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### Keywords

Social studies, early childhood, literacy development, holistic education, subject integration.



## **Closing the Knowledge Gap with Literacy-Infused and Rich Social Studies Content**

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### **Abstract**

Social studies have been marginalized in early childhood education amid the prevalence of standardized testing and political issues. However, a comprehensive approach to early education, including social studies, is gaining attention. This article emphasizes the significance of incorporating social studies into early childhood curriculum, illuminating its potential to enhance children's cognitive and social-emotional development. The second important aspect of this article focuses on the role of social studies in literacy skill development through building background knowledge, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills of young children.

### **Introduction**

Young children develop, grow, and begin to make sense of the world through interactions with individuals and the environment (Andrejeviatė & Špokaitė, 2021). Social studies content plays a critical role in helping children understand themselves as well as how to contribute to their communities (Berson & Camicia, 2013; Clark & Hooser, 2018). Despite its significance, this subject is often overlooked in early childhood classrooms, where greater emphasis is placed on literacy and numeracy skills (Berson & Camicia, 2013; Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Heafner, 2018; Willis, 2007). However, research has shown that social studies content can enhance young children's learning experiences and promote their cognitive and social development (Berson & Camicia, 2013; Kemple, 2017). This article explores the importance of teaching social studies content in early childhood classrooms and how it can support children's literacy development.

### **The Pendulum Swing**

It is often said that educational practices swing back and forth from one extreme to another as various trends and priorities make their way through the field. These shifts are often driven by changing societal values, research findings, and political agendas. For example, in the

early 20th century, early childhood education focused primarily on socialization and behavior control. At the same time, in the 1960s and 1970s, the emphasis shifted to child-centered approaches that emphasized play and self-expression (Bredekamp, 2020). More recently, there has been a renewed focus on academic preparation and accountability, emphasizing standardized testing and measurable outcomes (Berson & Camicia, 2013; Heafner, 2018; Willis, 2007). This pendulum swing can create challenges as educators must navigate changing expectations. However, it presents opportunities for reflection and growth, letting educators draw on the strengths of past approaches while integrating new research and ideas into their practice. Ultimately, the goal of early childhood education is to provide children with a strong foundation for lifelong learning and success (Berson & Camicia, 2013; Bredekamp, 2020; Haslip & Gullo, 2018; National Association for Education of Young Children, 2022); and these shifts reflect ongoing efforts to achieve this goal.

### **Social Studies Instruction Trends in the United States**

Sometimes, these shifts produce unintended impacts and consequences. The time allocated for social studies (as well as science and the arts) instruction in American schools has been reduced dramatically over recent years (Berson & Camicia, 2013). This reduction in social studies content in early childhood classrooms can be attributed to several emerging trends since the 1950s. Changes to more rigorous college-and-career readiness curriculum standards, such as the Common Core State Standards, have played a role, with some states and districts placing less emphasis on social studies in their standards and expectations (Dilberti et al., 2023; Rivera-Calderon, 2018). Another trend is the increasing political polarization and controversy surrounding social studies topics, which has made some educators hesitant to teach specific topics for fear of backlash or controversy (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018; Salman, 2023; Walker, 2021).

Another recent trend of increased emphasis on standardized testing has led many schools to focus primarily on literacy and numeracy skills (Bredekamp, 2020). As a result, social studies content has been deprioritized, with less time and resources devoted to teaching it (Berson & Camicia, 2013; Heafner, 2018). Educators, parents, and policymakers have debated high-stakes testing in schools. Some argue that these tests provide valuable information about student performance and help identify areas where additional support is needed. In contrast, others are

concerned that they can place too much pressure on young children and narrow the curriculum (Yin-Nei et al., 2020). Research on the effectiveness of high-stakes testing in early childhood classrooms has produced mixed results. Some studies have found that these tests can lead to increased academic achievement (Phelps, 2019), while others have found no significant impact or adverse effects, such as decreased motivation, stressful environment in the classroom, and increased anxiety among young children and teachers (Goforth et al., 2013; Saeki et al., 2018). Overall, the debate on using high-stakes testing continues, with advocates and opponents presenting solid arguments on both sides. Unfortunately, these trends have reduced social studies content in early childhood classrooms despite their importance in supporting young children's development and understanding of the world. Additionally, growing evidence shows that this reduction in focus on social studies content to make more room for literacy instruction has the opposite impact than intended, as young children need to gain essential exposure to content that creates the background knowledge essential for skilled reading.

