

SOCIAL STUDIES AND THE YOUNG CHILD: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

By

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*I*t is amazing to me that I am qualified to speak on the topic of the last fifty years in early childhood social studies education from first hand experience. In 1950, I was a freshman at then Iowa State Teachers College majoring in kindergarten/primary education, and a student in the social studies methods class of Esther Hult. She introduced us to the inquiry process, the unit teaching approach, and the expanding horizons scope and sequence orientation. As I remember, we didn't consider using textbooks for teaching social studies, but were taught how to develop units that focused on the expanding horizons themes of child, home, family, school, neighborhood, and community.

In 1954, my first teaching job led me to a second grade classroom in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The district directed that the kindergarten and primary grades be "social studies oriented" because research showed this orientation to be best for the development of the young child. I was impressed and proceeded to use the skills honed by Miss Hult to create and teach many units. This

orientation however, was short lived. In 1957, Russia launched Sputnik and American schools, the primary grades included, would never be the same.

Losing the space race was blamed squarely on the American schools for not training scientists and mathematicians competent to compete on a global scale. The ramifications for the schooling of young children were a shift in emphasis from child development and social studies to an emphasis on academics, namely reading and math. Throughout the sixties and seventies more and more emphasis was placed on success in school as measured by reading test scores. When it became evident that poor and minority children were at a disadvantage in this "race", Head Start came into being to try to help those children be more successful. At first, (1965-1970) Head Start programs were to focus on shoring up children's experiences by providing a social studies orientation. The community was studied, field trips were taken, play was emphasized so children could learn to get along with each other and learn the give and take of classroom interactions.

But, as nursery schools and preschool programs for more affluent children gained popularity, another kind of race began: who could produce the children most ready for kindergarten? Literacy skills began to dominate all preschool programs. Wrongly thinking that the children were entering kindergarten with "readiness" accomplished, kindergarten programs began to emphasize formal reading, a subject formerly taught in first grade. Inordinate amounts of time were devoted to the teaching of reading. Play became a "dirty word", rest time was seen as a waste of valuable time needed for academics and thus was eliminated from the program. These practices grew over the seventies and early eighties to the extent that a battery of formal tests were given to children in the spring of the year prior to their entering kindergarten to see which children were "ready" for kindergarten. If children could not pass the test, they could not enter kindergarten. This practice gained such prominence that up to 50% of children who were age eligible for kindergarten were being "red shirted" and placed in a junior kindergarten or worse yet, told they had to wait another year to mature so they would be ready for school. A social studies emphasis on expanding horizons was lost with the time formerly

allocated to teaching social studies content devoted to guidance programs such as the Human Development Program (Magic Circle), Duso, and Wally, Bertha and You. These programs followed the teachings of Carl Rogers and Alfred Adler focusing on helping children develop a positive self-concept. The inappropriate academic focus of early schooling caused many children to lose confidence in themselves as learners. Elementary guidance counselors, new faces among school staffs, found themselves very busy. Teachers were also becoming increasingly frustrated by the inappropriateness of the curriculum and its effect on the children.

During the 1980's early childhood educators found a voice. Research was beginning to indicate that children were not thriving in an "academic" early childhood setting. In fact many boys, especially those of color, gave up on school by third grade only to become high school dropouts. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) introduced reform in a publication titled Developmentally Appropriate Practice (1986). This publication explicitly described a model early learning environment for children of preschool and kindergarten age. A long list of program attributes included several which supported a social studies orientation such as allowing children to make choices and the importance of focusing on the child's cultural background. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) adapted these tenets into a publication titled Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children: Early Childhood Education and the Elementary School Principal (1990), which was intended for use in the evaluation of kindergarten through third grade programs. The NAEYC then expanded their guidelines to include the primary grades. In addition, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) published Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (1994) that addressed appropriate topics to be covered in kindergarten and the primary grades. Cooperative learning began to be used in kindergarten and the primary grade classrooms. In addition, whole language became the accepted approach to the teaching of reading and trade books that often focused on social studies topics took the place of the structured reading series approach that had dominated early learning programs for so long. It looked as though a social studies emphasis was going to regain prominence in early learning classrooms.

The Iowa Department of Education had been focusing on early childhood programs since the mid seventies. A Task Force had been formed whose charge was to develop guidelines for programs for four year olds as it was anticipated that at some point, four year old programs would be included in the public schools. These guidelines followed child development and included many social studies principles similar to those found in the NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Practices publication. Later, in the 1980's the group was reconvened to focus on developing a Five Year Early Childhood Vision statement for the state of Iowa. And finally, in 1995 the group met with early childhood special education teachers to develop guidelines for the new endorsement 100, which was designed to accommodate the inclusion of children with handicapping conditions in the regular classroom. The AEA Early Childhood Consultants in Iowa in conjunction with their counterparts in Nebraska, the Iowa Department of Education, The Nebraska Department of Education and the Head Start-State Collaboration Project joined forces to develop a guide for developmentally appropriate practice titled the The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland (1993). This document is intended to help directors, teachers and administrators of early learning programs craft developmentally appropriate programs for young children in day care, Head Start, nursery school, kindergarten, and the primary grades. It is oriented toward a social studies approach to early learning in that it emphasizes the aesthetic, artistic, intellectual, social, and physical development of the child as well as the development of responsibility. The latter requires that people understand the interdependence of social and ecological issues and value and respect cultural identity and heritage. Barriers to its use are time allocation, preparing children for success on standardized tests, and lack of training in its use.

