

Social Studies, Social Competence and Citizenship in Early Childhood Education: Developmental Principles Guide Appropriate Practice

Kristen M. Kemple¹

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Abstract The purpose of this article is to examine the nature of appropriate social studies education in the Kindergarten and Pre-Kindergarten years. The importance of social competence development as a basic foundation of the social studies in the early years of schooling is examined, with particular attention to the commonalities shared between goals and strategies for social competence and for civic ideals and practices. Knowledge of developmental direction in child development is described and illustrated as a tool for considering the importance of using close-to-home lessons built on children's own experiences, prior to lessons about more distal concepts. Historical foundations of developmentally appropriate social studies are revisited, and their relevance is discussed, with regard to social studies education in the kindergartens and pre-kindergartens of today.

Keywords Civics · Social competence · Social studies · Developmental direction

Introduction

In my thirty-plus years experience as an early childhood teacher educator, I have observed that beginning pre-service teachers are often intimidated by the prospect of teaching the social studies. They generally remember the social studies from their own school days as boring and as rote. Very often, they are not sure what the social studies *are*. They wonder, “How will I teach history to young children when I can't remember the names and dates

myself?” “Economics? *Civics and Government*?! Those were never my best subjects. How can young children understand such difficult and abstract subjects?”

Confronted with those fears and misconceptions, deconstructing the social studies to their most rudimentary conceptual roots becomes our first task. When approached from a child's eye view, as *exploring and making sense of the social world*, social studies emerges as potentially very interesting content. What could be more fascinating to the child than the world in which she lives? And therefore, what could be more natural to teach? With this rudimentary description of the social studies presented, I find that my teacher education students begin to warm to its basic familiarity. From this angle, the social studies no longer look so intimidating.

Making the social studies more familiar to teachers is especially important at a time when there is such a strong focus on literacy and math. Other subjects have been pushed to a back burner. This requires that emerging teachers be knowledgeable about the social studies and be motivated to include the social studies in their teaching. Otherwise, the social studies are in danger of being lost (McGuire 2007).

What are the Social Studies?

Scenario #1

Three-year-olds Tito and Lamar struggle over an attractive toy. Ms. Anna scaffolds them to consider how they could resolve their conflict, gently leading them to consider the possibilities of sharing and taking turns. When they agree to a turn-taking plan, Ms. Anna says, “you've found a way that you can both have a chance to play”. That is social

✉ Kristen M. Kemple
kkemple@coe.ufl.edu

¹ University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

studies! The boys have experienced a lesson in social competence and “civics” which is learning about the rights and duties of being a citizen. Based on this lesson, Tito and Lamar can gradually continue to construct their understandings of negotiating and compromising in the resolution of conflicts and differences.

Scenario #2

Mr. Thompson notices that 4 year-old Savanna exits from the disorder of the dramatic play center as soon as the “2 minute-until-clean-up” warning is given, leaving Katrina and Jihye behind. Mr. Thompson calls Savanna back to the center, and describes what he has seen. He asks each of the girls to voice their perspective of the situation, and he supports their discussion of whether it is fair for only two to clean up. This is social studies, too. The girls are learning a lesson in civics and social competence. With further growth and experience these can build their understandings of social responsibility through making rules and guidelines for group activities.

Scenario #3

The kindergartners in Mrs. Jackson’s class have a choice to make. They can have their class picnic at the public playground, or in a nearby park. As children assert their opinions about the best place, Mrs. Jackson introduces a system for voting. Each child is given a single sticky-note, and invited to place it on one side of a divided poster (one side has a photo of the playground and the other has a photo of the park). The “one-note-one-vote” system prevents children from voting twice, as often happens when young children vote by a show of hands. Once all sticky-notes are placed, the children together count the votes. Again, we see social studies in action as children experience the fundamental principles of democracy and acting to accomplish public purposes through group problem-solving and voting.

In its definition of the social studies, The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) describes it as “...the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote *civic competence* (italics mine).” (NCSS 2010, p. 9) Further, NCSS asserts that “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, p.9). Civic competence is viewed not only as one area of the social studies, but ultimately as a primary goal of learning in the social studies as a whole. The content and skills learned through early social studies experiences prepare children to become

informed and engaged citizens of their country (Koralek 2015).