### **Reading Instruction Dominates**

Reading instruction now dominates in US schools, particularly in the early grades (Hong & Hong, 2021; Willis, 2007). This emphasis on reading instruction stems from the valid belief that strong reading skills are essential for academic success and that reading instruction should be the primary focus of early childhood education. As a result, many schools have strongly emphasized teaching phonics, decoding, and comprehension skills, often at the expense of other subject areas such as social studies, science, and the arts (Berson & Camicia, 2013; Heafner, 2018).

However, there is also growing recognition of the importance of a holistic approach to early education that contains a variety of subjects, including social studies, as a mechanism for providing equitable and inclusive experiences for young children. As mental health issues increase in schools and other settings, there is an increasing understanding of the importance of play-based learning and the value of creating a safe and nurturing learning environment that supports children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). While there is still much work to be done to create a more equitable and inclusive early education system in the United States, there are many promising developments that are helping shape a more comprehensive and child-centered approach to early education and providing

experiences with social studies content early on seems to be an essential component to be incorporated. Despite this, the dominance of reading instruction in US schools has significantly impacted the curriculum and instructional practices (Haslip & Gullo, 2018), and it will take a concerted effort to shift the focus towards a more holistic approach to education. In the meantime, some children not only come to schools with a deficit of background experiences and knowledge but also perpetuate this deficit by needing more quality experiences with social studies in the early grades.

### **The Knowledge Gap**

In her book "The Knowledge Gap," Natalie Wexler (2019) argues that there is a significant knowledge gap in American education, particularly in children in low-income schools, and that this gap can be attributed to a lack of focus on content knowledge in early childhood education. According to Wexler (2019), American schools have prioritized reading comprehension skills over content knowledge in the early grades, leading to a situation where students may be able to read texts but lack the background knowledge necessary to comprehend fully. This is particularly true for students in low-income schools, who may need more access to resources and experiences that can build their background knowledge. The general idea is that if we teach children how to read through grade three, this will translate into reading ability to learn in the upper grades. The problem with this idea is that it needs to pay more attention to the essential role of background and content knowledge in reading comprehension, which is a crucial reading goal.

The terms achievement gap, opportunity gap, and test-score gap are often used in discussions about disparities in academic performance among different groups of students. While these terms are related, they refer to different aspects of the issue. The achievement gap refers to the persistent disparity in academic performance between groups of students, such as racial and ethnic groups, low-income students, and students with disabilities. The opportunity gap refers to students' unequal access to high-quality educational resources and experiences, such as advanced coursework, effective teachers, and adequate facilities. The test-score gap refers to the differences in average scores on standardized tests between different groups of students. While these gaps are related, they are not interchangeable. The achievement gap is the outcome of the opportunity gap, which is reflected in the test-score gap. Understanding the differences between

these terms is essential in identifying and addressing the underlying factors contributing to disparities in students' educational outcomes.

Wexler (2019) argues that the impact of all these gaps can be characterized as the *knowledge gap*. According to Wexler, the knowledge gap is the disparity in content knowledge between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. She argues that this gap is mainly due to differences in the quantity and quality of children's language experiences in their homes. Children from low-income backgrounds may have less exposure to rich language and complex vocabulary, some citing a 30-million-word gap between less and more affluent children, which can cause a disadvantage upon school entry. Wexler (2019) emphasizes the importance of early intervention in addressing the knowledge gap, focusing on building children's content knowledge and vocabulary through meaningful, engaging learning experiences. She also highlights the need for teachers to be knowledgeable about their content and provide a content-rich curriculum early on so that children are offered accurate and relevant information that builds on their prior knowledge. Overall, Wexler's (2019) work underscores the critical role of early education in promoting equity and closing the knowledge gap for all children.

