

Using Inquiry to Connect Young Learners to Social Studies

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Last March, Mr. Peterson's 2nd grade class began their social studies lessons outside, in front of the school. On days one and two the students used their thermometers to determine the current temperature. On day three, Mr. Peterson asked them to describe the type of weather for that day as clear, windy, sunny, or calm. It was a windy day. He asked them to observe their surroundings and tell why they classified the weather as windy. Students gave responses such as: "The trees are moving." "I feel the air blowing across my face." "Martha's hat just blew across the street." On day four, Mr. Peterson asked the students to describe the similarities and differences between the wind on days three and four. One student responded, "The trees are not moving today like they did yesterday." Mr. Peterson then invited students to ask questions about how climate might affect their needs and wants. Once back in the classroom, he jotted their questions on the white board and asked, "How might we find answers to your questions?" Occasionally, he asked them to share their knowledge about the climate and how it affects their daily lives. Their own words guided Mr. Peterson's first few lessons in his unit on weather and how people live. This exploratory lesson is being used by many of today's classroom teachers.

Research shows that when teachers feel comfortable teaching social studies and they are aware of the many hands-on activities integrated lessons, the achievement of students improve. Inquiry is a multifaceted activity that involves making observations; posing questions, examining books, technology databases and other sources of information to see what is already known in light of evidence; and using tools to gather, analyze, and communicate the results. Inquiry requires identification of assumptions, use of critical and logical thinking, and consideration of alternative explanations.

Inquiry involves activities and skills that focus on the active search for knowledge or understanding to satisfy a curiosity. With the advances in cognitive

research and developmental psychology, educators and researchers agree that most people learn best through personal experiences and by connecting new information to what they already believe or know. The guided inquiry teaching model encourages learners to construct their own conceptualizations while exposing them to the content suggested for a given grade level Eggen and Kauchak (2001). Villavicencio (2000) teaches kindergarteners using an inquiry path model that asks learners to engage five steps of inquiry planned by them.

- Form a question.
- Make a plan.
- Do the investigation.
- Record and report.
- Reflect, revisit and plan again.

A more engaging inquiry-based model is the 5-E Learning Cycle, a method of structuring a lesson based upon hands-on activities and constructivist learning theory. It is a recursive cycle of unique learning stages that include: engagement, exploration, explanation, extension, and evaluation. The 5E Learning Cycle involves learning something new, or attempting to understand something familiar in greater depth. It is not a linear process. In trying to make sense of things students use both their prior experience and the first-hand knowledge gained from new explorations. The science lesson often takes several days or weeks to complete. The 5-E model builds on the tasks of inquiry identified in the National Science Education Standards.

Step One: Engagement

The engagement phase of the 5-E model is intended to provide a focus for the lesson and to allow the teacher to probe students' initial conceptions. Mrs. Johnson is reading



a book on weather to first graders. She is involving her students in the engagement stage of this 5E Learning Cycle lesson on *Seasons*. After listening to the story, she asks the students what they know about weather and the four seasons. This engagement stage can be organized around a biography of a famous community leader, a demonstration, a discussion, or other activity. The goal is to access students' prior knowledge and peak their curiosity about the social studies concept or topic.

Step Two: Exploration

In this step, provide opportunities for students to use the inquiry processes of observing, questioning, and investigating. The objective is for students to develop basic understandings of the concept introduced during engagement and to develop deep knowledge about materials and ideas related to the concept. Organize students to work in groups. The teacher serves as a facilitator and refrains from using a direct instructional approach. The exploration phase of the 5-E model proceeds much like guided discovery.

Here are examples of essential questions to guide lesson planning during exploration.

- What is the precise concept that students will explore?
- What activities must the children do to become familiar with the concept?
- What kinds of observations and records should the children keep?
- What kinds of instructions will the children need? How can you give the instructions without telling the concept?

Step Three: Explanation

Mrs. Johnson and her students are engaged in a discussion. They are explaining in their own words how the four seasons are alike and different. They also discuss weather as one factor that determines how people live. She asks them to justify and clarify their ideas. She also introduces a new concept: Seasons follow a weather



pattern. She helps students make a connection between their real world experiences of wearing different types of clothing during different seasons.

Here are essential questions to guide your lesson planning.

- What kinds of information or findings should learners discuss?
- How can you help students summarize their findings?
- How can you guide the students and refrain from telling them what they should have found, even if their understanding is incomplete?
- What concept “labels” should the children discover?
- Why is the concept important?

