

Social Studies in Preschool? **Yes!**



Ann S. Epstein

The preschoolers in Ms. Sharif’s class take a walk around the block at outside time. They pass the bodega, a fish store, the pharmacy, a produce stand, and a used clothing store. In front of the produce stand, Adam waves to Mr. and Mrs. Torricelli, the owners, who are piling fruit on the carts. “They live upstairs from me!” Adam announces. Concetta points to the fruit and says, “Manzanas and plátanos,” and Ms. Sharif replies, “Yes, apples and bananas.” The children talk about the neighborhood places they visit with their families and the people who work there (for example, the man at the shoe store, the money lady [cashier] at the corner store, and the popcorn guy at the movies).

Later that day, at choice time, Adam sets up a fruit store, and the other children make purchases. Ms. Sharif asks for some less common fruits (such as plantains, mangoes, rambutan), and the children talk about the vegetables and fruits they eat at home with their families.

OFTEN YOUNG CHILDREN’S FIRST SENSE OF community outside the home comes from attending an early childhood setting. As children learn to get along, make friends, and participate in decision making, they are engaging in social studies learning. Typically, the social studies curriculum also expands children’s horizons beyond the school into the neighborhood and the wider world.

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), “the aim of social studies is the promotion of *civic competence*—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life” (2010, 1). Although state standards for social studies in early childhood vary, they address the following common themes: (1) membership in a democratic classroom community, (2) location and place relationships, (3) similarities and differences in personal and family characteristics, (4) basic economic principles as they relate to children’s lives, and (5) apprecia-

tion of one's own and other cultures in a diverse society (Gronlund 2006). Early childhood teachers help children begin to understand these concepts so they can later generalize the ideas to school and eventually the larger society.

Social studies draws on several disciplines, including history, geography, economics, and ecology. Although these subjects sound abstract when applied to young children, preschoolers deal with them in concrete ways (Seefeldt, Castle, & Falconer 2010). For example, children between 4 and 7 years old become aware of personal time—that is, how past, present, and future are sequentially ordered in the history of their own lives. By age 6 or 7, they have rudimentary clock and calendar skills. The components of geography include spatial relations and the places people occupy. An awareness of nature and the importance of taking care of animals and plants in one's immediate environment give real meaning to an appreciation of ecological diversity and interdependence.

Young children's development in social studies

Beginning with their interactions with the individuals in their families, neighborhoods, and schools, young children establish a foundation that will later enable them to branch out to encounter new people and settings when they become older and eventually take their place in the adult world. Aside from their families, early childhood settings are where young children typically first learn to become responsible citizens.

For example, preschoolers learn about human diversity—language and culture, beliefs and practices, living environments and relationships, abilities and needs—by interacting with a wide range of adults and peers. They take on different roles during pretend play, read stories and informational books about interesting people and situations, explore the arts of different cultures, and go on field trips in their communities. When young children solve problems collaboratively in the classroom, it is a microcosm of the democratic process (Gartrell 2012).

Components of social studies

Social studies learning in early childhood has two components. *Social systems* are the norms, values, and procedures that affect human relationships in our day-to-day lives. For preschoolers, they include experiencing the diversity of people and cultures, becoming aware of the roles people

About the Author

Ann S. Epstein is the senior director of Curriculum Development at HighScope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

This article is adapted from the forthcoming NAEYC Comprehensive Member benefit *The Intentional Teacher*, revised edition, by Ann S. Epstein, being copublished by NAEYC and HighScope.

perform at home and in the community, understanding the need to have rules for group behavior, and beginning to participate in the democratic process.

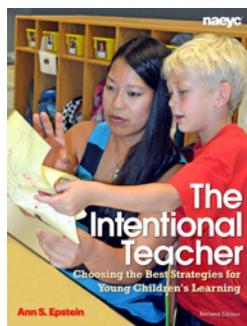
The second component is *social concepts*, or the standard topics taught later in school. They include economics, which for preschoolers involves gaining a rudimentary understanding of how money works. History at this age focuses on the sequence of events, as young children are increasingly able to recall the past and anticipate the future. Preschool geography is about locations and their relationship to one another, especially direction and distance. Preschoolers are also interested in the lives of people from other parts of the world, provided these are made concrete and connected to their own lives (e.g., customs related to food, housing, games children enjoy, family relationships). In recent years, ecology—how human behavior affects nature and the health of the planet—has been added to the mix. While mastering these subjects might seem like a tall order for preschoolers, meaningful early experiences can have a positive impact on the rest of their lives.