### **Importance of Social Studies in Early Childhood Classrooms**

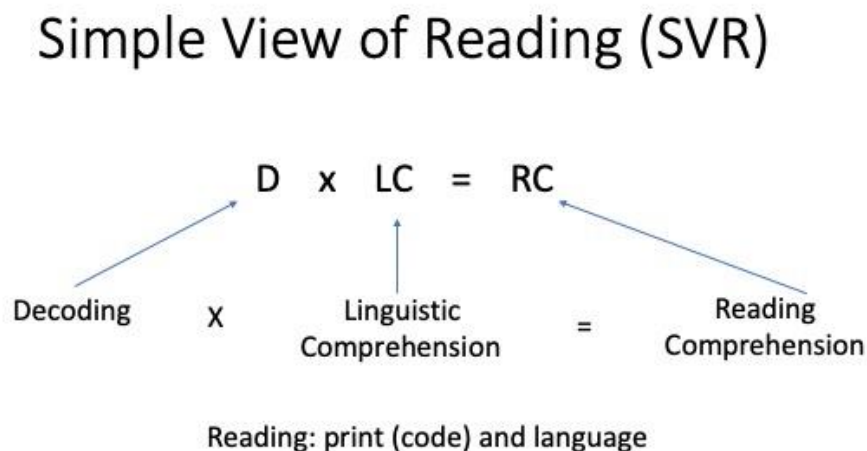
Social studies content can be critical in building students' background knowledge and supporting their cognitive and social-emotional development (Kemple, 2017; Usta & Kimzan, 2023; Usta & Şahin, 2022). Social studies can help young children understand the world, including the history and culture of their communities and the broader society. Through social studies content, students can learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens and develop an understanding of different cultures and perspectives. Additionally, social studies content can support the development of crucial skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication. By engaging with social studies content, students learn how to analyze and evaluate different sources of information, connect different ideas and events, and effectively communicate their ideas (Berson & Camicia, 2013; National Council for Social Studies [NCSS], 2019). While providing these incredible learning experiences, social studies can also contribute to better development of literacy skills as well.

### Simple View of Reading

Gough and Tunmer's Simple View of Reading (SVR) is a foundational framework for reading science (Figure 1). The framework proposes that reading comprehension is determined by word recognition and language comprehension (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018). This view supports literacy-infused social studies instruction in early childhood classrooms, emphasizing the importance of vocabulary development and content knowledge acquisition in reading comprehension, not just a focus on decoding skills.

#### Figure 1

*Simple View of Reading*



The SVR model emphasizes that it takes both word recognition (decoding skills) and language comprehension (understanding based on background knowledge) to produce skilled reading. Notice the multiplication sign at the center of the formula. This highlights that deficiency on either side of the equation significantly impacts the outcome of reading proficiency. When children lack robust background experiences and are denied content instruction early on, their reading ability is impaired. In early childhood classrooms, children are at the building of foundational language and literacy skills (Bredekamp, 2020). Teachers can use the simple view of reading to develop lessons that focus on building word recognition and



language comprehension skills. For example, teachers can teach young children to recognize high-frequency words and to activate prior knowledge to figure out unfamiliar words as they are decoded.

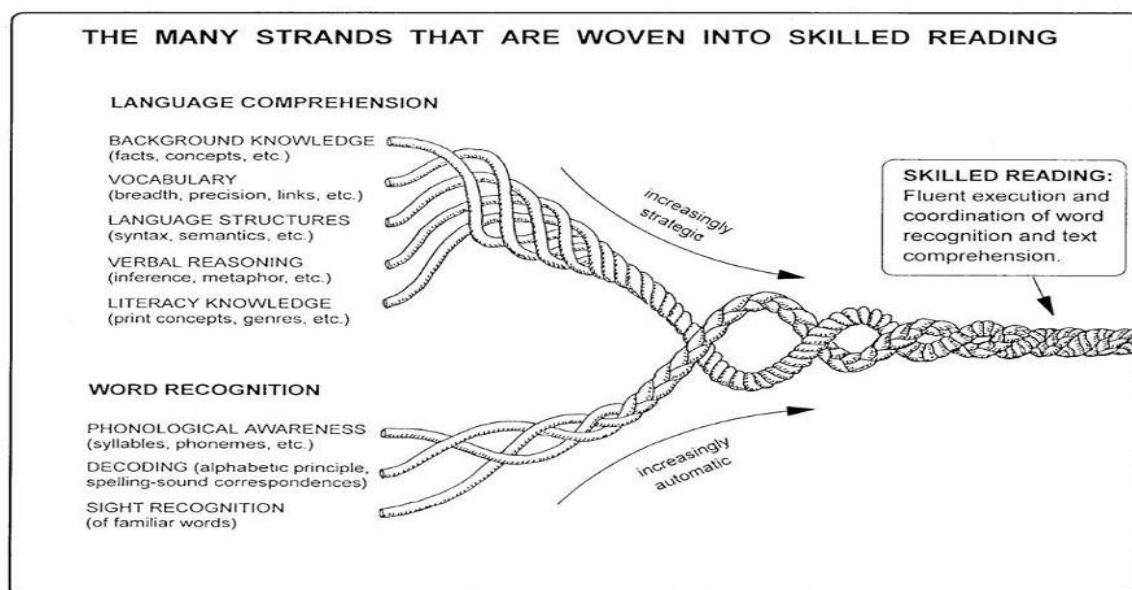
Additionally, teachers can use social studies topics and texts to build children's content knowledge and vocabulary. Strategies such as read-aloud, discussions, and hands-on activities can engage children in learning about history, geography, and culture while supporting their language and literacy development. Teachers can help young children build the foundational skills needed to become successful readers and learners by using the simple reading view to guide their instruction.

