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## Social Studies in the Elementary Classroom: Helping Students Make Sense of Their World

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## **Social Studies in the Elementary Classroom: Helping Students Make Sense of Their World**

### **Abstract**

*This paper documents my journey as a preservice teacher engaging in practitioner inquiry to make social studies more meaningful for my first grade students. I begin by briefly introducing my background with social studies as an elementary student and my growing interest in making improvements to my own social studies instruction. Next, I provide information on the data I collected and the social studies lessons that I designed and taught. Then, I discuss three themes identified from the data that encapsulate the most important learning related to planning and engaging students in meaningful social studies lessons. Finally, I share reflections on next steps for the future and new ideas for my instruction.*

*Editor's Note: The first author in this article conducted this inquiry during her final semester in an undergraduate teacher education program. The second author of this article, served as her course instructor and mentor in the writing of this paper and was her supervisor during the time of the inquiry.*

### **Background**

During the holidays, my grandma always asked the infamous annual Thanksgiving questions “What is your favorite subject, Lauren?” and “What is your least favorite subject, Lauren?” I always knew these questions were coming and I had all year to prepare for them. Despite changing my answer every year for the first question, I knew I could always answer the second one without any hesitation at all: social studies. For me, this subject consisted of memorizing dates, wars, and names of dead people I could never relate to. Social studies learning was garnered through completing worksheets, watching movies of times past and writing down dates that I never remembered. By contrast, as I entered my senior year at the University of South Florida and attended my weekly class on social studies methods, I began to see social studies in a whole new light. I realized that social studies is far more than memorizing facts, but rather social studies is becoming informed and aware of the world around us. Simultaneously, it seemed that across my experiences as a preservice teacher that social studies is the subject that suffers from a lack of creative planning (often relying on worksheets), less time allotted on a teacher’s daily schedule and is pushed aside as reading and math take priority. Sadly, while my passion for social studies was increasing, it also seemed that this subject was decreasing in importance and quickly becoming extinct in the classroom.

As I have grown as an educator, I have discovered that social studies is as essential in the elementary classroom as the turkey is on the table every year. In fact, I believe it is more like the table that lies beneath the Thanksgiving feast. The table is strong and sturdy as it holds everything together and keeps the mashed potatoes, stuffing, and biscuits in place. Without the table, there would be no place to come together to talk and enjoy the feast. Just like the table, social studies unites us and is the base of everything we encounter. It represents the vast and diverse cultures that surround us every day. It is the foundation on which history is made and kept alive. It is all of this and more. Without social studies, there would be no “place” for us to come together to enjoy the “feast” of the many unique and complex things this world has to offer. Therefore, my purpose is to establish my internship classroom as a “place” for myself and my 20 first- grade students to eagerly explore and learn as we engage in this “feast” together.

### **Wondering**

With this purpose my wondering was “How can I incorporate social studies instruction on a regular basis while having my students engage in meaningful discussions and activities to help them make sense of their world?”

### **Methods**

To begin the journey of better understanding what my inquiry will encompass and answering my wondering, I took numerous, well-thought out actions. First, I gathered formative data by consulting the literature, fellow education professionals, my collaborating teacher (CT) and the students in my first grade classroom. Next, I created a plan for ongoing data collection, during three social studies units focused on big ideas such as diversity, civic and political participation, and understanding the meaning of social studies. Finally, I revisited my wondering, and engaged in summative data collection and analysis.

**Formative Data Collection.** The first step for me was to gain insight on fellow educators’ perspectives on social studies. According to literature I have collected to better understand my inquiry:

Teachers feel uncomfortable with content and skills that were inadequately addressed in their schooling or perhaps never developed any interest in the subject. Some elementary teachers, as they contemplate teaching social studies, become fearful that their lack of knowledge will be exposed (Passe, 2006, p. 190).

Thus, I wanted to know fellow educators experiences as a K-12 student with social studies and their experiences as teaching professionals, whether they

are pre-service teachers, current teachers, or hybrid educators. During an elementary education event in which I was able to share my inquiry plan, I asked attendees questions such as, (1) Did you like social studies when you were growing up, (2) Have you taught social studies?, (3) Do you feel comfortable teaching social studies? What I noticed across the responses was the unspoken rule that while social studies is important; it is acceptable in today's classroom to overlook its importance in favor of math and reading. In addition, many of my fellow educators expressed feelings of inadequacy related to their social studies knowledge and thus felt uncomfortable with teaching this subject in the classroom. For me, hearing their views was important because it revealed the vicious cycle that educators are stuck in in relation to this subject.

