Developing International Understanding in Young Children: The Soup Company Storypath

International Assembly
National Council for the Social Studies Annual Meeting
Atlanta, 2009

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As citizens of the globe, they [K-12 students] need to be aware of the global nature of societal issues, to care about people in distant places, to understand the nature of global economic integration, to appreciate the interconnectedness and interdependence of peoples, to respect and protect cultural diversity, to fight for social justice for all, and to protect planet Earth—home for all human beings. (p. 113) Yong Zhao

Access to Robust Social Studies Learning

Young children are too often denied access to a robust social studies curriculum for the sake of more literacy and numeracy but at what cost to their future as global citizens? How will they meet the expectations set out by Zhao if they are deprived of opportunities to learn about their world in their early years? These early school years are important as this is the time when values and attitudes are formed about others; and when social awareness and interpersonal skills are developed (Selman, 2003). Children of the 21st Century undoubtedly will be confronted by cultural differences next door or further afield. Learning about cultural differences and developing social awareness does not exclude literacy and numeracy; in fact, learning literacy and numeracy in the context of a social studies experience can make such skills more meaningful for young learners.

With the recognition of globalization on all fronts, national standards are being reframed to better reflect the knowledge and skills that will be needed for the future. The Framework for 21st Century Learning (2004) highlights interdisciplinary themes such as global awareness and civic literacy that are the heart and soul of a robust social studies curriculum. Further, the Framework goes on to cite such skills as creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration. The Framework provides a compelling argument for the kind of social studies program that is described in the remainder of this paper. Further, developmental psychology underscores the value of teaching young children about cultural universals—human activities that are part of everyday life regardless of a child’s socio-economic background. As Brophy and Alleman (2010) confirm:

Educators who approach the subject of cultural universals analytically can help students develop a valuable understanding of how our social system works, how and why it got to be that way, how and why related practices vary across location and culture, and what all of this means for personal, social and civic decision making. (p. 133)

Using the cultural universal of food, we created a unit of study entitled, “The Soup Company” to engage young children in cultural understandings that begin with the idea: everyone eats soup. We used the Storypath approach (McGuire, 1997); an approach that is inquiry based and focuses on problem solving. Moreover, Storypath provides an organizational framework drawing on the story form of scene, characters, and plot to help learners develop and make sense of deep social and cultural understandings. What makes Storypath uniquely different from other learning approaches is that the children become the characters in a story, set in a real time and place, and they must resolve the plot of the story. The universality of story, with the children imagining themselves as the characters, places the students within the context of the unfolding events. Learning becomes a lived experience carefully guided by an inquiry process that ensures the children learn important social studies skills and understandings.

The Soup Company Storypath

This Storypath begins with the announcement by the teacher of the creation of a soup company and an invitation to the children to be the workers in the company. As the unit is introduced, children learn that soups come in many different forms and from many different places around the world. The concrete example of soup provides an entry into developing appreciation and understanding of similarities and differences among people beginning with the soups that children eat at home. This topic, “The Soup Company,” allows learners to focus on big ideas grounded in economics and cultural and social interaction through the “lived experience” of the Storypath approach.
As the unit develops, children learn that:

- families in different times and places eat soup and that many different ingredients are used to make soup;
- ingredients available in regions where families live, personal preference, culture, religion, and family traditions can influence the particular mix of ingredients used in soups;
- businesses provide goods and services that they think consumers want;
- workers in businesses specialize in jobs to contribute to the production of goods and services;
- workers rely upon each other and cooperate to get jobs done and solve problems, and
- businesses can create demand for products through advertising and pricing.

A civic dimension is included, with a focus on rights and responsibilities related to problems faced by the soup company. Skill development naturally emerges from the experience as children sequence the production process for making soup; work cooperatively to make decisions about the soup company; write to describe and persuade; and participate in problem-solving meetings. Additionally, children have opportunities to develop appreciation for the variety of soups from other cultures and times and explore new “tastes.”

Some may argue that these complex learning goals are developmentally inappropriate but our research shows quite the opposite (Fair Go Team, 2007). Within the context of the Storypath approach, children grasp complex understandings because they live the experience; are authentically engaged; and construct personal meaning from the experience.

