

Building Competence and Promoting Quality Social Studies by Engaging Families

By Kristine Calo



Through culturally responsive practices children learn about other cultures

famous individuals from the past, or looking at how technology has changed over time (National Council for Social Studies, 2009). This is done through social studies.

While the need for social studies in the primary grades is clear, the amount of time dedicated to social studies has clearly diminished over the past two decades (National Council for Social Studies, 2009; Heafner & Groce, 2007). Educators have found innovative ways to incorporate social studies into the curriculum by integrating social studies content through

For early childhood educators, social studies help young children learn what it means to be contributing, productive members of their family, as well as of their classroom, school, neighborhood, community, and the world. In PreK-grade 3 classrooms, children learn about rules—at home, in school, and in the community. They explore not only what the rules are, but also how rules promote ideals such as fairness, safety, and order. Through classroom activities and culturally responsive practices (Dora & Fraser, 2009), young children learn about and begin to accept cultures that are different from their own. Children find out about people and places that make up our communities, nation and world.

Children learn about problems and issues in our communities and begin to see that they, too, can think critically and creatively to find solutions and solve problems. As they learn that they can have a voice in our society, they learn how to form opinions, find reasons to support their opinions, and listen to perspectives that may differ from their own. Young children also begin to understand the differences between past, present and future as they start to explore the past—whether it be through past events,

literacy and other subject areas. Teaching children to access social studies content through informational texts supports not only important social studies learning but also the development of key literacy skills and strategies (Brozo & Calo, 2006).

Another way that educators infuse social studies learning into children's everyday lives is by promoting family engagement to support children's understanding of key social studies concepts. In this article we present activities to promote quality social studies learning and knowledge while building essential early literacy skills. Not only do the activities in this article extend children's learning beyond the classroom, but they also promote purposefully partnering with families to enhance children's learning and development across learning domains. Along with promoting social studies competence and active literacy learning, intentional family engagement yields strong social-emotional benefits by supporting strong, reciprocal family partnerships with the school and positive caregiver/child relationships (Halgunseth, 2009; U.S. Department of Health and Social Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Educators promote family engagement through social studies

Engaging Families to Support Social Studies Learning

Exploring the World Around Us: Geography

The C3 (College, Career, and Civic Life) Framework states, "Geographic inquiry helps people understand and appreciate their own place in the world, and fosters curiosity about Earth's wide diversity of environments and cultures" (National Council of Social Studies, 2013). Young children are naturally curious about the world around them.

Helping children explore their own culture, as well as other cultures, can build appreciation for the diversity of communities, our nation and the world. To explore their own culture, educators such as second grade educator, Ms. Kanz, asks families to engage in a conversation about their own family histories. Using a Family History Graphic Organizer, children note the members of their families (including pets), the country(ies) their families originally came from (if they are immigrants), a favorite family tradition, and something about their family that the child believes makes them special.

Ms. Kanz also asks families to send in pictures or have children draw pictures to accompany the text on the graphic organizer. Children then use this information to share about their families by making a mobile, a collage, or even cover a cereal box to make a "book" cover about their families. All of the diverse projects are then displayed around the classroom to help establish a caring, inclusive classroom.

A basic way to learn about other cultures, is through a Food Journey (Gaines-Buchler, 2015). To take the journey, families "travel" the international food aisle at the grocery store. They talk about the food from different countries, noticing the many different types of foods from all over the world. Each time they go on a journey they choose a new food from another country to take home and try. For example, they may devour some hum-



mus from Greece or whip up corned beef and cabbage from Ireland. Families look at a map or globe to see where the food they are trying comes from and come up with adjectives to describe the food using their five senses. Children capture their food journeys in a *Journey Journal* where they note from which country the food came and the adjectives they use to describe the food. Periodically students share their food journey adventures with others in the classroom. Of importance is to note the culinary contributions that immigrants have brought to the U.S. over time and as such many of the foods we eat are more familiar than we think. This contribution helps children understand part of the identity of individuals in the U.S.

To support children's development of geographic knowledge, educators encourage families to create maps of their home and their communities and explore online resources from the United States Geological Survey (USGS.org) and National Geographic (<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/>) to find games, activities and projects to foster children's curiosity about the natural world. For example, educators encourage children to learn

Figure A. My Family History Graphic Organizer

Name: _____

My family includes:	My family originally came from:
One of my family's traditions is:	My family is special because:
Family pictures!	

about issues facing animal populations by engaging in activities like the Big Cat Initiative through National Geographic Education. Nonfiction classroom magazines such as *National Geographic Explorer* or *Time for Kids* are sent home and families are encouraged to read the articles together, find topics that are of interest to the family, and do further exploration online. These magazines support students' abilities to read and comprehend informational text, while also encouraging them to learn about the world around them.

Making a Difference: Civics

Educators and families play an important role in helping children see the value in taking an active role as citizens in their school or community. When educators encourage families to explore the ideas of volunteerism, random acts of kindness, and being helpful, they reinforce classroom ideals and encourage civic engagement. To encourage volunteerism, educators such as Ms. Holt, a first-grade educator, suggests that families create cards for service members or the elderly. Cards made at home are sent to service member organizations such as the Red Cross or Operation Gratitude. Local nursing homes are appreciative of cards created for residents. When writing cards, Ms. Holt reminds families to have children only use their first names. Additionally, Ms. Holt sends home information about random acts of kindness and encourages families to talk with their young children about what kindness is, what it looks like, what it sounds like, and why it is important for their family and for society as a whole.