### Scarborough's Rope Model

Scarborough's Rope Model builds upon SVR (Figure 2) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex reading comprehension process. This model emphasizes that reading comprehension is influenced by multiple factors, including phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, syntax, and background knowledge (Dickinson, 2023). As the factors of language comprehension, such as background knowledge and vocabulary, become increasingly strategic and the factors of word recognition, such as phonological awareness and decoding, become increasingly automatic, skilled reading occurs.

#### Figure 2

*Scarborough's Rope Model*



The image, courtesy of the author, originally appeared in the following publication: Neuman, B. S. & Dickinson, D. K. (Eds). (2001). *Handbook for Research in Early Literacy*. Guilford Press.

This is a valuable framework for understanding the complex reading comprehension process and can be applied to literacy-infused social studies instruction in early childhood classrooms. Social studies instruction involves learning about history, geography, culture, and other topics that require students to comprehend complex texts. The Rope Model emphasizes the importance of various factors in reading comprehension, including phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, syntax, and background knowledge. In social studies instruction, teachers can use these components of the Rope Model to design lessons that support children's understanding of academic vocabulary and the development of content knowledge. Early childhood teachers can use the model to design social studies instruction that addresses these components of reading comprehension. For example, teachers can use phonological awareness activities to help young children develop an understanding of the sounds of language.

They can also teach decoding skills, such as letter-sound correspondence and blending, to help children read words accurately. Vocabulary instruction can be integrated with social studies content to build children's content knowledge and academic vocabulary. Syntax and grammar can be taught through modeling and guided practice, and background knowledge can be developed through hands-on experiences and discussions. Teachers can use read-aloud, discussions, and hands-on activities to engage children in learning about social studies topics and to build their comprehension skills. By using the Rope Model to inform their instruction, teachers can better understand the multiple skills young children need to become proficient readers and engaged learners in the context of social studies learning.

### **Developmentally Appropriate Content-Infused Literacy Learning**

Social studies content-infused literacy learning is an approach to teaching that integrates social studies content and literacy skills in a developmentally appropriate way for young children. This approach recognizes that young children learn best when actively engaged in the learning process and when learning is relevant to children's own lives (NCSS, 2016; NCSS, 2021). Furthermore, it is based on a deep understanding of child development and is designed to holistically support children's cognitive, social-emotional, and language development. By infusing social studies content into literacy learning, teachers can help students build background

knowledge and vocabulary and develop critical thinking and communication skills. Additionally, social studies content can provide a rich context for literacy learning (NCSS, 2017; NCSS, 2021), helping students see the connections between the text read and the community. This effectively supports young children's cognitive and social-emotional development while preparing them for future academic success.

