

LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Social Studies

Social Studies in the Early Childhood Classroom

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In the early childhood classroom, teaching and learning social studies should be enjoyable and meaningful experiences.

Often social studies is viewed as a side subject taught only when there is extra time. Elementary curriculum forms the foundations for a multitude of learning situations for students. Invariably, there never seems to be enough time in an elementary school day to cover every issue. One response to this dilemma is to prioritize content. What is most important to teach? What will be tested? What does the textbook include in its scope and sequence? The risk here is shortchanging students of important applied knowledge and skills.

How can social studies have a meaningful place in the primary classroom? This can be accomplished by using integrated practices to facilitate the learning of young children, by recognizing the characteristics of young learners and supporting their development with appropriate practices, and by having clear academic goals and objectives to ensure a rigorous program.

With school reform efforts placing an emphasis on literacy performance, many teachers feel they have little time to address social studies, a multidisciplinary



subject in which few elementary teachers specialize. The emphasis on literacy in the early childhood classroom is well deserved. It is imperative young children experience early literacy success. However, social studies need not be viewed as a competitor to the literacy focus. In fact, if literacy is defined as “communicating in real-world situations using reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and thinking” (Cooper 2000), then social studies not only facilitates but also expands student literacy skills as well as content learning. Literacy experiences should encompass every minute of the day

in a primary classroom, being incorporated into *all* content areas.

How can social studies have a meaningful place in the primary classroom? This can be accomplished by using integrated practices to facilitate the learning of young children, by recognizing the characteristics of young learners and supporting their development with appropriate practices, and by having clear academic goals and objectives to ensure a rigorous program. As represented in the NCSS Consortium for Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning position statement (1994), recent calls for educational reform focus on the need for curricula emphasizing conceptual learning that is integrated across traditional subject areas. Eliminating artificial barriers among subject areas gives students a broader context for solving real-life problems.

Early childhood pedagogy has long recognized that children under the age of eight do not learn isolated facts with much success; neither are they passive learners (Seefeldt 1992). We know that allowing children to address academic goals that represent specific knowledge and skills in interactive, child-centered experiences will promote greater depth of learning. Yet, a common struggle in the primary classroom is finding the balance between covering predetermined content and developing multifaceted critical thinkers and learners.

As a classroom teacher, I, too, struggled with covering language arts, math, science, and social studies in a comprehensive manner while remaining true to early childhood practices. However, I continue to be convinced that integrated curriculum allows for intermingling of content as well as child-centered, interactive learning experiences for students. The benefits of this child-centered, integrated approach cannot be emphasized enough.

Social studies curriculum proved to be a powerful link to interdisciplinary teaching and learning for my students. Take, for example, the common themes of self, family, and community. These topics are full of connections and

high-interest projects for children to expand upon. The information I offered in a teacher-directed lesson could facilitate the emergence of child-initiated learning. It was possible for students to express their natural curiosity and enjoy the satisfaction of self-generated learning by asking questions that led to further investigation (Helm, Katz 2001). The projects children initiated allowed me to facilitate and guide them toward interdisciplinary academic goals. These projects provided my students with experiences requiring questioning and problem solving, communicating in written and spoken language, and manipulating materials. Not only were core academic areas integrated, but also the visual arts played an important role in providing children with a tangible means to explore concepts and make personal meaning of instructional experiences. Allowing children to express and play with their understanding through visual arts provides valuable opportunities for important language building and teacher-student discourse (Taunton, Colbert 2000).

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With an integrated curricular structure in place, teaching strategies and the understanding of young learners begin to create a complete picture. That picture will not portray the early primary teacher as an instructor lecturing on content and information to 20 to 25 young children as they passively wilt with every word (Gronland 2000). The young children I have worked with have never been passive recipients of information! To the young child, exploring, discovering, and making connections are stimulating activities. My most successful practices set up experiences for children to be active participants in their own learning. The key is to find the experiences

that meet the learning needs of all children. With a classroom of children each coming to school from unique situations and varying experiences, my teacher role was to create a learning environment to facilitate learning at multiple levels.

Again, as the social studies themes occur, children can be provided with common experiences such as field trips, guest speakers, stories, activities, and shared information. In a kindergarten classroom, if family and community are the theme, display photos of children's lives in the past and present. Depict different families and the kinds of activities they participate in together. Have available in the classroom books, pictures, and props for dramatic play during independent exploration time. Children can use these materials to construct their personal understanding and practice their newly formed theories, alone or with other children (Curtis, Carter 1996). From these common experiences different levels of understanding will emerge.

I found my role as teacher was sometimes that of observer, having created an environment and experiences conducive to student exploration. My role was that of facilitator, asking open-ended questions to promote and extend vocabulary development. I was an evaluator, facilitating scaffolded learning and always looking to move children to their next level of understanding for optimal learning.

The foundations established in early learning experiences for children support learning and development as they continue to construct their own interdisciplinary connections both in the classroom and in the real world.

To value the nature of young children's learning does not mean academic rigor is compromised. Academic goals can and must have an appropriate place in the early childhood classroom. We cannot make the mistake of

shortchanging student development by leaving important learning to chance in a totally child-centered program, nor do we need to concentrate so heavily on content delivery that little attention is paid to the learning needs of young children (Bredenkamp, Rosegrant 1992). Skillful teachers weave content goals and objectives into meaningful classroom experiences.

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