Social Studies Research and Practice
www.socstrp.org

Social Studies Investigations for Young Citizens: Passports to Inquiry, Community, and Partnerships

Kathleen I. Harris
Seton Hill University

The world beyond the classroom may be introduced to young children through the social studies curriculum. This curriculum serves as a dynamic component of early childhood education by building young children’s understanding of their particular roles in the community. A critical child outcome promoting overall growth and school readiness is the development of citizenship and social skills. For a young child, social studies promotes citizenship opportunities to apply learning cognitively, socially, and emotionally by teaching concepts about society and partnerships with family, school, and community. The importance of social studies is to promote citizenship and democratic thinking. This paper addresses social studies investigations that emphasize holistic education and provide opportunities to learn through partnership education. Social studies investigations offer teachers authentic classroom explorations. Young children are invited to investigate, predict, document, and reflect on discoveries with peers to cultivate a sense of citizenship and community. Accompanying social studies investigations, the citizenship rubric is a formative way of assessing a child’s progress toward social studies standards, promoting partnership and holistic education in the classroom community, and documenting citizenship responsibilities.

**Key words:** social studies, young children, holistic education, citizenship, investigations, community

Twelve, four-year old children sat in a circle on a crisp early autumn morning ready to start a class meeting with their teacher. The teacher listened to the children sitting closest to her in order to hear their comments about a passport, a document permitting citizens to travel to countries freely as it passed from one child to another. Each child took a turn, looking at the contents of the passport and gently turning the pages. While the children investigated the passport, their teacher surveyed the environment to develop a sense of the community that surrounded her. In essence, she became a social scientist. As the children commented about the picture inside the passport and notes written on pages, the preschoolers also became young social scientists. The children were able to make firsthand observations and use the environment as a laboratory. Each child was given a voice to share observations. Their collaborative work in small groups in this way demonstrated that young children have much to add to the teaching and learning process.

**Social Studies and Young Children**

From birth, young children engage in social studies when they explore their world (Mindes, 2006). During each developmental stage, they are capable learners, both cognitively and socially (Gardner, 1993; Nutbrown, 2006). Children are curious about their environments, ask questions about it, and explore it, young children gradually learn more about their expanding communities and see themselves as active citizens. Children are citizens from their earliest years because they...
are able to express ideas and needs as well as contribute to decision-making that affects the world around them (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). As they ask questions, and explore, elaborate, interpret, and share their discoveries, they become social scientists, using inquiry skills to learn about the world around them (D’Addesio, Grob, Furman, Hayes, & David, 2005). My purpose here is to address the importance of social studies in the advancement of civic competence through social studies investigations and partnership education in early childhood education. The paper, additionally, introduces a citizenship rubric that may be used for assessing citizenship and social skills in early childhood settings. Although social studies may be one of the oldest areas of study as a content area in early childhood, it creates adventure and opportunities for community and adds a fresh, new layer of fabric to society and its youngest learners (Epstein, 2014).

Holistic Education and Social Studies for Young Children

Holistic education supports the development of the whole child. This is a perception originating in ancient time and includes intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual development (Miller, 2006). Children must be able to relate to one another openly and directly to develop a sense of caring (Miller, 2000). Engaging with a holistic approach to education includes the following goals: promoting experiential learning, creating connectedness through personal relationships, and paying close attention to children’s emotions, ideas, and questions (Miller, 2006). Holistic education accomplishes these goals through a dynamic, inquiry-based curriculum that provides for meaningful learning opportunities in at least seven intelligences and is based on communities of learning (Miller, 2006). Holistic education for young children can be incorporated into the social studies curriculum by creating opportunities for them to learn about and act out various community roles. Teachers may consider taking field trips or inviting visitors to the classroom to expand their awareness of people and roles in the community. Other occasions could be asking children to consider alternative ways to reach a goal as they experiment and use maps and timelines to investigate geography and history.

Recognizing holistic education cannot be reduced to a set of techniques is important for teachers. Holistic education rests in the hearts and minds of teachers and children (Miller, 2005). Professionals in the educational system should look beyond children’s educational needs and focus on affective, social, and emotional needs (Wane, Manyimo, & Ritskes, 2011). Early childhood teachers can do this by taking time to know the children’s strengths, dreams, passions, and understand their likes and dislikes. They should provide a space with opportunities for promoting citizenship and social skills, in which children feel comfortable sharing their lives with peers. This sharing can be done through activities such as picture book journaling and community conversations. Although some teachers understand the necessity of holistic education, the full spectrum of emotional, social, physical, and other aspects of the whole child is not always addressed in the public schools (Rechtschaffen, 2014). The social studies investigation is one strategy early childhood teachers can use to nurture citizenship and social skills. The investigation allows teachers to explore and connect with new journeys in holistic education. Both children and teachers engage in authentic and reflective exploration to cultivate citizenship, community, and balance.

