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# Applying the Constructivist Framework to Elementary School Social Studies: Benefits for Young Learners and Preservice Teachers



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## ABSTRACT

*The constructivist framework provides elementary school teachers with pedagogical guidance and professional support particularly effective for teaching and learning social studies benefiting both their young learners and their preservice teachers. Research conducted with approximately 100 elementary school teachers produced three key conditions for applying the constructivist framework competently to social studies education. Findings from this research revealed that elementary school teachers believe that foremost they must be cognizant of and proficient in their: (1) knowledge, skills, and attitudes of social studies content and purposes, (2) understanding for developing social studies curriculum and methods for communicating the social studies effectively both independently and integrated across the curriculum, and (3) pedagogical expertise for designing and facilitating meaningful social studies instruction formally and informally. The teachers in this study overwhelmingly reported that, based upon their experiences, none of these areas nor the constructivist framework is highly valued nor adequately supported by their school districts and building administrators which greatly impacts their success with both their young learners and their preservice teachers.*

“Constructivism refers to a set of related theories that deal with the nature of knowledge” (Schuerman, 1998, p.6). Schuerman ascertains that knowledge is created by the individual, influenced by past experiences and personal values, and continues to develop with sustained inquiry, investigation, participation, application, and reflection. The constructivist framework differs from the behaviorist framework wherein knowledge “exists outside of people and independently of them. For the behaviorist [and most teachers], a good education instills in learners an accepted body of information and skills previously established by others” (Schuerman, 1998, p.7).

## THE ROLES OF TEACHERS IN THE CONSTRUCTIVIST FRAMEWORK

In his research, Schuerman identifies four roles of teachers or approaches to teaching including the functions of:

(1) transmitter or behaviorist who presents information to learners independently of the individual;

(2) manager or information processor who is influenced partially by the individual’s prior knowledge,

(3) facilitator or cognitive constructivist who guides learners through activities dependent on the individual’s intellectual development, and

(4) collaborator or social constructivist who engages learners actively in open-ended inquires conducted interdependently among all participants.

Most teachers employ each of these four roles or approaches to teaching in varying degrees and for different purposes and with different learners throughout their daily classroom lessons and interactions. Teachers need to recognize that each role serves a specific function, and that teachers and learners benefit when teachers incorporate all four approaches quickly and naturally throughout the teaching and learning process. However, teachers are least likely to use the collaborator or social constructivist framework (Schuerman, 1998, p.9). And it is this role or approach that frequently offers the most effective method to ensure that all learners encounter powerful instruction and personalized learning experiences that help them to connect content with relevance and authenticity, areas of major importance particularly for teaching and learning elementary school social studies.

### THE GOALS OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST FRAMEWORK

Honebein (1996, p. 11-13) identifies seven pedagogical goals requisite for successful constructivist learning. These goals urge teachers to:

- (1) organize and facilitate learner-centered experiential learning opportunities based upon the construction process,
- (2) provide learning experiences with an appreciation for multiple perspectives and various viewpoints,
- (3) embed learning within realist and relevant contexts,
- (4) encourage ownership and voice during the learning process,
- (5) integrate learning within the social experience,
- (6) advocate the use of multiple modes of representation, and
- (7) empower learner self-awareness of the knowledge construction process.

Each of these goals supports a strong rationale guiding the instruction of all academic disciplines and are applicable especially to elementary school social studies for incorporating both cognitive and social constructivism.

### OVERVIEW OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST FRAMEWORK

The constructivist framework empowers teachers to examine not only how learners learn, but to investigate how teachers teach, and is applicable throughout elementary school social studies education. In many traditional classrooms, curricula is presented part to whole with emphasis on basic skills; content is teacher-selected, teacher-directed, and remains fixed. Instruction relies heavily upon didactic delivery of information through unimaginative assignments limited to textbooks and worksheets; single, correct answers are assessed primarily through testing, and learners tend to work alone (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). These behaviors limit learners' abilities to understand the new knowledge fully, to use their acquired skills in a variety of ways, or to develop positive attitudes either about learning (and school) in general or social studies specifically.

