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Why is it Important to Teach Social Studies?

I believe that it is just as important to teach social studies, as it is to teach the “main subjects,” like reading and mathematics. Learning about and studying social studies and history enables our society to learn from events from the past and plan for events that may occur in the future. The social studies “enable students to understand and participate effectively in their world, and explain their relationship to other people and to social, economic, and political institutions (NCSS, 1988).” Students develop problem solving and decision making skills, and learn to assess and analyze issues and making thoughtful judgments based off of their judgments. Students become aware and thoughtful citizens of the school, their neighborhoods, and above all, the world, when they have been provided the opportunity to investigate events from prior years.

The National Council for the Social Studies statement about the rationale for teaching social studies to elementary students explains that effective social studies curriculum program is one that directs and focuses the natural characteristics of energy, curiosity, and imagination of young children to help them understand and function in their personal and social worlds (NCSS 1988). I believe that children must be able to practice and utilize their natural senses of curiosity and imagination while at school. Using systematically organized concepts from social studies and history can enable students to develop their thinking and curiosity skills so that as student grow older so that they are capable of processing information so that they can make generalizations and integrate new information into their schema. Social studies are a subject that also allows students to work collectively in groups, and should be shared in groups. Cooperative learning enables students to develop social skills, and allows students to hear multiple

perspectives on a topic in which students learn to understand how other individuals see the world and they become open to new ideas.

The Indiana Department of Education website states that “in order for students to make reasoned decisions about their lives and contribute to their family, community, and nation they need more skills and knowledge than ever before. To meet these challenges, Indiana established world-class academic standards that clearly outline what students should know and be able to do at each grade level and subject area (IDOE, 2009).” I am expected to teach the academic standards that my state has in place for my students to learn, and I can use these standards to help me drive instruction. I will use the standards to give me a starting place when it comes to what curriculum to cover with my students while they are in my classroom. The standards also will help me know what students should have learned the year before they were in my classroom, so that I am not covering the same topics that they have already learned about. It is also important for me as the teacher to know what the students will be expected to learn in upper grades, so that if possible, we can draw connections and create schema for the students to have when they are learning more in depth concepts as they progress into higher grades.

There are so many fun and interesting methods that teachers can employ when teaching social studies. The Think-Pair-Share method is one that I will most definitely use in my classroom when teaching social studies. While reading about a topic and I want the students to think about and discuss the concepts I will stop and allow the students to think about the question or idea, and then have them pair up with a partner and share their thoughts and opinions with one another. After the small pairs have met, each pair can share an idea with the entire class. The Think-Pair-Share method allows student the chance to formulate and talk about their opinions

with one another. I think that students can learn a lot from each other when they share with each other, and a lot of interesting ideas can come out of a Think-Pair-Share session. Students are given a question that allows them to think deeply and practice analyzing concepts of social studies, and many teachable moments can arise when sharing the opinions discussed. Students do have the potential to get off task during this session; however, if the teacher pays close attention to the discussions, he/she should be able to tell when the students are done discussing to allow the lesson to move on.

Another teaching tool that I will utilize during social studies instruction is the jigsaw method. Once again students are working in small groups, and each person is assigned a topic in the small group to become an expert on. Then each topic gets together and does research and discusses the key points. Then each person gets back into their original small groups and teaches the rest of the group the idea. This allows the class to cover more material and students are held accountable to know their information because they are teaching their classmates. To ensure that complete information is brought back to the groups, the teacher can monitor the topic groups and ask the students questions to assess whether they understand the topic before they go back to teach the small groups. This is a great student centered activity that encourages social interaction.

The gallery walk technique is another great instructional device that I will try to use as an elementary teacher. The gallery walk is a collection of student created pictures that illustrate a task that the teacher has asked the students to draw/analyze through drawing. The class then goes around and looks at each picture, evaluating the content of the picture and its relevancy to the topic. The students then pick their favorite picture and then have to justify why they chose the one they did. This gets students working on their critical thinking skills and practicing justifying

why they think the way they do. This activity also can help students practice using evaluative vocabulary. This is a great way to incorporate the multiple intelligences, and meets the needs of several types of learners.

I took a history class at while Manchester College with a professor who, on the very first day of class, shared his thoughts about assessing students over history. He explained that he does not believe in giving tests to assess the knowledge a student has over history because history, he feels, is not just a bunch of dates or important people that one has to memorize, rather, history is what happened, the events, that are the most important when studying history and social studies. We did not have a test in his class, rather, we were asked to write papers and analyze events that took place during the period in history we were studying. By writing a paper, the students are providing the teacher with information that lets the teacher know whether the student fully understands the concepts and ideas that were the main objective for the instructor. I believe that projects and writing assignments are effective ways to assess a subject like social studies. Social studies is a more application based subject, so creating a project or writing an analysis paper allows student to apply their knowledge and present it in a way that demonstrates what is going on in their heads. Tests do not fully reflect the abilities and knowledge that students have over a subject like social studies, however tests can provide quick feedback into what the student already knows, which can help the teacher plan her/his instruction. I believe that as a teacher I will use projects and papers as a way to assess my student's knowledge and ability to analyze historical events, and apply the knowledge to what is happening in the student's life now.

The children's book *John, Paul, George, and Ben*, written and illustrated by Lane Smith, is a silly book that can be used to enhance social studies instruction. Much of social studies and

history involves analyzing sources and finding what is true and what is false. This book discusses the tales, almost legends, in history that has been told to students through the ages, and puts a funny twist on them. The book talks about John Hancock and his large signature, Paul Revere and his loud mouth, George Washington and cutting down his father's cherry tree, as well as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. In the end the author provides a true/false section that debunks these American history legends and explains the true side of the story, or elaborates. This is a great book that can be used to introduce the idea that when studying history we do need to analyze the validity of the source. So much of what students see in movies, and read in books provides false information which gives students a lot of misconceptions about history. When teachers take the time to discuss and change these misconceptions about history and social studies, students will be able to make judgments about the validity of what they see in movies, and perhaps they will even conduct research on their own to discover the real answers.

Upon taking my social studies methods course, I was unclear as to how to reach all of my students when planning curriculum units and lessons. However, I have discovered that student centered lessons and activities can help enhance what is read out of the textbook, and that all ages of students benefit from reading grade level appropriate picture books. Integrating trade books into a social studies unit can help students draw connections to what they are learning and can provide supplementary information that is found in the textbook. Overall, I see my social studies curriculum being a hands on, student-centered approach that focuses on analyzing what happened in the past and how that shapes the future, and gets students digging deeper into their own lives and making meaningful and lifelong connections to the social studies.

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