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Book Review

Childhood is a social study: A book review of social studies and young children

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Teaching elementary social studies can be a difficult task. That social studies is marginalized in elementary classrooms has been well documented and discussed (Fitchett, Heafter, & Lambert, 2014). At the university level, social studies methods instructors face the challenge of balancing content with pedagogy, ensuring that preservice teachers are provided with satisfactory disciplinary learning in subjects most often comprising social studies, history, geography, civics/government, and economics as well as the best ways to teach such content to very young children specifically. *Social Studies and Young Children* is a text that attempts to accomplish this task by addressing the nature of teaching young children in general alongside each of the four main social studies disciplines.

Structure of the book

Social Studies and Young Children is divided into nine chapters. The book begins by establishing a context for teaching social studies to young children. From reading the first three chapters, it might not be immediately apparent that this is a social studies methods text. These chapters establish a context for teaching very young children in general, as they focus on topics related to child development, curricular planning, and family and community contexts.

Although the titles of the first three chapters include nods to social studies, the book's title should be taken seriously, this is a book geared towards children as young as nine months old. Theoretically, the authors draw off of the NCSS social studies standards and the NAEYC standards for teaching young children. The text also provide a brief rundown of the theories of child development theorists familiar to educational psychology, such as Vygotsky, Kohlberg, Erikson, Gillian, and Piaget. These theories are deployed throughout the book in order to establish profiles of expected behavior from children as well as developmentally appropriate activities based on what children of a certain age would be expected to know, do, and value. The middle four chapters deal with teaching the four main social studies disciplines of economics, geography, history and civics. The final two chapters are much like the first three in addressing more general education topics such as multiculturalism and diversity and assessment.

Using the book

The book is useful for social studies, but also for early childhood education in general. This is the sort of book social studies teacher educators might share with an early childhood colleague as a useful tool beyond the social studies methods course because the book is a sort of jack-of-all-trades when it comes to content, curriculum planning, and child development. This is the sort of book early childhood education or elementary education programs that certify K-3 educators might consider as a cross-curricular text. For example, chapter Two contains a useful step-by-step guide to Wiggins and McTighe's backwards design as well as six considerations for planning social studies curriculum which, although titled social studies are just good elements in any sort of lesson, regardless of the content. To that end, the first three chapters and the final two could be used seamlessly in conjunction with other more general early childhood education courses.

The social studies disciplines

Chapters 4–7 are centered on the four main disciplines that comprise social studies; history, government/civics, economics and geography. In reviewing the four discipline chapters, I will focus on what I see as the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Chapter 4: History

The text focuses on the NCSS theme time, continuity, and change, as the basis for teaching history to young children. The approach taken here and in the other discipline-focused chapters is very much a social education one (Halvorsen, 2009). The text begins by establishing a context for teaching history “history is a story. The story begins with the child and then extends to members of the family and finally to other people” (p. 89 and referencing Schoenfeldt, 2001). The scholarship used to inform this chapter are drawn from largely outside the field of social studies education and are comprised of works in assessment, child development, and pedagogy. A few exceptions to this are works by Alleman and Brophy (2003), the NCSS, and Blow (2011), whose works actually address the teaching of history to young children.

One of this chapter's strengths lies in the consistent language of time. For example, one sample activity suggests that preservice teachers observe social studies teaching and create lessons from words used by both teachers and children reflective of the passing of time (p. 115). Moreover, teachers are encouraged to reiterate words that indicate the passing of time throughout the school day such as before, next, after and later. These concepts turn the day's routine into a purposeful social studies lesson, which mirrors the running theme of the book that child development itself is a social study wherein children make sense of their place in the world. Another activity suggests a play center with several types of phones such as those with a bell receiver, a rotary phone, and a bag-style cellular phone wherein children can explore the history and development of a certain piece of everyday modern technology. These are examples of innovative and integrative teaching methods for young children that make great contributions to any early childhood social studies class.

On the other hand, some of the suggestions in the book are nonspecific to teaching history. For example, field trips are suggested as a good source of hands-on learning that keep the classrooms “alive with curiosity and wonder” and promote the learning of authentic information (p. 111). These are certainly worthy reasons for taking field trip, but these reasons are not specific to social studies. Thus, the chapters' recommendation could be for any subject area. In a book directed towards early childhood social studies, it would be prudent to tie each suggestion to social studies, specifically the running theme of time, continuity, and change. As is, the book offers teachers little in terms of how to evaluate a site for a potential field trip and how to create field trips that incorporate the elements from the first three chapters of the book, such as higher order thinking, self and community identity formation, thematic and justice-oriented teaching practices. It would be important for teacher educators using this text to prompt their preservice teachers to make this, and other, connections.

Chapter 5: Civics, Government and Citizenship

The text grounds civics, government, and citizenship in the ideas of *community* and sense of self. The chapter suggests that citizenship exists on many levels, from the family to the classroom to the nation to the world. Hence, everyday classroom procedures and belonging are forms of citizenship. One suggestion for developing a sense of global citizenship is posing the question “how can we show we care about people we don't know.” This sort of question is meant to help children think about the needs of others in the community and the world. The chapter includes a section on the inclusion of current events, acknowledging that events like presidential elections may be topics of discussion in children's homes and offer an opportunity to discuss voting and democratic processes in the classroom.

Although the chapter offers these excellent suggestions that current events should be taught, the text does not offer suggestions for how discussions of current events and presidential elections veer into the territory of controversial issues. Considering the increased partisanship in the U.S. today (McAvoy & Hess, 2013), it would be important for teachers and teacher educators to consider how to handle issues that arise.

Chapter 6: Economics

In this chapter, the text focuses on economics as “the study and distribution of goods and services” (p. 145). After an explanation of how children at various stages of development understand economics, a list of sample questions that teachers might ask their students are provided. Some of these questions include; what questions are important to ask about wants, needs, goods and services? Why can't people have everything they want? How does the availability of resources influence economic decisions? (p. 148–149). These questions are an example of how the text presents the study of economics as a field where “the concepts are experienced day to day” (p. 145). To that end, the text provides numerous examples of what this approach might look like in early childhood. Much of the focus is on making money, making purchases, making choices, and job and careers options. For example, the text suggests field trips to places like a bank or a parent's job and allowing students to draw, or dress up as, a particular community helper. The text also includes an extensive list of books for children on these topics.

There are several strong activity and discussion suggestions in this chapter. My favorite activity was an advertisement/commercial analysis wherein children discuss TV advertisements, as the teacher prompts with questions such as “are the claims true?” and “Can a particular item really bring ‘endless joy?’” (p. 153). This sort of activity is a wonderful example of how to help children become critical consumers of media and marketing. Moreover, these questions represent the sorts of

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