

What is Social Studies?

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Abstract

This paper explores the question of the nature and purpose of social studies with the aim of showing the relevance and importance of teaching the subject well. The authors argue that social studies is about citizenship education and as such, is an important subject in the school curriculum. Teachers' orientations towards the subject, that is, the beliefs about the goals of the subject and perspectives that teachers may hold about what constitute critical knowledge, skills and values to be taught are also discussed. Some key knowledge, skills and values essential to developing young people to become informed, concerned and participative citizens are highlighted with some examples of what lessons may look like.

Introduction

The start of a new school year is approaching and Ms Tan, who teaches Primary 4 is busy preparing for the new students with whom she will be working. Although she is starting her fifth year in the classroom, she is still excited, and a little apprehensive, when the school year begins. Today she is rethinking some of the social studies activities she and her Primary 4 colleagues had developed in the past. Tomorrow they will all be at the meeting, and she wants to be ready with some new ideas. She wants the teachers, and most importantly the children, to understand how meaningful social studies can be. Ms Tan worries that too often the other teachers will put aside social studies

lessons in order to concentrate on the "more important" subjects such as Maths and English Language. "What could be more important than the study of people, how they live together and how we got to where we are today?" Ms Tan wonders. Ms Tan believes that if our children do not understand themselves and the social and physical world in which they live, it will not really matter, in the long run, that they excel in Maths, understand scientific method or can write good essays. She knows all these things are important, but if children do not learn how to knowledgeably participate in their communities, their nation and the world, all the rest will have no meaning.

Ms Tan is facing a dilemma familiar to many teachers - making sure there is time in the primary school curriculum to teach social studies and to teach it well. Ms Tan's students are very lucky. Not only does she believe that social studies is important, but she has a clear sense of why it is important and what students ought to learn from their social studies classes in primary school. Think back to your own experience as a student in social studies. Do you remember the class as dull? Did it seem to be a lot of information that really never held together or did it seem interesting? Did your teachers sometimes drop social studies altogether in order to teach subjects considered by some to be "more important"? Or was it exciting and engaging? Whether social studies is exciting, interesting and challenging or dull and boring, or even ignored, depends greatly on the teacher. Teachers who understand and appreciate the purposes

and goals of social studies are more likely to find ways to make its teaching meaningful to the learners. Understanding the goals of social studies will help you to ensure that the knowledge, skills and values that are so vital to social studies will be a part of the actual curriculum you teach, not just words in the syllabus and the textbook. This paper will explore various ideas about the goals and purposes of teaching social studies. As you read through this paper, consider where you stand and what you believe should be the **reasons** for children to learn social studies.

What is Social Studies?

References to the term “social studies” can be found as far back as the early twentieth century in the United States and the United Kingdom. For example, in the United States, a nation-wide set of curriculum recommendations released in 1916 included a reference to the teaching of social studies in order to better prepare young people as citizens in a democratic society (Martorella, 2001). In the early twentieth century, the United States was experiencing massive social changes resulting from industrialization, urbanization and immigration. Many, including educators, were concerned that such rapid changes would disrupt social stability. They believed that learning such subjects as history and geography, separately and integrated under the term *social studies*, would help young people better understand that changing world and become citizens who could help shape their communities and nation for the better.

Thus the idea of social studies was born from recognition that people live together in social groups such as families, communities and nations, and that social living can be a challenge, especially in diverse societies. Even family members sometimes have difficulty getting along.

As people engage in larger, more diverse and more distant groups, such as communities, nations, and the world, the challenges and difficulties become more complex. Social studies was seen as a way to enable young people to interact in thoughtful and informed ways as members of social groups. As you learn more about the big ideas, important skills and key values found in social studies, consider why these are significant to helping young people be thoughtful and informed participants in their social worlds.