In traditional classrooms, learners tend to be restricted from exploring topics and concerns of personal interest and from asking their own questions. They are restrained from discussing issues with their peers, applying the new information practically and meaningfully, and reflecting upon their new understanding and personal growth holistically. Rarely is social studies integrated with other learning nor do classroom activities connect with young learners' immediate environments and communities either inside or outside the classroom.

In constructivist classrooms, curricula is examined from whole to part with emphasis on major concepts and comprehensive understanding; learners' questions and reflections are valued and encouraged. Instruction remains interactive accessing primary sources of data while conducting self-selected and self-directed, on-going investigations. Alternative and authentic

assessments match curriculum and the interests expressed by individual learners, building upon strengths while nurturing weaker areas. Learners tend to work more often in well-structured cooperative learning groups rather than completing assignments in isolation (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

### **THE OBJECTIVES FOR IMPLEMENTING THE CONSTRUCTIVIST FRAMEWORK**

Additionally, in most constructivist classrooms, teachers and learners collaboratively organize the learning processes identifying procedures, expectations, parameters, and outcomes. According to Phye (1997), the teacher must:

- (1) create and maintain motivating conditions offering a variety of learner interactions;
- (2) introduce a multitude of challenges and situations prompting learners to select, organize, and pursue their own learning;
- (3) foster retrieval of prior knowledge aiding in the acquisition and construction of new knowledge; and
- (4) create social environments emphasizing the attitudes associated with learning to learn.

Elementary school teachers and their young learners benefit significantly when teachers modify their approaches to teaching and learning incorporating Phye's ideals aligned with the constructivist framework. As teachers restructure their methods to personalize the context and empower their communities of learners through authentic decision-making and problem-solving, learners engage respectfully and responsibly in higher-order thinking skills and begin to construct their own levels of understanding that offer them personal meaning and value. When young learners become partners in their individual investigations, they are more likely to become life-long participants in the learning process.

Preservice teachers also benefit extensively when they see the constructivist framework applied naturally and authentically with young learners. Preservice teachers are more likely to transfer and use their teacher education coursework into their own elementary school

classrooms. As teacher education course faculty and elementary school teachers model and reinforce the constructivist framework, preservice teachers acquire more effective teaching strategies and learner-centered learning practices that establish essential foundations beneficial to the preservice teachers' future pedagogical beliefs and behaviors. Likewise, practicing teachers, school administrators, school board members, and parents will initiate their own paradigm shifts when they are introduced to the constructivist framework as they, too, empower and reinforce teachers to incorporate these competent teaching strategies focused on learner achievement and life-long success.

### **OVERVIEW OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION**

Many elementary school teachers strive to understand and teach social studies more effectively. Teachers often discover that the social studies curriculum offers them and their young learners exciting and engaging content as they actively delve into myriad historical investigations and challenging contemporary issues relevant to the complexities of their current individual existence and group dynamics. Drawing from a broad range of academic disciplines, elementary school social studies prompts young learners and their teachers to query and analyze who we are, where we are, where we come from, why we do what we do, how we ensure democratic principles and social justice in this time and space, etc. The social studies establish important foundations authentically supporting highly valued processes such as inquiry, multiple perspectives, higher-order thinking skills, problem-solving, decision-making, performance-based learning, respect, and responsibility.

However, elementary school teachers do not always possess the requisite knowledge nor the pedagogical preparation associated with the social studies content and purposes to guarantee successful instructional strategies and academic outcomes. Teachers tend to be limited in their competence and confidence for teaching social

studies, integrating the curriculum, facilitating valued-based controversial subject matter, and providing alternative and authentic assessments (Gallavan et al., 2002). Too often teachers are not provided the necessary classroom time, resources, or reinforcements to teach the social studies curriculum adequately. As learner achievement, measured by standardized test scores and learner performance, begins to reflect more social studies knowledge and skills, teachers report their concerns and seek effective ways to improve the teaching and learning of elementary school social studies.

