
**SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION IN A NEW WORLD:
BEYOND “PROBLEM-SOLVING**

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Introduction

It is well known, and scholars will agree, that we live in a time of great uncertainties, of dazzling political changes, of enormous shifting of socio-economic realities. Within the twinkling of an eye we have witnessed monumental changes in our experiences as humans. The complexity of the world we are living, caused by fast industrialisation and technological inventions, requires that individual and groups possess skills in problem solving as they strive to understand the circumstances and give meaning to their life. As human interact and struggle to improve the quality of life, it sometime lead to unhealthy competition and crises at various levels (community, state, regional and global levels). Teachers undoubtedly are advantageously placed to prepare learners with knowledge and competencies needed to confront the challenges related to these complexities as change-agents within the structure of human-environment interaction. Social Studies education and educators are particularly positioned to achieve this goal.

Like every other country, Nigeria looks up to its educational system for creating people who are conscious of their responsibility but are equally conscious and can demand their rights. Nigeria’s philosophy of education is geared toward the

development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen while integrating him or her into the community (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2013). Social Studies, at all levels of education, occupies a centre-stage position in actualising this compelling demand of the Nigerian society.

Social Studies as a field of study for many decades was ingrained in the habit of thinking only of solving problems. We were taught to identify a problem and then work to put it right. In this paper, it is argued that the Social Studies' attempts to maintain relevance in the new world will falter unless Social Studies educators clearly redefine their pedagogical focus from a fixation with problem-solving with its biases which limit the creative ability of Social Studies educators and learners to think about what they want to create rather than what they want to eliminate. This paper serves to expand the perceptions of Social Studies educators beyond current assumptions and let go of dependence on problem-solving to teaching Social Studies. In doing this, I will provide answers to these posers: What is Social Studies? What is/are the contents of Social Studies in the new world? What is Problem-Solving in Social Studies? And finally, what should Social Studies educators do beyond problem solving?

What is Social Studies?

Debate over the place and purpose of Social Studies has a long and contentious history. Social Studies may mean different thing to different people, as there is no one definition of Social Studies that is why several scholars came up with different definition of Social Studies. In spite of the varied definitions, Barth and Shermis, (1970) have classified them into three broad categories, thus: Social Studies seen as an approach to the teaching, the integration of the social sciences, and citizenship education. Some of the issues facing Social Studies educators in Nigeria are: What should be Social Studies' place and role in relation to national education, citizenship education, and nation building projects? The school curricula have allocation for all of these and, in practice, they often contradict the seeming cohesive planning. Social Studies develop

the essential values, attitudes, knowledge, understandings, skills and processes necessary for students to become active and responsible citizens, engaged in and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world. Social Studies connect students with the real world (Brodsky-Schur, 2020). In today's interconnected world, students must be prepared to interact with people of all cultures and communities, and Social Studies prepares them for this.

What is/are the contents of Social Studies in the new world?

What is the new world, or in the common parlance, new normal? Before we were launched into the new world, our life was relatively normal. We engaged in face-to-face interactions, and travelled freely to see friends and relatives. But with the COVID 19 pandemic and its attendant effects, our life has dramatically changed particularly our educational system.

The dynamic nature of Social Studies makes special interest in addressing contemporary issues inevitable. Several issues of importance to Social Studies education have engaged the global attention. Such issues include HIV/AIDS, population growth, environment and sustainable development, global peace, human rights, governance and modern citizenship. Other social issues of concern are corruption, examination malpractices, electoral malpractices, insecurity, cultism, drug abuse, prostitution, human trafficking, pornography, drugs abuse etc. The greatest challenge brought about by the "new world" since the pandemic is the temptation of sweeping global challenges of pre-COVID-19 era underneath the table with the possibly consequences of aggravating their adverse effects on the collective human condition. Social Studies educators must be careful not to fall into the trap of losing touch with these contemporary issues to which COVID has only made an addition.

What is Problem-Solving in Social Studies?

The concept of problem-solving has been idealized to mean just about anything. *Many scholars have opined that problem-solving is what you do when you do not know what to do.* It is both a *process* of students' experience through engagement. It is how they frame, support, and consolidate their thinking when working through a question or task that is novel, with no immediate recognition of the solution (Costello, 2020; Siwi, & Siwi, 2019). It is also regarded as a *method*. There are many ways in which we can use problem-solving as part of our teaching. These can be divided into three categories: teaching **for** problem-solving, teaching **about** problem-solving and teaching **through** problem-solving. Teaching **about** problem-solving highlights and emphasizes characteristics of problem-solving, and provides opportunities for students to see it, experience it, and reflect on it. Teaching about problem solving underscores the importance of fluidity in thinking. Teaching **through** problem-solving is where students solve problems before a solution method or procedure is taught. Teaching **for** problem-solving is helping learners to acquire the knowledge, understanding and skills that are useful for solving-problem (Killen, 2015).

For several decades, Social Studies is perceived as a problem-solving discipline due to its historical antecedent which was addressed to social problem of racial discrimination in American and in African schools in response to emergent challenges of the post-independence era and colonial education, and methods of inquiry. Again, Social Studies subject themes and topics have been organized around a major social problem about which students are obviously concerned and affected. In the same spirit, experts in the field have continued to Nigerian Social Studies educators to channel the school subject towards addressing the country's socio-economic and political problems. However, the time has come to go beyond mere advocacy for problem-solving approach.