Social studies came to be identified with enabling young people to be effective citizens in democratic societies. It is important to remember that being a “citizen” is not simply about our membership in a nation state. We are all members of many groups: families, friends, schools, communities and so forth. When we participate as members of these groups, we are acting as “citizens” of those groups. As social beings we must learn, not only how to get along with others, but how to understand others, to see from their point of view (even if we do not agree) and to develop empathy. We must learn how we can help the group function effectively. We must learn how to present and support our ideas and viewpoints, as well as how to listen and respond when others disagree.

The National Council for the Social Studies, an international association based in the United States and devoted to social studies teaching and learning, defines social studies as:

... the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence.... The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (NCSS, 2010)

Many educators agree that the purpose of social studies is the promotion of civic competence, the knowledge, intellectual processes, and values required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life. But this definition raises an important question: what does it mean to be “an effective citizen”? This question is, in fact, hotly debated. Some would argue, for example, that a good citizen is one who obeys the laws, gets along with and is considerate of others, and generally contributes to the stability of social life. Others might argue that these are important characteristics of a good citizen, but that even more is required of good citizens in a democracy. What, after all, is the difference between a good citizen in a totalitarian state and a good citizen in a more open and democratic state? In democratic societies, many would argue, a good citizen raises questions, engages in deliberation and decision-making around issues affecting members of the group or society, wonders about existing social practices, and contributes to helping society to be more just and equitable. Over the years, social studies educators have suggested that in practice, teachers hold a variety of ideas about the goals or purposes of social studies. These various ideas impact their thinking about the content that should be included, the skills that ought to be developed, and the teaching strategies that might be used. Even when the content to be covered is clearly indicated by a national syllabus, a state or school district curriculum guide, or a school’s plan of work, teachers still make decisions about what they will emphasize and how they will teach. These various ideas about the goals of social studies, and the perspectives toward knowledge, skills and teaching that each suggests are often referred to as *orientations towards social studies*.

Orientations Towards Social Studies

Consider, for example, the *three traditions* of social studies that Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977) described. They argued that the dominant approaches to the teaching of social studies in the United States in the mid-twentieth century could be described as falling into one of three orientations. Each orientation, or tradition, reflected different goals for social studies. These different goals, in turn, suggested different teaching methods, and different ideas about the content and skills which would be emphasized. These orientations were: social studies as *citizenship transmission*, social studies as *social science*, and social studies as *reflective inquiry*. As you read more about each of these orientations, ask yourself which of these, in part or as a whole, might apply to your thinking about teaching primary social studies in Singapore?

The first tradition described by Barr, Barth and Shermis was one they labeled *social studies as citizenship transmission*. In this tradition, the purpose of social studies is to *transmit* the values, history and traditions of a society to the young. Children are prepared to contribute to the society as it is, and to see change as gradual and incremental. In fact, all societies seek to socialize their young by teaching the beliefs and behaviors appropriate to the society and this tradition in social studies is consistent with this goal of socialization. In this tradition, the content to be taught would focus on instilling pride, responsibility and respect. Historic and current events which focus on positive elements of the society would be stressed. Basic literacy skills such as comprehension, reading maps and globes, chronological arrangement, and defining important vocabulary would be taught. Within this tradition, young people would not be encouraged to question authority, to

examine values or to examine controversy. A variety of teaching strategies might be used, but on the whole teacher-directed learning is likely to predominate. This approach is often emphasized at the primary level with the argument that children must first be socialized to society before they can be encouraged to question it.

The second tradition they identified was *social studies as a social science*. Within this tradition, young people are expected to learn the content and methods of history and the social sciences. The goal of social studies is to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to identify and solve social problems. The knowledge and methods of history and the social sciences are felt to best equip young people with both knowledge and skills for participating in a changing world. Content acquisition is emphasized as young people learn to look at the world as social scientists. They learn the methods or processes used by social scientists to investigate problems and understand behavior. While a variety of teaching methods would be used, there would be an emphasis on engaging learners in either teacher-directed or student - initiated inquiry. You may think this approach would be more appropriate for older learners; however, many educators have found that presented well, even young children are capable of understanding the significant concepts from the disciplines and using the basic methods of investigation from history and the social sciences.