I also interviewed my collaborating teacher about her perspectives on social studies. My collaborating teacher, Ashley Fitzgerald (pseudonym), is a graduate from the University of South Florida who is in her fourth year of teaching. During this interview, we discussed ways in which she would support me as a preservice teacher, and different resources I could use to better prepare for my social studies lessons. She shared that she enjoyed learning about social studies when she was a student, but did not have the strongest social studies background when it came to teaching the subject. She agreed that the instructional time scheduled for social studies was more the exception than the rule as the needs of other subjects and school events often consume the allotted time. Therefore, she believed this inquiry would strengthen our relationship by learning more about social studies instruction together. This interview helped me because I knew I had a strong support system within the classroom.

Unquestionably, the literature I had read and the interview responses resonated with my own experiences with social studies as a student and the way I felt about the subject when trying to teach it as a pre-service educator. It was interesting to hear from others who also felt their knowledge of social studies content was inadequate, lamented the lack of time spent on social studies instruction, and to learn from those whose experiences led to greater comfort in teaching the subject.

Once I acquired these stakeholders' perspectives, it was time for me to hear from one of the most important stakeholders in the teaching profession: the students. To do this, I gave my students an interest survey that asked two questions. The first question asked was "What is social studies?" For this question, I explained that they needed to tell me what they thought it was about and what they think they should be learning during social studies. The second question asked was "How does learning social studies make you feel?" This

question was followed by a scale of faces for the students to choose from. I explained that the first face, a smiley face, meant that they really enjoy social studies and liked to learn about it. I further explained that the second face, a neutral face, meant that they thought social studies was okay, but they enjoyed learning about other things more. Finally, the last face, a sad face, meant that they did not enjoy social studies at all and learning about it was not fun for them.

Throughout the whole administration of the interest survey, I constantly stressed how important it was to be truthful because this was going to help me to help them become better learners. The learning that resulted from these surveys will be shared in the findings of the paper.

**Diving into Our Social Studies Journey.** Once I had collected initial data on social studies, I was ready to dive into teaching the subject and learning with my students. At the onset, my CT and I agreed that the allotted two days a week for social studies would be dedicated to meaningful social studies instruction. We committed to using the 50 minutes a week to its full potential. To do this, first I acknowledged my own fears of teaching social studies and made a commitment to step out of my comfort zone and be confident in my ability to improve the quality of social studies instruction my students receive as recommended by Passe (2006). Second, I read aloud to students during each of the units I planned in order to incorporate social studies and reading simultaneously as recommended by Strachan (2015). Finally, I incorporated class meetings and whole group discussions during social studies lessons to create a safe and welcoming space for students to share and record their social studies ideas as recommended by Britt and Howe (2014). With the help of my CT, we determined three topics (diversity, citizenship, and understanding social studies) that aligned with first grade standards and school initiatives and held promise for the integration of reading and discussion. Across these units, I collected data to answer my wondering including student work and interviews, anecdotal and field notes, student surveys and self-assessments. I also took pictures, received feedback from peers, my CT, and my supervisor (the second author), and reflected in blogs.

**Defining Diversity.** The first unit I chose to do was a series of three lessons on diversity. These lessons occurred during Black History Month. My essential question for the first two lessons of the unit was, “How are eggs like people?” My objective was for the students to begin to notice the similarities and differences between people and consider that we are all more alike than different. I hoped to begin to minimize students’ stereotypes . . . and instill in them a more realistic and sensitive perspective of difference and diversity (Lintner, 2005).

The first two lessons taught this concept using brown and white eggs. I created the lesson by adapting an idea I got from Pinterest, an online network where users can share and discover ideas from one another (MLK Day Egg Experiment, 2013). For the first lesson, the students got to hold the eggs and make observations about them, noting their similarities and differences. In the second lesson, the students got to engage in discussion about how the eggs were like people once we cracked them open and realized that the insides of both eggs were the same. I felt these lessons were significant because it was a simple way to teach a profound idea, an opportunity to begin to understand one of the most valuable ideas we can learn as a child that becomes tainted as one grows up—loving and accepting one another for who we are, not what we look like. Pictured in figure one is the chart we made of our observations.