Aside from their families, early childhood settings are where young children typically first learn to become responsible citizens.

Social systems

Because of their observant natures and their curiosity about people, children become aware of human diversity on their own, although they depend on adults to help them develop sensitivity in responding to the differences they encounter among people. Likewise, young children are very attuned to the roles performed in their own families and, as they venture out into the world, to roles in the community. When it comes to creating and following rules, however, adults need to play a more active role in helping preschoolers see how and why rules might apply to them. Involving children in making reasonable decisions about how the classroom should be run (adults still decide matters related to health and physical and emotional safety) helps them appreciate and follow rules

voluntarily. Related to this practice is encouraging children to help establish and participate in the democracy of the classroom. With adult guidance, they can learn to listen to others, contribute their own ideas, and accept majority decisions that affect the group as a whole.



Valuing diversity. Diversity can take many forms, including gender, ethnicity, age, religion, family structure, ability levels, body shape, hair/eye color, culture, language, ideas, aesthetic preferences, and so on. Valuing diversity means accepting and appreciating the differences of ourselves and of others as normal and positive. It means treating people as individuals and not as stereotypes and recognizing that preferences are not always value judgments (for example, if Daiwik brings curried lentils for lunch and Ramon brings macaroni and cheese, it does not mean each child can refer to the food the other one likes as “yucky” or “bad”).

Teaching strategies. Teachers can help children accept and even embrace diversity in the classroom and community (as well as other cultures they may encounter through the media) in ways such as these:

- Model respect for others by the way you listen to and accept children’s ideas and feelings. Let them see you treat everyone equally and fairly, including children, families, and your coworkers.
- Avoid judgmental comparisons. Instead, comment on specific attributes and accomplishments without labeling one as better than the other. For example, instead of saying to Yolanda, “I like red hair,” offer an observation such as, “Yolanda has short, red hair, and Nicole has her brown hair in braids.”
- Hang reproductions of artwork in diverse media and representing different cultures at eye level throughout the room. At large group time, explore different styles of music and dance, again being sure to include the many styles that children’s families enjoy. Grow different (and unfamiliar) vegetables and flowers in the school garden.

Learning about community roles. The first roles preschoolers become aware of are those played by the people in their families. At first, they are concerned about the roles that affect them directly, such as who cooks their meals, provides comfort when they are hurt or upset, or reads to them at bedtime. Provided they feel secure about having their basic needs met, young children next begin to pay attention to the roles family members perform outside the home, such as their jobs or the volunteer work they do. As their world expands, preschoolers also take an interest in the services performed by people outside the family, such as doctors, firefighters, police officers, teachers, bus drivers, zookeepers, performing artists, and barbers and hair stylists. These roles often appear in their pretend play. Over time, the number of roles and the details included in acting them out become more elaborate.

Teaching strategies. Materials and experiences inside and outside the classroom can support children’s interest in learning about community roles. Here are some ideas:

- Create opportunities for children to learn about and act out different community roles. Provide materials for pre-



tend play (dress-up clothes, housewares, shop and garden tools, office equipment). Talk about what family members do at home (for example, “Sean’s daddy made dinner last night” or “Mattie did the laundry with her mom. She helped sort the *calcetines*, the socks”) and the roles they play outside the home (for example, “Jerome’s uncle is a teacher like me” or “Charlotte’s grandmother sings in the choir at church”). Make a class book with photos of children’s families performing different roles (planting a garden, taking the bus to the library).

- Take field trips and invite visitors to the classroom so children can expand their awareness of people and roles in their community. On neighborhood walks point out people at work—for example, people who are driving trash and recycling trucks, selling produce at the farmers’ market, or fixing cars at the corner garage. Visit various places of work, especially those that often show up in children’s pretend play, such as the fire station or supermarket. Bring back materials (grocery bags, receipt pads) they can incorporate in their play scenarios.