The third tradition is *social studies as reflective inquiry*. This tradition also focuses on inquiry and problem solving, but puts less emphasis on drawing on the formal knowledge and inquiry methods of the disciplines. Within this tradition, the emphasis is on exploring issues in the social world which directly affect the

students involved. The goal is to help young people learn to play an active role in society as thinkers and decision-makers. They are encouraged to examine the personal, social and political implications of issues so that they might learn to take supportable positions on issues, to speak out in support of what they believe, after investigation, is good for society, and to become informed voters. This view of citizenship sees young people maturing into active citizens. The content in this approach emerges as children investigate issues and seek information. Children are taught the skills of inquiry, collaboration, and perspective taking as they learn to investigate social issues. The teaching methods used would be predominantly learner centered.

Other writers have identified similar ways of categorizing thinking about the goals of social studies. Another example is the work of Irving Morrisett (1977), who also wrote in the mid-20th century. Morrisett described five traditions:

- Transmission of culture and history
- Social science processes and subject matter
- Reflective or critical thinking and inquiry
- The study of social and political controversies with the aim of promoting social activism
- Personal development

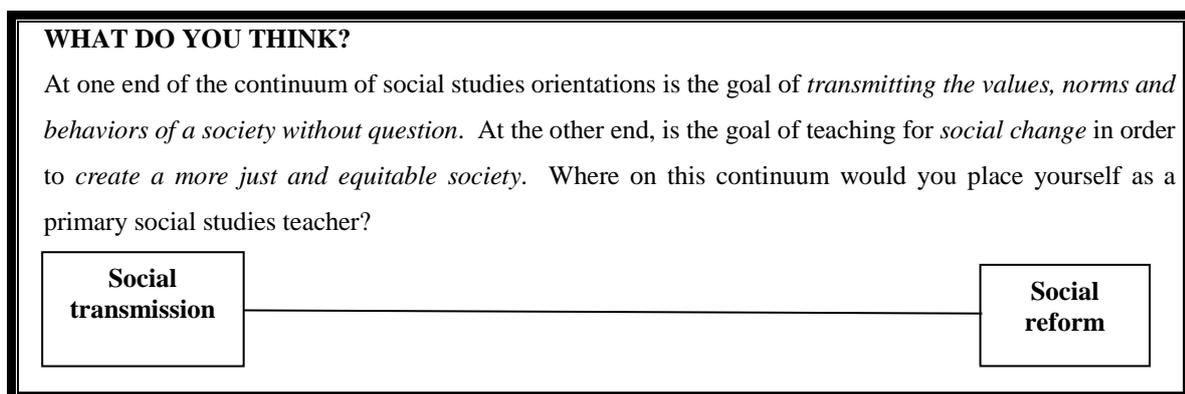
You will notice the overlap with the three traditions laid out by Barr, Barth and Shermis. A major difference is the addition of a perspective which more explicitly focuses on promoting social activism. This perspective is similar to that which stresses the development of critical and reflective thinking skills; in addition, it makes the application of critical thinking to social issues clear and explicit. Another difference between the Morrisett

orientations and Barr, Barth and Shermis is the addition of a perspective which focuses on social studies for personal development. This orientation focuses on the goal of helping learners develop their individual capacities to the fullest. Students would be encouraged, under the teacher's guidance, to pursue their interests and questions within the contexts of the social studies curriculum. The teacher would serve as a guide to discovering the knowledge and developing the skills needed to become thoughtful, educated members of society.

