Definition: social studies from Collins English Dictionary

1 (functioning as singular) the study of how people live and organize themselves in society, embracing geography, history, economics, and other subjects

Summary Article: Social Studies, Curriculum
From Encyclopedia of Giftedness, Creativity, and Talent

The primary goal of social studies curriculum is to equip students with the knowledge and skills to become active participants in society. Citizenship education is a common thread transcending different perspectives on social studies curriculum, though there has been long-standing disagreement on the definition of the phrase as it relates to curriculum and instruction. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act passed by Congress in 1992 called for the development of national standards in many areas of education but omitted social studies from its list. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), founded in 1921, and a group of educators responded by advocating for and eventually adding social studies to the agenda for the development of national standards. A task force of social studies curriculum and instruction experts assembled and developed the 1994 publication Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. The 10 main themes that serve as the basis for the national standards outlined in this publication are as follows:

- Culture
- Time, continuity, and change
- People, places, and environment
- Individual development and identity
- Individuals, groups, and institutions
- Power, authority, and governance
- Production, distribution, and consumption
- Science, technology, and society
- Global connections
- Civic ideals and practices

The development of national standards in the educational content areas has been viewed by many as a response to the 1983 publication A Nation at Risk. This publication drew attention to the mediocre status of curricula in the United States and indicated that the percentage of students taking general courses instead of college-track courses had increased dramatically from 1964 to 1979. Gifted learners in particular are affected by such nonrigorous curricula and are capable of learning more material, often
at accelerated rates than those of their peers. Even with national standards in place, social studies curriculum and instruction must be adapted and modified to meet the needs of these high-end learners. NCSS defines the academic purview of social studies as “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2008, p. 211). This broad context incorporates an array of subjects, stemming from the traditional topics of history, geography, and political systems to less prominent fields such as economics, philosophy, religion, psychology, and anthropology. Armed with such a vast body of material to explore and to process, the social studies curriculum offers the gifted learner a wealth of intellectual stimuli and fertile opportunities for research, evaluation, and application. In addition, the social studies curriculum carries the NCSS mandate to guide the development of young people by fostering their abilities to make informed decisions and to participate actively in culturally diverse societies. With this aim of building informed and proactive global citizens, the gifted learner is challenged by social studies to develop an enlightened mindset and to attain a collection of strategies and skills to achieve a high level of citizenship and real-life engagement in world affairs. This entry describes textbooks and other curricular resources along with curricular adaptations and modifications for gifted learners.

Textbooks and Other Curricular Resources
Despite the adoption of NCSS standards at the national level, the social studies curriculum of each school district is often primarily influenced by the content of current textbooks, which are not necessarily based on national standards. Analyses of social studies textbooks have demonstrated that each book’s content is subject to authors’ biases and often reflects the values of consumers rather than providing accurate, multicultural perspectives of events. In addition, the difficulty level of textbooks has steadily declined during the past few decades, a process referred to as “dumbing down” by former Secretary of Education Terrel Bell. Textbooks are designed to give broad content overviews, and some have been criticized for their biased viewpoints of events of historical and cultural significance. To provide in-depth, detailed accounts from multiple perspectives, social studies curriculum experts suggest the inclusion of additional resources and materials.

According to subject experts, a key component of any social studies curriculum is the investigation of primary source material. For the gifted learner, it is essential that ample opportunities be provided to explore, contemplate, interpret, debate, and respond to primary documents and other authentic objects and artifacts. The advanced learner can develop higher-order reasoning, abstract conceptualization, and an awareness of bias and alternate perspectives through the dissection and explanation of primary materials and their themes. Gifted learners, who are often capable of absorbing and processing content at a faster pace and more sophisticated level than are their peers, should be engaged with primary source materials as an effective way of addressing this pedagogical challenge. Working independently under the supervision of the teacher, the gifted learner can establish his or her own plan of research, pursue individual interests, generate written pieces and other forms of assessment, and develop essential social studies skills such as critical thinking, document analysis, and the synthesis of multiple sources and perspectives.

