ABSTRACT. Researchers have been documenting the unfortunate status of social studies in the elementary classroom since the 1980s (J. Stark 1987), and although a lack of teacher interest, poor instructional methods, and the No Child Left Behind Act may be the current contributing factors, these factors should be viewed as just the tip of the iceberg. The often-overlooked and most detrimental factor is that most elementary teachers have not been taught the nature and purpose of social studies, because the majority of courses that they have taken deal with methodology and pedagogy rather than content. Using the National Council for Social Studies standards as the curriculum framework for a social studies methods course can greatly expand the elementary preservice teachers’ concepts of social studies, and studying the student performance expectations associated with each standard can help preservice teachers to see the practical application of each standard in the elementary classroom.

Keywords: No Child Left Behind, preservice teachers, social studies methods, status of elementary social studies

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No Child Left Behind Is Just the Tip of the Iceberg

LEIGH TANNER

I s social studies still considered a core content area in the elementary curriculum? For decades, the amount of time, expertise, and resources devoted to social studies instruction in elementary classrooms across the United States has varied considerably (National Council for Social Studies [NCSS] Task Force on Early Childhood/Elementary Social Studies 1988). Some teachers have the texts, literature, technological resources, content knowledge, and enthusiasm necessary to actively engage students in discovering not only what the Bill of Rights is but also why it was added to the Constitution. Other teachers, lacking the elements required to conduct effective social studies instruction, relegate their students to the passive use of textbooks and worksheets (Haas and Laughlin 1998) from which inquiring minds do not emerge. In addition, there are an increasing number of classrooms in America where social studies receives little or no attention during the week, and in some cases it is not found on the teacher’s schedule at all (French et al. 1998).

Compounding this often serious deficit of instructional proficiency, time, and resources is the typical student’s attitude toward social studies, which is generally described as apathetic. Researchers have repeatedly found that many students have a negative attitude toward social studies, finding it “boring and useless” (Zhao and Hoge 2005). This lack of enthusiasm is generally considered to be the result of the seemingly dull curriculum and the instructor’s teaching methods (Governale 1997). A study by Yali Zhao and John Hoge (2005) of student and teacher perceptions of social studies illustrates this point. Their research shows that teachers had (1) failed to show students why social studies is important; (2) failed to relate social studies skills and concepts to students’ daily lives; and (3) failed to identify resources for instruction other than textbooks.

As a teacher in an urban school district, a social studies methods instructor, and a university supervisor, I have seen that the emphasis placed on social studies in the elementary curriculum varies widely across school districts. The preservice teachers I instruct and supervise have come to realize this as well. In fall 2006, I required the twenty-nine preservice teachers in my elementary social studies methods course to survey the materials, resources, and time allocated to social studies instruction in the K–5 schools where they were serving as interns. The preservice teachers were
then asked to use their data to draw conclusions about the relative importance of social studies in their school districts’ elementary curricula in relation to reading, mathematics, and science.

Of the twenty-nine preservice teachers, who worked in nineteen urban and suburban school districts, four found that the materials, resources, and time allocated to social studies were comparable to those for reading, mathematics, and science and therefore determined that their districts had demonstrated a firm commitment to social studies education.

The remaining twenty-five preservice teachers—from fifteen school districts—looked at data that showed primary-level (K–3) students receiving social studies instruction on an average of one period per week and intermediate-level (4–5) students on an average of three times per week. The preservice teachers’ conclusions regarding the relative importance of social studies in their school districts’ elementary curricula can be summed up by three of their survey statements: “Social studies takes a back seat,” “Social studies is so unimportant it is scheduled less than gym,” and “Social studies is of minimal importance and my mentor teacher said she was ashamed to admit it.”

In a recent national survey of elementary teachers conducted by James Leming, Lucien Ellington, and Mark Schug (2006) at the Center for Survey Research and Analysis, 31 percent of fifth-grade teachers reported devoting three hours or less to social studies instruction each week, while 63 percent of second-grade teachers reported doing the same. In this study reported that social studies is a stand-alone subject in only 18 percent of second-grade classrooms and 37 percent of fifth-grade classrooms. In the remaining classrooms, social studies is partially or mostly integrated with other subjects.

This is the state of social studies in today’s elementary classrooms. I would suggest that there is little doubt that it has lost its place as a core academic subject in many school districts across the country.

Reasons for the Current Status

Many elementary teachers, principals, and district supervisors view social studies as a less important subject than reading, English, and mathematics, relegating social studies to a status of low priority in the teaching day (Haas and Laughlin 1998). In the nationwide study conducted by Leming, Ellington, and Schug (2006), social studies was found to rank fourth overall in importance behind reading, mathematics, and science. Only 39 percent of the teachers surveyed considered social studies very important, whereas reading and mathematics were considered important by 96 percent of the respondents.