The Moon Festival: A Passport Investigation

Social studies investigations can be teacher-initiated or child-initiated, and may serve as a road map supporting active, engaged, meaningful learning and intellectual development. Incorporating social studies investigations into classroom discussions and play encourages the development of citizenship competencies for young children. The investigations can give
children opportunities to participate in small groups, use multiple ways to investigate, question, and wonder; and make first-hand observations of using democratic processes, such as establishing rules, voting, and consensus. After viewing the teacher’s passport, talking about the places listed inside the passport, and pointing out the locations on the world globe, the children in the example given earlier, made their own passports taking digital pictures with cameras and putting together several small pieces of paper. Children worked together as a community, exploring interactions with peers and cooperating to achieve a group goal. The classroom passports took the class on new adventures in learning about geography and maps for an entire school year. During the investigations, children used their personal passports as invitations to take pretend trips around the world. Throughout the investigations, the children exercised habits of mind including wondering, predicting, and explaining.

The first passport investigation was teacher-initiated and took place in late September was a trip to China to celebrate one of most important holidays in the Chinese calendar - the Moon Festival - which commemorates a bountiful harvest. This investigation began as children, noticing the days growing shorter, observed the night sky near bedtime. Several children brought drawings of the moon to class and talked about the shape of the moon during meeting times. As the teacher listened attentively to the children’s discussions, she noticed several citizenship behaviors. They took turns, shared ideas, listened to one another’s comments. They wondered also whether moon celebrations could take place anywhere in the world. Taking the children’s lead and using tablet computers, the teacher and children found online sites with photos and applications containing facts about the Moon Festival in China. Gathered in a circle, children viewed videos and webcam sites of a Moon Festival celebration and read about, examined, and speculated about what a moon festival would be like for a classroom investigation. During this process, the children engaged in initial discussions about the topic. The teacher’s use of the tablet alongside hands-on early learning exploration stimulated interest for the whole class and expanded the children’s horizons. Tablets gave children multiple ways to explore, create, and problem solve. Use of the tablets was beneficial for the teacher to document children’s activities and experiences.

Several citizenship competencies developed in the classroom. Children collected information about the festival and recognized that class members had a variety of interests and information about the Moon Festival to share. In small groups, children found various methods and materials to create stories, pictures, and fantasy play related to the Chinese culture and Moon Festival. Through these activities, the children developed competencies in leadership roles by planning and learning to cooperate with peers. The children created a community of learners encouraged to use their full capacities in a setting that nurtured social development and supported personal and interpersonal growth as well as responsibility. Demonstrating how children’s interests connect with geography and history can motivate them to care about social studies (Calkins, 1997).

**Citizenship and Community: An Interactive Model**

How can an appreciation of others be nurtured and young children encouraged to advocate for social justice? The answer may be found in teaching respect for differences among people (Calkins, 1997). One of the primary purposes for social studies education is to prepare young children for the responsibilities of living in a democratic society (Bryant, 2006). Citizenship, the prerequisite for belonging to a group, has a significant impact on identity formation. Citizenship is also crucial for the well being of society determining social, political, and civil rights (Ben Arieh & Boyer, 2005). The development of citizenship and social skills
supports a sense of belonging to and responsibility for family, community, and the environment. As a result, children appreciate and respect themselves, their peers, culture, and the home–school community. Early childhood teachers can promote citizenship and social skills through the process of socializing and daily living in the classroom. Careful planning and reflection upon curriculum content may also develop a knowledge base for citizenship. Teachers can encourage citizenship dispositions through activities that emphasize real-life experiences that require executive function skills (i.e., goal setting, increased attention span, and persistence), promote multicultural concepts throughout the curriculum, and encourage democratic behaviors by teaching conflict resolution techniques. Constructivist early childhood teachers can promote a community of informed and engaged citizens in which young children learn and care about one another and are truly concerned about issues of citizenship, fairness, and justice. Because a supportive, caring learning community is critical for all young children, they should be stimulated in their work through the life of the community (Dewey, 1929). Communities are built over time, through shared experiences, and by providing multiple opportunities for children to know themselves, know one another, and interact in positive and supportive ways (Sapon-Shevin, 1995). Believing in a democratic, inclusive, collaborative environment stems from mind and heart, the place where Parker J. Palmer (1998) said intellect, emotion, and spirit converge.