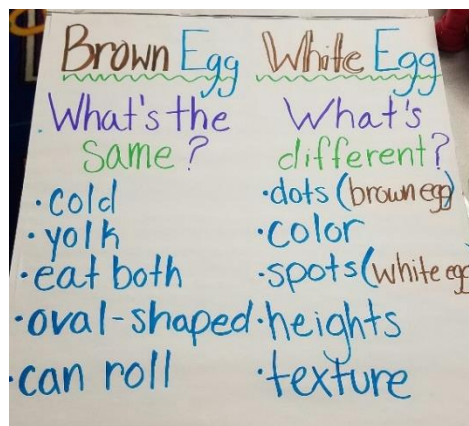


Figure 1. Chart created while observing eggs.

The final lesson connected the idea of diversity to the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and our dreams for the world. To introduce this lesson, I read aloud a picture book about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *I am Martin Luther King Jr.*, by Brad Meltzer (2017). We discussed how his dream for the world was for us to live in peace, regardless of our outward differences. Following this, I had the students engage in discussion about what their dreams were for our world. After our discussion, we created our own “dream catchers” and wrote about our dreams.

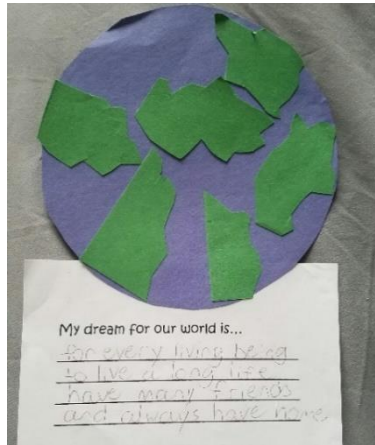


Figure 2. Example of a dream catcher.

**Understanding Civic and Political Participation as Qualities of a Good Citizen.** The next unit I focused on was a unit on the different ways we could be a good citizen. Around a month into my inquiry journey, I taught a lesson to my students about how to be kind to one another. I chose to do this because I believe being kind as a school citizen can lead to future efforts as adults acting as informed citizens in society. The first lesson focused on kindness and addressed the following standard, SS.1.C.2.4: Show respect and kindness to people and animals. The essential question we discussed was “How can I show kindness to others?” To answer this question, I adapted a lesson from Pinterest (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/4292562125652925/>) and used the book *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes (1991).



Figure 3. Heart created during *Chrysanthemum* read aloud.

As I read the book aloud, I had the students wrinkle a large paper heart each time someone said something mean to Chrysanthemum. At the end, when we tried to fix the heart, we realized that we could not make it look exactly like it did before every one said mean things to her. We talked about what doing this activity meant, and after sharing our ideas we learned how words can hurt others for a long time and that it is important to show kindness to one another.

During the week of President's Day, I taught a lesson on why we celebrate this day, focused on the standard SS.1.C.3.2: Recognize symbols and individuals that represent American constitutional democracy. To start off the lesson, I discussed with my students why they thought we took off this day every year. I think it is crucial for students to know why we take certain days off from school so they can begin to develop an understanding of the meaning of these holidays. We talked about how President's Day was a way we could honor the leaders of our country. This discussion then addressed why we honor presidents in the first place. Group discussions are important to "the process of engaging the students in thinking about what they know and want to learn" (Britt & Howe, 2014, p. 160). The students shared their ideas on why they honor presidents and were interested in learning ways of how they could honor them.

To help us, the main activity of this lesson was reading in our *Weekly Reader* about George Washington and why we honor him. A *Weekly Reader* is an educational magazine created for children that covers news-based, current, and past events. As we read the *Weekly Reader*, we made the connection that one does not have to be president to be a leader. Like Washington, the students could be honest, listen to and think of others, and be a good role model if they want to make a difference in the world.

Following the *Weekly Reader*, we talked about how we could honor our presidents in other ways besides reading about them. The students shared their ideas, and one way that was discussed was how presidents are honored by being on our currency. To end the lesson, we examined a penny and discussed how Abraham Lincoln is on it twice. The students were thrilled with this new fact! As they passed it around, I reminded the students to be on the lookout for ways our presidents are honored that are around them every day.

In a similar way, I taught a lesson on the Pledge of Allegiance and United States flag. I chose to do this lesson because I noticed that the students were mispronouncing the words of the pledge and some did not even know why we stood for the pledge in the first place.