### **EXPECTATIONS FROM THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES**

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) defines social studies as “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” with “the primary purpose—to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (NCSS, 1994, p. vii). The NCSS vision states that five principles of powerful teaching and learning occur when classroom experiences are “meaningful, integrated, value-based, challenging, and active” (NCSS, 1994, p. 11-12).

The constructivist framework provides an effective approach applicable to the NCSS guidelines to curriculum development and instructional practices for increasing learner participation and achievement. An inclusive social studies curricula based on the ten NCSS themes (NCSS, 1994, p. 21-141) offers a multitude of opportunities for designing and implementing learner-centered and actively engaging learning experiences as learners learn more about themselves and one another. Learners self-select and self-direct their investigations about people, places, and events from the past, present, and future while examining a diversity of beliefs and perspectives in a variety of holistic sociocultural contexts.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Research was conducted with approximately 100 practicing elementary school teachers enrolled in 1 of 4 foundation of education graduate courses related to effective teaching strategies in the elementary school classroom. Following an in-class discussion related to a reading assignment examining the theories and practices associated with the constructivist framework, the practicing teachers were placed in groups of approximately 5 teachers each. Groups were supplied with large sheets of papers and markers and asked to describe their own preparation for teaching elementary school social studies, to identify benefits of the constructivist framework, and to list deficits of the traditional approaches specifically for teaching and learning elementary school social studies. Teachers recorded and shared their insights, and they were encouraged to record additional notes during the open class discussion. Then the broad range of teachers’ responses were organized into three key conditions that were reported as being necessary for applying the constructivist framework competently to elementary school social studies benefiting both young learners and preservice teachers.

### **THREE KEY CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION**

Findings from this research revealed three key conditions. The respondents reported that elementary school teachers must be cognizant of and proficient in their:

- (1) knowledge, skills, and attitudes of social studies content and purposes,
- (2) understanding for developing social studies curriculum and methods for communicating the social studies effectively both independently and integrated across the curriculum, and
- (3) pedagogical expertise for designing and facilitating meaningful instructional strategies formally and informally, specifically for implementing the constructivist framework.

### **(1) TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ATTITUDES OF SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENT AND PURPOSES**

The respondents in this study stated that they possessed limited knowledge about the social sciences. As young learners in elementary schools, they were not taught social studies regularly either as a subject area unto itself or integrated with other subjects across the curriculum. During their middle school and high school social studies classes, they were not taught the content utilizing meaningful and relevant strategies empowering them either to participate actively in the learning process or to retain and apply the information to their personal lives. During their college courses, the social sciences were taught in discrete subject areas that focused primarily upon memorization and recitation of isolated information. Their social studies methods course taken during their teacher preparation programs concentrated on pedagogy, not content.

Few of the approaches experienced during their preK-12 years assisted the respondents in increasing their knowledge level, helped them create their own understanding within their existing constructs, or built upon their prior knowledge as maturing learners. Rarely did their social studies education connect with their holistic, sociocultural existence either inside or outside of the classroom. The ideals of scholarship and stewardship were not viewed realistically nor collectively.

Similar results were reported regarding the respondents' learning vital social studies skills such as acquiring information and manipulating data, developing and presenting policies and arguments, constructing new knowledge, exploring diverse perspectives, and participating in groups (NCSS, 1994, p. 3-5). The respondents revealed that during their preK-12 years, few opportunities were extended which engaged them actively in their learning, particularly strategies relevant to social studies content and processes. Their past teachers rarely organized and introduced learner-centered learning experiences that allowed them to design their own investigations, ask their own questions, or construct

their own new knowledge. Few occasions existed to work with partners or in cooperative learning groups, self-assess, and/or reflect upon their personal growth within the scholastic context. Higher order thinking skills, decision-making, and problem-solving were not emphasized although the respondents acknowledged that these skills are the most important strengths for their own learners to possess as they pursue their future coursework and careers. The respondents emphasized the necessity for all teachers to incorporate these skills into their social studies instruction and across the curriculum to make learning more meaningful, engaging, and challenging thusly increasing participation and achievement for young learners who may become future teachers.

