



# Social Studies in Today's Early Childhood Curricula

**C**hildren are born into social studies. From birth, they begin exploring their world. At each stage of early development—infant, toddler, preschool, and primary—children look around and try to make sense of their social and physical environments. They gradually learn more about their expanding community and eventually come to see themselves as citizens.

What is relevant social studies subject matter and what is a useful approach for early childhood educators teaching social studies today? The answers to these questions depend of course on children's ages and stages of development as well as their child care or school setting.

Social studies currently and historically is a field designed to meet the educational needs of society. It emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century as a holistic approach to citizenship education using the techniques of social science: raising questions and gathering, analyzing, discussing, and displaying data. Elementary schools at that time focused on basic education—reading, writing, arithmetic. To help immigrant children understand the history and social mores of their new country, teachers read stories about the early formation of the United States and focused on children's development of the virtues exemplified in moralistic stories (such as those in the McGuffey Readers). A debate emerged between educators who sought to teach the facts of history and those who sought to develop students' appreciation and understanding of the unique aspects of U.S. history.

After several study commissions of the National Education Association (NEA) had grappled with the issues of an increasingly complex society, schools began in 1916 to integrate history, geography, and political science—teaching students how to think about social issues and content—so that graduates could be effective employees in a democratic society. The NEA saw social studies as “the subject matter related directly to the organization and development of human society, and to individuals as members of social groups” (1916, 5). “The ‘subject matter’ for this new school subject was to be drawn from the most influential social sciences of the time—history, geography, and civics—and blended together as one school subject for the purpose of helping children understand our American heritage and acquire the skills and sensitivities basic to constructive participation in our nation's democratic society” (Maxim 2006, 13).

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### Taking an integrated approach

Progressive educators such as John Dewey in the 1930s encouraged teachers to use social studies as the foundation for activity-based learning built on children's interests. Dewey maintained that learning involves firsthand experience and draws upon many instructional resources beyond the textbook. He advocated child learning and teaching activities that begin with the familiar experiences of daily life (Dewey [1916] 1966). In farming communities, this might mean growing wheat in the classroom, observing the process, and documenting the progress of plant growth; in the city, children might study the work of the milk-wagon driver and the chimney sweep.

Accordingly, from the inception of the field, social studies teaching used an integrated, project-oriented approach that continues today. Preschool investigations now might consider such child questions as why, in December, people in Florida wear different clothes than people in New York. In following up, teacher and children may look at the role climate plays in determining what clothes people wear. They could collect data—look at weather maps; make weather charts; read stories about weather and clothes; consult the weather channel on TV or on the Internet; and draw, cut, and paste pictures—to explore climatic differences.

At the primary level, a project might more directly align with state standards but still follow child interest and a project orientation. For example, children may consider what to do when there are not enough silver crayons for everyone in the class. Besides evincing the obvious answer of sharing resources, the question triggers an investigation of a basic economics unit on supply and demand. The silver crayon discussion evolves into data collection about economic decisions at classroom, school, and community levels, fostering eight-year-olds' burgeoning understanding of issues like resources and scarcity.

Another powerful influence on the child-centered curricular and instructional approach for social studies came in the 1960s with the work of Jerome Bruner. In *The Process of Education* (1960), Bruner explained spiraling curriculum, in which a topic, such as democracy, is introduced to children at an age-appropriate level. Activities with young children might focus on classroom rules to keep order and be fair to all. In the later grades, children would study government operations and subtleties of democracy.

With Bruner's influence, inquiry-based teaching became a central instructional strategy for social studies. He stressed the *doing* of social science in the learning process. For example, in considering What is a family? children would gather information to elaborate their understandings of family, appropriate to their ages and stages of development. They answer complex questions through investigation of the big ideas and questions that require critical thinking (see Zarrillo 2004).

In the preschool–primary years, the big ideas derive from topics related to self, family, and community. They might include immigration (How did/do people come to the United States?), transportation (How do we move around in our community?), banking (What does the bank do with money?), and heritage (How did our ancestors live?). The tradition of holistic instruction, using the content and processes of the social sciences, continues. It is evident in





the scope of and sequence for social studies in the primary grades, as defined by the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS):

- Kindergarten—awareness of self in the social setting
  - First grade—the individual in school and family life
  - Second grade—the neighborhood
  - Third grade—sharing the earth with others in the community
- (NCSS 1984, 376–85)

More recently, while preserving the developmental sequence, the NCSS organized social studies content around 10 large themes:

- culture;
- time continuity and change;
- people, places, and environments;
- individual development and identity;
- individuals, groups, and institutions;
- power, authority, and governance;
- production, distribution, and consumption;
- science, technology, and society;
- global connections; and
- civic ideals and practices (NCSS 1994).