**Making Meaning of Social Studies.** Throughout this inquiry, I looked over the answers and results from the self-assessments, social studies interest survey and content quiz and I realized that most of the students do not know what social studies truly is. This gave me the idea of exploring the idea of “What is social studies?” I wanted to build on our previous lessons, and directly address the issue. Therefore, I created a lesson that had the students become experts on different topics that first graders needed to know in social studies. Each group of students was assigned the task of becoming experts on assigned social studies topics because at the end of the lesson, they were going to teach the rest of the class. The four assigned topics were Beginning Economics, Where We Live, Good Citizens, and People and Traditions. These areas were based off of the four main content areas covered in the students’ social studies workbook. This way of teaching is called the jigsaw method and is a peer learning process that gives students defined “practice in negotiation, communication, and teamwork.” In the jigsaw method students “each can focus her/his expertise; subsequent discussion centers more on overlapping themes among topics and leaves time for higher-order comparisons and critical thinking.” (Amador & Mederer, 2013, p.90). Since social studies is such a broad topic, I felt that the jigsaw method was the best way to approach this type of lesson.

The groups were given a large piece of a puzzle that I created, and each piece had various sentence starters and questions they needed to complete by using information from a short text about their topic. I created this short text, one page for each of the four topic areas, using their workbook and pulling out key information that extended my students’ knowledge of grade level social studies concepts. They were instructed to work together in a spot around the room to fill it in with information from their text, thus becoming experts on their assigned topics. Each member of the group had a specific job to do to complete the puzzle piece but were encouraged to work together and help one another find the information in the text. At the end of the lesson each group shared with the class and we completed our social studies jigsaw puzzle.



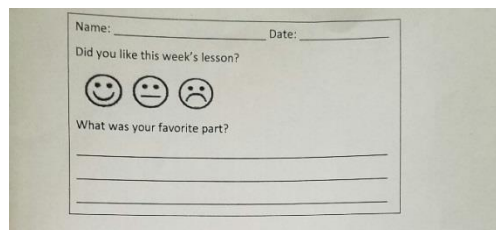
Figure 4. Students completing their puzzle piece.

**Collaborative Support and Feedback.** In addition to engaging in lessons with my students, I also worked with colleagues, my CT, supervisor and peers to gather needed support and critical feedback. First, I got support and feedback through continuous engagement in online discussion groups and in person with peers in my teacher research course. During these moments, I shared struggles I was facing and learned of ways I can address the issues.

In addition, when preparing to submit this paper for publication, I worked with my supervisor, the second author, through phone conversations and revisions of my inquiry paper. My supervisor asked questions focused on why I had chosen to teach certain lessons and how the lessons connected to meaningful social studies. We also worked to deepen my analysis by thinking about what I felt was successful as well as what was challenging for me during the inquiry process. Finally, we added a second question to the wondering as stated below. This new wondering and additional information was incorporated into this write-up of my inquiry journey.

**Summative Data Analysis.** As I engaged in the inquiry process and lessons described above, I collected data to answer my wondering by referring back to the literature, collecting and analyzing student work, taking anecdotal and field notes, referring to surveys and self-assessments (described next), taking pictures, receiving feedback from peers, my collaborating teacher, and my supervisor, reflecting in blogs, engaging in an formal interview with my collaborating teacher, and engaging in informal interviews with my students.

Throughout the units, I administered a self-assessment feedback form pictured below. Doing this also gave me the opportunity to learn of ways I could tweak the lessons to make them even better for the future. In addition, I administered the initial two question survey at the conclusion of the inquiry, as a reminder the two questions were (1) What is social studies? and (2) How does learning social studies make you feel?



The image shows a student self-assessment form. At the top, there are two lines for 'Name:' and 'Date:'. Below that is the question 'Did you like this week's lesson?' followed by three smiley face icons: a happy face, a neutral face, and a sad face. At the bottom, there is the question 'What was your favorite part?' followed by three horizontal lines for writing.

Figure 5. Student self-assessment collected throughout the inquiry.

I made sense of this data in numerous ways. To start, I read the educators' perspectives established and confirmed why I am doing this inquiry in the first place. I examined student feedback and self-assessments on my lessons, and student work throughout the semester and how this helped me shape the lessons that followed. Next, I organized the data into units that addressed (1) how and if lessons were meaningful and (2) considering how and if lessons were engaging. Making judgements on meaning was the hardest part for me, but ultimately I decided that if the lessons broadened students' perspectives of their world in some way, even if the impact was small, then it truly was meaningful because it made a positive difference in the way they view the world and the ideas, concepts, and facets that compose it.

