Early Childhood Building Blocks

Early Childhood Social Studies: Using Big Ideas—Discovery Learning and Curricular Integration

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Introduction

Teachers of young children usually think holistically about curriculum and teaching strategies. That is, they plan day-to-day activities around multiple entry points in order to address the diverse learning styles and needs of each child. Early childhood teachers put materials in learning centers for children to explore, such as:

- rocks and leaves
- puzzles
- play dough
- prop boxes
- blocks
- food preparation and housekeeping
- woodworking tools
- literacy activities
- computers
- art
- water or sand play
- music

These are the staples of the early childhood curriculum, i.e., materials organized as discovery learning centers. How, then, do teachers use these materials to promote the learning of social studies content?
Rationale

Discovery learning is a project-oriented approach which promotes opportunities for young children to explore their ever-expanding social world. When teachers organize exploration around important social studies themes—family, school, neighborhood, transportation, and so forth—they offer students rich vehicles for developing subject-matter knowledge in all curricular areas.

Let the following questions guide you in linking discovery activities to social studies:

- How will you incorporate the research skills inherent in the social studies into your activity?
- What skills and techniques of social scientists will the young children use?
- How will you assure the development of critical thinking in young children?
- How will you ensure that a thematic or project-based approach to curriculum organization is holistic, crossing content lines?
- In what ways will your project encourage students to develop social knowledge through the personal relationships that occur naturally in the classroom?
- How will you use questions skillfully to promote learning and to facilitate young children’s understanding, individually and collectively?
- What kinds of questions work best to foster learning for all young children?
- How will you empower young children as learners through the discovery-learning approach?

Example

Using Learning Centers

You can meet the content demands of social studies themes throughout the year by changing the exploratory materials in the various learning centers and on the bulletin board in your classroom. Young children acquire social knowledge through the relationships that they have with each other and with the adults in the classroom, within their families, and in the community. Use learning centers to help them make connections to this knowledge in the social studies content areas of culture, etiquette, and geography. For example, young children build upon their knowledge of personal relationships that occur in families and informal settings through play in the housekeeping area. Through play—in the housekeeping center, outdoors, on the corner block, or elsewhere—children make sense of their immediate world by trying on roles, imagining the real and the unreal, and in other ways exploring the social world of the child care center or school and community. Teachers can scaffold social learning by varying the props in the housekeeping center, transforming the center into the post office, the grocery store, the shopping mall, the playground, or other community setting.
Organizing Big Ideas

Help children decide what to investigate by using a graphic organizer or KWL chart. Then have young children use the skills of social scientists to answer the questions within the big idea of, say, family. These skills include listening and reading more stories to gain background knowledge about family styles and relationships. In this way, young children express their understanding of emerging concepts by creating charts with teachers. They make concept maps to show relationships among elements of the classroom, the school or center, and the community. Sometimes they acquire information by interviewing family members and elders or workers in the school such as the principal and cafeteria workers. Finally, young children document their emerging understandings of the social studies by making murals, drawing pictures, and producing plays based on the knowledge that they acquired during their investigation of the specific big idea.

Making Connections with Big Ideas

While exploring these big ideas, children are acquiring social studies concepts and skills as well as utilizing the content and processes of the whole curriculum. That is, they are using literacy skills to listen, read, and write about families, to use our same example from above. Children use investigative skills to find out why families build different kinds of structures related to particular weather conditions—exploring both geography and science. They chart the numbers of people in families in the class using graphing skills that will apply to the math curriculum. In this way, the social studies themes serve to integrate the curriculum.

Example

Curricular Big Ideas

Children gain additional significant social studies knowledge from the exploration of big ideas with their teachers in the early years. These include such questions as:

• How do babies grow to be older children?
• What is a family?
• How do people move from place to place?
• What are houses and shelters like in my community?
• Who are the helpers in my community?