These and other perspectives are useful in helping us think about the values and goals we hold regarding the teaching and learning of social studies. But, in fact, most educators are somewhat eclectic and are probably influenced by most or all of these perspectives. Clark and Case (1997) suggest that it is useful to think about your own beliefs in terms of a set of intersecting continua. On one continuum, we would place the citizenship transmission

orientation at one end and social change and reform at the other. Rather than see these as two opposing visions, each of us could place ourselves somewhere on the continuum between the two. You are likely to agree that good citizens are committed to the groups, and the society, to which they belong. We usually identify good citizens as those who are considerate of others and who seek to contribute to the well-being of all the members of the society. Many of us would agree that the effective citizen is committed to the goals and ideals of society. At the same time, to what extent would you agree that good citizens in democratic societies are those who seek to improve society and to work toward fairness and equity for all the members of society? To what extent do you believe citizens should be willing and able to raise thoughtful and informed criticisms with an eye to how life can be improved for all the society's members? Where are you on the continuum in Figure 1 below?

Figure 1: Social Transmission – Social Reform Continuum of Social Studies Orientations



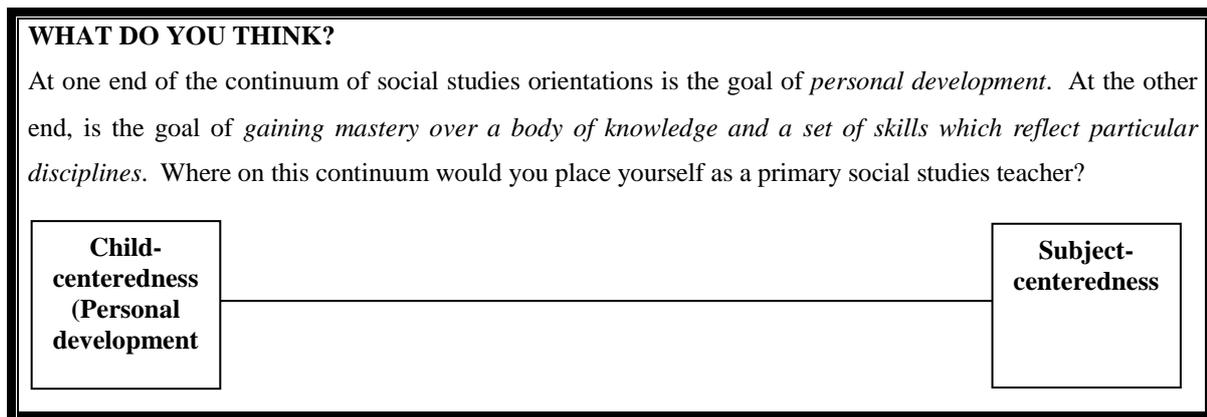
A second and intersecting continuum would put child-development on one end and the subject-centered approach on the other. Thus, at one end is the goal of personal development in which children are helped to develop their personal competencies and interests within a social

context. This is often labeled as the *child-centered* orientation. At the other end, is the mastery of the content and skills of the disciplines which contribute to social studies. This can be labeled as the *subject-centered* orientation. By gaining mastery of these bodies of knowledge and forms of

inquiry, young people are prepared to make sense of and contribute to a complex and changing world. Once again, these are not mutually exclusive options; most teachers strive to make content meaningful to the

lives of their students. Where on the continuum in Figure 2 would you, ideally, place your ideas about the purposes of teaching social studies in primary school?