### **Findings**

From engaging in the data collection and analysis above I developed three learning statements related to my wondering: *How can I incorporate social studies instruction on a regular basis while having my students engage in meaningful discussions and activities to help them make sense of their world? What do I and my students learn as a result?* These learning statements include: (1) Planning for Meaningful Social Studies Expanded My Use of Resources, (2) Students Increased Their Understanding of and Made Connections to Social Studies, and (3) Facing My Fears Allowed New Ideas of the Importance of Social Studies to Develop.

#### **Finding 1: Planning for Meaningful Social Studies Expanded My Use of Resources**

As I engaged in data analysis, I recognized that to make social studies meaningful, I expanded my use of resources and drew from resources beyond the school curriculum, incorporated my students' interests and connected to events in the school community. While I used the school curriculum tools, I also expanded upon these tools and I used ideas from online and grade-level colleagues. The ideas I found online were mainly from Pinterest and I utilized this resource by looking up elementary specific content and adapting what I found to meet the needs of my students. For instance, the dream catcher lesson was originally intended for intermediate grades and required students to do an essay. To modify it, I had my students capture their dreams in just a few sentences. Moreover, the diversity lesson using eggs was suggested to be a demonstration. However, I felt as it would make more of an impact on my students if they had the opportunity to be physically a part of the lesson. My grade-level colleagues, mainly my collaborating teacher and previous collaborating teacher next door, were able to give me ideas based off of lessons they previously taught in the years before. Using their feedback, the ideas I found on my own, and just my own curiosity, I

was able to create the lessons from resources described above and make them meaningful by incorporating students' interests.

One of the most important things that I have learned to do was to incorporate my students' interests. That being said, I worked hard to ensure my social studies lessons engaged my students and did just that. For instance, my lesson on diversity using the dream catchers incorporated their interests because the dreams they created were their *own*. One student's dream that reflected something he cares a lot about was Ryan's (pseudonym) dream for the world "to have more veterinarians to help animals..." Ryan is very passionate about caring for and loving every type of animal! Another student's dream that reflects an interest was Brandon's (pseudonym). His hope for the world was for "every kid to have a toy." I felt that his dream was very different than his classmates, but also just as important because he knows how happy his Legos make him and his dream would ensure every child could share his happiness.

During some of my lessons I also used books for read alouds that would interest my students because they were visually appealing, relatable and age appropriate. For example, when choosing the book for the dreamcatcher lesson, there are many incredible picture books about Martin Luther King Jr. that I could have chosen from, but this one in particular I felt was simple yet profound when telling his life story through comic strips for my first graders. The *Weekly Reader* we used was provided by the school for each grade level. Finally, the workbooks utilized were specific to first grade.

In addition to student interests, I also connected the content I taught with events in the school community. The lessons on diversity coincided with the school wide focus on celebrating African-Americans and their accomplishments during Black History Month and the lesson on kindness reflected our week of kindness that the first-grade team had during mid-February. Furthermore, the lessons on President's Day acknowledged the holiday schools honor nationwide and the Pledge of Allegiance lesson touches upon a tradition the school community recognizes and recites daily. By connecting the content to these school wide events, I feel as though this showed the students that social studies can be something they can find in other familiar surroundings, not just inside the four walls of their classroom, and can be applied even farther to the larger world around them.

## **Finding 2: Students Increased Their Understanding of and Made Connections to Social Studies**

Through the careful use of these resources, I found that by intentionally using the time given for social studies instruction, including hands-on activities and meaningful discussion, my students were able to expand their understanding of what social studies is and made connections to the role of social studies in their own lives. Before this inquiry, social studies lessons consisted of worksheets and if students were able to define social studies they saw it as connected to events and people in history, similar to how I viewed as a child. In addition, responses to the initial survey question, “What is social studies” included four students that did not answer or shared they did not know. In addition 10/20 students gave answers that demonstrated an unclear understanding of social studies. These answers are shared in the chart below (the entire chart is found in Appendix A).

I like it because it is about learning.
Social studies is about learning all kinds of things like writing and reading.
I think it is about science I think that is what it is about.
I think it is writing.
It is things like talking about something.
Learning social studies is about studying for a science test.
I think social studies is supposed to be about learning new things and writing.
I think that social studies is learning things about other people. And to learn about animals too.
I think is about reading.
To help you learn the things in Earth to keep grownups safe. And learning to read.

