Nurturing Young Social Studies Learners’ Notions of Democracy

When educators, families, and children come together in the classroom to share their diverse cultures, potential exists for learning concepts about democracy, citizenship, and social justice through an immersion experience of interacting together. By involving families and encouraging interaction among them, social studies teachers can organize opportunities to develop democratic learning environments. Such an environment can have a bearing on how children and their families experience a sense of community. Teachers who plan intentional interactions among families of diverse cultures where parents can learn from each other may modify parental child-rearing practices. The three basic parenting styles that can be associated with a young child’s social development are authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive types. It is through these parental exchanges that alternative parenting styles can be observed and possibly adopted. Early childhood social studies educators can support children and caretakers to envision a just and compassionate democracy.

Key Words: Child-rearing, Citizenship, Democracy, Early childhood social studies, Parenting, Social justice

Maxie Pate Kohler
Associate Professor, Educational Psychology and Research at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Service, research, & grant writing activities focus on working in the mental health field, post-secondary education, parenting, socialization, & literacy. She can be contacted at mkohler@uab.edu.

Lois McFadyen Christensen
Professor, Curriculum and Instruction at University of Alabama, Birmingham. An early childhood education and elementary education social studies specialist for undergraduate and graduate levels. For six years, she collaborated in a cross-disciplined course on Birmingham Civil Rights. Publications and presentations are often with in-service teachers pertaining to social studies --- social justice, Reggio Emilia inspired approaches, women’s issues, and qualitative methods.

Citation for this Article
Introduction

Children’s concepts of citizenship and democracy can be influenced by early home-rearing styles. Basic parenting styles associated with a young child’s social and attitudinal development, according to Diana Baumrind (1967; 1971; 1972) are the authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Cynthia Sunal (1991) conducted a review of substantive social studies research about young children’s experiences and contextual aspects and attitudes within the home environment. It was found that family members’ approaches to child rearing affected children’s development of early social studies skills, concepts, and generalizations. The review of research presented how young children constructed and developed notions about social education from their first teachers, their families at home, and how these differed among the familial styles of child rearing.

Child-Rearing Influences: Authoritarian, Authoritative, and Permissive Parents

Parenting styles are extraordinarily important in developing children’s attitudes regarding social interactions, moral development, and decision-making processes, as well as numerous other developmental aspects of growth. Because each child is born with a unique temperament, it creates a need for what Kathleen Berger (2008) calls an appropriate “goodness of fit.” “Goodness of fit” essentially is the degree of match between one’s temperament style and the parenting style used in a particular home. And, as noted in Mary Rothbart and John Bates (2006), cultural influences and inborn traits tend to have a direct influence on early behavior. So, the better the two match, the less conflict and the more opportunities the child will have to learn independence of behavior and thought.

Family members truly are one’s first teachers, and how they approach children relative to setting boundaries and limits impacts the ability to think and take risks. Risk-taking behavior is necessary and in virtually every aspect of life, so child-rearing style very much determines the way children will view the environment. If reared utilizing a restrictive parenting style (authoritarian), a child’s view of the world may become restrictive. If reared with more freedom than is age appropriate, the more difficult it can be for the child to frame thoughts, feelings, and actions (permissive). Conversely, if reared utilizing an age-appropriate, open, democratic parenting style (authoritative), a child’s view of the world tends to be more open and tolerant. When conceptualizing Baumrind’s (1967) child rearing styles on a continuum, the permissive and authoritarian styles would be on either end of the continuum. The authoritative style would be in the middle. In human development, generally, extremes in behavior, learning, or child rearing, are not as healthy for growth as the “happy medium,” which we see is the authoritative type. As children develop cognitively, having caregivers who offer age-appropriate amounts of freedom to think and make decisions facilitates confidence and competence. The type of environment which children come from greatly impacts a child’s view of the world. Over-controlling (authoritarian) child rearing styles that allow little freedom to develop independent thought are really no more appropriate for children than a style that provides too few boundaries (permissive). Based on the discussion above, one can make the assumption that parenting styles also can influence views of social justice and democracy.

When considering important aspects of how humans relate, young children’s environmental contexts impact their perceptions and attitudes. Other aspects, such as moral development, moral reasoning, perspective taking, and political socialization are early cognitive
impressions that also are shaped by the ways in which children are reared. These crucial aspects of relational styles with young children affect their beliefs about democracy, which in turn, informs how children internalize thoughts and attitudes regarding citizenship and democracy (Sunal, 1991; Walker, 2009).

Often young children who exhibit limited motivation and hold prejudices and negative racist attitudes and behaviors are associated with caregivers characterized by rigid parenting styles (Baumrind, 1977; Sunal, 1991). This authoritarian style tends to result in obedient but unhappy children (Berger, 2008). When child-rearing styles are authoritarian, often caretakers do not consider the child’s ability to exercise self-control in making decisions. In authoritarian child rearing environments, decisions are made for the child without amending rules or adapting for particular circumstances. Children often experience coercion without autonomy (Walker, 2009).

