New Challenges in Elementary Social Studies

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Social studies education has been endangered for a long time, with no aspect more threatened than the elementary program. This situation is problematic in itself, but its effects on the total social studies program are also pernicious. Consider the following recent developments:

Testing

It is well documented that high-stakes competency tests have influenced the quality of social studies education at the secondary level by shifting teachers’ emphasis from higher-level concepts to lower levels such as recall and comprehension (Grant 2001; Romanowski 1996). As troubling as that is, at least students are getting some exposure to social studies. At the elementary level, however, where most states do not require competency tests in social studies—focusing instead on the so-called basics of reading, language, and mathematics—the entire subject area of social studies is disappearing from the school day.

This is not a brand new development. For many elementary teachers, social studies has always been a back-burner subject, attended to after the higher-priority subject areas have been addressed (Perie 1997; Weiss 1978). Even when a state or district mandates a minimum amount of time for social studies, reports from schools indicate that some teachers still managed to overlook this designation in the plan book. They run out of time, perhaps accidentally, or feel compelled to provide recreation for their fatigued students, worn out from the constant stream of drill and practice inherent in traditional instruction.

Now, according to many of my colleagues, elementary teachers are getting the message that such oversights are acceptable and, in many cases, encouraged. Administrators, understandably feeling pressured by their school districts’ leadership to maximize their schools’ performance on non-social studies exams, send the not-so-subtle message that social studies is no longer required, needed, or desired.

The dangers of this message are apparent to any reader of this journal. Refutations are unnecessary among social studies professionals. But leaders in the field may not be paying attention to the underdevelopment of elementary social studies and its contribution to problems in secondary social studies. The standard course of study is being violated, or ignored, in the early grades, but the rest of the system has yet to adapt to the repercussions.

Secondary School Repercussions

Teachers are often skeptical about their students’ experiences in previous school years. “What, you never heard of _____?! What did they teach you in ___ grade?” is a common cry among teachers. In the secondary social studies classroom, it may now become a daily lament. Students may enroll in a social studies course without ever having been exposed to most of its basic concepts and skills.

In the very first lesson I planned as a student teacher, I was expected to introduce the early exploration of the Western Hemisphere. I decided to introduce the Crusades as a major event that encouraged Europeans to travel and trade beyond their continent. Imagine my surprise as I gradually discovered that my seventh-graders had not heard of Islam. It was even shocking to some that religions other than Christianity existed in the first place! My amazement increased as I came to recognize that these students...
were also unfamiliar with basic European and Asian locations. In short, they knew very little about world history and geography, which they were presumed to have studied in previous grades. I had to forget my wonderful lesson plan on the interaction of war and economics, and was forced to attend to more basic concepts.

It was an important realization for me as a beginning teacher. I suspect that these realizations, while always among us (mine happened thirty years ago), are becoming the rule rather than the exception. Having to teach elementary social studies concepts delays consideration of the content and skills required for secondary level courses. Due to this expenditure of time and energy, teachers may not give proper attention to some of the deeper knowledge and skills that are demanded for democratic citizenship. Performance on end-of-grade tests may also suffer (assuming that the test is a valid measure of the course standards).

The ultimate result is that our students are poorly prepared for secondary school, grievously unprepared for university courses in the social sciences, and overwhelmed by the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. This sorry state of affairs leads us to another root of the problem of elementary social studies: teacher education.

Teacher Education

Although it is easy to blame the testing movement as the primary culprit in the woes of elementary social studies, the situation is not that simple. Teachers who choose to overlook the social studies curriculum have a role in this crisis. While some elementary teachers provide an excellent social studies curriculum and many others would surely teach more social studies if it were not for testing pressures, some would not do so under any circumstances. Poor preparation in social studies is one cause of that decision.

Methods professors will confirm that too many elementary teachers do not like social studies. This problem is also of great concern to science and mathematics educators (Weiss 1994). Some teachers feel uncomfortable with content and skills that were inadequately addressed in their schooling or perhaps never developed any interest in the subject. Some elementary teachers, as they contemplate teaching social studies, become fearful that their lack of knowledge will be exposed. Under those circumstances, as reported by Shulman (1986), such teachers used to resort to textbook-based instruction. Now they skip the topic altogether.

If we can overcome the tendency to remind teachers that they are not supposed to be an expert in every topic, we may stop to consider why they feel so inadequate. A significant reason is the quality of their university experiences. A cursory review of elementary teacher education programs reveals that social science prerequisites are minimal. The required courses are usually survey courses at the introductory level, focusing on history. Introductory sections tend to be held in large lecture halls, with minimal opportunities for serious inquiry, discussion, or affective expression. It is no wonder, under these circumstances, that elementary teachers feel unprepared for a social studies curriculum that emphasizes the intersection of economics, geography, and culture at both local and state levels. At the upper-elementary levels, when political science becomes more prominent, the situation worsens.

Methods Courses

While it is tempting to bash social scientists, teacher educators should be cautioned to examine their own contributions to the dilemma of elementary teacher preparation. They play an indirect role in the structure of the social science requirements. Most universities have a governance structure, usually involving a teacher education committee, which selects requirements for teacher educators. It is possible for teacher educators to influence those decisions, and to fight for more social science, with more depth. To be fair, individuals who place a low priority on social studies education at the elementary level often dominate those committees. Another consideration is that many teacher education programs are hamstrung by university and state regulations concerning course requirements. Just the same, there may be a window of opportunity for change in the social science requirements.