However, at the conclusion of data collection during this inquiry, students expanded their understanding of social studies beyond their initial views and ideas. This was reflected in the start of my final lesson through students’ verbal responses before we began our jigsaw puzzle activity. To introduce the lesson, I started off by asking the students what they thought social studies was about. Some students connected social studies with events that happened in the past. For example, Daniel (pseudonym) stated it’s about “long ago,” and Mary (pseudonym) mentioned how it’s about past presidents and “how we have changed from the past.”

In addition to the past, some students connected social studies to current and future events. For instance, Lacey (pseudonym) recognized it can be things that happen in real life, and Adam (pseudonym) agreed that it can be about “what is happening all over the world right now.” Timmy (pseudonym) even suggested social studies can be about what will happen in the future, whether near or far. Similar to how I view social studies, Claire (pseudonym) realized that social

studies can relate to everyone when she proclaimed that “[social studies] is for young people and it is for old people.” Though, one student in particular had a difficult time describing what exactly social studies is, and defined it as “a lot of stuff,” which is completely accurate, because in reality, social studies *is* a lot of stuff!

After having this discussion, I told them they were all right. Social studies can be everything that each one of them said. It is “a lot of stuff,” and this stuff can include the impact of social media, things that happen in real life, history, how we’ve changed, what could happen in the future, and what is currently happening in the world right now. Lastly, it is for everyone, whether you are young or old- social studies makes an impact on every single one of us. I truly believe that the students were able to share these ideas because of how much social studies has become a part of their curriculum since the beginning of the semester until the end with this last social studies lesson.

At the conclusion of this inquiry, students expanded their ideas beyond events and they were able to articulate more specifically what social studies entails. This learning was often directly connected to the lessons I taught during this inquiry. Overall, 11 out of 20 students mentioned something they learned from lessons I taught in their new definition of social studies. For instance, one student, Mark (pseudonym) went from not knowing what learning social studies was about to responding with “I think social studies is about how we make the world a better place and how people are different on the outside and same on the inside.” This aspect of what social studies connects to our lessons on diversity. This hands on nature of the diversity lessons was one students found engaging. For example, when asked what their favorite part of the lesson was, Kara (pseudonym) stated that she liked “holding the eggs.” Furthermore, Mary (pseudonym), wrote that “feeling the eggs was the best part.” One student, Yosef (pseudonym), enjoyed when the eggs were cracked and when we learned “how eggs are the same as people.” Combined, this student feedback illustrates how this lesson’s hands-on activities with the eggs as well as relatable and significant discussion made the lesson more impactful and meaningful for the students.

Another student, Timmy, connected to the jigsaw puzzle lesson by stating terms related to beginning economics. Other students went from saying it was about science, reading, and writing to explaining how it is learning about people or even going on an “adventure of the Earth.” Even if they only mentioned one thing that learning social studies is about, every single student has unquestionably become more aware of what it *is* and are able to or are at least learning to make sense of their world by using what they now know as a result of this inquiry.

The student work collected throughout my lessons this semester also illustrates the profound ideas and concepts the students have learned from engaging in these hands-on activities and discussions. For instance, many students' dreams for the world during the last diversity lesson were insightful and thoughtful on what should change to make the world a better place. Some responses were dreams such as "to help people buy food and get good homes, family, and friends," while another's dream was "for everyone to be nice to each other." Another student's dream was "for every living being to live a long life, have many friends, and always have a home."

Furthermore, students were beginning to articulate social studies as something they are a part of and how it plays a role in their own life, even as something collective and collaborative. While reading my students' initial responses to what they thought social studies was, only one student recognized it as something we share together by referring to an aspect of it using the possessive "our." While reading the students' responses at the close of this journey, seven students recognized social studies as something we share by using words such as "our, us, and we," whether it be when the student referred to the United States as "*our* country", or how "*we* can make the world a better place." One student explained that social studies is about "things that happen in our lives that make *us* happy, sad, and mad." I think this is important to recognize because it exemplifies the most important thing I have learned about social studies—that it is something we should engage in, participate in, and learn more about *together* that can make more of an impact when viewed as a *we* instead of an *I*. The complete chart of students before and after responses is located in Appendix A.

### **Finding 3: Facing My Fears Allowed New Ideas of the Importance of Social Studies to Develop**

By engaging in this inquiry, I realized that acknowledging my own negative experiences with social studies, and facing my fears of teaching the subject, allowed me to be open to the perspectives my peers and my students had on the subject. These perspectives have further strengthened my reasoning, and led to new ideas, on the importance of social studies in the classroom.

