation, students learn connected networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and dispositions that they will find useful both in and out of school.
- Instruction emphasizes depth of development of important ideas with appropriate breadth of topic coverage and focuses on teaching these important ideas for understanding, appreciation, and life application.

- The significance and meaningfulness of the content is emphasized in both how it is presented to students and how it is developed through activities.
- Classroom interaction focuses on sustained examination of a few important topics rather than superficial coverage of many.
- Meaningful learning activities and assessment strategies focus students' attention on the most important ideas embedded in what they are learning.
- The teacher is reflective in planning, implementing, and assessing instruction.

Implementing the Research: Instructional Strategies

What kinds of teaching practices are suited to personalizing social studies? Even well-written textbooks usually must be supplemented with teacher creativity and additional instructional resources. This section offers suggested strategies and resources for personalizing social studies textbook content in the elementary grades, with a focus on the use of children's literature, lessons involving family stories and artifacts, and learning about local history through the use of community resources.

Using Children's Literature to Teach Social Studies

Quality children's literature can supplement and enrich social studies textbook content. Many textbook topics that capture students' interest cannot be covered in depth by publishers. Children's literature offers teachers a way to broaden coverage of selected topics. Children's literature also can provide personalized connections—through discussion of and reading about the everyday lives of people during a particular era.

Children's books should be selected for their appropriateness to the topic studied, their relevance to children's lives, and their historical accuracy.

Teachers should consider the value of picture books for broadening coverage of social studies topics, even

in intermediate and middle grades. Books featuring pictures or well-done illustrations often present information about people and their actions (adding depth to the topic of study), serve to bolster students' language usage, and help students develop habits of mind needed to comprehend social studies knowledge. Sensitive or difficult topics can be introduced or expanded upon through the use of appropriate picture books; for example, post-Civil War treatment of African Americans can be enhanced through biographies such as Towle's (1993) *The Real McCoy: The Life of an African-American Inventor*.

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Family Stories and Artifacts

Social studies learning and literacy skills are enhanced, and students experience more personal connections, when writing and speaking activities are woven into the social studies curriculum. Stories and storytelling are linked to the development of literacy. Through listening to stories and through telling them, children learn sequencing and structure. They also begin to appreciate the sensual and metaphoric properties of language: the rhythms, rhymes, figures of speech, and dialogic voices that communicate feelings.

Family stories especially serve to facilitate literacy and social studies learning. Teachers should provide a structure that allows children to comfortably share what they know about their own experiences. Structure with flexibility is key here, though—some families may be reluctant at first to share information they consider personal when that information may be shared aloud in class. Personal and/or family history assignments should encourage students to share significant events of their lives, not everything about themselves and their families.

One flexible strategy would be to give students the option of collecting information on someone's life other than their own, since the purpose of the activity is to discover how the past affects the present, not to put particular students on display.

Many strategies for collecting and sharing family stories in the classroom are available to teachers (see Recommended Reading for some suggested sources). Here I will share helpful hints for getting started with a family storytelling project:

- The hardest part for students is finding out about the first story—it gets easier after that.
- Older family members usually take responsibility for knowing and telling family stories—have students telephone, write, or visit grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles, or their parents' eldest sibling to ask about family stories.
- When students start out with a question rather than a general request for a family story, things go more smoothly.
- Bringing in or referring to family artifacts enriches the family storytelling process.
- Occasions involving traditional celebrations or rituals are rich sources for family stories.
- Students who research and write family stories come to sense their own valued role as a family member (especially when copies of scrapbooks or storybooks are made to give as gifts to extended family members).

The following questions will assist students as they begin to research their own families' stories. Duplicate the questions onto a handout to send home with students:

- What do you know about your family's last name? Did it undergo any changes coming from the "old country" to the United States? Are there stories about the name change? What are they?
- In your family, are there any traditional first or middle names? nicknames? What are they? What are the stories behind them?

- What stories have been handed down about your grandparents, parents, or other ancestors? What do you know about their childhoods and teenage years? What kinds of schools did they attend? When did they leave school, and why? What kinds of students were they?
- Is there a notorious, or infamous, character in your family's past? If so, who are/were they? What are the stories connected with this person? Are there newspaper clippings or photographs to document the stories?
- How did your parents meet? your grandparents? Are there any stories associated with their courtship?
- Have any historical events, such as World War II, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, or the Depression affected your family? How?
- Do any of your relatives have stories about a fortune made or lost?
- Does your family hold reunions? Where, and how often? Are there records of these reunions, such as invitations or photographs?
- Do any of your family members have family heirlooms or memorabilia that have been kept in the family for generations? What are they? Why are they important? Are there stories associated with these?
- Is there anyone who—while not being related to your family—is considered "one of the family"? Who is it? How did this come to be?