Ms. Holt's families use the Helping Hands activity to draw their hands and write about what they each do to help around the home and in their neighborhood. An extension of this activity is to have each family member cut out handprints and have everyone leave one of their handprints any time they do something helpful for another member of the family (Gaines-Bucheler, 2015). At the end of each week the family talks about what they did that was helpful, and what it felt like not only to help others but to be helped by others too.

Another aspect of Civics that educators can encourage families to build on at home is the concept of rules. At school, before collaboratively establishing class rules, educators such as Ms. Kanz and Ms. Holt read books such as *Rules Help, What If Everybody Did That?* or *Officer Buckle & Gloria*. Educators encourage families to build on the idea of rules using a modified Goldilocks Rule, asking questions such as How many are too few? Too many? Just right? Encourage families to have fun thinking about what their home (or neighborhood or classroom) would be like with too many rules. What would it be like to have too few rules or no rules whatsoever? Talk about what it would look like, sound like, and feel like. Encourage families to be creative. Have children create their own books and illustrate the books with their families. The books can be placed in the class library for all to enjoy.

Families also support children's learning about community helpers. Ms. Beckwith, a preschool educator, encourages family members to come in as guest speakers to talk about their jobs—what they do, what the job is like, and the tools they use

to do their jobs. Families are encouraged to visit local police or fire stations, talk with family doctors and nurses and be aware of other helpers in their community. Sending home questions to consider helps support the dialogue between caregivers and children about who their community helpers are. Families are encouraged to have their children write notes to say thank you to community helpers who keep them safe such as crossing guards, police officers, and others.

Exploring the Past: History

While educators engage young children in learning about concepts of past, present, and future and begin to develop children's historical thinking skills, families can support investigations at home as well. Encourage families to take a trip to the library to learn about famous Americans. Together with their children, families read about a famous person, talk about what he/she did and why, and also think about why that person still is important today. Families create a My Famous American page by drawing a picture of the person and writing about what he/she did and why. For younger children, they can write a label for their picture or dictate a sentence to be written down by a family member, such as an older sibling or a parent. Children bring their completed page to the classroom to be bound together with the pages from their classmates. The educator puts a cover on the book and titles it *Our Famous Americans* by <class name>. The bound class book then goes into the class library to be available for children to read during independent reading time.

Another way that families can support children's social studies learning is by creating a timeline of the child's life. The educator can place the timelines on a bulletin board and have conversations with the class about the ways that class members are all similar and different. Children then set goals for themselves for the future to think about what they want to be when they grow up. Jasmine, a preservice early childhood educator, created a process called a "Dream Board" where she asks students to write goals (or dreams) on big clouds and steps to take to achieve those goals (or dreams) on smaller, connected clouds. She then posts the clouds on a Dream Board.

Additionally, children in classrooms where social studies is embedded in their everyday activities talk with their families about items from the past that they can bring in for show-and-tell. This technique, called Antiques Roadshow: Show and Tell and created by Mr. Michaud, a kindergarten educator, helps children understand concepts of past and present, while also looking at people, events, and technology across time. Families send in photographs, old technology or any item that comes from the past. Mr. Michaud also sends home a worksheet for the children to complete with their families. It includes the child's name, the name of their object, a place to draw a picture of the object, and the question, "What does your object teach us about the past?" In class, the children present their objects and the class has a rich discussion about what the object shows about the past.

Money Matters: Economics

Educators build young children's understanding of economics by developing children's economic knowledge and decision-making

skills. Families support their child's study of economics by using the academic vocabulary taught at school, while at home and in the community. Educators share with families the goals of their economics lessons along with the words and definitions that they are using to teach the core concepts. Encourage families to look for real-world examples of economic decision making. When families are shopping, they can talk about goods. When they are at the doctor's office, they can talk about jobs and services. Encourage families to explore the production process. After teaching about the production process, educators such as Ms. Holt have children create books based on their research such as *From Farm to Table* or *From the Cow to Ice Cream in My Belly* to share with their families at home.

Ms Holt also encourages families to set up a savings accounts at a local bank or to save money in a piggy bank. She asks families to talk about the reasons that people in their family save money. Ms. Holt also has families explore the U.S. Mint's H.I.P. (history in your pocket) Pocket Change website to learn about different coins. Children bring in a coin from home and explore the different characteristics of the coins. State coins provide a window into state history. If families have coins or bills from another country, she encourages them bring those in too.

Building Competence by Building Connections

Educators of young children have a tremendous impact on the lives of the children in their classrooms. By purposefully connecting to families and providing them with easy-to-follow, engaging and purposeful activities, educators build and extend children's social studies knowledge in meaningful ways. Not only will activities such as the ones shared in this article engage families in their child's learning at home and in the community, but this collaborative effort will also help build a solid civic foundation for school and life.

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We are inviting teachers and administrators to write a one-page manuscript regarding their experiences about COVID-19. There is no need to include references. We are looking for manuscripts that provide examples and suggestions of any aspects of teaching and learning, working with families, health, nutrition, and stress during the pandemic.

The manuscripts will be reviewed by the editor and the selected manuscript will be featured in the Fall Issue of Dimensions of Early Childhood.

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Thank you!

Mari Riojas-Cortez, Ph.D., Editor
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