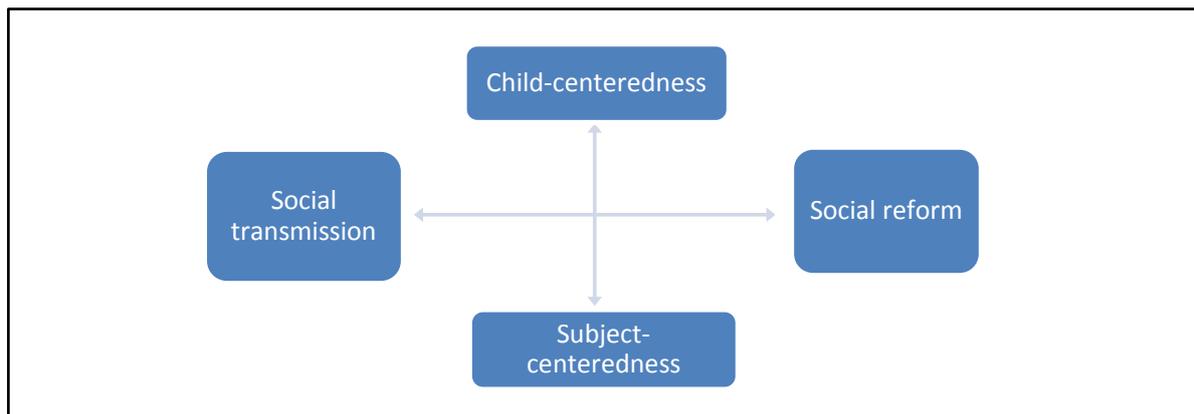
Figure 2: Child-centredness – Subject-centredness Continuum of Social Studies Orientations



These two intersecting continua create a matrix which is intended to help you think about your goals for social studies at this time. Look at the matrix in Figure 3 below and decide which quadrant your thinking falls in. Are your beliefs about what the goals of social studies ought to be (ideally)

consistent with your ideas about what you think these goals are as social studies is implemented in the schools? If there is a difference, how might you, as a teacher, bring the ideal and your perception of the real into greater alignment?

Figure 3: Matrix of Social Studies Orientations



To sum up, an important goal of social studies is to help young people be effective members of the diverse groups to which they belong, as well as to interact effectively across group borders. What it

means to be an effective citizen in a democratic society in a globally connected world is a subject of a good deal of academic writing. Clarifying for yourself what you believe will help you in your role

as a social studies teacher. Having a big picture of where you want your learners to go and why will help you in the day-to-day decisions every teacher constantly makes when implementing the formal curriculum he or she has been given. You will notice that the perspectives presented above have some common elements. Generally, social studies educators agree that we must help young people to become civil members of society and of the groups and institutions to which they belong. We would generally agree that group members need to respect others, listen to diverse points of view and seek to contribute to the greater good. However, we might disagree on the extent to which primary school students should be prepared to inquire into social issues. We are likely to agree that as teachers we have a responsibility to facilitate the personal growth of young learners. However, we might disagree on the extent to which personal development should be emphasized at the primary grades over the acquisition of the skills and knowledge of the disciplines.

At this point, let us revisit the NCSS statement of the purpose of social studies introduced earlier: *The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world* (NCSS, 2010). This is a more robust view of citizenship than the citizenship transmission view described earlier. This view of citizenship requires that young people learn to behave responsibly, respect others and develop a strong subject matter base *in order to* “make informed and reasoned decisions for the common good.” Thus, in addition, young people should learn, for example, to take and defend positions on social issues which are based on evidence. They should be able to consider alternative solutions to problems, weighing possible consequences.

At the same time, they should recognize that not everyone will see issues in the same way and should learn such skills as listening to diverse view points as they deliberate on social issues. They should engage in community service and civic action in which they care for and about people who are not friends or family. And they should seek to understand why some people and groups need care and what society’s role is in providing that care. The following discussion of the **knowledge, skills and values** that social studies should teach is based on this view of the purpose of social studies.

Knowledge

If social studies has at its core the education of citizens who are informed, responsible decision-makers, what knowledge then would be most important? Effective citizens must have the knowledge to understand and be engaged in their communities and towns, as well as in the nation and the world. Often, when we think about the content to be taught, we tend to think about covering what we find in the syllabus. While this is a reasonable goal, it still leaves a lot of questions unanswered and can result in teaching without real understanding.