Creating and following rules. A rule is an authoritative direction for how to act or what to do. Just as licensed programs must follow health and safety rules, programs and teachers have rules that children must concern themselves with, such as who will pass out snacks, feed the hamster, sit next to the teacher, choose the song for circle time, use the

computer, and so on. Children may create rules for games they invent, such as the start and finish line in a race or what constitutes inbounds in a beanbag toss. Sometimes the group feels the need to establish policies for preserving quiet areas, respecting block structures built by others, or protecting work in progress overnight. Setting rules also can be a way to deal with interpersonal conflicts, especially if they affect groups of children or the whole class.

Teaching strategies. Like a personal code of morality, competence in respecting and making rules begins in childhood and continues to develop into adolescence and early adulthood. Teachers can be instrumental in laying the foundation for this development by carrying out practices such as the following:

- Make children aware of basic health and safety rules that have everyday meaning to them. Be concrete and positive. Children relate mostly to the *what* of behavior (for example, “Always wash your hands after using the bathroom”), although they can also benefit from a simple explanation of *why* (for example, “Soap and water get rid of the germs so they don’t make us sick”). After discussing a few simple rules with children, write them out in short words and pictures, and post them at children’s eye level. Be sure to demonstrate the important rules rather than assuming that all of the preschoolers understand them based simply on your discussion. For dual language learners, write them in their home language (for example, *lávese las manos* [*wash your hands*]), which will help them learn key words as well as the rules themselves.

We do not always get our way, but the democratic process does provide the satisfaction of being heard and knowing that decisions and policies can be reviewed and revised if needed.

- During small group time or a class meeting, describe a problem that affects everyone and invite children to suggest one or more rules to solve it. (Children may also use small group time or class meetings to allow the whole group to resolve problems that involve just a few children, provided those directly affected agree to using this strategy.) Encourage children to discuss the pros and cons of each suggestion. Write down and post the rules they decide to try. Revisit the rules as a group in a few days to see whether or not they are working.

Creating and participating in democracy. Democracy in the early childhood classroom means conditions of equality and respect for the individual. “Education that teaches children the skills they need to be contributing members

of a civil society begins with classroom communities that embrace inclusive—mutually respectful—communication” (Gartrell 2012, 5). Developing a sense of democracy grows out of experiences with rule making and social problem solving. For young children, it means learning that everyone has a voice, even those with minority opinions. Democracy entails compromise and negotiation. We do not always get our way, but the democratic process does provide the satisfaction of being heard and knowing that decisions and policies can be reviewed and revised if needed.

Teaching strategies. Participating in a democratic society and in a democratic classroom require similar skills, such as solving problems, making decisions, managing emotions, taking the perspectives of others, and pursuing and achieving goals. To bring about these understandings in ways that make sense to young children, teachers can use strategies such as these:

- Ask children to consider alternative ways to reach a goal; for example, “What do you think would happen if . . . ?” or “Can you think of another way to do that?” Encourage them to plan more than one way to accomplish a task. Pose questions to help them anticipate consequences and reflect on outcomes; for example, “What will you do if the children who are making the refrigerator box into an airplane don’t follow the rules tomorrow that you came up with today?”
- Build children’s skills of perspective taking and turn taking. Remind children to listen before they add their ideas to the discussion. Ask them to repeat back what they hear and check it out with the speaker.
- Introduce other ideas and vocabulary words that are at the core of democratic principles and actions. Carry out mathematics activities to help children develop the concepts of *more/greater* versus *less/fewer*, which are foundational to the principle of majority rule. For example, ask children to indicate their preferences (for instance, for a color or food) by a show of hands. Count and record the results on chart paper, using the appropriate vocabulary words.

