

A Personalized Simulation Learning Process  
for Elementary or Diversified  
Ability Students

by

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Attention to special education has become one of the most significant and widespread movements in American education in the seventies. Most of the recent research and literature in special education has been almost totally devoted to language and physical skills. Because of this, there have been areas of the curriculum that have been almost totally ignored. Social studies is one of these areas. By ignoring social studies a teacher is excluding an activity that is naturally designed to develop the learner's appreciation of his heritage and surroundings.

A major reason why social studies has been ignored in special education classes is probably that in traditional social studies programs the readability of materials is geared to the average child, and children who are in special education classes have difficulty in relating to the material and often get frustrated. This can also reflect on the teacher who in turn will not devote much time to social studies. It seems that many educators have put the sole blame on the content of textbooks, but we feel that the blame should not be placed there alone, but also in the misinterpretation by teachers of the content of such textbooks.

Social studies should be a favorite subject for teacher and student; this is the subject matter which covers the areas that have the greatest effect on our lives. Social studies deals with ideas about people and their problems both in the past and present

and can provide an appreciation of and/or respect for persons with differing abilities and cultures. It is the area of study which should give the most opportunity for looking at the world and its problems in new and creative ways. Often times children who have a hard time expressing themselves seem to get discouraged easily in social studies as well as other subjects. However, too often social studies lessons become bogged down in the accumulation of descriptive facts which have no relevance to these children. Knowing that social studies can be conducted at varying ability levels should be partial encouragement and should give the student a better opportunity to learn to like the subject.

An alternative approach that can create a more positive atmosphere for social studies education for special education programs are simulations and games. Simulation games can be defined as an activity in which participants, who are attempting to achieve specific goals, interact within an artificially produced environment which recreates some aspect of social reality. For the purpose of reality, players assume the roles of individuals or groups who exist in the particular social system being simulated. Social studies teachers have shown a growing interest in simulation games for classroom use. This is in part because teachers are constantly searching for ways to make their classes more interesting and realistic. Simulation games are potentially an effective aid to social studies teachers and can be successfully incorporated into most curricula if used properly and intelligently. However, it should be emphasized that using simulation as a technique in the classroom is not an "easy way out." It is a skill which requires

Page Three

much effort to be effective, and certainly the misuse of the technique is more detrimental than not using it at all.

Supporters frequently cite three distinct advantages that simulations have over other teaching methods in creating a positive learning environment which seems more appropriate for children in special education: a new and non-authoritarian role for the teacher; a more realistic and relevant presentation of learning experiences; and an increase in student motivation and interest.

With simulations the teacher is no longer the dominant figure in the instructional process, and also is not the sole judge of the effectiveness of student behavior. Rather than the teacher, the simulation game is the data source. Although his/her role has changed, the teacher does not become a useless decoration in the classroom. He/she no longer acts as the authoritarian figure and fountainhead of all knowledge, but he/she still importantly must prepare the students to participate effectively in the simulation and insure that it runs smoothly. It is also important that the teacher be explicit about the students' experiences with the game and aid the students in examining their views of the real world or referent situations.

Learning by doing is one of the oldest educational techniques known to man and is the theoretical base upon which educational simulations rest. The use of simulation games in the classroom tends to be involving. It has been shown many times that the degree of participation in a game affects the amount of learning; greater participation results in greater learning and greater enjoyment, as stated by Alice Kaplan Gordon in her book, Games For Growth.

According to William Nesbitt, the game situation offers a good opportunity for students to learn since talking among peers is a natural way of learning.

In recent years, as was noted by Maidment and Bronstein, our educational system has been severely criticized for being made up of dull, joyless, unimaginative social institutions that stifle student initiative, creativity and motivation. Particularly this has been true all too often in special education. Simulations can motivate students to learn because they deal with real roles and situations.

Games add a new dimension to the classroom as they have the appeal of requiring participative learning and being fun at the same time. Because simulations are usually more physical and overt than traditional techniques in social studies, they seem to fit into the scheme or sequence of learning for children who have a hard time with learning difficulties and traditional social studies programs. Simulations are by no means a panacea for special education programs nor are they for all children or teachers, but they are a technique that should be investigated.