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**Social Studies Philosophy**

In all honesty, social studies has never been my strong subject area during elementary school, high school, and even college. Throughout my years in school, I always felt that learning social studies meant memorizing specific dates, writing out a list of vocabulary words, and taking a chapter test. Then, as I grew older, studying social studies was about remembering more information and still passing that test. I never felt like social studies was useful to me; I did not see the importance of the information I was learning. Yes, my knowledge of certain historical aspects has still increased, but I would not consider myself to be proficient in this area. Knowing this about myself, I used to think that I would just teach what was necessary and refer to the textbook to help explain the concepts. Now that I am closer to running my own classroom and being responsible for my own students, I realize that I do not want my students to feel the way I did about the social studies subject; I want them to learn and remember these concepts because it is interesting to them and because they see how it connects to their own lives!

Social studies in the elementary curriculum is important for that reason. Through this subject area, students learn about our diverse and changing world, the world that they live in. Throughout this curriculum, the students engage in learning about the historical aspects, such as where and how our democratic society evolved; they learn about our civic ideals, such as our rights and responsibilities as citizens of our society; and they learn about the different cultures that surround us in our everyday lives. As the students are learning about all of these different social studies concepts, all in all, they are learning how our society functions and how they
should act as a citizen of this country. Honestly, I wish that my past teachers would have taught
social studies in this manner, explaining how it connects to my own life. If my teachers would
have made that connection for me, or helped me to make the connection myself, I truly feel like I
would have personally gained more from this subject than I did. For instance, if I was teaching
2\textsuperscript{nd} grade, one of their social studies standards is about the local history. This standard, fitting
under the Time, Continuity, and Change NCSS theme, could be taught by showing pictures of
the past local community and then taking a field trip walk around the town. After looking at
both perspectives, the teacher and students could discuss the changes that have occurred and if
the change was for better or worse. Overall, the students are more apt to learn if the concept is
related to the students themselves. Using this particular standard and method of teaching, the
students will be learning about the connection to their place of residence. Another example that
emphasizes my philosophy about making social studies connect to students’ lives would deal
with the NCSS theme of Power, Authority, and Governance. For instance, if I was teaching 5\textsuperscript{th}
grade, one of their social studies standards is about the role of citizens and how they participate
in the election process to voice their opinion about what happens in government. To teach this
concept, most students may see this as a hard and boring concept to grasp; there is so much to
learn about our government and all of those big words about our government may cause teachers
to lose the students’ attention. However, this is where I would recognize what kinds of
difficulties this lesson/unit could bring, and then I would consider which things I could do that
would grab the students’ interest and help them to see the relevance of this information to their
world. For example, we could hold an election in the classroom, meanwhile going through the
entire process (selecting candidates, campaigning, and voting). Then, after taking each step, this
is where I (the teacher) would step in and make that connection to our world and our presidential
elections. My main focus would be to allow the students the chance to explore with these new concepts by playing a role, and then showing/explaining how it connects to their lives.

As I have outlined just two standard areas for two different grade levels, it is easy to see where I am going with this. All of the social studies standards for any grade level will fall under one of the ten NCSS themes; these themes are like headings for the concepts to be taught to our elementary students. I am sure that there is a way to make every lesson hands-on for every grade level; and I am sure that there is a unique way to connect every concept to the students’ lives, especially since the topic of social studies revolves around the world that we live in. The matter then becomes, what is the most important to teach and deserves the most time since it will be nearly impossible to learn in great depth about each concept. As a future teacher, I know that my time will be limited when teaching social studies because there are some areas that need more priority, such as Language Arts. Even though I know and realize this, I still intend on teaching these social studies aspects to the best of my ability. I want my students to understand the importance of history, government, and citizenship. I want my students to see why they should care about these aspects that have contributed/are contributing to how our world functions.