Using Family Artifacts

Using family artifacts is another way to "build on what young children already know." Acting as historians, children themselves collect data, examine primary sources, interview the people who used these artifacts or who have firsthand knowledge of persons who did, draw conclusions or make generalizations that help them make connections between artifacts and their own personal/family histories, write reports or descriptions that may themselves become memorabilia,

and disseminate information about artifacts examined through these reports and student-created museum-like displays.

A class project to collect, analyze, and display family artifacts can be an excellent way to launch young students into active historical inquiry. The stories artifacts engender help mold identities and provide a continued sense of family, but these relics can help motivate serious study of the past, as well. The two activities described below capitalize on the fascination of heirlooms and memorabilia, and suggest ways students may indulge their curiosity and imagination as they are encouraged to learn about their own family's history.

A "Grandma's Attic Trunk" project begins when the teacher shares memorabilia from his or her own family's history with students. One second-grade teacher brought a small clothing chest filled with personal artifacts to school and invited her students to speculate about the history behind the contents. Students were inspired to think about their own family's artifacts and, after taking home a note explaining the purpose of the activity, returned to school the following week with shoe boxes and other small containers filled with ten family or personal artifacts. The students shared their "trunks" orally with classmates and then composed a short story about each item—describing the item's relevance to their own lives or to the lives of family members.

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Another second-grade teacher read to her class the book *Song and Dance Man* (Ackerman, 1983), in which a grandfather shares props and costumes from his vaudeville days with his family. After reading the book aloud, the teacher shared an artifact from her own attic:

a silver ladle passed down through several generations in her family. Students called the resulting activity "My Treasure," since they were inspired by the book and the teacher's sharing time to go home and search for a personal or family artifact that had meaning for them. Once students brought their personal artifacts to class, they spent time sharing orally, and then created a "museum exhibit," labeling the artifact, designing a display, and adding a short essay describing the artifact's importance in their lives. The "museum exhibits" engendered so much interest throughout the school that students opened their classroom for "museum tours" one afternoon and invited other classes to examine their artifacts.

The study of one's personal and family history can be a powerful motivational strategy that inspires students to think differently about history and social studies as school subjects.

Use the questions below to create a handout for students to take home when a family artifact project is planned:

- Who owned the article?
- What historical period is the article from (e.g., the 1920s)?
- What do you know about the life and times of the person who owned this article?
- What well-known people also lived during this time period?
- What famous events occurred during the same period?
- What other interesting or significant information can you provide about this article and/or the time period in which it was used?

Using Community Resources

The study of one's personal and family history can be a powerful motivational strategy that inspires students to think differently about history and social studies as school subjects. It is equally important, however, for teachers to help their students learn to place important people/places/events in some sort of historical context, especially one that has personal meaning, such as the local neighborhood or community. Studying local history is a good way to begin looking at historical context, especially in elementary grades.

Community resources most frequently used by teachers to broaden children's understandings of social studies topics include museums and field trips. Field trips and museum visits are favored by students and teachers alike for the opportunities they present for out-of-school experiences. Unless proper planning and follow-up occur, however, even well-intentioned field trips can become little more than entertainment.

Students need to be properly introduced to and prepared for out-of-school learning opportunities. Teachers need to take care that all aspects of the field trip (introduction, the trip itself, and classroom activities after the trip) are integrated into the regular curriculum, so students will experience connections between what is learned in the school setting and what is learned during the field trip. Finally, teachers must be certain to follow up on field experiences after returning to the classroom through advance planning of lessons and activities that take advantage of children's field trip experiences and memories.

Community resources offer teachers many opportunities and resources for personalizing local history, and they need not be limited to the traditional field trip. A special unit of study or project emphasizing local and community history, for example, extends children's historical understanding beyond self and family. Local historical study should include hands-on and interactive experiences with realia and primary sources, whenever

possible. Students are excited when they realize history involves buildings and landmarks that they pass on their way to and from school each day. Older people who have lived in the community their entire lives, photographs, letters, diaries, and old maps are indispensable resources for interactive projects and field trips involving local history.

Before beginning a local or community history unit, teachers should spend some time at the local historical society and/or museum, making notes and investigating curricular resources available to educators. The public library also is an excellent resource; published diaries and letters bound or stored in vertical files represent a treasure trove of realia. Old newspaper clippings and historical picture books that provide then-now comparisons may be available at public libraries, or librarians may know how to find these contextually rich resources. The local courthouse may provide local history resources to broaden or enrich students' investigation of community history, such as surveyors' maps, aerial photographs, and copies of appropriate legal documents.

