



# **ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES**

**David T. Naylor/Richard Diem**

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# Elementary and Middle School Social Studies

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RANDOM HOUSE



NEW YORK

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This book was prepared for Random House by Lane Akers Inc.

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**First Edition**

987654321

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Naylor, David T., 1941–

Elementary and middle school social studies.

Includes bibliographies and index.

1. Social sciences—Study and teaching (Elementary)

—United States. 2. Social sciences—Study and teaching (Secondary)—United States. I. Diem, Richard A. II. Title.

LB1584.N33 1987 372.8'3044 86-26165

ISBN 0-394-32952-X

Manufactured in the United States of America

Book Design: Glen M. Edelstein

**Text credits:**

Excerpts on pages 54–55 from Curriculum Organization in Social Studies in *The Current State of Social Studies: A Report of Project SPAN* by J. Lingle and D. Superka, 1982, are reprinted with permission from the Social Studies Education Consortium, Inc., Boulder, Colo.

Excerpts from Revision of the NCSS Social Studies Curriculum Guidelines, *Social Education*, April 1979, are reprinted with permission of the National Council for the Social Studies.

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## Elementary and Middle School Social Studies

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## Dedication

*To our wives, Mary and Roberta, and our children, Tom and Todd and Josh and Sarah, without whose support, understanding, and inspiration this book would not have been possible.*



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# Acknowledgments

A book of this nature necessarily requires its authors to draw upon, reflect, and be guided by the contributions of many others. We are deeply indebted to the many who have shared their ideas about and scholarship related to social studies through the publication of books, articles, and other materials and through presentations and discussions of various types. As much as possible, we have sought to acknowledge their special contributions with citations throughout this book. We also wish to acknowledge the contributions of our teachers, our students, and our colleagues in shaping and indelibly influencing the understandings and perspectives shared in this work.

We are indebted to the following individuals who made special contributions to this manuscript. They include the anonymous manuscript reviewers whose ideas, suggestions, and criticisms have proven to be of great value in helping us improve what we had written previously. Professors Jeffry Gordon and Chester Laine of the University of Cincinnati merit special mention, Jeff for his help in shaping the material dealing with computers and Chet for his assistance in preparing the chapter dealing with reading and writing. Mary Naylor proved to be a tireless worker and a valuable resource by offering constructive ideas and suggestions, helping to organize the reference pages, and proofreading manuscript drafts. We also wish to express our appreciation for the contributions of the secretarial staffs at the University of Cincinnati, especially Ms. Jane Buchanan, and at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Finally, we acknowledge the contributions of our editor, Lane Akers, whose patience, understanding, and useful suggestions helped to make this book possible.

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PART 1

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PERSPECTIVES FOR  
TEACHING SOCIAL  
STUDIES

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# CHAPTER 1

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# Setting the Stage

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## OVERVIEW

**T**his introductory chapter begins by asking you to reflect on your experiences with social studies in the elementary and middle school grades, and on your attitudes and beliefs about social studies. Using a hypothetical situation, the chapter then examines the special role that social studies plays regarding citizenship education. Again, you are asked to consider the implications of that role for the present and future lives of your students. With this as background, the chapter discusses the elements of a sound social studies program, including its knowledge, skills, and valuing dimensions and the importance of having students engage in active learning experiences in school and out of school. The chapter then provides perspectives on American schools and students by examining factors that influence social studies programs and social studies instruction. The theories of Piaget and Bruner and their implications for teaching social studies are also examined briefly. Finally, the chapter explores student attitudes about social studies stressing the important role that you play in influencing what social studies will be for your students.

## WHAT WAS SOCIAL STUDIES LIKE FOR YOU?

Social studies has long been part of the curriculum in American schools. If you attended American elementary and secondary schools, then you will no doubt remember that social studies was a subject you encountered at most or even all grade levels, beginning as early as kindergarten or first grade and extending as far as twelfth grade. What is it you remember about your experiences with social studies? What was social studies like for you in the elementary and middle school grades?

The following hypothetical scene may help to refresh your memory. It takes place in a college classroom during the first class meeting of a course entitled Teaching Social Studies in Elementary and Middle Schools. The students in the



class are nearing the end of their teacher preparation program and will soon be student teaching.

PROFESSOR: What was social studies like for you in the elementary and middle school grades? Let's take some time to think about that question. Brainstorming is a good way to get responses to this type of question. In fact, you will find this type of activity helpful when you teach. I'm going to show you an unfinished sentence that I have written on a transparency. After you have thought about it, I want you to share with the class what you remember about your experiences. I will write them on the chalkboard and then we will discuss them.

The professor proceeds to show the unfinished sentence to the class: "When I think of my experiences with social studies in the elementary and middle school grades, I think of . . . ." After a brief pause, students begin to volunteer a number of responses. As each response is given, the professor writes it on the chalkboard. In a short time, the chalkboard is filled with a long list that includes these responses:

- Memorizing names, dates, events, and lots of other facts
- Dressing up as Pilgrims and re-creating the first Thanksgiving
- Preparing a family tree and talking about what life was like when my grandparents and great-grandparents were alive
- Using maps and globes and trying to learn about latitude and longitude
- Writing lots of papers about countries and famous people
- Answering endless questions on ditto sheet after ditto sheet
- All the interesting things I learned about how people live in other societies
- Memorizing things like the Declaration of Independence
- Being expected to learn about things that I already knew
- Seeing films about people living in different countries
- Some of the teachers I had, but I really don't remember much about what I studied
- Studying about Mexico and Japan, their customs and ways of life
- Studying history and geography
- Talking about current events and what was happening in my community and the world

- Being in plays about famous events and reading biographies about famous people
- Studying about things like the presidents, the Civil War, and the American Revolution
- Taking field trips to various places like the museum, factories, the mayor's office, and the courts
- Sitting in my seat listening to the teacher talk
- Learning about my community, my state, and other states
- Doing lots of small-group activities
- How interesting it was and how much I enjoyed it
- How boring it was and how much I disliked it
- Participating in a mock presidential election
- Building models of things—like a tepee, a log cabin, and a medieval castle
- Studying about cities, where they are and how they are alike and different
- Learning about the states, their location, their capitals, their main products, and things like that

Though this is a hypothetical scenario, these responses are fairly typical. How many of them strike a familiar chord with you? How close do they come to your experiences and reactions to social studies in the elementary and middle school grades?

Some responses—such as, “All the interesting things I learned about how people live in other societies,” “Taking field trips,” “Talking about current events,” and “Doing lots of small-group activities”—reflect desirable characteristics of social studies. Other responses—“Memorizing names, dates, events, and lots of other facts,” “Answering endless questions on ditto sheet after ditto sheet,” and “Sitting in my seat listening to the teacher talk”—do not.

What we tend to remember are those experiences that had a meaningful impact on us, in both a positive and a negative way. They are not always the things our teachers may have wished us to remember, nor do we necessarily remember them in the way our teachers hoped we would. Yet what we remember about our personal experiences with social studies has a major impact on our attitudes and beliefs about this subject. It also influences how we will approach the teaching of social studies and, in turn, the types of experiences our students will have while studying it.

It seems appropriate, then, to begin this book by asking you to recall and reflect on your personal experiences with social studies in the elementary and middle school grades. What was social studies like for you? How do you feel about this area of the school curriculum? The accompanying boxed insert should help you clarify your feelings and beliefs.