Sometimes, teachers cover social studies content by occasionally including nonfiction texts. The problem with this approach is that content tends to be portrayed as disjointed rather than connected. For example, a preschool teacher may read a book on insects on Monday, a book on community helpers on Tuesday, and another on the first Thanksgiving. A better way to approach this is to select texts related to an overall big idea, theme, or project so that the various ideas presented are connected, and ideas build upon one another. This approach respects how the brain works by creating stronger neural connections for related ideas, particularly those the brain can connect to background experiences. It is essential to focus on teaching fundamental concepts and themes rather than just facts and figures (NCSS, 2013; NCSS, 2017). By emphasizing big ideas such as democracy, justice, and citizenship, teachers can help students develop a deeper understanding of social studies content and its relevance to their lives. The preschool teacher could then systematically select specific nonfiction books related to the topic and integrate this into the classroom activities using the big ideas as a framework.

Teachers can utilize various strategies to systematically provide literacy-infused social studies. One critical approach is incorporating hands-on experiences (NCSS, 2019), such as field trips, classroom simulations, and interactive projects, that allow students to engage tangibly with social studies content. Additionally, teachers can incorporate a variety of texts, including primary sources, historical fiction, and nonfiction, to build students' background knowledge and develop their literacy skills.

One example of a literacy-infused civics lesson connected by a theme for an early childhood classroom could be a lesson on community helpers. The lesson could start with a read-aloud of a children's book that introduces different community helpers, such as doctors, firefighters, and police officers. During the read-aloud, the teacher could pause to define new vocabulary words and ask comprehension questions to check for understanding. After the read-aloud, the class could discuss the different community helpers and their roles in the community.

The teacher could then introduce a hands-on activity, such as a pretend play center where children can dress up and role-play different community helpers. Ideally, the students would have an opportunity to either go on a field trip to meet real-life community helpers in their settings or have a classroom visit. The teacher could also provide children with writing and drawing materials and ask them to create books or posters about their favorite community helper. Throughout the lesson, the teacher could use language-rich and content-specific vocabulary to build children's knowledge of community helpers and support their literacy development. By integrating literacy and social studies content, this lesson provides children with engaging, meaningful learning experiences that build their knowledge and skills in both domains.

Another thematic example of a literacy-infused social studies lesson could be a lesson on holidays worldwide. The lesson could start with a read-aloud of a children's book that introduces different holidays celebrated in different countries, such as Christmas in the United States, Diwali in India, and Lunar New Year in China. During the read-aloud, the teacher could pause to define new vocabulary words and ask comprehension questions to check for understanding. After the read-aloud, the class could discuss the different holidays and how they are celebrated in different parts of the world. The teacher could then introduce a hands-on activity, such as a craft or cooking project, where children can create holiday decorations or foods from different cultures. The teacher could also provide children with writing and drawing materials and ask the students to create books or posters about their favorite holidays. Again, the teacher could use language-rich and content-specific vocabulary to build children's knowledge of holidays and support their literacy development. This lesson provides children with engaging, meaningful learning experiences that build their literacy and social studies knowledge and skills.

An example of a literacy-infused geography lesson connected by a project for an early childhood classroom could be a lesson on map skills. Again, a read-aloud of a children's book that introduces different types of maps and their purposes, such as road maps, treasure maps, and world maps, could start the lesson. During the read-aloud, the teacher could pause to define new vocabulary words and ask comprehension questions to check for understanding. After the read-aloud, the class could discuss the different types of maps and how they can be used. The teacher could then introduce a hands-on activity, such as a treasure hunt where children use a map to find hidden treasures around the classroom or school. The teacher could also provide children with

writing and drawing materials and provide the opportunity to create maps of their homes, schools, or neighborhoods. Language-rich and content-specific vocabulary would be used to build children's knowledge of maps while supporting their literacy development.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching social studies content in early childhood classrooms is critical to building students' background knowledge, supporting their overall development, and better supporting the development of skilled reading. By incorporating social studies content into their curriculum, teachers can help students understand their world, develop critical skills, and prepare for active and engaged citizenship. As Natalie Wexler (2019) argues in "The Knowledge Gap," content knowledge is essential to students' success in all areas of education, and social studies content is a vital part of that knowledge. Social studies content can help young people understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens and develop an appreciation for the diverse cultures and perspectives that make up our society while also developing essential literacy skills. By engaging with social studies content, students can develop critical thinking skills, learn how to evaluate sources of information, and understand how different social, economic, and political systems work. Educating young people to become knowledgeable and engaged citizens who are also literate is essential to creating a thriving democracy and a just society.

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