Rather than organize curriculum standards by the traditional discipline names from which the social studies draw their content (e.g. anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, sociology...), NCSS helpfully promotes the deconstruction process by identifying instead ten broader themes for categorizing knowledge about the human social world: Culture; Time, continuity and change; People, places and environments; Individual development and identity; individuals, groups, and institutions; Power, authority and governance; Production, distribution, and consumption; Science, technology and society; Global connections; and Civic ideals and practices.

What is Social Competence for Young Children?

Nurturing the growth of young children’s social competence has been a long-standing goal of early childhood education (Copple and Bredekamp 2009; Kostelnik et al. 2014). Social competence can be defined as “the ability to achieve personal goals in social interaction, while simultaneously maintaining positive relationships with others over time and across situations” (Rubin and Rose-Krasnor 1992) and has been described as including...”all the social, emotional, and cognitive knowledge and skills children need to achieve their goals and to be effective in their interactions with others” (Kostelnik et al. 2014). From a developmental perspective, this aspect of early childhood education is viewed as residing primarily in the social and emotional domains of child development. Social competence is also viewed as a component of learning and development in the subject area of social studies. Given that this expanded view of the social studies is shared by both the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and NCSS, it is disconcerting that this is not consistently reflected in state standards. “Although state learning standards for kindergarten and the primary grades increasingly include social studies, few of the standards focus on key skills related to social and emotional understanding, valuing differences and diversity, or learning to cooperate and manage conflict” (Thompson and Thompson 2015, p. 33). Social Competence has been described as being comprised of seven areas: Positive self-identity, interpersonal skills, planning and decision-making, cultural competence, emotional intelligence, social values, and self-regulation. Specific examples of competencies within each of these areas are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 The Seven Elements of Social Competence and Examples of Practice. Adapted from Kostelnik et al. 2014

1. <i>Positive self-identity</i> self-awareness, sense of competence, sense of personal power, sense of worth, sense of purpose, positive view of personal future	<i>For example</i> , “a sense of personal power” and “a sense of purpose” can be developed by allowing children some choice about activities in which to engage and by allowing adequate time for them to become deeply involved
2. <i>Interpersonal skills</i> establishes friendly relationships, communicates ideas and needs, cooperates and helps, “reads” social situations accurately, adjusts behavior to fit varying social situations, resolves conflicts peacefully, asserts own ideas, accepts others ideas, acknowledges other people’s rights	<i>For example</i> , helping a child learn to “communicate ideas and needs” can be accomplished by prompting a child to express his perspective to a peer. Some children may only need a reminder to “use your words”. Others may need a teacher to supply them with words to use
3. <i>Planning and decision making</i> makes choices, solves problems, develops plans, plans ahead, carries out positive actions to achieve social goals	<i>For example</i> , learning to “plan ahead” can be facilitated by asking children to describe their plans for center time. This may consist of “tell me one activity you plan to do during center time” and “so, you’ve decided to make an insect journal. What will you need to do first?”
4. <i>Cultural competence</i> Demonstrates knowledge, comfort with and respect for people of varying ethnic or racial backgrounds, Interacts effectively with people of varying backgrounds, recognizes unfair treatment, questions unfair treatment, acts to obtain social justice	<i>For example</i> , the developing ability to “recognize unfair treatment” can be supported by presenting stories of injustice. When reading or storytelling are done in a dialogic way, children may be asked to voice their feelings about the story and to suggest fair solutions
5. <i>Emotional intelligence</i> Recognizes emotions in self and others, demonstrates empathy, gives and receives emotional support, labels emotions and communicates feelings constructively, manages frustration, disappointment, and distress in healthy ways	<i>For example</i> , children can be helped to manage anger or frustration by being taught and reminded to first calm down by “taking a belly breath” or counting to ten
6. <i>Social values</i> caring, helpfulness, equity, social justice, honesty, responsibility, flexibility	<i>For example</i> , the value of “responsibility” can be taught by assigning children meaningful classroom jobs, and by providing encouragement for well-completed jobs, like “Thank you for washing the tables so thoroughly. Now they won’t be sticky for our next activity”
7. <i>Self-regulation</i> Controls impulses, delays gratification, resists temptation, resists peer pressure, exhibits prosocial behavior, monitors self	<i>For example</i> , children can be helped to “delay gratification” when they are guided to use turn-taking strategies like using a timer, creating a waiting list, and/or engaging themselves in another activity while they wait