Curricular Adaptations and Modifications for Gifted Learners
Though research on effective implementation of social studies curricula with gifted learners is limited, the theories and recommended practices from gifted and talented educational researchers can often be applied across content areas. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) recognizes the

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special needs of gifted learners and has developed standards designed to help schools meet the needs of these students. In its standards, the NAGC calls for each content area to have well-defined national standards spanning prekindergarten through Grade 12. This goal is often neglected in social studies as districts sacrifice this subject in the early grades to provide additional time for the more heavily tested areas of mathematics and reading. Early school engagement with a vibrant social studies curriculum can meet the challenges of developing the intellectual curiosities and defining the academic capacities of the gifted learner. The wide variety of subject areas encompassed by the social studies curriculum provides teachers with an assortment of topics for evaluating and developing core skills while generating meaningful discovery activities. The practice of exposing students to multiple subject areas within social studies and basing activities and experiences on their strengths and interests is supported by gifted education theory, including Joseph S. Renzulli’s work on the enrichment triad model. The young gifted learner should be offered opportunities for self-directed exploration and the chance to pursue individual fields of interest. From the hands-on research and open-ended speculation offered by the areas of anthropology and archaeology, to the authentic interaction with primary source materials contained in the study of history, geography, politics, and economics, the social studies curriculum can expose the gifted learner to a wealth of intellectual stimulation and valuable skill development. Particularly within the gifted and talented student population, the young learner must be presented with opportunities to explore and to define his or her personal interests and to investigate material in an independent but supported manner. Natural curiosity, especially prominent in the gifted learner, should be fueled by a rigorous and diverse social studies curriculum.

The social studies curriculum provides the gifted learner with multiple opportunities for authentic research. Through engagement in inquiry activities, the gifted learner can pursue investigations into historical topics and contemporary issues on a self-directed and individually paced basis. During inquiry projects, the complexity of content and level of expectations can be monitored and adjusted by the teacher to accommodate different learning styles and abilities, an essential concern of gifted education. Although employing technology to access a variety of primary and secondary source materials, the gifted learner can achieve the key social studies goals, including student investigation of original documents, critical analysis of multiple sources, and consideration of bias, fact versus opinion, and alternate viewpoints. Finally, independent inquiry can enable the gifted learner to engage in higher-order reasoning, to tailor intellectual pursuits to personal interests and proclivities, and to consider historical themes balanced against modern interpretations and culturally diverse perspectives.

In addition to inquiry research, the social studies curriculum provides the gifted learner a variety of ways to explore historical topics and contemporary issues, to demonstrate the accumulation of knowledge and skills, and to explore real-world applications of content. The gifted learner should be given the chance to express knowledge of social studies materials in personalized formats and through cooperative learning experiences. For example, the gifted learner often interprets material in unusual and unpredictable fashion because of his or her advanced intellectual abilities. Suitable outlets for demonstrating knowledge should consider these individual differences. Instead of simply writing a generic letter to a congressperson, a standard approach employed in the average social studies classroom, alternate assessments such as drafting authentic legislation, creating a Web site to promote a social cause, or interviewing local politicians to produce an informational video can be employed. Gifted learners are often isolated because of their advanced abilities in misguided efforts to meet their special needs. This approach can alienate students and stigmatize both a gifted learner and his or her classmates. A stated purpose of social studies education is to build citizenship, so the gifted
learner should be given appropriate opportunities to build leadership skills and to work collaboratively with peers. Through presentations, multimedia productions, mock trials, debates, and other classroom activities, the gifted learner can develop strong citizenship and leadership abilities while learning to work effectively with peers.

Product differentiation and inquiry research are typical methods of differentiating social studies curricula for gifted learners, but may not be sufficient for students who have already mastered the content of a particular course or unit. Research on curriculum compacting done by the University of Connecticut's National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) found that as much as 50 percent of content can be eliminated for high-ability students in different content areas. The curriculum compacting process consists of identifying the subject area objectives and selecting a pretest that matches the stated objectives. Based on pretest results, the curriculum can be modified and compacted for students who have mastered some or all of the objectives. These students work independently on projects and assignments focused on the nonmastered objectives, and then pursue enrichment or acceleration activities on successful completion of the unit test. Of the five subject areas examined in the research study, social studies was compacted least frequently.

The PreK-12 social studies curriculum for the gifted learner demands challenge, customization, and effective teaching. With appropriate adaptations and modifications, it provides avenues to meet all of these goals. The diversity of content within the social studies orbit provides ample material for authentic research and numerous opportunities for real-world applications. Through inquiry and other social studies approaches, the gifted learner's academic pursuits can be tailored to his or her personal interests, intellectual levels, and particular learning styles. Differentiation strategies from gifted education curricular experts can be used to modify existing social studies curricula to meet the needs of advanced learners.

See also
Curriculum Models, Differentiation, Elementary School, Social Studies Curriculum, Individualized Instruction, Secondary School, Social Studies Curriculum, Service-Learning

Further Readings

Albany: State University of New York Press.


APA

Cole, Shelbi K.
Schreyer, Conan A.

Chicago

Harvard

MLA


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