Furthermore, a unit such as this is ideal for including families—everyone eats soup whether it’s opening a can of tomato soup or making a traditional family recipe—and children’s experiences are affirmed. Children can gather soup recipes to make a cookbook; visit businesses where family members work or invite family members to share what they know about soup. This topic opens doors to a myriad of opportunities for family involvement; including discussion of religious or cultural traditions related to food. The involvement of family in authentic learning experiences within the context of the storyline further affirms the body of research that advocates for family involvement to support children’s learning (Epstein and Salinas, 2004).

The Learning Sequence for the Storypath

Creating the Setting: The Soup Company
As noted earlier, the Storypath is introduced with an invitation for the children to become workers for a new soup company explaining that the company needs workers who are willing to find out about lots of different kinds of soup, can work well together, and are creative. Assuming a favorable response, students explore what it means to be workers in a soup company, before they create the setting, or frieze, in their classroom. To create the setting for the Soup Company Storypath, students consider what they will need for the soup company, guided by teacher questions to help them make concrete connections to the business of making soup. Children then create the floor plan for the soup company thinking about the rooms, tools and equipment they will need.

Once the floor plan is completed, a discussion to reinforce conceptual understanding, vocabulary and soup-making, connects the visual representation to the work of a soup company. Questions are asked to extend and deepen the children’s understanding of the production process and authentically introduce economic concepts such as natural, human and capital resources, scarcity, opportunity cost, supply and demand, and profit-motive. A jointly constructed word bank can bolster vocabulary and support writing activities such as the preparation of a “press release” or podcast announcing the new soup company.

Creating the Characters: The Soup Company Workers
Children are now ready to imagine themselves as soup company workers by writing a simple job application and making a model of themselves as workers in the company with appropriate uniforms, or clothing, and the tools they will need to do their job. Introducing themselves as workers in the soup company will reinforce conceptual understanding and develop their presentation skills.

Context Building: Learning about Soup and a Healthy Diet
Exploration of all the different ways around the world in which people make soup can begin with students writing a letter to their families asking them to share a family soup recipe. Children bring their recipes to class (along with their family and the soup if possible) to discuss and sample. The exploration of soups, their various names, and origins can be explored over a number of days and interspersed with short role-plays to reinforce children’s soup company roles. Ideally, the tasting of different soups—every soup company needs taste-testers—reinforces and expands children’s understanding and appreciation for similarities and differences. Adding soup names and origins to the word bank and linking to a world map develops children’s understanding of the movement of people as recipes travel with families as they move from place to place. To reinforce previous learning, children are reminded that certain ingredients come from particular regions of the world and that the ingredients reflect flavors and tastes—making distant and unfamiliar places seem less so.

Lessons on healthy foods and a balanced diet follow, as children consider various ingredients and their food groups. The “soup company workers” can interview guest speakers who work in similar businesses, such as restaurants. In the Sydney classroom, a chef came to the classroom to talk about her work, speciality clothing and types of soups she made. The children then spent time looking at soup cans and designing their favourite soups and attractive soup labels. Children were engaged as they participated in role plays about making different soups and tasting the new soups. This led the children to consider the soups they wanted to make in their soup company. A company meeting was called to help them deliberate on the best soup(s) for their company. Children can write persuasively about the soup(s) they think their company should produce. Guiding children through the persuasive writing process reinforces writing skills, the concept of taking a position, and then supporting the position with logical reasons reinforcing important social studies understanding through the writing process.

Critical Incidents: Trouble in the Soup Company
The critical incidents to be solved can include any number of problems. A natural for this Storypath is one that all production companies fear – no one will buy the product. Presenting the problem of how to get customers to buy the soup(s), introduces the concepts of marketing and advertising. This problem provides important assessment opportunities because children can write or draw advertisements that reflect the major learning goals of the unit. Understanding the concept of advertising will also assist students to be more critical consumers. Other critical incidents can be selected based on learning goals, available time, children’s learning needs, and the logical progression of the Storypath. Possible critical incidents include:

- Customers are not buying the soup.
- A customer sends a letter or email to object to the company’s choice of soup making the claim we need “basic soup”; in other words, challenging the “appreciation” for soups from other places in the world.
- Certain ingredients are unavailable because of shipping problems, foul weather, or some real-life current event that could interfere with getting the needed ingredients.
- The price of the soup and some of the ingredients are so expensive that customers may not buy the soup.

Key questions will guide children’s problem solving and the natural unfolding of the story, along with the reading, writing, and “company meetings” authentically applied in context.