Civic Competence, Social Competence and Child Development

A glance over the list in Table 1 suggests that the overlap of “social studies” with “social competence” is quite evident. Civic Ideals and Practices is one of several social studies themes identified by NCSS (2010) for which the overlap with social competence is particularly strong. To illustrate this, Table 2 lists the Personal Interaction and Civic Engagement strategies (Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE 2003), and connections to elements of social competence.

By organizing its standards and recommendations in broad grade ranges (early grades (including Pre-K), middle grades, and high school) the NCSS leaves room for interpretation concerning appropriate standards, content, and teaching at specific grade levels. This space is particularly wide open for the “early grades” because of the enormous and rapid developmental changes that occur between the preschool and middle school years. While the national standards are comprised of a set of principles that are intended as a framework for creating and implementing

content standards, they do not (and are not intended to) distinguish between what is appropriate content and teaching for kindergartners as compared to 4th grade children.

Knowledge of the science of child development and implications for educational practice is critically important for making this distinction. The National Association for the Education of Young Children’s publication, “Developmentally Appropriate Practice in (Copple and Bredekamp 2009) serves as a framework to guide decisions about what is individually-appropriate, age-appropriate, as well as culturally-appropriate practice for children from birth through age eight. When considering developmental appropriateness, it is helpful to consider well-established principles of developmental direction and their implications for teaching in the social studies.

Child development proceeds in an orderly sequence; while individual rates of development vary, the sequences within various domains of development are generally predictable. Based on the extant knowledge base of early childhood development, we know that children’s understandings and skills progress, most generally, from simple

Table 2 Personal Interaction and Civic Engagement Strategies and their Connections to Elements of Social Competence

<i>Personal strategies</i>	<i>Social competence elements</i>
Exhibit honesty and integrity	Social values
Convey creativity and ingenuity	Planning and decision-making
Communicate personal beliefs, feelings, and convictions	Interpersonal skills, Emotional intelligence
Demonstrate self-direction when working toward and accomplishing personal goals	Positive self-identity, Planning and decision-making
Demonstrate flexibility as goals and situations change	Interpersonal skills, Social values
Adjust personal behavior to fit the dynamics of various groups and situations	Interpersonal skills, Cultural competence, Social values
Respect & be tolerant of others' beliefs, feelings, & convictions	Interpersonal skills, Cultural competence
<i>Collaborative strategies</i>	
Contribute to the development of a supportive climate in a group	Interpersonal skills
Participate in making rules and guidelines for group activities	Interpersonal skills
Assist in setting, working toward, and accomplishing common goals for a group	Interpersonal skills
Participate in delegating duties, organizing, planning, making decisions, and taking action in group settings	Interpersonal skills, Cultural competence
Participate in persuading, compromising, debating, and negotiating in the resolution of conflicts and differences	Interpersonal skills
Utilize diverse perspectives and skills to accomplish common goals	Interpersonal skills, Planning and decision-making, Cultural competence, Social values
<i>Civic engagement strategies</i>	
Understand the fundamental principles of democracy	Social values
Identify and understand public and community issues	Social values
Dialogue with others who have different perspectives	Interpersonal skills, Cultural competence
Participate in communities through organizations working to address an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs	Positive self-identity, Interpersonal skills, Cultural competence, Social values
Act to accomplish public purposes through group problem-solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting	Positive self-identity, Interpersonal skills, Planning and decision-making
Exhibit moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference	Positive self-identity, Cultural competence, Social values

to complex. This progression is known as developmental direction, which describes the typical unfolding of the learning process (Kostelnik et al. 2011). More specifically, principles of developmental direction include the interrelated principles that development and learning progress from known to unknown, from self to other, from concrete to abstract, and from enactive to symbolic representation.

