

Making Time for Social Studies in Elementary Classrooms

In the last two decades, federal legislation has often relegated social studies to side status. With No Child Left Behind's focus on math and reading, and the Common Core burying social studies in ELA standards, social studies instruction has been reduced to as little as [20 minutes per week in some elementary schools](#). Teacher education programs are no longer focusing on the subject, so “teachers coming from [these] programs feel the least competent in teaching social studies,” says [Dr. Paul Fitchett](#), Director of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte.

As a result, many students are leaving elementary schools without the vocabulary and background knowledge to build the foundation for thoughtful civic engagement. In the 2013 The Atlantic article, “[Bring Back Social Studies](#),” a study by the Carnegie Corporation of New York revealed that students who receive a solid social studies education are more likely to vote, four times more likely to volunteer in their communities, and are more confident in communicating with their elected representatives. Also, an effective social studies education has the power to close the civic achievement gap, which hits low-income families the hardest.

Day-to-Day Discussion of Identity

With so little time to cover social studies, educators need to be creative in seizing teachable moments and making every minute count. One resource to tap into is students' lives. “Issues of race, class, culture, gender, language, and nationality all play out in the



Did you know?

A position statement from the National Council for the Social Studies states that early social studies instruction should be:

- ✓ Meaningful
- ✓ Integrative
- ✓ Value-based
- ✓ Challenging
- ✓ Active

Source: [NCSS](#)

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broader society, but also in students' day-to-day experiences,” says Bill Bigelow, Curriculum Editor of [Rethinking Schools](#) and Co-director of the [Zinn Education Project](#).

Case in point: elementary students are beginning to acquire vocabulary around their own identities. Giving them the opportunity to do so within the context of broader social identity can bring social studies concepts into the conversation. “If we listen to children and pay attention to what they’re bringing into the classroom, we realize it’s full of issues about race, class, gender, money,” [says](#) Stephanie Serriere, Associate Professor of Social Studies Education at Indiana University-Purdue University Columbus. By defining social identity and giving students the language to discuss their own identities, students can learn to think critically about social justice and ways to improve their communities.

Teaching Kids to Question

Asking important questions has always been the hallmark of a good teacher, but teaching students how to generate their own good questions helps encourage lifelong learners. [The Right Question Institute](#), a non-profit organization whose aim is to close the civic achievement gap, recognizes the power of questioning to incite critical thinking and action. The institute trademarked a tool called the [Question Formulation Technique](#), in which participants produce, improve, and prioritize questions about a topic, phrase, image, or situation related to a current issue. When generating questions, participants are encouraged to ask as many as possible, not stopping to discuss, judge, or answer any of them. After prioritizing and reflecting on their questions, participants use them to do research or develop a project.

By practicing this questioning technique on a regular basis, elementary students can develop critical thinking skills. Whether or not teachers have the time to assign a lengthy research project, students learning to effectively question leads to active



The Inquiry Arc

1. Developing questions and planning inquiries
2. Applying disciplinary concepts and tools
3. Evaluating sources and using evidence
4. Communicating conclusions and taking informed action

Source: [The C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards](#)

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participation and critical thinking in all subject areas. Down the road, these skills help drive active participation in broader communities.

Making Lessons Lively

With so little time to teach it, making social studies come alive is more important than ever. Bigelow [suggests](#) teachers think of themselves as curricular artists: “Creating a lively, playful, experiential curriculum about things that matter is more fun for students, and for us as teachers, too.” Lively lessons— such as role-playing, simulations, and demonstrations— are memorable. Schools can invite guest speakers in areas where teachers’ expertise is lacking. Even a short presentation by a guest leaves a long-lasting impression.

In 2013, the National Council of Social Studies launched the [C3 framework](#) as a supplement to the Common Core standards. This comprehensive, inquiry-based guide aims to prepare students for the three C’s: college, career, and civic life. After all, as Bigelow says, “Social studies is not just about famous people and Big Events; it’s about our students and the choices they face everyday.” This era in history may very well be remembered by its divisiveness. More than ever, people are divided by class, gender, race, and politics. By making time in the elementary classroom— incorporating students’ lives into the curricula, teaching them to question, and making lessons into memorable experiences—young people will be better equipped to tackle these divides in generations to come.



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