According to researchers, family interactions that offer children warm and supportive behaviors characterize authoritative child rearing styles (Baumrind, 1971; 1972; Walker, 2009). They interact with youngsters using verbal “give and take,” while they propose choices for behavior. Children reared in authoritative homes are able to self-direct their behavior and consider more issue-oriented attitudes. Families valuing authoritative measures help children develop self-will and disciplined consideration for others. Authoritative approaches affirm children’s interests and set standards for behavior. Opportunities are present for autonomous reasoning and consensus building. Achieving goals through decision-making processes, coupled with children’s interests, are valued. Baumrind (1971) followed authoritative families through their children’s adolescence and found they generally demonstrated self-control, pro-social, and cooperative behaviors.

Permissive child rearing styles include more lax, inconsistent, and avoidant behaviors (Baumrind, 1971; Walker, 2009). Commonly, permissive child rearing practices and environments are characterized by children having unlimited boundaries for behavior coupled with modest nurturing. According to Berger (2008), permissive parents feel less responsibility for shaping their children. With that being the case, these young children are left to their own devices at an early age to try to develop appropriate cultural values, attitudes, and behavior patterns.

**Democracy and Citizenship Connections**

As early social studies educators, it is our moral mission to meet all children where they are and value the knowledge they and their caregivers bring. It is also important for teachers to recognize the various styles of caregiving (Posner, 1992; Sunal, 1991, Walker, 2009).

If learning goals for the classroom are to build community through democracy and citizenship, then the educators’ role is to communicate honest interest and willingness to incorporate students’ reality into the curriculum. Social studies has to be meaningful, values-laden, active, hands- and minds-on (NCSS 1994, 2008. Consideration and reflection must be ever present regarding values, caregiving styles, and the ways in which educators establish management for democratic learning environments. With attention to these components, youngsters may be encouraged toward democratic citizenship. Early educators certainly can encompass the knowledge that children already possess and utilize it where appropriate. The development of skills, concepts, and generalizations for attitudes of acceptance can best be achieved in warm, safe environments where autonomy and decision-making processes are valued. Resources and materials are gathered to support this early childhood social studies curriculum. Young social studies learners will be enabled to
expands their development through a civic-minded, competent, transformational approach to citizenship.

**Early Childhood Social Studies Educational Implications**

How can early childhood social studies educators meet vastly differing child-rearing styles? How can they assist young children to develop full potential in thought, attitude, and action regarding interaction with peers and society? How can educators nurture social competence, moral development and reasoning, perspective taking, and political socialization to help shape early notions about citizenship and social justice in the classroom and beyond?

Caretakers of young children have cultural capital that can be brought into the classroom showing such cultural capital is valued in the classroom. Teachers who extend intentional respect and invitations to diverse classroom families become part of the school community (Moll, 1992).

Early childhood teachers can offer caretakers opportunities to speak in classrooms about life experiences. These contributions are important child development issues for family members to become part of the school community. Early educators can explain why family members’ contributions are crucial to the curriculum of the classroom in newsletters and various forms of home-school communication. Evening programs are another means by which teachers can tap into family knowledge while expanding family interactional skills. For example, at math night a family member comes to learn how to better assist the child with “number talks.” At the same time, he or she observes different styles of interaction. Teachers, too, have alternative approaches to “give and take” with the class which can be observed. In this social learning experience, therefore, there is a plethora of cross-pollination of caregiving styles to observe and from which family members may learn.

When young children see that their families, parents, and home lives are accepted and valued, they not only accept themselves more fully, but they also are better able to feel motivated and successful in school. When early educators and school personnel demonstrate a genuine interest in, and respect for, students, families, and caretakers, one’s self-esteem is promoted. This can be true especially for immigrant students where knowledge is essential from and about their homeland (Moll, 1992).

Maxine Greene (1988) emphasized that the purpose of education is to help children and teachers create meaning. As early childhood social studies educators, we want to assist children and their caretakers alike to envision a just and compassionate democracy. This is a place where young learners, and their family members, can make meaning and expand learning potential. Cognitive, social, and affective possibilities can be naturally and thoroughly accomplished. Alternative caregiving styles may be considered or adopted by family members who attend the events in the school, enabling cross pollination of caregiving styles.
In summary, caregiving styles shape how young children develop societal, social, and moral slices of their world. Early educators who provide involvement and interaction among families lay a foundation for experiences in developing democratic learning environments that can have further bearing on how children and their families envision community. As Maxine Greene (1978) encourages us, social studies teachers who intentionally plan learning opportunities are moral beings making moral choices.

Early social studies learners and families who interact together in the diverse richness of the cultural and linguistic democratic pluralism of today’s classrooms possess learning potential for citizenship and social justice (Posner, 1992; Sunal, 1991, Walker, 2009). Because family members choose to participate in classroom and school sponsored functions with young children through immersion experiences, teachers help families experience citizenship in the classroom, school, and community. Participants learn to appreciate and respect diversity in real circumstances. Cultural capital is honored (Sunal & Hass, 2008). There are no promises, but perhaps budding family interactions are keys to ensuring inclusive and expansive means of educative ends for familial attitudes and child-rearing styles. It is in the early childhood social studies classroom where social justice blossoms.

References