Known to Unknown

Children build new learning on what they already know. Prior knowledge serves as a foundation for the construction of new and more sophisticated understanding. This means that a kindergarten teacher must do the work of discovering what her students already know and understand, so she can use this as a basis for extending their knowledge and building their conceptual thinking. This is why an early childhood teacher who wants to introduce the concept of “mammals” to children begins with those common to the

children’s environment, rather than those they have not directly experienced. This is why a preschool teacher who wants to introduce the concept of fairness to young children begins with issues of fairness inherent in the children’s present environment, such as who gets to ride on the new tricycle, or why can’t I take all the cookies.

Self to Other

Though not so pronounced as Piaget once asserted (Thompson and Thompson 2015) young children possess a degree of egocentricity. They have a tendency to view the world in terms of themselves. One of the important processes of early childhood development is the gradual growth from the very young child’s inability to consider that any other perspective than his own exists, to the kindergartner’s strengthening ability to recognize the point of view of others and to take those perspectives into consideration. This is why a teacher of young children begins

with an exploration of articles of clothing worn by her group of children, before introducing the purposes of less familiar clothing worn by other children in a very different environment. This is why a kindergarten child needs to experience the protection of his own rights (through development and implementation of classroom rules, for example) before he can fully appreciate the importance of respecting the rights of others.

Concrete to Abstract

The fewer of the five senses a child can use to explore something, the more abstract that something is. The more abstract the object of learning is, the more difficult it is for a young child to grasp. Teachers of young children respect this principle when they begin with tangible objects and experiences, as a springboard for introducing more abstract concepts. This is why a concept such as “people wear different clothing in response to the climate and geography in which they live” will be better understood by young children after they have had direct experience with sensory exploration of various types of clothing and sensory experience of the environment for which that clothing is adapted. This is why early experiences with classroom voting are better understood if each child can hold a tangible token to represent his vote, and can physically place it on a graph structure to represent its contribution to the class distribution of votes.

Enactive to Symbolic Representation

The ways in which young children depict objects and experiences as they “represent” these in their own thinking and in their communication of ideas to others progresses from emphasis on enactive, to iconic, to symbolic modes of representation.

Enactive representation is very common throughout the early childhood years, as children often act out their understandings and ideas through their bodies, using gestures, sounds, words, and manipulation of objects. This is frequently seen in both individual and group dramatic play, as children display and construct their understanding of community roles through the way they pretend at being firefighters, grocery store clerks, or doctors.

Iconic representation is more abstract, and is exemplified as children create and use pictures or three dimensional creations to convey what they understand. As children draw about firefighters or create a grocery store using blocks and small figures, they are communicating in a way that is one step further removed from the reality they are representing.

Symbolic representation is more abstract still. As compared to an icon, which in some way resembles the object

or reality for which it stands, a symbol generally does not bear much, if any, resemblance to its referent. Written words, numerals, and signs are often used to represent ideas and objects, and their use is a greater challenge for young children. The spoken word as well, especially when used outside of supporting context and the cues provided by context, is symbolic in nature.

A kindergarten teacher who intends to teach children about rule of law, for example, can capitalize upon all three of these modes of representation. Instead of simply telling children what the classroom rules are and lecturing about their importance, she can engage children in rule creation based on recent experiences in their play, take advantage of opportunities to re-enact correct behaviors in instances of broken rules, and support understanding of rules through children’s illustrations of the class-generated rule.

Historical Roots

These developmental principles call to mind the work of two well-known historical figures in early childhood education generally, and early childhood social studies education in particular. Lucy Sprague Mitchell, a student of John Dewey and contributor to the progressive education movement, developed and advocated for what came to be known as the “here-and-now” curriculum (Mitchell 1934). Mitchell believed it was important for children to experience things for themselves before being taught about those things. Her curriculum was antithesis to the social studies curricula of her time, which focused on rote memorization of a body of unchanging facts. Instead, she advocated that:

- (1) the younger the child, the greater the need for first hand sensory experiences
- (2) One experience, fact, or idea needs to be connected in some way to another; two facts and a relationship joining them are and should be an invitation to generalize, extrapolate, and make a tentative intuitive leap...even to build theory
- (3) what children learn must be useful to them in some way and related to daily life and
- (4) play and active learning are necessary (Seefeldt et al. 2013, p. 7).

