The Vision for Transformational Social Studies Teaching

A Constructivist Approach

Authentic and impactful student learning is an integrated process of building academic capacity through varied forms. A constructivist approach of learning describes learning as an intellectual process in which learners develop what they know by fitting new ideas together with ideas they have already learned from previous experience. In the process of making these intellectual constructions, learners are influenced by the social and intellectual environments in which they find themselves. To this end, the revised standards for social studies amplify the need for students to construct meaning, highlight purpose, explore and process learning with depth in classrooms.

The primary teaching tasks of schools and teachers are (1) to provide constructivist-rich ideas and learning experiences, (2) to stimulate and guide learner constructivist thinking, and (3) to remember continuously that all members of the community—students, teachers, staff members, administrators, and parents—are learning all the time in their unique ways. Particularly important is the realization that teachers continuously learn from and about students just as students learn from teachers. The transformational social studies teacher recognizes the reciprocal nature of learning and works to instill this principle within students.

Transformational Social Studies

The “essential characteristics of powerful social studies” as described by NCSS consist of five principles and each principle has direct implications for what teachers should know and be able to do and what dispositions they should possess.

1. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are meaningful.
   - Students learn connected networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that they will find useful both in and outside of school.
   - Instruction emphasizes depth of development of important ideas within appropriate breadth of topic coverage and focuses on teaching these important ideas for understanding, appreciation, and life application.
   - The significance and meaningfulness of the content is emphasized both in how it is presented to students and how it is developed through activities.
   - Classroom interaction focuses on sustained examination of a few important topics rather than...
superficial coverage of many.

- Meaningful learning activities and assessment strategies focus students’ attention on the most important ideas embedded in what they are learning.
- The teacher is reflective in planning, implementing, and assessing instruction; and the institution values reflection as demonstrated in its practices and policies.

2. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are integrative.

- Social studies subject matter is taught topically across disciplines.
- The subject matter cuts across time and space.
- The instruction interconnects knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and attitudes with effective social/political action.
- The teaching makes effective use of technology.
- Social studies teaching and learning are connected to other subjects.

3. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are values-based.

- Social studies content invariably involves the examination and understanding of values—one’s own and those of others—as values are expressed in points of view, beliefs, policies, actions, or inactions. Values-based instruction appropriate to education in a democratic society committed to safeguarding individual rights and the common good occurs when:
  - Social studies teachers guide students to consider the ethical dimensions of topics and address controversial issues, providing an arena for reflective development of concern for the common good and application of social values.
  - Students are made aware of potential social policy implications and taught to think critically and make value-based decisions about related social issues.
  - Rather than promulgating personal, sectarian, or political views, teachers make sure that students: (a) become aware of the values, complexities, and dilemmas involved in an issue; (b) consider the costs and benefits to various individuals and groups that are embedded in potential courses of action; and (c) develop well-reasoned positions consistent with basic democratic social and political values.
  - Teachers encourage recognition of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to social responsibility.

4. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are challenging.

- Students are expected to strive to accomplish the instructional goals, both as individuals and group members.
• Teachers model seriousness of purpose and a thoughtful approach to inquiry, and use instructional strategies designed to elicit and support similar qualities from students.
• Teachers show interest in and respect for students’ thinking and demand well-reasoned arguments rather than opinions voiced without adequate thought or commitment.

5. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when the learning is active.

• Teachers and students engage in reflective thinking and decision-making as events unfold during instruction.
• Students develop new understanding through a process of active construction of knowledge.
• Interactive discourse facilitates the construction of meaning required to develop important social understanding.
• Teachers gradually move from providing considerable guidance by modeling, explaining, or supplying information that builds student knowledge, to a less directive role that encourages students to become independent and self-regulated learners. Teachers emphasize authentic activities that call for real-life applications using the skills and content of the field.

Adapted from the National Standards for Social Studies Teachers, National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).