What should Social Studies educators do beyond Problem-solving?

In an ever-changing world, it is only inevitable that all things must succumb to the changing tides. As our society changes, so should school subject transit pedagogically, and in this transition Social Studies education and educators cannot afford to be left behind. This calls for collaborative, communicative ability and skills that will eventually aid students navigate their way in the future. As argued by Silverman,

Students must have the opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice. To do this, they must be encouraged to become thoughtful, creative problem solvers. Students need practice in analysing problems, asking important questions, considering various responses, arguing for or against different solutions, and seeking more than one answer to a problem. To become successful teachers, they will need to learn to think through problems so that they can arrive at effective solutions (Silverman, 1990:95).

To move beyond problem-solving, we must be creative. The creativity of individual must not be limited to solving existing problems, if it is, then the opportunity and potential of that individual to be creativity will be defined by the problem he/she attempt to solve. Of course, problem-solving is part of life and we should be eager to explore creative solutions to problems. However, creativity in response to a problem is just a reaction. This alone isn't bad, but we need to understand that it can be limiting. We must bring on board other dimensions of learning to derive maximum benefits from the application of problem-solving methodology. We shall illustrate with two clear examples of such learning skills.

Critical thinking is one of the most valued life skills a learner must possess. It is the ability to think logically, clearly, and rationally. Critical thinking enables learners to analyze, interpret,

reflect, evaluate, infer, and explain information to be able to solve problems and make decisions (Martinez & McGrath, 2014). When students can think critically and direct their education, they are leading their own learning and will need to continue to do so throughout their lives. Social Studies educators need to sharpen their critical thinking skills and get better at recognising good and bad arguments. Critical thinking skills include focusing, information gathering, organizing, analyzing and integrating, evaluating and generating idea (Bekirođlu, & Güllühan, 2022; Heard, et al., 2020).

Social Studies education and educators in the new world must try to adopt a pedagogical approach that enables learners to challenge their own assumptions and come to understand issues from diverse perspectives. This approach draws on the work of theorists such as Paulo Freire. At the core of Freire's approach is an emphasis on learners' ability to think critically about their lives and circumstances. This allows them to recognize the connections between their individual concerns and experiences and the wider social contexts in which they are embedded. This approach is focused on learning that is open and participatory, but also deeply political, and incorporates a recognition of power.

Due to the increasingly interconnectedness of the world, Social Studies educators should be concern about developing an understanding of the globalised world. Developing an understanding of links between our own lives and those of people throughout the world, local-global interdependencies and power relations, global and local development and environmental challenges, and issues of identity and diversity in multi cultural contexts.

Values have always been central to Social Studies education, it is time to move from implicit aspirations to explicit goals and practices, so that communities will shift from situational values (I do whatever a situation allows me to do) to sustainable values that generate trust, social bonds and hope. A learning approach based on values of justice, equality, inclusion, human rights, solidarity, and respect for others and for the environment should be adopted.

Social Studies educators should in the new world must strive to get students to acquire what in development parlance is global skills. Global skills encompass a broad and deep conceptualisation of skills, going beyond the numeracy, literacy and technical skills needed for work to include broader social and intercultural skills that both benefit the workplace and enable people to make a positive contribution to society. Bourn, (2011:13) identified these skills as: ability to communicate and work with people from a range of social and cultural backgrounds; critical thinking to question and reflect upon a range of social, economic and cultural influences on the learners' life; openness to a range of voices and perspectives from around the world; willingness to engage in society, resolve problems and seek solutions; recognition and understanding of the impact of globalisation on people's lives and the ability to make sense of a rapidly changing world; and willingness to play an active role in society at local, national and international level

The new world will be heavily reliant on technology. Technology can create learners that make teaching and learning more sociable and enjoyable. It can create teachers to collaboration on professional development and institutionalization of professional practice, while at the same time sharing and expanding teaching tools and pedagogies. Digital resources can be powerful learning tools, if they are used to support recognized students' learning processes and clear learning goals. It is the collaborative and social elements of learning that positively impact the learning process. And not in the depth or flexibility of content often associated with digital resources. Things that are simple to teach and test have also become simple to digitize and automate in the society we live in. In the future, human values, talents, and abilities will be combined with computer artificial intelligence (AI). We will be able to use technology to improve the world by using our creativity, awareness, and intellect.

Concluding Remarks

Social Studies educators must be interested in contemporary issues because we are all part of the global community. In Social Studies classrooms, deep learning should happen every day. To do that, teachers need to find opportunities to truly engage students while building their mastery of academic standards and Social Studies content. Students require knowledge and skills that will help them cope with the challenges of this ever-dynamic technological world. Social Studies education in the new world should be able to contribute meaningfully to achieving this goal.

Teaching Social Studies is an enormous responsibility. Social Studies educators must ensure that they come out with an equally significant sense of accomplishment when it is done well. We have an important mission, the education of pupils and students for responsible citizenship in this country is a task that must be done. Social Studies educators cannot afford to be left out. We must continue to explore every opportunity for pedagogical development that will make us relevant in the new world. Each Social Studies educator in this audience deserves recognition for the enthusiasm, and commitment that you bring to your work each day.

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