Mitchell’s ideas are congruent with Piagetian (Piaget and Inhelder 1969) and Vygotskian (Vygotsky 1978) principles undergirding much of early childhood practice today, with research (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000) and with the principles and philosophy of developmentally appropriate practice (Copple and Bredekamp 2009).

Patty Smith Hill, also a student of Dewey and leader in the progressive education movement, advocated for an approach that came to be known as the Social-Living Curriculum (Hill 1923). The goal of Hill’s curriculum was

the development of social skills and appropriate habits, as foundation for preparing children to participate effectively in a democratic society. Toward this end, early childhood programs that grew from Hill's ideas were intended to help children to:

- (1) learn to share materials and ideas
- (2) develop healthy relationships with others
- (3) become self-reliant
- (4) feel responsibility for their own behavior
- (5) develop interest and attention span
- (6) cooperate with others in a friendly willing spirit
- (7) appreciate the worth and contribution of others and
- (8) develop self-concept and self-respect" (Seefeldt et al. 2013, p. 8).

Although both Mitchell and Hill's ideas are supported by current theory and research in early childhood development and education, their own followers over the years misinterpreted and misapplied their ideas in ways that led to the Here-and-Now and the Social-Living approaches being discredited as simplistic and overly narrow. In Mitchell's case, the intention of beginning with the child's own present world and then building outward (a predecessor to the spiral curriculum as described by Bruner 1960) became stuck in a simplified view of children's here-and-now world; her successors lost sight of the purpose of the here-and-now as a springboard for understanding the more distal concepts of "there" and "then". In Hill's case, the social skills approach transformed into a curriculum approach that consisted primarily of methods for teaching basic habits of behavior, with diminishing attention to the complex nature of the whole of child development and diminishing attention to the richness of a curriculum for nurturing and educating the "whole child".

Social Studies and Social Competence Today

There continue to be valid and persuasive reasons, grounded in developmental science, for beginning with the here-and-now and for including strong attention to social competence in the early childhood social studies curriculum. The essence of both Mitchell's and Hill's ideas are still highly relevant. Before children can understand "Concepts and ideals such as...fairness...the common good, rule of law..." (NCSS 2010, p. 90), they need to experience real life personal situations in which these concepts come into play, and practice the requisite social skills. Before children can genuinely "identify and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizens" (NCSS 2010, p. 90), they need to experience those rights and responsibilities within the context of their own immediate "here-and-now" world.

Social competence has been identified as a strong predictor of children's school readiness. Young children with social competence difficulties are at risk for maladjustment

and social problems into adolescence and adulthood. Children who have experienced programs designed to enhance their social-emotional competence show improved academic performance and social behavior, reduced behavior problems, and less emotional stress (CASEL 2014; Mindes 2015). In an era of narrowing curriculum in response to testing mandates, attention to support for children's developing social competence has waned significantly (McGuire 2007). In the current public school climate, as teaching in the early childhood years is weighted toward tested skills in literacy and mathematics, other areas of the curriculum are in danger of being pushed out. Art may be narrowed to ½ hour per week and the occasional cut-and-paste activity masquerading as art; Music may rarely be heard outside of the music room; science and social studies may be relegated to sharing the last ½ hour of the day (but only if time permits). In an era when various domains of learning and development are pushed to compete for resources and time, it is crucial to recognize and capitalize upon areas of natural and meaningful integration and overlap. Social studies and social competence development are closely intertwined in the very early years of schooling. It is important to think carefully about what content is developmentally appropriate to teach, and what methods are the best match for the unique characteristics of 4, 5, and 6 year old children. The principles of developmental direction presented can guide that thinking. Precious time captured to be used to implement developmentally appropriate teaching is time and opportunity well-spent.

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