Creating for all young children a learning community that promotes citizenship dispositions with critical thinking, meaningful collaboration, and service with peers can be accomplished by integrating partnership education into the social studies curriculum.

**Partnership Education: Guiding and Supporting**

Partnership education finds its roots in early childhood theorists and leaders, such as Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1781), Maria Montessori (1912), John Dewey (1916), Paulo Freire (1970). It includes many of the contributions of contemporary progressive education, including holistic education. Partnership education addresses three goals for young children: (a) guiding them to develop into healthy, kind, caring, and competent citizens, (b) supporting them with the knowledge and skills in the areas of environmental, economic, and social issues, and (c) creating meaningful opportunities for them to be successful and develop to their full potential as future citizens. Early childhood teachers may successfully accomplish these goals by ensuring young children feel good about themselves, feel positive about the differences they see in other children, and are secure in their own sense of place in their early years’ communities (Nutbrown & Clough, 2013). With increased concern about accountability, young children should be critical and creative thinkers, able to work on teams collaboratively in organizations with diverse memberships (Helm & Katz, 2011).

Partnership education consists of three core-interconnected components: partnership process, partnership structure, and partnership content (Eisler, 2000). The partnership process entails how we learn and teach; including incorporating children’s interests into social studies investigations. An interest in social studies may grow from a passion or interest or through dramatic play. Each may be the thread that connects children to an engagement with geography and history (Calkins, 1997). Giving children opportunities to try their ideas for problem solving contributes to their learning and promotes ownership of tasks. The process of partnership education also includes children and teachers working together in meaningful exploration and learning. During social studies investigations, teachers facilitate, mentor, and coach young children to construct their own understanding of social studies instead of lecturing during the entire investigation. Teachers invite children to try new ideas, to imagine unique possibilities, and to make their own decisions; learning is very hands-on. They show a deep respect for
children’s ideas and hold a very strong belief that all children are confident and resourceful social scientists. Teachers support awareness so that children can feel comfortable with social studies by teaching them to develop the skills for citizenship and the attitudes necessary to be lifelong learners who care about social studies.

Partnership structure involves where learning and teaching will take place, in other words, the type of nurturing classroom environment that encourages citizenship social skills and democratic values. In this type of organized learning environment, young children participate in decision-making and rule making. The children should feel as though they have a voice and that their ideas are valued and considered by peers. The physical arrangement includes learning centers and furniture that is age appropriate and of universal design for all types of learners. Materials for social studies investigations are open-ended such that children use them in ways that make sense to them. Children can share thoughts, dreams, and reflections with peers in small groups during social science investigations through multiple means of engagement. Teaching and learning are interactive processes; in addition, the walls of the classroom echo with the voices of children through authentic artwork and class creations. Real-world artifacts along with samples of writing are posted as living documents of social studies investigations. Bulletin boards with handwritten journals and drawings display the history of the investigations along with family photos and traditions. The stimulating and validating classroom environment is inviting to all young children, who can explore social studies and understand that people everywhere, no matter what culture, build worlds for themselves. Thus, the children gain an understanding that their own classroom is a world made just for them.

Finally, partnership content is what is taught and learned; in other words, it is the social studies curriculum. Does the curriculum present social studies in holistic, relevant ways? Are children taught to be kind and caring and to build strong citizenship social skills? Does the curriculum promote a democratic understanding of individual differences? Teachers should notice and support children when they work and play with others who are different from themselves. Children should be invited to become part of the assessment process through involvement with self-reflection, portfolios, parent conferences, and classroom meetings. Children can suggest themes for social studies investigations and identify open-ended materials they need to further their investigations. The social studies curriculum should address the social studies competencies, include performance-based assessments, and emphasize intrinsic motivation. The main teaching objectives for promoting a social studies curriculum with an emphasis on citizenship should encourage children to communicate ideas, collaborate with peers, and solve problems as a classroom community.

