

Operationalizing the Thematic Strands of Social Studies for Young Learners

DeAn M. Krey

The advent of the ten thematic social studies strands identified by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) marks a fresh era of thought about the teaching of social studies. Spawned from a definition that describes the social studies as *the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence* (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994, p. 3), the thematic strands point to a core of fundamental knowledge drawn from many academic disciplines. In particular these comprehensive thematic strands draw most heavily on the social science disciplines of *anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences.* (Ibid)

The Ten Thematic Strands

Each of the 10 thematic strands encompasses meanings from one or more of the disciplines. The thematic strands which have been identified by NCSS follow:

- I Culture
- II Time, Continuity, and Change
- III People, Places, and Environments
- IV Individual Development and Identity
- V Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- VI Power, Authority, and Governance
- VII Production, Distribution, and Consumption
- VIII Science, Technology, and Society
- IX Global Connections
- X Civic Ideals and Practices

(NCSS, 1994, pp. x-xii)

The power of the 10 thematic strands lies in their potential to serve as a framework for social studies curricula and stimulate visions of effective classroom learning experiences.

This article presents a new thematic model for operationalizing the thematic strands of social studies during the learning experiences of young students. It includes a visual representation of the relationships between a thematic teaching unit, focus questions, classroom learning experiences, the 10 thematic strands of social studies identified by NCSS and civic competence. The general thematic model and a specific model are both included.

Thematic Strands and Focus Questions

Whether the approved social studies curriculum of a school calls for teaching units of study with traditional foci such as Families or The Westward Movement, or innovative foci like Quilts (McCall, 1994) or Pockets (Field Labbo, 1994), an initial step is to itemize the basic knowledge to be drawn from the social science disciplines. For example, consider a unit of study with a focal point of The Places We Call Home, written for children ranging in age from 6-9 years old.

Brainstorming what to teach about The Places We Call Home could result in the following systematic itemization of knowledge in the form of sets of focus questions. (It should be noted that the focus questions listed here are a suggested partial listing of those that could appear in each set. Only Thematic Strands I to VII are included due to space limitations.

Set I-Culture

- * What leisure activities take place in my home(s)?
- * What is the ethnic background of those who live in my home(s)?
- * What traditions are observed by the people in my home(s)?
- * What religious beliefs are held by people in my home(s)?
- * What language(s) is (are) spoken in my home(s)?

Set II-Time, Continuity, Change

- * How has (have) my home(s) changed?
- * When was (were) my present home(s) created?
- * Has my family always lived here?
- * Who else has lived here?
- * What stories exist about events that have occurred in my home(s)?

Set III-People, Places, Environments

- * What does (do) my home(s) look like? Inside? Outside?
- * What is the location of my present home(s)? Why?
- * What are the physical and the human characteristics of the place(s) I call home?
- * Where else has my family lived?

Set IV-Individual Development & Identity

- * What is special to me about my home(s)?
- * What special events have I experienced in my home(s)?
- * What is my favorite space within my home(s)?

Set V-Individuals, Groups, & Institutions

- * What family members live in my home(s)? (Each child should be invited to include all persons in the settings they call home.)
- * Who are our neighbors? How are we alike/different?
- * In what groups do my family members and I participate?

Set VI-Power, Authority, & Governance

- * What rules must I observe in my home(s)? Why?
- * Are there rules I must follow in my yard(s) or neighborhood(s)? Why?
- * Who enforces rules and laws in my neighborhood?
- * How can I get help if I need it?

Set VII-Production, Distribution, & Consumption

- * How does the availability of money to the adults in my family affect my home(s)?
- * What does it cost to live in different types of homes?
- * What personal possessions do I keep in my home(s)?

Having itemized the knowledge about *The Places We Call Home*, one can easily see that the groupings of focus questions are directly related to one or more of the ten thematic strands of social studies. For example, Set Three of the question groupings given above, which begins with the question, *What does (do) my home(s) look like?* develops the meanings contained in Thematic Strand III, *People, Places and Environments*. The remaining sets of questions which maintain home(s) as a focal point emerge from the other thematic strands creating the “integrated study of the social sciences” called for in the National Council for Social Studies definition of social studies (NCSS, 1994, p. 3).

A Thematic Model for Teaching

The next phase in the teaching process, after brainstorming focus questions for a thematic unit, is to choose learning experiences which enable children to answer the focus questions. The learning experiences might involve a children’s book, a role play, a learning game, an interview, a computer simulation or an infinite variety of other activities. As children are engaged in these experiences, the teacher’s role is to guide the children toward building the conceptual knowledge (or meanings) of the appropriate thematic strands of the social studies. Finally, as children begin to demonstrate acquisition of knowledge related to one or more of the thematic strands, they grow toward civic competence. To summarize the entire teaching process, Figure 1 (on opposite page) details the thematic model for teaching social studies. The phases address (a) a thematic teaching unit, (b) focus questions, (c) classroom learning experiences, (d) thematic strands of social studies, and (e) the major purpose of social studies, which is civic competence.

An Applied Example of the Thematic Model

Figure 2 provides an example of a specific learning experience from a unit focused on *The Places We Call Home*. Starting at the bottom of the model and following Spoke III which has the focus question, *What does (do) my home(s) look like?*, a teacher could choose the learning experience of making a class book. Children would then be asked to make sketches of their present home(s), either the inside or the outside. While the children sketch, the teacher would circulate and discuss with children the physical and human characteristics of the place(s) shown in their drawings. In addition, each child would be asked to complete the sentence stem, *My home is special because...* and write it on their sketch. For closure, the children would be invited to share their sketches with the class and the teacher would question further about the physical and human characteristics shown in the sketches prepared for the class book.

