

Cognitive Power Through the Social Studies: Upper Grades

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FOR a long time social studies in the upper grades were descriptive in nature. Whether the course was about the local state or a foreign country, the children were mostly memorizing the names of rivers, mountains, and cities, or they were making lists of imports and exports. Soon after they had passed an examination, youngsters in most cases were forgetting everything. If there was anything left in their minds, it was usually a bitter taste for social studies as a school subject.

With the spread of the conceptualization approach during the past ten years from the fields of science and mathematics into the social studies, the emphasis has been placed on the development of concepts and generalizations. A shift was effected from studying isolated facts to studying facts, events, and phenomena that could be clustered together in order to be simply labeled or used to explain various happenings and trends. No one would doubt that this new direction raised many hopes for a sound social studies program, but what has happened thus far should not be perceived as adequate in terms of developing the student's cognitive power to the extent possible or needed.

An illustration will probably make this point clear. Can anyone think of a bank that limits its function to collecting money, to classifying it into denominations, and to labeling each denomination? Of course not. In order for a bank to grow, or even exist,

it must invest the money which it collects. The better the investment decisions are, the faster and stronger the bank will grow. Needless to say, decisions made by bankers are usually good when they are supported by relevant knowledge and by a capability to analyze and project on the basis of present economic trends.

Beyond Generalizations

The above analogy can apply to human beings as well. The main emphasis of this article is that the cognitive power of the individual grows faster and stronger when the individual goes beyond the development and accumulation of concepts and generalizations into their actual use through the application of a sound decision-making process.

The overemphasis on concepts and generalizations during the past decade was probably due to the rather strong influence that social scientists have had on the curriculum, but there is a difference between the orientation of a social scientist and that of an average citizen. The task of the social scientist is to analyze data and discover basic principles. The average citizen is primarily concerned with how to use this knowledge to

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resolve the dilemmas which he faces in his dealings with his social environment. As Shirley Engle pointed out,

In marked contrast to the meticulous research orientation of the social sciences, the social studies are centrally concerned with the education of citizens. The mark of a good citizen is the quality of decisions which he reaches on public and private matters of social concern.¹

The Teacher and Decision Making

The power to make intelligent decisions is a very important commodity in our society today. The social crisis that prevails all around us can no longer tolerate citizens who decide and act solely on the basis of narrow interests and without careful consideration of the consequences of their decisions as far as their relationship to the dignity of other men and the general welfare is concerned. Our society needs active citizens whose actions must be controlled by a steady capability to make wise decisions. How can teachers in the upper grades, or any grades, help develop this capability through social studies?

The most important step is for the teacher to understand the decision-making process. One source describes this process in six phases as follows:

1. Identification of the problem
2. Obtaining necessary information
3. Production of possible solutions
4. Evaluation of such solutions
5. Selection of a strategy for performance
6. Actual performance of an action or actions, and subsequent learning and revision.²

In essence, decision making is the inquiry method or the problem-solving approach, taken a step beyond simply arriving at conclusions about the status of phenomena or situations. Decision making is more dynamic in nature than problem solving or

¹ Shirley H. Engle. "Decision Making: The Heart of Social Studies Instruction." *Social Education* 24 (7): 301; November 1960.

² Orville G. Brim et al. *Personality and Decision Processes*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1962. p. 49.

inquiry in that it requires action as a result of and following each instance of systematic intellectualization.

One of the most fundamental aspects of decision making is that it involves, besides knowledge, the affective domain of the individual—what are commonly referred to as feelings, values, attitudes, and beliefs. Human beings usually establish an equilibrium between their knowledge, their beliefs, and their behavior; any decision for action tends to preserve and be influenced by this equilibrium. A segregationist clergyman, for example, most likely knows the Bible just as well as any other clergyman, but he uses his knowledge to justify his segregationist beliefs and behavior.

Decision making, then, requires that the teacher and the school be concerned about the affective domain of the child just as much as they have been and continue to be concerned about increasing his knowledge, whether it is in terms of factual information or in terms of generalizations and concepts. If the school is to emphasize intelligent choice and decisions, no longer can attitudes and beliefs continue to be considered private matters that should remain outside the classroom. This appears to be inconceivable when sociologists remind us that "Values and norms are the main sources of energy to individuals and society."³

Curriculum for Decisions

Turning to more practical matters, it should be emphasized that the social studies program should be structured in a way that would allow opportunities for exercise in decision making. Social studies should comprise an active program, one that would require involvement. Whether one deals with the local state, the region, the nation, or the world, the field of social studies is probably more open-ended than any other school subject. An effort should be made to keep it open-ended. One way to do this would be

³ Lawrence Senesh. "Organizing Curriculum Around Social Science Concepts." In: John J. Gibson. *New Frontiers in the Social Studies: Action and Analysis*. New York: Citation Press, 1967. p. 82.

to select topics that tend to bring out the major issues of our time. A traditional textbook approach to the study of the United States in the fifth grade, for instance, should be strengthened by more relevant topics such as the following:

1. The changing nature of family in the United States
2. The rise of the city, and resulting urban and suburban problems
3. Changing interpretations of Civil Rights and the growing responsibility of the federal government in their enforcement
4. United States and the world
5. Environmental pollution
6. The role of labor, management, and government in determining labor-management-consumer relations.

The topics listed and others like them have the potential of raising in the students' minds some very personal questions that will stimulate involvement. Some of these questions could be: Why can I not swim in the lake? Is there anything that can be done about it? What can I do? Is it right for my grandparents to live in a small apartment by themselves? Why can they not live with us? Should I talk to my dad about it? What should be done about poverty in the United States? What can we do to eliminate this problem from our own community? Questions of this type help to bring into the open the children's own values, and eventually their consideration usually leads to action.

Whatever decisions for action the children make, the teacher should be sure they are made after careful consideration of all possible alternatives. The merits of each alternative should be examined and debated in terms of its consequences.

Helpful New Teaching Strategies

Teaching strategies also changed along with the curriculum. Emphasis on decision making generated some rather stimulating teaching techniques. Role playing, games, and simulation are among these techniques. Children in a particular community, for example, were studying the local problem of bussing children from one neighborhood school to another. This was initiated to bring about integration, but some felt it was not as successful as originally expected. The school board had to decide whether or not to continue bussing children to different neighborhoods. While the community was waiting for the board's decision, the children were asked to play the role of the school board, and reach a decision on this problem by considering all points of view and by following exactly the same procedure that would be used by the board. In this way, the children not only learned the facts and became aware of reality, but they projected their feelings as well, and they were able to clarify them in view of the facts.

Ours are very difficult times. The society in which we live has many problems. Consequently, it needs not just knowledgeable citizens, but socially concerned and active knowledgeable citizens who would have the power to make the appropriate decisions at the appropriate times. To develop this special cognitive power in citizens, work must start early in their education. One of the most serious problems teachers in the upper grades have in their effort to develop in children the decision-making process is the fact that it is not emphasized enough in the lower grades. Unfortunately, there are too many people who still feel that the three R's should dominate the program. □



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