Teaching Social Studies With Games

Polona Jančič, Faculty of Education, University of Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia
Vlasta Hus, Faculty of Education, University of Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia

ABSTRACT
Social studies is a class students encounter in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school in Slovenia. It includes goals from the fields of geography, sociology, history, ethnology, psychology, economy, politics, ethics, aesthetics, and ecology. Among other didactic recommendations in the national curriculum for teaching, social studies include experiential learning with games. Game-based learning enables an optimal learning environment for students. The purpose of this article is to examine representation of games in social studies in primary school. The research sample consisted of 290 students of the fourth and fifth grade, 177 teachers teaching fourth and fifth grade, and 56 observed social studies lessons. Results showed that teachers rarely use didactic games in social studies. Results show that teachers rarely use game-based learning in teaching social science. Depending on the type of a game, the most commonly used one is a role-playing game. Most respondents’ students like game-based learning in social studies and also estimate games are not played often enough in social studies.

KEYWORDS
Didactics, Learning, Games, Primary School, Social Studies

INTRODUCTION
Social studies cannot be taught like a “closed box” – it should reflect interaction between school learning and what a student learns through everyday experiences (Mishra, 2015). Especially in their early years, children best gain experiences through playing. For children, playing can be serious learning. In recent years, the interest in games within classrooms has increased. Bognar (1987), Roskos & Christie (2000), Ginsburg (2007), Cenčič, Cotič & Medved Udovič (2008), Miller & Almon (2009) and Juriševič (2012) are only some of the authors that have researched the effects of games on teaching and learning. They studied and researched effects of games in educational process among different age groups of children and positive effects on different educational stages. After reviewing the literature, we discovered that games in social studies at this stage of primary school and its effects on students’ knowledge and competences is quite a non-researched area. In this research paper, we present the subject of social studies in Slovenian primary schools and its didactic recommendation for teaching with experiential learning and games. This research paper continues by presenting the research in games with its results and conclusion with discussion at the end.

SOCIAL STUDIES
In Slovenia, social studies is a class students encounter in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school. A total of 175 hours of class time are dedicated to it – 70 in the fourth grade and 105 in the fifth grade. It includes goals from the fields of geography, sociology, history, ethnology, psychology, economy, politics, ethics, aesthetics, and ecology. The emphasis of classes is on learning about the relationship between the individual, society, and the natural environment.

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In this course, students develop:

- Understanding of their social, cultural, and natural environment in time and space;
- Awareness of the interaction and the interdependence of cultural, social, natural processes, phenomena and the importance of sustainable development;
- Social, communication, research skills and abilities in addition to knowledge that enable them to effectively perform in the environment;
- Attitudes and values in the context of environmental, civic, and patriotic education as well as education for democracy and human rights; and cognitive, emotional, social abilities, skills and strategies involved in lifelong learning (Budnar et al., 2011).

Teaching Social Studies in Primary School

The didactic recommendations for the teaching of social studies suggest teachers should derive strategies from students’ prior knowledge, skills, and interests, as well as take into account students’ individual potentials when they plan lessons. It can be summarized that the National Curriculum for the Subject of Social Studies is based on and comes from the constructivist theory of learning and teaching. The constructivist approach emphasises students’ active roles in the education process, as well as their capability of developing their own knowledge by themselves based on experience and previous knowledge. A teacher must create favourable conditions for the learning process, including an encouraging environment and social atmosphere so that the processes of active and independent knowledge acquisition can begin (Maxim, 2010; Woolfolk, 2002). The strength of constructivism is that it unifies a lot of teaching strategies and, consequently, teachers can choose from an array of strategies within constructivism (Colburn, 2000). Teaching strategy is, by definition, a concept-based planned order of practical learning operations or activities which lead to a certain goal (Blažič et al., 2003). If a teacher is aware of which strategies effectively involve students in the learning process, they will be able to choose the appropriate one to achieve the objectives of the curriculum. Among other appropriate teaching strategies, a recommended strategy of teaching the subject social studies is experiential learning (Budnar et al., 2011). As games are one of the methods of experiential learning, this strategy was chosen as the centre of our research.

Experiential learning is a teaching and learning strategy that attempts to integrate the emotional and sensory experience of the students and their thinking into a whole (Marentič Požarnik, 2003). In the case of experiential learning, experience is understood as the student’s previous knowledge, which enables easier following of the class and learning (Ivanuš Grmek & Hus, 2006). A key element of experiential learning is the student being personally involved in this pedagogical approach (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010). The importance of the active involvement of children in the learning process is emphasised by several studies, namely by the following authors: Pianta, Laparo & Hamre (2006); Leavers (2005) and the study NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2003, 2005) (as in Tankersley et al., 2013).

Game-Based Learning

Children learn best through play. Through play, all areas of a child’s development can be enhanced. Play positively supports children’s social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language skills and is essential to a child’s overall healthy development (Boocock, 1971 as in Bognar, 1987; Ginsburg, 2007).

Some benefits of playing games for young students:

- Games enhance student’s creativity and problem-solving (Smith & Simon, 1984)
- Games contribute to the development of self-regulation and social skills such as turn-taking, collaboration, following rules, empathy, and motivation (Bodrova & Leong, 2007)
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