

Thinking Processes in the Social Studies Curriculum

Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS, 1997a)

National Standards for Social Studies Teachers (NCSS, 1997b)

Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Powerful social studies teaching and learning is:

- *Meaningful*
- *Integrative*
- *Values-Based*
- *Challenging*
- *Active*

Definition of Social Studies

Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is 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, 1992, p. 2)

Powerful Teaching and Learning

Learning is an intellectual and social process in which learners construct what they know by connecting new experiences with previous understanding. Therefore, the primary teaching tasks are (1) to provide challenging intellectual and social learning experiences, (2) to stimulate and guide learner thinking, and (3) to expect and support continuous and personally unique learning within the school community (NCSS, 1997b).

Powerful social studies teaching and learning is:

- *Meaningful*: Students develop connected networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that are useful both in and outside school; instruction focuses on teaching for understanding, appreciation, and life application; and classroom interaction focuses on sustained examination of a few important topics.
- *Integrative*: Subject matter is taught topically across disciplines; cuts across time and space; interconnects knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and attitudes to action; makes effective use of technology; and connects to other subjects.
- *Values-Based*: Students consider the ethical dimensions and social policy implications of controversial issues; think critically and make value-based judgments about social issues; develop well-reasoned positions consistent with basic democratic social and political values; and recognize opposing points of view and develop respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and commitment to social responsibility.

- *Challenging*: Students learn to be thoughtful in their inquiry; develop well-reasoned arguments; and accomplish instructional goals both as individuals and group members.
- *Active*: Students engage in reflective thinking and decision-making; develop new understanding through active construction of knowledge, develop important social understanding through interactive discourse; and become independent and self-regulated learners through authentic activities and real-life applications. (NCSS, 1997b)

The Ten Themes and Five Disciplines of the Social Studies Curriculum Standards

The social studies curriculum standards are organized both by five disciplines (history, geography, civics and government, economics, and psychology) and by ten subject matter themes. The ten multidisciplinary themes are: (1) culture; (2) time, continuity and change; (3) people, places and environments; (4) individual development and identity; (5) individuals, groups and institutions; (6) power, authority and governance; (7) production, distribution and consumption; (8) science, technology and society; (9) global connections; and (10) civic ideals and practices. (NCSS, 1997a)

Achieving Excellence in Social Studies

Achieving excellence in social studies learning involves three primary activities: (1) supporting the common good; (2) adopting common and multiple perspectives; and (3) applying knowledge, skills, and values to civic action.

Supporting the Common Good

The common good is supported when all citizens become aware that the meaning and purpose of education in a democratic republic is the intellectual and ethical development of "student-citizens," young people who will soon assume the role of citizen. Individuals must understand that their self-interest is dependent upon the well-being of others in the community. . . . Our moral imperative as educators is to see all children as precious and recognize that they will inherit a world of baffling complexity. Our responsibility is to respect and support the dignity of the individual, the health of the community, and the common good of all. This responsibility demands that we teach our students to recognize and respect the diversity that exists within the community. (NCSS, 1997a, Introduction)

Adopting Common and Multiple Perspectives

Each person experiences life in an individual way, responding to the world from a very personal perspective. People also share common perspectives as members of groups, communities, societies, and nations—that is, as part of a dynamic world community. A well-designed social studies curriculum will help each learner construct a blend of personal, academic, pluralist, and global views of the human condition.