Step Four: Extension

The extension lesson provides opportunities for students to apply labels, definitions, explanations and skills in new, but similar situations. Students become involved in investigative projects, problem solving and decision-making. Here is the opportunity to use the community as a laboratory. Encourage students to design and complete their own investigations.

Consider asking these essential questions.

- What questions can be used to encourage discovery of the concept's importance?
- What new experiences will help to apply or expand the concept?
- What is the next concept related to the present one?

Step Five: Evaluation

In this stage, teachers and students have the opportunity to assess learning. Evaluation and assessment can occur at all points along the continuum of the instructional process. Some of the tools that assist in this diagnostic process are: rubrics, teacher observations checklists, student interviews, and portfolios. Regardless of the selected method, the assessment of student learning should inform the teacher about students' progress toward attainment of the instructional goals, and inform the teacher about appropriate instructional adjustments.

Design the evaluation lesson plan to answer these essential questions.

- What are the appropriate learning outcomes you should expect?
- What types of hands-on evaluation techniques can the students do to demonstrate the basic process skills?
- What techniques are appropriate for learners to demonstrate the integrated process skills?
- How can pictures help students to demonstrate how well they can think through problems?
- What types of questions will help students reflect on what they have discovered?

Here is a 5-E Lesson supporting the generalization that weather is one factor that determines how people live.

The Seasons

<p>Engagement</p>	<p>This lesson focuses on how the weather is different for each season. Students will listen to a story, “The Four Seasons” by Rozanne Lanczak Williams, which discusses the weather changes during the four seasons. Students will make connections to a season by clothing and other objects associated with it.</p> <p>Invite students to talk about today's weather.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the weather today? • Is it hot/cold, warm/cool, rainy, windy? • What did you wear or carry today because of the weather? • Ask students if they can name the seasons? • Ask students if they know what season it is now? • How do they know? • What happens in this season? <p>Introduce students to the concept, season as a time of the year that has a certain kind of weather. Explain there are four seasons in a year.</p>												
<p>Exploration</p>	<p>Students will observe various items pertaining to each season. Ask students to record what they see. Ask students to name some of the items. Ask students if they know when these items are worn.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Materials Needed</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">boots</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">umbrella</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">gloves</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">raincoat</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">heavy jackets</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">flowers</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">light jacket</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">sunglasses</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">long sleeve shirt</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">swimsuits</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="padding: 5px;">short sleeve shirt</td> </tr> </table>	boots	umbrella	gloves	raincoat	heavy jackets	flowers	light jacket	sunglasses	long sleeve shirt	swimsuits		short sleeve shirt
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<p>Explanation</p>	<p>Ask students if they can name the seasons. Write the seasons on chart paper as they are identified. Ask students to describe typical weather for each season. Show posters with seasons and ask them to describe what they see.</p> <p>Ask students to describe pictures of seasons. Let students know that seasons follow one another in a pattern. (Which season comes next?)</p> <p>Show students photographs of what people do and how they dress for summer and winter. Have students to organize the pictures using a foldable.</p> <p>Have students make comparisons between each column on the foldable. Have students <i>speculate</i> about different businesses that operate during winter and those that operate during the summer.</p> <p>Ask the students why we need to wear different clothing in different seasons? Responses may include temperature change, and protection from the nature elements (rain and sun). Students should be told that although seasons change at a specific time</p>												

	<p>in the year the weather change is a continual process and does not happen overnight.</p> <p>Ask, “Why do people participate in different activities and wear different clothing during summer and winter?”</p>
Expansion	<p>Students will make a season wheel, depicting seasons in the correct order. Each student will color clothing worn for each season, cut them apart and glue them on a strip of construction paper representing the order of seasons to make a season wheel.</p> <p>Ask students the name of the first season on their wheel and the names of remaining seasons. How do you know? Why do the season wheels look alike? Why do people wear similar clothing? The seasons follow the same pattern order no matter where they start. Students will share their season wheels and tell how they sequenced the seasons.</p> <p>Students will bring items from home that symbolizes each season and place them under the right category on a poster board.</p>
Evaluation	<p>Observe students identifying seasonal cards with the correct name and describe the appropriate and clothing for each season.</p>

Modified from Zarrillo (2004) “Grade One: Using an Integrative Model –“Summer and Winter”

References:

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Zarrillo, J. (2005). Teaching elementary social studies, (Chapter 6: Inquiry and Critical Thinking.) Upper Saddler River, New Jersey: Pearson.