**Citizenship Rubric: Connection to Social Studies Standards**

A growing body of research has indicated that having citizenship and social skills is necessary for promoting children’s development and subsequent school readiness (Nutbrown & Clough, 2013). Citizenship and social behaviors focus on skills related directly to interpersonal interactions, are established in principles related to social interactions, including the initiation and response interchange required for engagement with others (Howes, Droege, & Phillipsen, 1992). These skills have the potential to increase higher levels of peer acceptance, creating opportunities to form new friendships and taking responsibility to contribute as a member of society (Ben-Arieh & Boyer, 2005). Because young children are the future of society, promoting citizenship and social skills is crucial. A respect for and engagement with other people and their lives, together with a willingness to live according to one’s principles are the true foundation of social studies education (Calkins, 1997). How children are taught and how they are instructed to
interact with peers dictate in part the culture and society. To address this, early childhood teachers need an assessment tool to assess, support, and promote children’s progress toward citizenship.

The citizenship rubric is an assessment tool I developed after a thorough review of 37 US states’ early learning social studies standards. The standards include a variety of citizenship and social skill indicators (e.g., helping peers, cooperating with peers, participating with peers at play, taking turns with peers, making age-appropriate play choices, respecting rules at school, and following directions) (Gronlund, 2006). The citizenship rubric is a formative means of assessing a child’s progress toward the aforementioned social studies standards. This rubric was designed for teacher documentation, using three different tiers for determining whether a child has met a particular social skill indicator, is making progress, or is at the beginning steps. The citizenship rubric is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Rubric for Assessing and Documenting Citizenship Social Skills for Preschool Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beginning Steps</th>
<th>Making Progress Toward Meeting Standard</th>
<th>Meeting the Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toward Meeting Standard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Takes steps to take turns. Some impulsive, selfish behavior is still evident (e.g., will allow a peer to take a turn only if a teacher asks the child to wait his or her turn).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Helps peers (e.g., attempts to assist a peer with building a fire station during block play)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Demonstrates awareness of group rules; recognizes the reason for rules (e.g., waits before painting because the easels are all in use)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Demonstrates an understanding of specific rules in the classroom (e.g., picking up toys during clean up)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Interacts with peers as play partners (e.g., smiles and greets a peer at the sandbox)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. More often takes turns with peers without being asked during play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. More often helps peers without being asked during classroom routines and play time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Follows classroom rules, shows concern for other children (e.g., without being asked, will wait quietly for his or her turn)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Assists peer who needs help (e.g., says to a peer, “I’ll help you with the puzzle.”)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Participates often in both small- and large-group activities (e.g., remains with two peers, paints a picture, and gives it to a teacher to dry during free play; asks questions and interacts with entire class during a game of I Spy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Develops increasing abilities to give and take turns with peers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Makes suggestions for problem solving in the classroom community (e.g., shares watercolor paints and paints with peer when only one easel is available in the classroom)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Follows routines with little supervision (e.g., cleans up after snack time without being told; checks picture schedule upon arrival to school without being reminded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Helps peers often through the day and at play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Participates in creating and following classroom rules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Shows concern for peers (e.g., gets off swing and lets peer get on)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Almost always takes turns with peers when required</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Helps peers often throughout the day and at play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Participates in creating and following classroom rules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Shows concern for peers (e.g., gets off swing and lets peer get on)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Makes suggestions for problem solving in the classroom community (e.g., shares watercolor paints and paints with peer when only one easel is available in the classroom)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Follows routines with little supervision (e.g., cleans up after snack time without being told; checks picture schedule upon arrival to school without being reminded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Almost always takes turns with peers when required</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Helps peers often throughout the day and at play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Participates in creating and following classroom rules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Shows concern for peers (e.g., gets off swing and lets peer get on)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. Makes suggestions for problem solving in the classroom community (e.g., shares watercolor paints and paints with peer when only one easel is available in the classroom)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Follows routines with little supervision (e.g., cleans up after snack time without being told; checks picture schedule upon arrival to school without being reminded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 38. Often plays games with
6. Demonstrates a sense of belonging to a classroom community; contributes to the care of materials, pets in the classroom (e.g., feeding a class pet; watering a plant in the classroom)
7. Cooperates with other peers in small group activities (e.g., during playtime a child reaches for a chunk of play dough to share with a peer)
8. Aware of the importance of following simple directions in the classroom (e.g., listens quietly to the teacher who gives directions about playground safety)
9. Plays alongside peers; shows interest in others by playing beside or briefly with one or more children (e.g., plays next to a peer at the water table; draws a picture across from a peer during free play)
10. Responds to and initiates interaction with others through gestures, vocalizations, or body contact (e.g., offers toys, thumbs-up, signs, or high-five to a peer).
11. Understands different places have different rules (e.g., knows that “outside voices’ are not for the classroom)
12. Takes in interactions (e.g., during dramatic play, sets a table for stuffed animals and puts all the red dishes on the table requested by another peer)
21. Plays cooperatively with peers; expresses interest to others (e.g., during restaurant play, a child takes crayon and paper and asks a peer, “Do you want a hot dog or a hamburger?”)
22. Plays cooperatively with peers (e.g., two peers mixing play dough together to make animals; two peers painting together and mixing colors to create a rainbow)
23. Demonstrates strategies to join play with adult’s support (e.g., builds with blocks with peers after the teacher sensitively enters into the activity)
24. Participates actively as a member of the class (e.g., helps to put toys away during clean up time; passes out napkins and cups to each child during snack time)
25. Attempts to solve problems with other peers independently, by negotiation, or other socially acceptable means (e.g., during block play tells a peer, “I need more blocks; rules in a cooperative way with one or more peers and reminds others of the rules (e.g., during a game, each peer is given a turn and follows the rules as a group)
39. Demonstrates leadership skills in organizing play with peers or cooperating with peers (e.g., leads peers in pretend play; tells peers to wash their hands before snack time)
40. Willing to follow peers and negotiate roles and rules during play (e.g., only four children at the sand table; when playing a board game, suggests to peers to roll a pair of dice to see who will go first, second, third, etc.)
41. Assumes some responsibility for contributing to a classroom community (e.g. during circle time, participates by singing songs, and listens to a peer count the days of the week and do Weather Bear)
42. Demonstrates awareness of the outcomes of one’s own choices (e.g., picking up toys creates a safe environment)
43. Participates in voting as a way of making choices (e.g., may raise
12. Makes simple choices when playing with peers and adults (e.g., during free play, makes a choice between two activities)