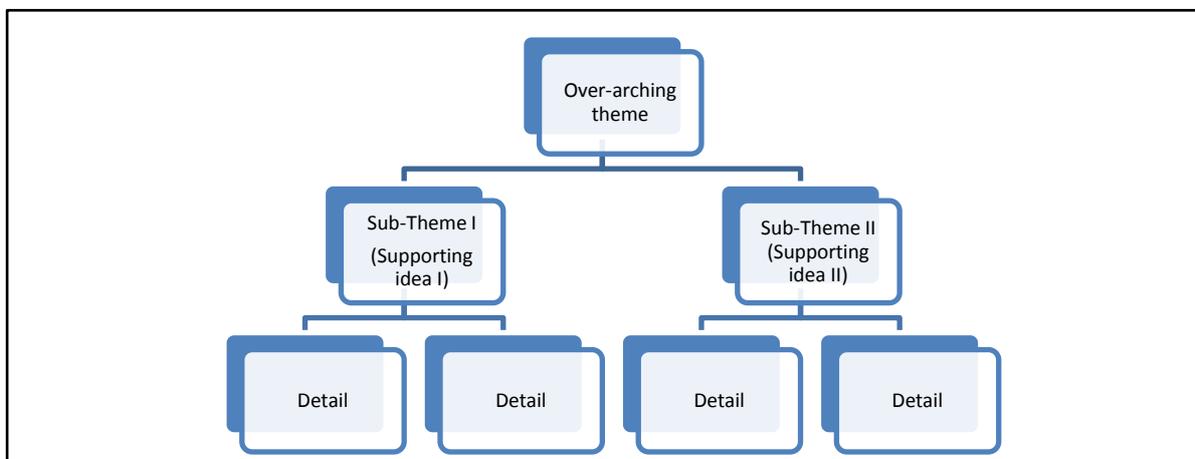
When we think of knowledge to be taught in schools, we tend to think about the disciplines or fields of knowledge from which school subjects are developed. Social studies is an interdisciplinary field which draws on the disciplines of history, geography, economics, political science and sociology. However, the goal of social studies is greater than simply teaching some of the content from these disciplines. As an interdisciplinary field, the subject is generally organized around themes or big ideas. As children learn about such themes as living together or economic development, they will draw upon the

content and skills of the various disciplines. As a teacher, it is important that you understand the big ideas embedded within the themes you teach in order to enable your students to develop their understanding related to the various themes and issues presented in the curriculum. In other words, it is not sufficient to simply present a lot of information; rather, it is important for you to understand how the information is, or

can be, organized in ways that will help learners create the mental schema necessary for understanding.

The first step in organizing knowledge in the curriculum is the development of themes. Themes create the super-structure around which the content is organized. Within each theme are the sub-themes or important ideas that relate to the over-arching theme.

Figure 4: Mental Schema of Themes, Sub-Themes and Details



By building the curriculum around a theme and sub-themes, students can begin to see a big picture and the main ideas which support it. The basic facts, or information, then become the details which contribute to the big picture. They are not ends in themselves but ways to help build understanding. Figure 4 above illustrates the mental scheme of themes, sub-themes and details.

Skills

At the heart of the purpose of social studies as envisioned by NCSS is the idea of **making informed and reasoned decisions**. Of course, informed decision-making involves gaining knowledge. But it requires much more as well. Learners must be helped to develop

the skills of finding, organizing and using information. Importantly, they must also be helped to interpret, evaluate and synthesize information. After all, we live in an information rich world. People who cannot distinguish reliable sources from those which are unreliable are likely to believe anything they read or hear – and that is not a characteristic of an “informed citizen”. Consider the following steps for effective decision making (NCSS, 2010) and notice how much more is involved than simply gathering information:

- Identify a situation in which a decision is required
- Secure factual information relevant to the decision

- Identify alternative courses of action and predict the consequences of each
- Define criteria to be met for one of the alternatives to emerge as the best
- Make decisions based on criteria and the data obtained
- Take action to implement the decision
- Examine and evaluate consequences

An example of skills development in a primary social studies classroom is shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: A Classroom Example with Focus on Skills Development of Students