There are several methods out there for teaching these different concepts, but I have chosen, out of the many best practices, what I believe are the top three practices that should be incorporated in my teaching. One recommendation for best practice in teaching social studies is that teachers should ‘use more than a single source: history books other than textbooks, a rich variety of historical documents, and artifacts that present alternative voices, accounts, and interpretations on the past’ (Daniels, Hyde, Zemelman, 1998, p.140). For example, if I was teaching a 5th grade class and focusing on the colonial time period, I may choose to have students read case studies from different perspectives, such as a colonist, a Native American, and/or a
resident of England. By reading passages from these different perspectives, the students are likely to see and more clearly understand the difference in these peoples’ lives and how they all affected each other. This particular lesson could fall under the Cultural Diversity NCSS theme. Each of these case studies would be written from a different cultural perspective and from different types of people.

This method of using more than one single source is an important method to use when teaching social studies because often times our social studies textbooks are not easy for our students to relate to. For example, by reading these case studies, the students are more likely to gain more knowledge about the way these different peoples’ lives were, than if they were simply reading the chapter of their textbook. The textbook is not always the most interesting piece of work for students to read; a story from the perspective of a person living during that time period would be more appealing to an elementary student. The *National Standards for United States History* highlights the fact that effective teachers will use this variety of sources to bring in-depth instruction into the classroom. By selecting more sources outside of the textbook, teachers may cover less information, but it will be “in more depth ensuring better understanding and increasing the likelihood that students will pursue further inquiry” (Daniels, Hyde, Zemelman, 1998, p.140). Overall, that is our goal of teaching social studies: providing students with necessary information that interests them and encourages them to connect it to their own lives.

Another best practice for teaching social studies is that “social studies must involve students in active participation in the classroom” (Daniels, Hyde, Zemelman, 1998, p.141). For instance, if I was teaching a 5th grade class about the colonial time period and how they lived during that time (under the Time, Continuity, and Change NCSS theme), I may choose to involve my students in an active simulation in which the students recreate a day in the lives of a colonist;
we could recreate our classroom for a day acting as people would during that time period. The students would no longer sit by and read about how these colonists had to live, they would experience it.

This method of teaching is important to the teaching of social studies because by allowing students to become actively involved in what they are learning, “they do not passively receive or copy curriculum content; rather, they actively process it by relating it to what they already know about the topic” (Daniels, Hyde, Zemelman, 1998, p.141). The students will more than likely walk away with more knowledge than they would have gained if they had only read about these settlers lives in a book. I know that I was always better able to learn and remember new information if I was able to put that information to use in some active form. I intend on giving my students these types of opportunities in the classroom so that they are more likely to retain the new concepts that they are learning.

Finally, my last chosen best practice for teaching social studies is that “social studies should involve students in both independent inquiry and cooperative learning to build skills and habits needed for lifelong, responsible learning” (Daniels, Hyde, Zemelman, 1998, p.142). Teachers need to balance individual and group work because of the different learners in the classroom; “some children learn more readily in one setting, some in another, and so variety helps reach them all” (Daniels, Hyde, Zemelman, 1998, p.142). For instance, if I am teaching in a 5th grade setting, my students may be learning about the way of life before the arrival of the Europeans to the New World. This means that the students would be investigating the different Native American tribes that existed and how they lived (this fits under the People, Places, and Environments theme). Since there are several standards about the Native Americans, I may choose to teach a unit covering all of the different tribes. Therefore, sometimes I could have the
students work in groups to complete projects and sometimes it would be appropriate to have the
students work individually. Some learners function better on their own and some function better
with partners. Incorporating a balance of independent and cooperative learning is important
because I will be able to reach out to all of my different learners. Also, the students will be
gaining the experience they will need to develop outside of the classroom, sometimes working
alone and sometimes working together. In my classroom, I intend on providing several different
types of learning, such as independent learning and cooperative learning. As a teacher, we need
to accommodate for all students and it is a good idea to begin with the different learning styles in
the classroom.

Overall, I would say that my philosophy for teaching social studies would be to do what
is necessary to help the students retain the important information so that they can understand the
world around them. This means that I will incorporate these three best practices in my own
classroom, hopefully while using some other best practices that are out there. I truly do feel that
students need more than their history textbooks to guide their learning, they need to actively
participate in lessons, and they need the experiences of working independently and
cooperatively. By including these practices as a major part of my classroom, my social studies
subject area should become something that the students like learning about. That is my overall
goal: if they are interested in what we are learning, they will want to learn more!
Works Cited