Social concepts

Some social concepts, such as economics and history, tend to emerge from children’s own observations and experiences. For example, as they accompany family members on errands, they encounter people exchanging money for goods and services. Looking at photos of a family vacation or a trip to their home country, preschoolers begin to recall what happened at a time in the past, when they took their trip. They also begin to anticipate events, such as an upcoming birthday, although their sense of time is still shaky. Understanding other standard social studies topics, such as geography, requires more active adult intervention. Children are so used to being taken places, for example, that they may only become aware of where they are coming from or going to if adults call their

Research shows that young children are capable of engaging with three areas of geography: reading simple maps, identifying familiar locations and landmarks, and recognizing prominent features in the landscape.

attention to it. Likewise, preschoolers often take nature for granted. They may not consider how their actions, let alone those of others, affect the plants and animals around them.

Understanding simple economics. While the field of economics can seem abstract, even for adults, preschoolers know many things about this aspect of social studies. Observing the roles of family members and others in the community, they develop basic ideas about reciprocity, including the exchange of money (Seefeldt, Castle, & Falconer 2010). For example, young children can grasp that people work to earn money to buy food, medicine, and movie tickets. They know that money, or its equivalent, comes in various forms (paper and coins, checks, plastic cards). Overhearing comments from adults or in the media, they gather that certain goods and services are more valuable than others.

Teaching strategies. Money often assumes a prominent role in children's pretend play. For example, children pay for food at the restaurant; the more they order, the more it costs. Adult guidance can help preschoolers begin to think about the connections that underlie a society's economic system. Try the following strategies:

- Provide materials and props so children can incorporate money and the exchange of goods and services into their pretend play. Build on typical family experiences, such as going to the grocery store, paying the doctor or babysitter, or purchasing new shoes. Provide strips of paper, rocks, beads, and other small items for preschoolers to use as pretend money.
- Make comments and pose occasional questions to help children consider simple economic principles, such as the relationship between work and money. For example, you might ask, "How much more will it cost if I order the large salad instead of the small one?" When you read books that include stories with people buying and selling things, briefly engage children in discussing the transactions.

Understanding history. Children's understanding of history is closely tied to their ideas about time. At first it is a highly personal understanding, associated with events in their daily lives. By late preschool, however, children begin to apply logic to understanding time. They know time moves forward, are able to look backward, and understand that

the past and present can affect the future (for example, they can wear the jacket they bought yesterday to school today). A growing vocabulary (words such as *before* and *after*, *first* and *last*, *then* and *next*) enables preschoolers to understand and talk about time. They begin to grasp that a minute is shorter than an hour, and a day is shorter than a year.

Teaching strategies. With a consistent schedule, children become aware of the daily sequence of events in the classroom on their own. However, it helps if adults occasionally point out "what we just did" or "what comes next," especially to children who are new to the group. Materials and books also provide many opportunities to help children develop a sense of time. Try these strategies:

- Play sequencing games at group times. For example, at circle time, have the children do two movements in order (for example, "First tap your ears; next tap your shoulders"). Do the same with sounds.
- Use concrete representations, such as books, artwork, and music, to make children aware of the distant past and far future. (To see how one preschool classroom set up an old-fashioned general store inspired by the *Little House* books, see Miles 2009.) Media images might similarly encourage them to think about futuristic settings where people have superpowers, travel in unusual vehicles, and use fantastic equipment to accomplish their goals. Talk about the characters in stories that feature spaceships, robots, or odd-looking houses and vehicles, and compare their lives with life today.
- Use and encourage children to use an expanding vocabulary of time and sequence words. Begin with terms such as *before* and *after*, *first* and *last*, *yesterday* and *tomorrow*; include their home-language equivalents for dual language learners.

Understanding geography. Geography is "a field of study that enables us to find answers to questions about the world around us—about where things are and how and why they got there" (GESP 1994, 11). The challenge for early educators is to introduce young children to geography concepts that are meaningful to them. Research shows that young children are capable of engaging with three areas of geography: reading simple maps (Liben & Downs 1993), identifying familiar locations and landmarks (Mayer 1995), and recognizing prominent features in the landscape (Seefeldt, Castle, & Falconer 2010).