In the Sydney classroom children designed new soup labels to increase sales and when there was a flood in the kitchen of the soup company, children role played how everyone was responsible for fixing the problem, getting the plumber, and cleaning up and getting the company back on track – working as a team became an important learning as children worked together to figure out how to solve the problem.
Concluding Episode: The Grand Opening of the Soup Company

To bring closure to the unit, a grand opening is planned inviting families and other classrooms, and/or people from a soup kitchen, to enjoy the students’ creation(s). The grand opening can be as simple or elaborate as appropriate to the circumstances. Children’s imaginations will suffice if they eat imaginary soup, but of course, the making and eating of real soup adds an exciting dimension. In the Sydney classroom after the role plays with the pretend soups, the children were really excited about making real soup. They all brought in ingredients so the vegetable soup recipe evolved from what the students brought in. Parents were surprised that the students ate the vegetables in the soup (mixed with plenty of noodles) given their response to eating vegetables at home! Washing the ingredients, chopping safely, allowing the soup to cool before eating it were major lessons that naturally grew out of the experience.

Opportunities for counting and measuring ingredients make numeracy skills an integral aspect of learning. Advertisements for the grand opening, invitations to families and the like, authentically apply reading and writing skills and create a sense of drama for the final episode. Making the soup, serving it to “customers,” and determining price (real or with play money), address a range of learning goals including important numeracy skills. The importance of reflection on the learning both in the final episode and throughout the unit reinforces and maximizes learning. This brings the Storypath unit to conclusion.

Enhancing the Global Connection

*The Soup Company*, in and of itself, has global connections throughout but for the purposes of this paper, we decided to enhance the global connection by introducing two classrooms from two different hemispheres to each other—Seattle, USA and Sydney, Australia. Given the schedules of the school year in the two different hemispheres, the Sydney class completed *The Soup Company Storypath* before the Seattle class was ready to begin. We decided to capitalize on the “experts” from one classroom providing guidance to the other classroom that was just beginning the unit. Using email technology allowed the two classrooms to communicate without worrying about time zones. The class in Seattle prepared questions to ask the class in Sydney as they embarked on their own company plans.

These concrete experiences connected children from two parts of the world in authentic dialogues. Sharing photos of the classrooms made the email experience more tangible as children, not only saw how the Sydney class organized their soup company, but also made the concrete experience of soup making a common connector for understanding each other. At the time of preparing this paper, we noted that the affective response to being experts and consulting experts resulted in children being more engaged and operating with a sense of pride in their work. Children made comments such as, “We have to help each other in the soup company.” This sense of pride is important for many of these children as they come from highly diverse backgrounds and many are from immigrant families. For many, English is a second language and they are often from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, developing a sense of self-worth based on their ability—what they know and are able to do—is essential to the learning process (Grant and Gillette, 2006). *The Soup Company Storypath* has demonstrated that it is well suited to such affective and cognitive learning goals.

The questions the Seattle children asked and the responses they received from the Sydney children were thus:

1. Why did you decide to make soup?
   We decided to make soup because we were talking about who works in a company and the different jobs they have and we picked soup because it is healthy.

2. How do you make soup?
   We put carrots, potatoes, chicken stock, mushrooms, noodles, onions, celery, salt and pepper in a big pot and cooked it. We had toast with it.

3. Can you send us some of the soup you made?
No. We can send you our recipe if you like.

4. How does the soup taste that you made?
   It was really yummy!

5. Did you share when you made the soup?
   Yes. We ate it on our SOUP GROUP COMPANY opening day with our parents, teacher and school principal.

6. Did you have any leftover soup?
   No we ate it all!

7. Did you make the soup for your families?
   Yes and we invited our families to come to school.

8. What kind of soup did you make?
   We made vegetable soup.

This ongoing project will continue to connect these two classrooms to enhance the international connections and foster understanding across borders. We are continuing to collect data on children’s and teachers’ responses to this international project.

As noted at the beginning of this paper in the Framework for 21st Century Learning (2004), global awareness and civic literacy are necessary for citizenship accompanied by the skills such as creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration. The Soup Company endeavors to make such challenging goals accessible to young children through the Storypath approach. In this unit seeds were planted for fostering global understanding. Our hope is that these seeds will be nourished throughout the early grades and beyond so that our children will have the knowledge and understanding to meet the challenges they will face in the 21st Century.

REFERENCES