The same outcomes applied when analyzing teachers' attitudes or values toward social studies specifically and toward learning in general. The respondents shared that their social studies experiences did not seem to be about them or for them; they seemed to be learning about the human rights of others with little or no relevance to themselves. The respondents were not exposed to classroom opportunities that featured contemporary issues or controversial subjects. Important topics such as conflict resolution seemed like an imposed learning objective rather than a participatory event. Overall, the respondents reported that too often their social studies education was taught via a behaviorist approach preventing two important outcomes: (1) learners (at all grade levels) did not learn valuable social studies content, and (2) preservice and inservice teachers did not acquire appropriate or useful pedagogical modeling for their own future teaching practices.

### **(2) TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING AND ABILITIES TO DEVELOP SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULA**

Few respondents participating in this study had been exposed to any in-depth description of the social studies curricula or the characteristics, principles, or models for developing curricula. They had spent little or no time establishing the goals, objectives, rationale, assess-

ment, or evaluation applicable to their own social studies programs. Too often they had leaped directly into selecting a social studies topic and a quick, easily-managed classroom activity. The respondents advocated the importance of teachers examining their current approaches to the teaching/learning process with particular emphases upon their methods for organizing and implementing the social studies especially in relationship to the constructivist framework.

It was reported that developing the social studies curricula exemplifies powerful social studies teaching and learning in itself as curriculum development relies upon vital content knowledge, learning skills, and open attitudes. Most respondents in this study had been prepared to teach social studies to various extents through their teacher education programs. Superficially, they had examined the related social studies disciplines as valuable content areas to be incorporated into the social studies curricula. Most respondents had practiced integrating social studies into interdisciplinary thematic units of learning emphasizing the importance for teaching social studies as a subject area of its own and some respondents had been introduced and valued integrating social studies authentically across the curriculum.

Few respondents participating in this study had selected social studies themes as the central focus of the thematic unit or felt that could integrate all subject area successfully with social studies as the focus. Only a few respondents had learned the ten NCSS thematic standards or applied these guidelines to their curricular development. These respondents stressed the value of the ten NCSS thematic standards for competently organizing their curricular development.

The respondents reported that teachers usually are provided the school district scope and sequence curriculum guide, the suggested amount of time to allocate toward the teaching of social studies, and few books or teaching resources. Some respondents shared that teachers seem to be aware that social studies content would be included on the annual standardized testing during the upcoming years. However, the respondents in this study did not identify a single inservice or staff development opportunity dedi-

cated to elementary school social studies curriculum or instruction other than an occasional inservice addressing cultural diversity. They could recall few times in which they had analyzed the social studies curriculum or discussed it with other teachers.

### **(3) TEACHERS' PEDAGOGICAL EXPERTISE FOR DESIGNING AND FACILITATING EFFECTIVE LEARNING**

An emerging trend in this research revealed the respondents' observations that teaching and learning frequently is not learner-centered nor does it actively engage the learner in meaningful or challenging experiences in any subject area particularly within the social studies. Respondents openly reported their hesitations and limitations for empowering their young learners, again especially during social studies. The respondents described their needs to cover a large amount of content quickly while managing the diverse learning styles and needs of learners enrolled in their overcrowded classrooms. The respondents also stated that they had been exposed to several effective teaching and learning strategies during their teacher education programs that were engaging and enriching. However, during their own preservice teaching experiences and first years of teaching, those exciting models had been supplanted with techniques learned from cooperative teachers or colleagues appearing as more efficient approaches requiring less preparation (and, frequently, learner participation).