It can be seen that the example learning experience shown in Figure 2 puts emphasis on Thematic Strand III, *People, Places, and Environments* (the geography spoke). That is, as children make sketches that show the physical and human characteristics of the place(s) they call home, they are focusing on a place and describing the environment in which they and their significant others interact. However, when the teacher asks the children to complete the sentence stem about why their home is special, the thematic strand that becomes important is Strand IV, *Individual Development and Identity* (the psychology spoke).

Figure 2 shows that it is also the case that several other thematic strands such as *Individuals, Groups, and Institutions* will emerge during lessons like the one described above. Having the focus question of, *What family members live in my home(s)?*, it follows that this strand will logically be included in classroom discussions about the sketches of homes completed for the class book. This

demonstrates the integrated nature of social studies learning experiences for young children. It is a reminder that all of the social sciences have a contribution to make when teaching social studies to young learners.

Constructing a Thematic Unit: The Places We Call Home with Emphasis on Strand III-People, Places, and Environment

The unit is for children ranging in age from 6–11 years old. It includes historical fiction, biography, autobiography, journals and poetry. The books lend themselves to being read aloud by the teacher and contain supporting illustrations. Any of the books cited could be placed at the center of the Thematic Model shown in Figure 1. Seven of the NCSS Thematic Strands are matched with Focus Questions and text information below:

Culture/What leisure activities take place in my home(s)?

Chall, M. W. (1992). *Up North at the Cabin*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

A cabin in Northern Minnesota is the setting for this historical fiction. Based on the author's own traditional vacations, the young girl in the story has memorable experiences with other family members and nature.

Keegan, M. (1990). *Pueblo boy*.

New York: Cobblehill Books.

This is a biography of a child growing up in the San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico.

Time, Continuity, and Change/How has (have) my home(s) changed?

Dragonwagon, C. (1990). *Home place*. New York: Macmillan.

In this book of historical fiction a family, hiking in a wooded area, discovers artifacts at an old homesite, leading them to imagine the way of life of the family who called this place home in another time.

Knight, A. S. (1992). *The way West*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

This is an authentic journal account of a nine-member family and their wagon train trek from their home in Iowa to Oregon Territory in 1853.

People, Places and Environments/ What does (do) my home(s) look like?

Houston, G. (1992). *My great aunt Arizona*. New York: HarperCollins.

This biography tells the story of the author's great aunt who was born in Appalachia and became a teacher. Arizona Houston-Huges influenced generations of children who attended school in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Siebert, D. (1989). *Heartland*. New York: HarperTrophy (div. of HarperCollins).

In this book of poetry the Midwest people and farmlands of today are described and illustrated.

Individual Development and Identity/What is special to me about my home(s)?

Shannon, G. (1993). *Climbing Kansas mountains*. New York: Bradbury Press.

This book of historical fiction presents a boy and his father who share a special hometown experience by driving across their town and climbing a local grain elevator. The boy treasures the time spent with his father and the adventure of seeing his home and its surroundings from the top of a "Kansas mountain".

Rosen, M. J. (Ed.). (1992). *Home*.

New York: HarperCollins.

In this book thirty authors and illustrators give personalized answers to the question, "What does home mean?" (Their time and talent were donated so that proceeds from the book could be used to aid the homeless.)

Individuals, Groups and Institutions/What family member(s) live in my home(s)?

Cooper F. (1994). *Coming Home: from the life of Langston Hughes*. New York: Philomel Books.

This biography explains the many life experiences that helped Langston Hughes define home. From hearing Grandma Mary's stories in Kansas to living and writing poetry and stories in Harlem, New York, he came to see that home was within himself.

Bedard, M. (1992). *Emily*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Pub.

This book of historical fiction is based on evidence about the poet Emily Dickenson at home in her Amherst, Massachusetts neighborhood.

Power, Authority and Government/ What rules must I observe in my home(s)?

Yolen, J. (1992). *Letting swift river go*. New York: The Trumpet Club.

A father and daughter recall the characteristics of their Swift River hometown in New England. They visit the reservoir that covered with water the homes of the people who used to live there. This historical fiction recounts an event that has occurred in many locations in the world where large cities must have water.

McLerran, A. (1992). *Roxaboxen*.

New York: Puffin Books.

Based on historical evidence, this book tells the story of a young girl, her sisters and friends who were careful to observe the rules of their invented home town at the edge of the Arizona desert.

Production, Distribution and Consumption/How does the availability of money to the adults in my family affect my home(s)?

Hendershot, J. (1987). *In coal country*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

In this autobiography, the life of each member of a miner's family living in Willow Grove, Ohio on Company Row is seen through the eyes of his daughter.

Cross, V. (1992). *Great-grandma tells of Threshing Day*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Co.

This historical fiction presents a story about two children on a Missouri farm in the early 1900's as they experience the work and excitement of threshing day.

References

Field, S. L., & Labbo, L. A. (1994). A pocketful of history. *Social Studies & the young learner*, 7(2), 4-7.

McCall, Ava L. (1994). Including quilters' voices in the social studies curriculum. *Social Studies & the young learner*, 7(1), 10-14.

National Council for the Social Studies. (1994). *Expectations of excellence: Curriculum standards for social studies*, Bulletin 89, Washington, DC: Author.

About the Author

DeAn M. Krey is a professor in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. She teaches in an integrated elementary methods block which includes social studies, language arts and science.

Krey, DeAn. "Operationalizing the Thematic Strands of Social Studies for Young Learners." National Council for the Social Studies. Used with permission.