The decade of the 1990's also brought an emphasis on the Reggio Emilia and constructivist approaches, integration of the curriculum, and inclusion of special needs children in the regular classroom. At last opportunities for social studies to be once again a focus for early childhood programs presented themselves. Textbook publishers such as Harcourt Brace published a social studies program for kindergarten through second grade, which was based on units and centers. Children were encouraged to participate in their own learning through the project approach. The theme approach with units pertinent to the theme

developed by children and teachers together became widely used. Most of the themes had a social studies orientation e.g. community, friendship and the environment.

Over the course of these fifty years we have come nearly full circle in early childhood social studies. It is interesting to examine this phenomenon in light of the work done by Elliot Eisner and published in his book The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs (1985). He makes a distinction between the explicit, the implicit, and the null curriculum. He defines the *explicit* curriculum as those aspects driven by publicly explicit goals such as “to teach children to read, and write, to figure, and to learn something about the history of the country” (p. 87). These are found in benchmarks set down by the school district which *all* teachers are to make sure *all* children reach before going on to the next grade. Thus, within the benchmarks there are explicit goals for the social studies in early learning programs. Eisner describes the *null* curriculum as that which the schools do not teach. This includes those aspects of a discipline that have *not* been chosen to be included in the benchmarks. Here is where we find many aspects of the social studies which we think are important, but which are left out because of the use of time, attitudes of the curriculum planners, expectations of the school board, and monetary constraints which all comprise the *implicit* curriculum. An examination of the NCSS curriculum standards can serve to emphasize its depth and breadth. It is striking to note that it would be impossible to cover all of the standards let alone explore any of them in depth in kindergarten and the primary grades when social studies, in many school districts, is granted only 20 minutes twice a week. And, this precious twenty minutes must be devoted to the science curriculum half of the time. Thus the *implicit* curriculum determines what the *explicit* curriculum will be, and social studies is sacrificed for children in early learning situations in the name of teaching more “important” subjects such as reading and math.

Does the future of the social studies in early learning programs look any brighter? Amazingly, yes. Several changes are taking place in the state of Iowa and the nation that will likely force change. NAEYC recently published a volume titled Children of 2010 (1998). This report states that by the year 2010 no single ethnic or minority group will constitute a majority of the population in the United States. The commit-

tee who wrote the report gives various statistics related to this change, and suggests what can be done to help all people live together peacefully in our country. Of course the schools are looked at as being the great equalizers. The fact that schools will have to teach children who do not speak English, (one of the major barriers to learning), come from various ethnic backgrounds, and need "special services" will necessitate a change in the explicit, implicit and null curriculum offered by the schools. The Waterloo Courier reported on Thursday, June 8, 2000 in an article titled "Panel: Immigration key to Iowa's future" that there would be a concerted effort made to attract immigrants to our state. Among the recommendations cited were a call to schools to do what they can to encourage immigration, welcome newcomers and provide help once they arrive. The fact that the first area discussed in the Expectations of Excellence (1994) is "culture" would indicate that lessons from the social studies may become more commonplace in the early childhood curriculum.

And, finally, at the recent annual meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Steve Case, CEO of America Online, asserted in an address that, if it is used wisely, the Internet can transform schools and curricula, liberate educators, and unleash the full potential of every child. He stated that forty-six million American households have online access, which makes it possible for children to "chat" with someone in England, or take a virtual tour of the ocean floor or translate Spanish into English. Perhaps this indicates that the *explicit* curriculum of the social studies will be sought by children in school, at home or at a computer terminal in a library, and the *implicit* barriers of time allocation, and school district directives will be overridden by the demands of society and everyday life. Indeed, the social studies could well be the curricular emphasis in the forefront of learning for the twenty-first century.

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Biography

Dr. Judith M. Finkelstein began her teaching career as a second grade teacher. She subsequently taught first grade and in the Head Start Program when it began in 1965. She is currently a professor at the University of Northern Iowa where she has taught for the last 32 years. She developed the Nursery/Kindergarten program at Malcolm Price Laboratory School, taught Social Studies Methods, and currently teaches courses in the Early Childhood Program on both the undergraduate and graduate level. She has published in Social Education, Social Studies and the Young Learner, and Social Studies, as well as serving as Senior Editorial Advisor for the K-3 portion of the Social Studies program Alive With Literature published by Harcourt Brace.