The respondents in this study emphasized the importance for professionals to rethink their practices and revisit many of the effective strategies emphasized during their preservice teacher education programs. Respondents suggestions for applying the constructivist framework to social studies education advocate that teaching and learning social studies should be:

- organized and facilitated via a multitude of approaches:
  - (a) singularly as identified content knowledge emphasizing the specific social science disciplines of history, geog-

- raphy, economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology;
- (b) integrated within the social studies drawing from two or more of the social sciences;
  - (c) integrated across the curriculum incorporating social studies with other subject areas such as language arts, math, science, technology, and the fine arts, and
  - (d) as interdisciplinary thematic units of study with social studies as the central focus;
- included daily and identified as both the specific social science and as the general field of studies;
  - clustered into both long-term and short-term units, themes, or theme cycles of curriculum and instruction that are based upon learners' needs and interests where learners self-select and self-direct their own learning processes;
  - facilitated through powerful learning experiences where learners conduct investigations involving inquiry, examination, discovery, participation, and reflection;
  - learner-centered featuring topics and issues that address contemporary issues and controversial subjects that challenge learner beliefs and behaviors;
  - supported with a multitude of resources including textbooks, primary sources, technology, literature—fiction and non-fiction, maps, globes, atlases, reference materials, experts, etc.
  - guided by well-developed goals and objectives with matching assessment and evaluation developed with or by learners. Alternative forms of assessment should be generated by learners and designed to follow the constructivist framework as learners establish their own learning expectations and methods for demonstrating new knowledge. It is equally important for learners to assess their procedures for establishing their learning expectations and interactions with others throughout the learning process while reflecting upon their outcomes and achievement. These

assessments address both the cognitive and social aspects of the constructivist framework. Assessment should be authentic; learners exhibit the most growth when their school experiences replicate the real world (Alleman & Brophy, 1998);

- shared as meaningful outcomes and products allowing learners to teach one another and demonstrate their new knowledge, skills, and understanding. Learners tend to motivate one another as they continue their own explorations and discoveries;
- integrated to promote social action outcomes prompting learners to connect with their neighborhoods and communities in the most authentic way possible. When learners design and facilitate social studies investigations via the constructivist framework that result in positive social actions, learners become true participants in the world around them and learners of and for life.

#### **BENEFITS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS AND PRESERVICE TEACHERS**

A synopsis of the findings demonstrate that young learners benefit when teachers apply the constructivist framework sincerely, thoroughly, and authentically through their individual pedagogical expertise in conjunction with three conditions. Elementary school teachers must be cognizant of and proficient in their:

- (1) knowledge, skills, and attitudes of social studies content and purposes,
- (2) understanding for developing social studies curriculum and methods for communicating the social studies effectively both independently and integrated across the curriculum, and
- (3) pedagogical expertise for designing and facilitating meaningful instructional strategies formally and informally, specifically for implementing the constructivist framework.

The elementary school teachers in this study reported that young learners who participate in approaches utilizing the constructivist framework to teaching and learning acquire a more positive, energetic, and genuine excitement



about learning. The learners' enthusiasm, in turn, motivates and vitalizes the teachers; thus, dynamic communities of learners and learning develop and perpetuate the teacher's competence and confidence while empowering learner engagement and achievement.

Preservice teachers benefit greatly from field experiences where teachers model the application of the constructivist framework to their social studies education and across the curriculum. The preservice teachers experience theory in practice as they transfer the university coursework to their own pedagogical repertoire. They, too, reflect the same motivation regarding teaching and learning as the elementary school learners while the preservice teachers negotiate their roles between learners and teachers. Early in their professional careers, preservice teachers establish their understanding and expertise for applying the constructivist framework to the social studies curriculum empowering themselves and their young learners.

However, the teachers participating in this study overwhelmingly reported that none of these areas is highly valued nor adequately supported by their school districts and building administrators which greatly impacts their success with both their young learners and their preservice teachers. As the respondents described their knowledge and experiences related to teaching social studies education, most of them frequently reported that the ideals purported by the National Council for the Social Studies and the constructivist framework are not the "norm" in most elementary school classrooms. The respondents shared that few elementary school teachers possess the competence and confidence to facilitate powerful social studies education via the constructivist framework as they would like to be implementing with both their young learners and preservice teachers.

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