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Several of the children in Ms Khoo's Primary 3 class were commenting one day about how messy the canteen was after the children finished lunch. "It doesn't seem fair," commented Ayisha, "that the Aunties have to pick up after us." "Well," responded Wee Boon, "I'm willing to pick up after myself, but I'm not going to clean for other people." Ms Khoo decided to seize this teachable moment and brought the problem to the whole class. Most of the children felt that everyone should share the responsibility of picking up after themselves. But how could they encourage other children to be less careless? The children decided that this was a problem they would try to solve. Following the decision making process they had learned in social studies, several children set out to gather information: what was the official school policy? What were the policies in other schools? Some children volunteered to ask friends in other schools if they had a similar problem. Others volunteered to ask other students in the school what they thought about the messy canteen and what they thought might be done about it. After gathering the information, the children came together and brainstormed several possible solutions to the problem:

- Launch a publicity campaign to encourage all children to take responsibility to clean up the canteen;
- Form a student clean-up squad which would do a quick pick-up as they leave the canteen;
- Talk to the principal about bringing in volunteers from the community to help with the clean up after lunch.

The children agreed that the best solution would be one which would not burden any one person or group with doing most of the cleaning up, would be fairly easy to implement and would involve minimal cost. Using these criteria they decided to launch a publicity campaign to get everyone to share in taking pride in their school and in the canteen and to show their pride by not leaving trash about.

A month later, Ms Khoo asked the children to evaluate the effectiveness of their campaign. They agreed that it had been a low cost (and enjoyable) activity, that no one person or group had been unduly burdened with the chore and that the canteen was actually cleaner. In fact, the custodial staff had written a note to the class praising them and thanking them for their "pick-up campaign." Ms Khoo smiled when Ayisha said, "We really can make a difference."

Social studies can equip young learners with a variety of other skills that can contribute to educating effective citizens.

If social studies is to help learners work within and across groups, then it seems reasonable that in teaching social studies

(as well as other subjects) we consider facilitating the development of such skills (excerpted from, NCSS, 2010, p 166) as:

- How to adjust personal behavior to fit the dynamics of specific groups and situations;
- Participate in developing rules and guidelines for group activities;
- Assist in setting, working toward and accomplishing goals for a group;
- Participate in persuading, compromising, debating and negotiating in the resolution of conflicts and differences;
- Utilize diverse perspectives and skills to accomplish common goals;
- Dialogue with others who have diverse perspectives;
- Participate in communities through organizations working to address an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs;
- Exhibit moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and the belief in the capacity to make a difference.

Think about other skills identified as important in the Social Studies syllabus and ask yourself how the development of these skills will help learners in their personal growth and development and in their development as members (citizens) of the groups to which they belong. How will developing particular skills help your students develop as “effective citizens”?

Values

In all societies, schools not only teach knowledge and skills, but values and attitudes as well. What are values and attitudes? Values refer to ideas about the *worth* of something. Values guide our

choices about what is right or preferred. They help us define what is desirable and important. For example, social harmony is an important value in many societies. Social harmony allows diverse groups to live together and to learn from one another. Harmony among groups contributes to social stability. It can also contribute to a social dynamic in which many views are heard and considered, enabling a society to develop and change as times demand. Attitudes, or dispositions, are closely related to values. Dispositions define our inclinations to behave in certain ways. If we truly value honesty, for example, we will be inclined to behave honestly. Dispositions come to define a person’s character and reflect the values which actually guide behavior. Including values and dispositions in the educational system is part of the socialization function of education; that is, schools are designed to enable people to develop as functioning members of their society. Imagine a society in which most people are not virtuous. In such a world, no law or police action could really protect individuals. The ability to live together in groups depends upon the core values and dispositions of the group members.