Before starting this inquiry, I knew that learning social studies was important, but failed to recognize exactly what makes it so important. I based my views off of my negative learning experiences I had during my secondary education. To me, social studies was mainly about historical figures I could not relate to and important events I could not remember the dates of, thus I never had a strong background in content. Admittedly, I was embarrassed by my lack of knowledge and expertise, and this humiliation turned into fears of teaching the

subject as an elementary educator— what if my own social studies instruction is boring? What if I never acquire a strong enough understanding to effectively teach it? Though, my own views about social studies have changed drastically throughout this experience as a result of acknowledging these fears. Now, not only do I recognize how social studies is important, I also know that social studies is a very intricate subject and is composed of many facets that contribute to its significance. Understanding this has helped me recognize the need for teachers who are willing to effectively teach it, even if they share similar fears as me.

Something I noticed as I engaged in this inquiry was the tremendous support I got from my peers on incorporating social studies. They encouraged me and even congratulated me, some saying they wish they had the time to do what I was doing. While I got to share my reservations and fears with my peers, I also got to hear of their own current or past experiences with social studies in the classroom. For instance, at the University of South Florida Fall Semester Conference, I asked other educators if they enjoyed social studies as a K-12 student and how social studies plays a role in their current field experience. Although our feelings towards the subject as a K-12 student were different, those who answered that they loved social studies also explained that it either was not important when they were a student or that they have not even had the opportunity to teach it or see it in the classroom. Dana Yancy, a fellow intern, shared “I have not taught the subject. Although I love this subject, it was not emphasized in my education.” Furthermore, Jenny Irvine, also an intern exclaimed “In my current classroom experience, there is not much time for social studies and it is often overlooked.”

In addition, some educators shared that they did not enjoy social studies and expressed similar fears to mine. For instance, another pre-service teacher, Stan Perkins, stated “Social studies has never been my strong subject growing up, and that worries me a little for when I have to teach it in the future.” Although both responses were different, I feel as though they highlight two major problems: (1) social studies is not a priority in the classroom as some other subjects are, causing it to be a “weak” subject for students and (2) pre-service teachers are being “taught” that social studies can be overlooked. Both of these realizations confirm the need for strong social studies instruction.

When it comes to my students and their perspective of social studies, I had the chance to ask them how social studies makes them feel at the beginning and at the end of the inquiry process. Overall, four students’ feelings towards social studies had a negative change, three students’ feelings towards social studies had a positive change, and the rest of the students’ feelings towards social studies



stayed the same. The change of attitude or lack thereof in these students may be for several reasons. From the literature I learned that “Students’ attitude towards Social Studies is determined by various factors inherent in themselves, the school, their teachers and lastly in their homes. (Babatunde & Ijiwole, 2014, p.468).

Although many of the students’ feelings towards social studies did not change for the better like I had been hoping for, I reflected upon the feelings and perspectives that they had on social studies. When I see my students, I see myself as a student in her least favorite subject. I have accepted that every child’s favorite subject does not have to be social studies, because I know for sure at their age it was not mine. Although, I am eager to discover what I can do to make social studies a more enjoyable and rich learning experience for my students, something no teacher did for me until my Teaching Elementary Social Studies class in my final year of college.

### **Conclusion**

As my inquiry journey comes to its close, there are many things I have learned from engaging in this experience. When it comes to my students, I learned that it is possible for them to go from understanding almost nothing or very little about a subject to being able to express aspects of the subject in specific details in just a short amount of time, as shown in the chart in Appendix A and described above. I know this was only possible with the hard work I put in to my inquiry and my constant support from my CT and colleagues. To me, this proves how important it is to dedicate time to social studies instruction because this subject is the foundation for students to understand and make sense of the world that they live in and are a part of everyday. Even if a teacher is scared or uninterested in social studies, or is “fearful that their lack of knowledge will be exposed,” (Passe, 2006, p. 190), it is important to remember who one is doing this for- the kids.

This stance and belief on the importance of social studies is one I plan on carrying with me into my first year of teaching and the years beyond that. I have learned that incorporating successful activities, discussions, and lessons takes a lot of hard work, patience, and determination, and this passion is something I hope to implement in not only my social studies instruction, but my instruction in other subject areas as well.