13. Shows empathy toward peers (e.g., tells a teacher if a peer is crying)

14. Uses courteous words and actions with peers and adults (e.g., during snack time when given a drink and the teacher says, “What do we say?” Child responds, “Thank you.”)

15. Uses compromise and conflict resolution skills in resolving conflicts with peers. (e.g., takes turns during block play and says, “I’ll play with the cars, and you play with the blocks.”)

16. Play games with simple rules (e.g., musical chairs or red light, green light)

17. Recognizes that different places require different rules (school rules are different than home rules) and follows rules with assistance from teacher

18. Shows awareness of what it means to be a leader; shows increasing ability to use compromise and discussion in play and conflict resolution with peers (e.g., during dramatic play, tells peers, “Let’s make soup together, okay? We’ll need to put in alphabet letters for our soup. You get the letters, and I’ll get the pot.”)

19. Demonstrates ability to create rules in play (e.g., everyone gets one turn in the circle)

20. Demonstrates some understanding of respecting peers and individuality (e.g., is careful when passing a toy that belongs to a peer during show-and-tell)

21. Frequently uses courteous words and actions to peers and adults (e.g., during snack time when given a drink, responds by saying “Thank you”)

22. Hands to choose which snack to have at snack time: apples or popcorn)

23. Uses compromise and conflict resolution skills in resolving conflicts with peers. (e.g., takes turns during block play and says, “I’ll play with the cars, and you play with the blocks.”)

24. Shows respect for peers, their uniqueness, and individuality (e.g., opens a door with a teacher so peer who uses a wheelchair can enter the classroom)

25. Demonstrates empathy for the feelings of peers (e.g., says, “I’m sorry” to a peer if he or she grabbed a toy from the peer)

26. Often uses courteous words and actions with peers and teachers when leaving school).
Conclusion

During the early years, learners experience the social studies as they meet new friends at the playground, greet neighbors at the community library, and play board games at home with family members. Social studies education for young children is about the growing and learning child becoming a citizen. What does citizenship mean to young children? Early childhood teachers must endeavor to do the very best job they can to infuse partnership education into social studies curriculum with social studies investigations. Promoting citizenship and social skills in the social studies curriculum should illuminate the hearts and minds of young children, so as future citizens they will do their best, be honest, serve, keep promises, try new things, use good manners, count their blessings, and dream big.

References


13‒18.

**Author Bio**

**Kathleen I. Harris** is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. She teaches undergraduate and graduate classes and works with teachers at the Child Development Center. Her research interests include: peer-mediated interventions regarding citizenship and the social development of young children and children’s spirituality. Email: [kharris@setonhill.edu](mailto:kharris@setonhill.edu)