The time allotted for social studies instruction is consistent with the perceived importance of the subject. When second- and fifth-grade teachers nationwide were asked how much of their average week is devoted to teaching social studies, 23 percent indicated that they spend less than two hours, 47 percent between two and four hours, and 15 percent five hours or more. Yet, when those same teachers were asked about instructional time devoted to reading and mathematics, an average of 86 percent said they spend more than five hours a week on reading, and 75 percent spend an equal amount of time on mathematics (Leming, Ellington, and Schug 2006).

Another factor contributing to the unfortunate status of social studies in the elementary curriculum is the void that exists between what effective social studies instruction should be and the current practices found in many elementary classrooms (Adler 1991). Leming, Ellington, and Schug (2006) found that 30 percent of the teachers surveyed identified their instructional style when teaching social studies as teacher rather than student centered.

Added to this is the phenomenon of curriculum narrowing, a common response by many school districts to the accountability assessments in reading and mathematics mandated by the 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; Leming, Ellington, and Schug 2006; Rentner et al. 2006). In curriculum narrowing, teachers tend to limit time for social studies instruction, which is not currently tested, in favor of remediation in mathematics and reading, which are tested annually (Knighton 2003; Manzo 2005).

In its nationwide study, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) found that 71 percent of elementary school districts reported reducing instructional time for one or more subjects to make more time for reading and/or mathematics instruction. Thirty-three percent of the districts surveyed reported that instruction time in social studies had been reduced somewhat or to a great extent to make more time for reading and mathematics (Rentner et al. 2006). When asked to describe the negative effects of NCLB, one district representative in the CEP study said, “NCLB has torn apart our social studies curriculum. We are raising tomorrow’s leaders and it’s forcing us to fill their heads with math facts that do not make them better leaders or help students make choices” (Rentner et al. 2006, 10).

Tip of the Iceberg

Researchers have been documenting the unfortunate status of social studies in the elementary classroom since the 1980s (Stark 1987), and although there is a lack of teacher interest, poor instructional methods and NCLB may be the current contributing factors; these factors should be viewed as just the tip of the iceberg.

Unlike secondary social studies teachers, who are likely to hold an undergraduate degree in a social science discipline such as history, elementary teachers most commonly major in education (Leming, Ellington, and Schug 2006). Therefore, it is not surprising that when preservice elementary teachers were asked in a survey if “social studies is mainly about history and geography,” 77 percent of them agreed (Tanner 2002). The often-overlooked and most detrimental factor is that most elementary teachers have not been taught the nature and purpose of social studies, because the majority of their coursework dealt with methodology and pedagogy rather than content. Penelope Fritz and David Kumar (2002)
conduct a study at a southeastern U.S. university from 1994 to 1996 to test the American history content knowledge of preservice elementary teachers. Overall, the participants answered just 54 percent of the questions correctly on a basic test of events in American history.

According to June Chapin and Rosemary Messick (1999), the neglect of social studies in the elementary classroom can be attributed to the “lack of preparation and lack of interest . . . feel[ing] under qualified or reluctant may explain the less-than-enthusiastic attitude that many elementary teachers have toward the social studies” (3). Thomas Turner (1999) refers to a “content fear” of teachers: “If they teach the content at all, they are likely to communicate their own fear and dislike of it. They are also likely to repeat the kind of negative, unprepared teaching that turned them against the subject” (18–19).

What Can Be Done?

Educators should conduct research on how to better prepare preservice and in-service teachers to present effective social studies instruction in their classrooms. A study I conducted (Tanner 2002), which used the NCSS standards as the curriculum framework for a social studies methods course, demonstrated how an in-depth examination of these standards can greatly expand the elementary preservice teachers’ concepts of social studies. Exploration of the ten thematic standards served to illuminate the broad scope of content considered to be under the umbrella of the term social studies. Studying the student performance expectations associated with each standard helped the preservice teachers see the practical application of each standard in the elementary classroom. The data from the study suggest that after the preservice teachers examined the standards, they (1) developed a more comprehensive understanding of the nature and purpose of social studies, (2) began to view social studies as an essential part of the elementary curriculum, and (3) gained considerable interest in teaching social studies.

The NCSS standards can also be used effectively by curriculum supervisors in school districts to provide professional development for in-service teachers. Most elementary teachers are not familiar with the NCSS standards and equate social studies with the subject matter of their textbooks (Haas and Laughlin 1998). Therefore, in-service instruction on these standards and their performance expectations would provide teachers with insight on the areas of knowledge that encompass the social studies and the necessary degree of integration across the disciplines for K–5 social studies instruction (NCSS 1994).

Table 1 illustrates the integration of social studies in a typical reading program, showing the correlation between the NCSS standards and literature selections found in numerous reading texts in Grades 2 and 4. For example, Patricia MacLachlan’s Sarah, Plain and Tall (1985), the fourth-grade literature selection, is about a mail-order bride from Maine who lives on the Kansas plains in the mid-1800s, richly portrays the culture and history of the period.