Use the questions below to develop handouts to supplement study of the local community.

Information that usually can be found in local libraries and historical societies includes:

- What was the local geographic area like before this town was settled? in the early days of its settlement? What is it like now?
- What people first settled this area? Why did they come here? When?
- Who settled here later? When? What drew them to the area?
- What religious or ethnic groups settled here? Has this changed? What percentage of the current population's roots is from that religion or ethnic group? other ethnic groups?

- How did early settlers earn their living? Has that changed? How so?
- How was the community or town “laid out”— neighborhoods, streets, major city buildings?
- Which early settlers were the most influential? Why?
- Which local residents have been influential in different eras of the town’s history? Why?
- How were early houses built and furnished? Has that changed over the years? How and why?
- What industries represent the majority of the population now (i.e., steel mills, electronics, technological manufacturing, farming, dairy farms)?
- How was the early settlement of the area influenced by forms of transportation? How is the current population influenced by transportation?
- How were early settlers influenced by commerce here and nearby?
- How are we influenced by commerce now?
- What examples of cultural resources were evident for early settlers? Which ones are now?
- How have the area’s land and water resources contributed to its history?
- What examples of architecture are from various eras in the town’s history?
- Have certain geographic areas been settled largely by one group but not another? If so, why? Is this still true?

Questions recommended for use when interviewing a classroom guest, or by younger children as they interview older relatives or community members include:

- What year did you come here? What were your reasons for coming here?
- What was the community like when you first came here (or when you were a child)? What did people do for a living? What were their homes like?
- Think about the way the neighborhood looked when you first came here (or when you were a child). How

has it changed? Give as many specific examples as you can.

- Do the same people or families live here as when you first came? How are things different? Have your neighbors changed in terms of backgrounds, age, interests, careers, or concern for the community?
- What problems has this community faced since you came here? How have those been resolved, or how are they being resolved? What problems have not been solved? Why not?
- Are there any interesting “characters” in this community? What can you tell me about them?
- Are there any interesting stories about this community?

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Questions for community members who are recent immigrants, or who came to the United States from another country long ago include:

- What country did you originally come from? When?
- What were your reasons for coming to the United States?
- What was it like in your home country before you left?
- What do you remember about the trip over here?
- What were your expectations about the United States?
- What were your first impressions of the United States?
- How were you treated by others when you first arrived? Has that changed?
- Were there some things that you had to adjust to? What were they?

- What do you miss about your old country that you don't see in the United States?
- Which customs or traditions from your old country have you retained?

These questions can be used to interview various people in the community to get a broader perspective of the contributions of "community helpers":

- What job do you do? How did you get that job?
- Where do you work? Please describe what you do there on a usual day.
- What special skills did you have to learn to do your job? How did you learn these? What skills did you have when you first started working there?
- What do you like best about your job? Why? What do you like least? Why?
- Describe your coworkers. Do the workers there depend on each other? In what way?
- What was the first job you ever had? Why did you decide to work at the job you have now?

Students' study of the local community is limited primarily by time and interest. If time and/or interest permit, some students may want to explore certain topics in-depth. Others may decide to narrow one or more community history topics in order to explore subtopics, such as the Natural Community, Government and Services, Organizations, Agriculture/Related Industry, Roads and Transportation, Monuments and Landmarks, Recreation, Traditions, the Arts, Place Names. Suggest subtopics such as these to gifted students and motivated others.

A plethora of teacher-tested strategies and resources for teaching about the local community is found in my book, *Bringing History Home: Local and Family History Projects for Grades K-6* (Hickey, 1999).

Activities and projects such as Neighborhood Maps, Geography of a School, Visitor's Guide to Our Town, and others are explained in more detail than is possible in this monograph.

Conclusion

Children learn better and retain information longer when they experience connections between their own lives and what is being learned. It is necessary for young children to see personal relevance in what is being taught, and teachers who understand how to personalize learning are able to help children experience these personal connections. Social studies, especially through the study of family and community history, presents teachers and students with many opportunities to make the connections necessary for personalizing learning.

When young children become active investigators of their own place in history, they are empowered as learners. Children who are involved in researching family stories and artifacts, as well as those who study the history of their own community, have been found to demonstrate improved skills and abilities, and a sense of self-worth. These children become participants in the history-gathering process in ways that improve their thinking and reasoning skills, increase their academic achievement, enhance their sense of self-worth, and pique their curiosity about the world around them and their place in it.

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