Trade Books and the Social Studies Curriculum

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Historical fiction, fiction about contemporary people of other cultures, and nonfiction trade books can increase children’s interest in social studies and enhance their knowledge. Dianne Monson and Kathleen Howe discuss the ways that these books appeal to young readers and lead them to seek further understanding of historical events, foreign cultures, and Americans from different cultural backgrounds. They offer numerous examples of books that serve this purpose for several social studies topics.

One seeks to equip the child with deeper, more gripping, and subtler ways of knowing the world and himself.

—Jerome Bruner

Social studies in the elementary grades is the study of people and their interactions with one another. A primary concern of social studies education is to teach young learners the skills and knowledge necessary to become responsible and informed citizens. A second major concern is to help students begin to perceive themselves as part of a larger human community within the context of time and space. To accomplish this, it is important that children begin to understand other peoples and cultures and to consider similarities and differences in contrast to their own lives. History, government, and geography are the traditional major topics of study in the elementary grades. Opportunity to experience life in other times and places through the eyes of the people involved should be a major focus of social studies instruction, but too often this opportunity is not provided. Children’s books can offer that very important dimension.

Although the content and skills of social studies are particularly suited for helping children understand more about themselves and their role in the larger human community, social studies as an elementary subject has been rated by upper elementary students as one of the least liked subjects taught in school (Goodlad, 1984). Status studies comparing student attitudes toward

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different subject areas in the elementary and secondary grades have consistently found that social studies was rated poorly when compared to other curricular subjects. As early as 1949, Jersild reported that social studies was the least liked subject in school. More recently, social studies was named as the most favorite subject by only 3 percent of nine-year-old students surveyed, while 48 percent chose mathematics and 24 percent chose language arts as the favorite subject (Science Education Databook, 1980). Although topics from the social studies curriculum were often highly rated, interest in social studies as a school subject was consistently rated low in comparison with other subjects. "The topics of study become removed from their intrinsically human character, reduced to the dates and places readers will recall memorizing for tests" (Goodlad, 1984, p. 212). Children's literature can play a role in changing that situation.

The Research Base for Social Studies and Literature

What do children want to know about other places? Student interests should certainly guide development of the social studies curriculum and the choice of reading materials to support the curriculum, yet there is little evidence that children are often consulted about such matters. In order to find out about student interests, we questioned more than two hundred U.S. children, ages nine to eleven. We asked what they would like to learn about a child from another country, in this case Australia. We invited them to raise questions they would ask an Australian child who visited their school. The results were interesting, though perhaps not surprising. When the responses were clustered into broad categories, these nine questions emerged:

1. What kinds of foods do you eat?
2. What kinds of clothes do you wear?
3. What are your houses like?
4. What kinds of pets or animals do you have?
5. What are your schools like?
6. What is your weather like?
7. Do you have any brothers or sisters?
8. Do you have many friends?
9. Do you ever get lonesome?

This set of questions was derived from the actual, more specific questions such as: Do you have pizzas? Do you eat kangaroos? Do you have kangaroos for pets? How big is your house? What is it made of? What are your schools