While different groups may hold differing values, certain core values must be in place to hold a society together, especially a society made up of diverse groups. Certain values and dispositions can be thought of as “civic values” because they provide the glue that holds a group, a society, together. In Singapore, as elsewhere, this includes developing in the young a *sense of belonging* to and a love of one’s country and of the people who make up that nation. It includes *individual responsibility* to fulfill one’s obligations to the group. It also includes *civility* since a civil society depends upon people treating each other with respect and courtesy. Civility also means a

willingness to listen to others and to try to understand and value diverse viewpoints. *Civic competence* means recognizing that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It means recognizing that there is something referred to as the *public good* which is more than a collection of individual self-interests. It is about understanding that we are all members of communities. For those communities to succeed, sometimes self-interest must be put aside to consider what is good for the group.

All groups and societies require that their members behave in individually responsible ways. But in democratic societies, we ask citizens to be responsible and more. In democratic societies, citizens are faced with choices. Often, such choices involve whether or not to support particular people or the policies they advocate. Sometimes those choices are

difficult; for example, when two or more important values come into conflict. Should we support economic development when it conflicts with environmental conservation? Should we support development of new highways to solve traffic woes but at the expense of destroying the environment? At a more personal level, should we report (tell the truth) on a friend who has broken an important school rule? Should we lie about our age in order to save money on a movie ticket? Should we lie to our friend if we know the truth will hurt? Helping young learners examine the values and value dilemmas that underlie personal and public decision-making can go a long way toward helping them be informed citizens who are able to think critically and thoughtfully about the many policy issues that impact the public. Figure 6 provides a teaching idea for developing values in the primary social studies classroom.

Figure 6: An Example of Using a Historical Event for Developing Values in Students

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

An example of a historical event that raises value conflicts is the Maria Hertogh trial and subsequent riot in 1950. Examine the underlying causes of this event. You may want to begin by looking at the perspectives of the people involved in the court trial. Then examine the actions of the parties involved during and the media reports about the trial. What value conflicts are apparent?

Why Study Social Studies?

So why should primary school learners spend time learning social studies? They study social studies to gain the wisdom and understanding necessary to function as citizens of their communities, their nation and the world. They learn about historical events in order to understand the ways in which the past has shaped the present. They are introduced to geographical concepts to better understand the ways in which our environment shapes and is

shaped by human behavior. In primary social studies, learners are also introduced to basic concepts from the fields of economics, government, sociology and psychology so that they will begin to learn about the ways in which people and policies are formed and interact. Social studies matters because we are social beings who live together in communities. Each of us is a member of many groups – families, schools, religious groups, the nation and others. Being active, thoughtful members of these groups

requires particular skills, understanding and dispositions. As social studies teachers, we will help young learners develop as effective citizens in diverse groups.

Conclusion

It is important for teachers to understand the goals and purposes of social studies. More importantly, they need to believe that these goals and purposes are of consequence enough for them to take the teaching of this subject seriously. Every society engages in educating their young in the norms and values of that society. Social studies is a subject through which citizenship education is carried out. Citizenship education is contentious and there are ongoing debates about what form this citizenship education should take. In a democratic society, it is argued that we should not be simply educating citizens to obey the law, show kindness and consideration to others and generally contribute to maintaining social cohesion. There is also a need to educate for civic competence, for citizens to be able and willing to be concerned with public affairs, to raise questions and engage in debate, deliberations and decision making to make the society a more inclusive, just and equitable one.

There are a number of orientations towards citizenship education that social studies teachers may take. These include social transmission, social reform, child-centred personal development or subject-centred orientation. It is important for social studies teachers to reflect on their own beliefs and orientations towards the subject so as to plan and implement lessons that will achieve the goals of citizenship education in a democratic society.

This paper has also discussed the knowledge, skills and values that we think

should be taught in social studies. This selection of knowledge, skills and values that social studies should teach is based on the view that the purpose of social studies is to develop and equip our young to become citizens who will be concerned about and able to actively participate in making “*informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.*” (NCSS, 2010).

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