While almost any change would be an improvement, the question remains whether a handful of courses can ever adequately overcome thirteen years of weak or missing instruction in social studies. How many courses would it take to prepare preservice teachers for the demands of the social studies curriculum? It is hard to imagine a movement for additional social science requirements when state governments are overwhelmingly focused on test results in reading and mathematics.

Teacher Educators

Who is teaching the social studies methods course? In a surprisingly large number of programs, it is not a social studies specialist. A survey conducted for the College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA) of the National Council for the Social Studies in 1998 attempted to identify why more methods professors were not joining their foremost professional organization. While some critics expected the findings to pinpoint the quality of CUFA's scholarly journal, Theory and Research in Social Education (TRSE), and dissension at meetings, there was little reference to those issues. Results revealed that half the professors teaching social studies methods did not identify themselves as specialists. Some considered themselves generalists, and some had their primary training in reading and language arts. Most had never even heard of CUFA or TRSE.

At my own university, our past two searches for elementary social studies positions yielded dozens of applicants from other subject areas, but only a handful who had either earned graduate degrees in social studies or had been professionally active in social studies conferences and publications. Small colleges that cannot afford specialists in each subject area allow the course to be taught by a nonspecialist or may assign the task to a social science professor.

Professors from the social sciences can be effective methods instructors
because they possess substantial content knowledge. Unfortunately, they may not be familiar with the range of social sciences included in the social studies. They also may not have teaching experience. If these professors are biased toward their own disciplines, such as history, they may not promote social studies in a favorable light.

Almost certainly, the social science faculty members would not have any knowledge or experience regarding elementary social studies. They may be unfamiliar with the relevant developmental considerations, the aims of the elementary curriculum, or appropriate instructional techniques for younger children. As a result, beginning teachers receive inadequate preservice education in social studies.

This situation is problematic for elementary preservice teachers, but it is particularly troublesome for future teachers of the primary grades. Anyone who has taught or studied the needs of primary level students recognizes that there are major differences between grades K-1 and the rest of the elementary curriculum. It is not just that the children are only beginning to read; developmental differences in cognition, social skills, physical growth, and psychological needs dictate alternative curriculum and teaching methods.

The Challenge for the Primary Grades

A methods professor who has never taught cannot be expected to provide the kind of education necessary for preservice primary teachers. Nor can we expect such perspectives from professors who have only taught at the secondary level. Even professors with experience limited to the intermediate grades have to differentiate the content of the methods course accordingly.

Where are the methods professors with a specialty in primary education? An informal survey at the 2002 CUFA retreat indicates that they are somewhere other than CUFA. Only one participant in the entire gathering had been a primary-level teacher before becoming a social studies specialist.

It is possible that such specialists abound outside of CUFA circles. It is more likely that they do not exist. We would presumably have heard their voices somewhere along the way. When preservice teachers with limited social studies knowledge take methods courses with inadequate attention toward the primary grades and are then thrust into schools that discourage the teaching of social studies, the result will be anything but the development of primary social studies methods professors. Primary teachers would be more likely to associate themselves with reading, not social studies.

Textbooks

The situation is further exacerbated by the role of textbooks in the elementary curriculum. In many school districts, social studies textbooks are not provided before the intermediate grades. The assumed explanation is the limited reading skills that primary students possess; another explanation may be the cost savings of two grades’ worth of textbooks. Either way, primary teachers have to teach without a textbook. For many teachers, not having a textbook would be an exercise in liberation. For those who are fearful and embarrassed about their social studies knowledge, it is an excuse to bypass the subject area altogether.

A recent trend is toward Open Court, a reading series that encourages strict conformance with the teacher’s manual. Many teachers claim that Open Court materials include social studies, which means that the subject does not need to be taught separately. While many curriculum leaders would applaud attempts to integrate the elementary curriculum, a close look at the Open Court manual provides quick confirmation that the social studies content is extremely shallow and usually not aligned with the standard course of study established by each state.

In-service

Because the testing programs of most states focus on reading and mathematics, and because social studies achievement is seldom, if ever, measured at the elementary level, school systems have not been marshalling their resources toward social studies. In-service in social studies is seldom offered. When it is, teachers are not likely to view it as a priority. After all, tests and bonuses have become the new goal. Citizenship education once again takes a backseat.

What Can We Do About It?

Like any other aspect of educational reform, this situation has a variety of complex causes. No single solution will adequately address the problem. Yet, those of us concerned about social education in general and elementary social studies in particular can consider some initial steps:

- Call attention to the problem. The public should be aware of the crisis in social education. A thoughtful discussion may lead to a movement to improve the quality of elementary social studies.
- Call on states to enforce the standard course of study. The official documents of each state describe the social studies curriculum in great detail. If those standards are to be ignored, there is no sense in publishing them. State leaders should be called to task on their management of the curriculum.
- Strengthen accreditation standards for elementary social studies. Teacher education programs are supposed to be penalized for assignment of unqualified professors. If the accreditation agencies can be convinced that a nonspecialist is likely to be unqualified, the accreditation process may avert those assignments.
- Develop programs to identify and support potential scholars in primary and elementary social studies. There are teachers who do wonderful work in social studies but are unaware of the opportunities in higher education. Even a handful can make a difference.
- Work to develop authentic testing for elementary social studies. While many of us dread the thought of yet another test, most scholars are in favor of assessment that is educationally valid.
- Increase the activities of the Elementary–Early Childhood Community in the National Council for the Social...
Studies (NCSS). This group has done excellent work in the past. They can be very persuasive and effective.

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REFERENCES