Each theme guides teachers in selecting content or in deriving content based on child interest. Obviously, theme evolution and development depend on children's previous experiences, developmental stages, and skills. For example, time continuity and change for four-year-olds might mean a study of grandparents; global connections for third-graders might include e-mail correspondence with children in Australia.



### Social studies for today's early childhood setting

Using the underlying concepts from social science, teachers can draw content broadly from the 10 themes and use inquiry-based processes to foster curiosity, problem-solving skills, and appreciation of investigation. Social studies curricula can support children as they solve classroom and school issues as well as investigate neighborhood and community problems with the goal of enhancing understanding and civic awareness and pride. Thus, broadly defined, the social studies include the following disparate but intertwined content:

- Social learning and self-concept development, including character development. (While building a block structure together, young children can learn to negotiate, solve problems, and cope with strong feelings.)
- Academic content of social studies based on NCSS's 10 themes. (In the primary grades, children throughout the country usually study the history of the community and state.)
- Classroom community development. (Toddlers develop an understanding of group life that requires putting toys away and sharing materials.)
- Foundational understandings for civic engagement. (Children of all ages appreciate the diversity of their friends and classmates.)

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There is an inextricable linking of family, culture, and community in the teaching and learning of social studies. The evolution of each child's social understandings about the world begins with self and family, expanding to the child care and educational setting. In developing these social inquiries, teachers first focus on what children know and are able to do. Then they help children scaffold additional learning to elaborate their understandings of the world around them. A sensitive, respectful approach to child and family sets the tone for each child's broader social learning experience.



### Social studies as self-development

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The curricular focus of self-development in a social context starts with the classroom and the people in it: children, teachers, caregivers, and families. Personal interactions facilitate child understanding of the social world of classroom, child care program, school, and community. For each age group—infant, toddler, preschool, and primary—social interactions form the foundation for building curriculum. In responsive child care and school settings, families' home cultures influence this curricular foundation. Therefore, the social context includes an ethical orientation as well as appropriate behavior that begins with family values.

With experiences in child care programs and school, children modify their views of themselves—who they are in the social world. Beginning in children as young as age two, these experiences influence character—an individual's approach to ethical issues. Ethical issues include decisions about honesty, fairness, courtesy, and respect for others. School experience facilitates the development of mainstream social behaviors and values among children. Children's incorporation of such behaviors and values are expected by child care centers, schools, and communities. Toddlers in child care settings learn that they cannot grab a chunk of banana from a friend's plate but must take pieces from the serving platter in turn. Preschoolers take turns doing jobs that keep the classroom tidy and running smoothly.



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One of the most prominent early arguments for providing group play opportunities for young children stemmed from the idea that social and play experiences socialize young children—that is, help them learn the ropes for engaging in the discourse of mainstream “polite society” (see McMillan [1919] 1930; Read & Patterson 1980). Throughout history and in diverse cultural situations, the appropriate functioning of young children in the social world depends upon values articulated by the stakeholders who determine the educational standards for the time. In the twenty-first century, young children must operate in a society that values respect for diversity and appreciation of conventions and rules in a broad spectrum. Thus, the content of social studies becomes even more complex and engaging.

### Choosing the content for social studies

For the youngest citizens—infants and toddlers—the content is self-development in a social world. Adults enhance this self-development by providing safe, colorful, intriguing toys and materials to foster curiosity. Infants and toddlers play alone, by the side of others, and with others to elaborate their social understandings of themselves and others. But they also need nurturance and respect from teachers and families. In these early years, teachers encourage respect for others and provide opportunities to learn about various cultures by singing songs and reading stories from various viewpoints and cultures, displaying pictures that reflect families in the community, and modeling an appreciation for all cultures and backgrounds.

In the preschool and primary years, social studies offer a structure for broad, theme-based content—content organized around a topic and offering multiple entry points and significant opportunities for investigation. For children, such content serves as a training ground for acquiring problem-solving skills as well as a laboratory for the development and elaboration of interpersonal coping skills and strategies: “The primary purpose of social studies is 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 interdependent world” (NCSS 1993, 3).