You may wish to begin the exploration of these questions by reading a story. For example, The Hello, Goodbye Window (2006) by Norton Juster is a story about a little girl’s relationship with her grandparents. After reading the story to the children, you might begin an investigation of grandparents as family members. Include all of the possibilities—grandparents living with families, those living far away, those who are no longer alive—in the investigation of the big idea of family, one of the enduring topics of the social studies.
Choosing Big Ideas

When choosing big ideas to investigate for the social studies, guide children toward those questions that can lead to in-depth analysis and sustained investigation. Contrast an investigation of family, shelter, transportation, or food production and distribution, in which young children can assess the topic from multiple entry points with various amounts of background knowledge, with a theme on pumpkins. With the large questions, young children develop skills, dispositions, and knowledge on significant social topics that form the bridge to content in history, politics, geography, science, and so on. The work with enduring themes can anchor exploration for a sustained period. In contrast, the exploration of a theme such as “what is a pumpkin” may occupy children for a mere half hour, or at most a day with additional stories and the baking of a pie. As well, such a narrow theme may not add any additional opportunities for knowledge and skill development. That is, most children already know what a pumpkin is, have eaten pumpkin pie, and have carved pumpkins into jack ‘o lanterns. Thus, they are not building new knowledge. With a study of family, they have the opportunity to learn about families in the community, around the state, and across the globe. They are acquiring foundational knowledge of sociology and anthropology.

Conclusion

In this holistic, big idea, project-oriented approach to social learning and the social studies, young children experience the very best practice in early education. This approach to curriculum—teaching and learning—connects the learner to new knowledge in active discovery of content related to important, enduring concepts adding to self-knowledge as well as the construction of social learnings. Teachers engage young children in the acquisition of foundational learning strategies to ensure critical thinking. Such practice is in keeping with that advocated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children as stated in its position statement “Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Young Children from Birth through Age 8” (http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/PSDAP98.PDF) adopted July 1996. For additional resources on the topic, updated for 2005, see http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200507/05resources.asp, Journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Embedded Concepts

Holistic curriculum and teaching strategies: Children construct knowledge based upon interaction with teachers and the environment; subjects such as reading, writing, and math are artificial adult divisions of the curriculum. That is, children acquire skills, knowledge, and dispositions through holistic learning rather than through cut-up periods devoted to a “subject.”

Learning centers: In these places teachers organize materials according to a theme or interest, arranging them conveniently and labeling them clearly for child engagement.

Social studies themes: The ten themes defined by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994) are:

- culture
- time, continuity, and change
- people, places, and environment
- individual development and identity
- individuals, groups, and institutions
- power, authority, and governance
- production, distribution, and consumption
- science, technology, and society
- global connections
- civic ideals and practices

These themes are broad-based and suitable for engagement by young children when explored from the perspective of the young child’s experience and knowledge base.
Early Learning Content Standards for Social Studies

Social Studies Skills and Methods Standard

Pre-K – 2 Benchmark
A. Obtain information from oral, visual, print and electronic sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-K Indicators</th>
<th>Kindergarten Indicators</th>
<th>Grade 1 Indicators</th>
<th>Grade 2 Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gain information through participation in experiences with objects, media, books, and engaging in conversations with peers.</td>
<td>Listen for information.</td>
<td>Obtain information about a topic using a variety of oral and visual sources.</td>
<td>Obtain information from oral, visual and print sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify sources used to gather information: a. People; b. Printed materials; c. Electronic sources.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre-K - 2 Benchmark
C. Communicate information orally visually or in writing

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Represent ideas through multiple forms of language and expression.</td>
<td>Communicate information.</td>
<td>Communicate information orally or visually.</td>
<td>Communicate information in writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About the Author

Gayle Mindes is Professor of Education at DePaul University in Chicago, where she teaches in the preservice early childhood and elementary education programs. Mindes, a lifelong urban educator, writes and speaks on the topics of social studies, assessment, and kindergarten. She serves on the editorial board for Young Children. Her books include:


*Assessing Young Children* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall/Merrill, 2006. She earned a B.S. in Elementary Education from the University of Kansas, an M.S. in Counseling and Behavioral Disabilities from the University of Wisconsin, and an Ed. D. in Curriculum and Instruction with emphasis on early childhood education at Erikson Institute, Loyola University of Chicago.

References and Resources

- **Isbell, R., & Exelby, B. (2001).** Early learning environments that work! Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

For more information

Contact Nancy Brannon at nbrannon@ohiorc.org or Nicole Luthy at nluthy@ohiorc.org. Visit [http://rec.ohiorc.org](http://rec.ohiorc.org) to see the REC website. Also see other Early Childhood Building Blocks Briefs.