Teaching strategies. The perspective taking that allows young children to solve problems with materials and peers can also help them acquire simple concepts in geography. Help preschoolers engage with geography by beginning with their daily experiences—where they go, what they do there—and then branching out to a wider range of places and features. The following strategies will make learning about geography interesting and appropriate for young children:

- Draw simple maps or diagrams of the classroom, school, and neighborhood. Include obvious features such as doors and windows, the playground and parking lot, benches, bus stops, and stores. Talk about the maps with the children, emphasizing how the various places are related (for example, the direction and distance one must travel when getting from one place to another). Provide the children with flags, stickers, or other symbols they can use to mark places on the map.
- Display a map of the neighborhood near the block area and encourage children to use it to work together to re-create the neighborhood using blocks and other props (such as cars, people, animals, signs; [Colker 2013]).

Children must develop a love for nature before they can think about the environment abstractly and become its guardians.

Appreciating ecology. Learning about ecology involves understanding our roles as caretakers of the planet. For young children, this begins with regular and enjoyable encounters with the natural world. As members of the classroom community, preschoolers can take responsibility for its physical care, such as picking up litter, feeding pets, or planting a garden. Their growing capacity for empathy makes them capable of showing concern for wildlife. Children must develop a love for nature before they can think about the environment abstractly and become its guardians (Sobel 2008). Therefore, “during early childhood, the main objective of environmental education should be the development of empathy between the child and the natural world” (White & Stoecklin 2008, n.p.). This includes opportunities to play in nature, take care of plants, and cultivate relationships with animals.

Teaching strategies. Connecting children to the environment can be as simple as getting out into nature. Because children may take these experiences for granted, however, it is important to help them become aware of the diversity of plants and animals around them. Being indoors also presents many opportunities for helping children learn the importance of taking care of things if we want those things to remain available to ourselves and others. Use the following strategies to inspire young children to care about the environment and to make ecology a meaningful subject for them:

- Help children become aware of and appreciate nature. The more young children enjoy the sensations of the natural world, the more meaningful their concerns about ecology will become as they get older. Except during days of extreme weather conditions, include time to go outside each day. Call attention to the feel of the sun and wind on children’s faces, and examine the plants and animals native to your area. Plant a garden together or make and hang a simple bird feeder.

- Encourage children to take care of the indoor classroom and outdoor learning environment, such as putting tops on markers so they do not dry out, treating dress-up clothes carefully so they do not tear, and planting, watering, and weeding the class garden. When children play a meaningful role in taking care of the settings where they play and interact every day, it supports the development of empathy and the sense of community that undergirds ecological awareness.

Social studies is the “new kid on the block” when it comes to content areas in the early childhood curriculum, yet it is also the oldest area of study in general. The preschool classroom is a microcosm of the larger society. As concerns mount about the unraveling of civil behavior in the fabric of our social world, early childhood educators, in partnership with families, can help to lay the foundation for a future that guarantees that all of us have an opportunity to fulfill our human potential while respecting the rights of others and the sustainability of our planet.

References

- Colker, L.J. 2013. “A Place for Building Your Community.” *Teaching Young Children* 7 (1): 18–19.
- Gartrell, D. 2012. *Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- GESP (Geography Education Standards Project). 1994. *Geography for Life: National Education Standards—1994*. Washington, DC: GESP.
- Gronlund, G. 2006. *Make Early Learning Standards Come Alive: Connecting Your Practice and Curriculum to State Guidelines*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf; Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Liben, L.S., & R.M. Downs. 1993. “Understanding Person-Space-Map Relations: Cartographic and Developmental Perspectives.” *Developmental Psychology* 29 (4): 739–52.
- Mayer, R.H. 1995. “Inquiry Into Place as an Introduction to World Geography—Starting With Ourselves.” *Social Studies* 86 (2): 74–77.
- Miles, L.R. 2009. “The General Store: Reflections on Children at Play.” *Young Children* 64 (4): 36–41.
- NCSS (National Council for the Social Studies). 2010. *National Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS.
- Seefeldt, C., Castle, S., & Falconer, R. 2010. *Social Studies for the Pre-school/Primary Child*. 8th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Sobel, D. 2008. *Children and Nature: Design Principles for Educators*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- White, R., & V.L. Stoecklin. 2008. “Nurturing Children’s Biophilia: Developmentally Appropriate Environmental Education for Young Children.” *Collage: Resources for Early Childhood Educators*. November. www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/2008/nurturing-childrens-biophilia-environmental-education-for-young-children.