One thing I struggled with during this inquiry was trying not to step on anyone’s toes. When it comes to teaching social studies, there are unquestionably many barriers a teacher may face, and my understanding and acknowledgement of these barriers has grown. For example, one barrier I struggled with was when I was teaching the lesson on diversity using the eggs. Although this lesson taught

the importance of loving one another no matter what differences we have, I did not want it to sound like I was “color blind,” a phrase that means I overlook and ignore the race of a person, something that *should* be acknowledged because it makes that person who they are (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Another area of I feared for controversy that came up in conversation and lessons was our recent presidential election. Again, it is important to recognize that elections and controversial presidents have been and may always be a part of our history. Therefore, it is crucial to teach and discuss this past election and newly elected President, regardless of possible criticism from others. However, I also felt it was also important to remain neutral and unbiased while teaching such controversial topics in part because I feared I might upset parents of my students by either talking *too much* about the President or by not talking about him *enough*.

No matter what I may be teaching during social studies, someone might be offended or against it. Though, in a way, I think that represents the beauty of social studies— that we all come from different backgrounds and walks of life that have formed the opinions towards different social studies topics that we hold and carry with us today. Therefore, it is important for me not to be scared to teach social studies because of the barriers, but to embrace it for the opportunities of learning and growth it provides students.

After engaging in this inquiry, there are many wonderings I still have. For one, I wonder what I can do to change the attitudes that my students have towards social studies in a more positive direction. Furthermore, I wonder if there is an effective and efficient way to incorporate social studies instruction every day, like I had stated in my original wondering. Although I might not find the answers to these questions right away, I am eager to extend this inquiry into my first year of teaching and hopeful of any new insight I gather as I learn more about social studies alongside my students as we engage in the feast, enjoy its offerings, and make sense of our world together.

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## Appendix A

Student	Beginning Response 1/24/17	End Response 4/13/17
MB	I like it cause it is about learning.	I learned about a good citizen. A good citizen is a person that helps our country out by doing their job.
YB	Social studies is about learning all kinds of things like writing and reading.	I think social studies is about things about the past, universe, and more.
TB	I don't know.	I think social studies is about answering questions about earth. Beginning economics is like a good, opportunity cost, and a service worker.
CB	I think it is about science I think that is what it is about.	I think social studies is about reading Rosa Parks book and history things a long time ago.
RB	I think social studies is about history.	I think learning social studies is about learning about people, history, mathematics, pledge, and education.
DC	I think it writing.	I learn about social studies sometime it is the best sometime not because some time it is good sometime it bad and sometime its good some time it so bad
BG	It is things like talking about something.	I think social studies is about people.
VG	I think social studies is about stuff that happened in the past. Like old stuff, old places or people that help our country. I love it!	I think social studies are about stuff like primary sources, in the past, how people are different and the same, and history, the earth and important people like presidents.
AJ	I think social studies is about knowledge, biography, real life, olden days, wars, education, fiction, nonfiction, and learning.	ABSENT
KL	Learning social studies is about studying for a science test.	I think learning about social studies is about history and its learning about people in the past.
CL	N/A	I feel happy about social studies.

AL	Social studies are about learning about different people- who they are, what they do, and what is important about them.	I think social studies is about learning new and old things about our country and planet every day.
AM	I think social studies is supposed to be about learning new things and writing. I kind of like social studies.	Having fun and learning new things with your teachers. And about history. Rosa Parks, puzzle pieces. We learn every day.
MM	I think that social studies is about learning things that you learned about other people. And to learn about animals too.	Studies is where you learn about a long time ago. It is really fun. I like it. You learn about history and social media. It is about Rosa Parks, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Donald Trump, history. You should be kind, where we live, the pledge of allegiance, and 100 years ago.
LM	Social studies is learning things that are real that happen in the future kind of like when Dr. King died by just giving love to us. I love social studies.	I think social studies is about thing that happen in our lives that make us happy, sad, and mad. Things that happen long ago about history.
MN	I do not know.	I think social studies is about how we make the world a better place and how people are different on the outside and same on the inside.
ES	I think is about reading.	I think social studies is about reading about Rosa Parks.
CS	To help you learning the things in Earth to keep grownups safe. And learning to read.	S.S. is a adventure about the Earth. I like S.S. It is for kids and grownups.
MV	Learning about patriotic stuff about our country.	History, historical facts, and primary sources. And life long ago. Families and people that have passed away. And it's also about jobs that serve the country.
AZ	N/A	I think that we learn about people and how people are different.