Preschool and primary-age children can develop a sense of civic responsibility through the exploration of rich thematic units such as a study of food, clothing, shelter, childhood, money, government, communication, family

living, or transportation (Alleman & Brophy 2001, 2002, 2003). Using these themes as starting points, children and teachers form hypotheses, gather data, summarize, and make conclusions. Finally, children organize and present the data in pictures, with maps and charts, in dioramas, in PowerPoint presentations, and in other ways appropriate to child understanding. Not only do they use the skills of social scientists in these investigations and learn about civic engagement, but they also read, manage, and display data.





### Choosing the processes for social studies

Teaching strategies in preschool and primary social studies include individual investigations in the library, in the field, and on the Internet; interviews; small-group collaboration; and large-group discussions. The scale of these investigations varies depending upon the age and development of the child. For example, in interviews with a grandparent or older adult, three-year-olds might ask, "What was your favorite fruit when you were little?" The class could then collect the names of the fruits and, with the teacher's help, make a chart to show the grandparents' answers (oranges, bananas, and so on). For kindergartners, small-group collaboration might involve making a map of the classroom, with different groups assigned a portion of the room. Second-graders might go online to collect information about garbage collection

and recycling in their community.

The classroom environment must support children's use of these approaches to learning. In thinking about the space, teachers should consider not only the room arrangement but also schedules and how the contents of bulletin boards, learning centers, and resource areas may be arrayed to encourage child discovery.

- *Room arrangement*—Traffic patterns match the activities planned. Learning centers are clearly set up and defined by topic, with appropriate space for the activities. Equipment and materials are accessible and grouped to encourage child management of them.
- *Schedule*—There is balance between individual, small-group, and large-group activities. A well-developed schedule includes large blocks of time during the week to support theme-based curricular endeavors (Berry & Mindes 1993).

The way teachers allocate space clearly shows the values and culture of the community (Gandini 1998). A classroom that welcomes and encourages social studies has posters displaying child questions, results of data gathered, child-created pictures, and structures that document learning, along with comfortable spaces for individual and small-group work. The classroom may include materials passed from one group of children to another—for example, a book on the previous group's trip to the forest preserve becomes a part of cultural history and a resource for the class. The room also displays materials that families contribute to the ongoing projects and contains references to field trips made as part of the social studies investigations.

Seeing social studies as both content (organized around important child questions) and process (action-oriented strategies) prevents educators from considering social studies as an adjunct to other subject areas. An adjunct approach toward social studies is haphazard. Thoughtful teachers avoid stereotypical poems about Thanksgiving and occasional and inconsistent lessons on character traits like courtesy. Rather than posting their own classroom rules, good teachers collaborate on rules with young children, encouraging them to think about how to achieve respect and order. Effective

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teachers know, as they teach children to read, write, compute, and problem solve, that they also must

- assist children in social/emotional growth,
- emphasize holidays that have community meaning,
- seek an antibias approach to values,
- collaborate with families, and
- foster the development of integrity in individuals and groups of children (Mindes & Donovan 2001).

Through use of social studies themes, teachers can integrate seemingly distinct goals into meaningful investigations. Using a developmentally appropriate practice model (Bredenkamp & Copple 1997), teachers can develop the natural social studies curriculum.

Here are some ideas for thematic curriculum, with examples:

**Build on what children already know.** For instance, after studying neighborhood and community, move on to the home state.

**Develop concepts and processes** of social studies rather than focusing on isolated facts. For example, create maps visually showing the classroom, the school, or community.

**Provide hands-on activities.** Have children draw a timeline showing when each child was born or make a chart to show how many brothers and sisters each child in the class has.

**Use relevant social studies throughout the year.** Conduct child discussions about class problems, revising class rules accordingly, or consider the concept of scarcity related to choices.

**Capitalize on child interest** (Katz & Chard 2000). Consider why, say, the lake is closed to swimmers or what makes an airplane stay in the sky.

Developed in this way, the curricula of social studies use big ideas to connect with children and deepen their understanding of their relevant social world.

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## Conclusion

Social studies as content and process is a vibrant and vital part of early childhood curricula. Social studies at the center of early childhood curricula offers the hope that the focus of education will be on the development of effective, efficient, ethical children who will approach their world nonsimplistically and thoughtfully. With the help of good teachers, children will not only absorb the content that focuses on citizenship education in all its permutations, but also learn how to learn and how to consider multiple perspectives.

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