Once preservice and in-service elementary teachers are familiar with the NCSS standards and appreciate that social studies encompasses more than history and geography, covering areas such as individual development and identity, global connections and science, and technology and society, they can make use of that knowledge to expand their daily social studies instruction by developing standards-based lesson plans for social studies. Each lesson should (1) be integrated with reading, language arts, or science; (2) involve the students in active participation through cooperative learning or inquiry; and (3) require the students to use higher-level thinking skills to classify, interpret, analyze, or evaluate information.

Elementary teachers have many opportunities throughout the school day to conduct such instruction. A reading lesson, for instance, focused on John Steptoe’s Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters (1987), an African folktale about sibling rivalry, is an opportunity to show students how the social studies standard of individual development and identity is directly related to their personal lives. When drawn into a discussion about the story, students are able to use their critical thinking skills to arrive at conclusions about the characters’ motivations.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Although the status of social studies in the elementary classroom is very bleak in many places across the country, recent studies offer a glimmer of hope that the situation can improve. Research by Joan Governale (1997) and Chris Hanley et al. (2002) shows that teachers can improve students’ attitudes toward social studies by using student-centered instruction and the communication to students of both the importance of social studies and its relationship to their lives. Zhao and Hoge (2005) found that teachers wanted to receive more interactive materials for social studies instruction and were interested in attending workshops on how to integrate social studies with the language arts curriculum, which would allow them more time for social studies instruction. The teachers in Leming, Ellington, and Schug’s (2006) study also reported an interest in receiving professional development on subject-matter knowledge for social studies and ways to present content more effectively.
To respond to this teacher interest, social studies educators and curriculum personnel in school districts should provide professional development opportunities for preservice and in-service teachers that convey the (1) effective methods of social studies instruction; (2) relationship of social studies to students’ lives; and (3) existing areas in the elementary curriculum that can be enhanced via social studies instruction. Armed with this knowledge, teachers will be better prepared to conduct interesting and successful social studies instruction in their classrooms and less likely to let an obstacle such as curriculum narrowing stand in the way of preparing students to become knowledgeable, responsible citizens.

REFERENCES


<table>
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<tr>
<th>NCSS standard</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. Time, Continuity, and Change</td>
<td><em>Henry and Mudge</em> (Rylant 1996): A move to a different neighborhood illustrates how people’s lives change.</td>
<td><em>The Hatmaker’s Sign</em> (Fleming 2000): This retells a parable Benjamin Franklin whispered to calm Thomas Jefferson’s anxiety during the debates in the Continental Congress over the Declaration of Independence.</td>
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<td>3. People, Places, and Environments</td>
<td><em>Dear Daddy</em> (Dupasquier 1985): Daddy takes a trip to Hong Kong.</td>
<td><em>Mirandy and Brother Wind</em> (McKissack 1988): In this story, set in the early 1990s, Mirandy tries to catch the wind to be her partner at a cakewalk, a traditional African American dance.</td>
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<td>7. Production, Distribution, and Consumption</td>
<td><em>Lemonade for Sale</em> (Murphy 1998): This story introduces some elements of marketing, as the members of the Elm Street Kids Club refill their depleted piggybank by opening a lemonade stand.</td>
<td><em>Leah’s Pony</em> (Friedrich 1999): Leah decides to sell her beloved pony to raise enough money so her family can keep their farm.</td>
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Heldref Publications, the editors, and the editorial staff of The Social Studies are grateful to the following reviewers who served the journal during the past year. Their contributions are vitally important to the peer-review process.

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CLASSROOM SUCCESS STORIES

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To break into the publishing world, consider submitting a short feature on one of your classroom success stories. Follow the TSS directions to authors, which are printed in the back of the journal or available by e-mail from the Managing Editor at tss@heldref.org. Also, consider the following tips:

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- If appropriate, include a reference list of print, Web, or multimedia sources that will help readers carry out the project in their own classrooms.

A classroom success stories feature usually spans one to three journal pages. If you have questions about writing or submitting or would like to see a sample article, please contact the Managing Editor at tss@heldref.org.
BOOKS RECENTLY RECEIVED AT TSS

After-School Success, by Anne Bouie. The author describes how to organize, operate, and sustain an after-school education program for underachieving urban youth and their families. Using her work at Project Interface, a math and science enrichment program, as a case study, she argues that it is more effective to focus and build on students’ strengths than to identify their deficits. The book also features advice educators can use to assess existing after-school programs and strategies for engaging families and other community members. 2007. Teachers College Press (1234 Amsterdam Ave., New York, NY 10027 or http://www.tcpress.com).

Educating the Gifted in Mainstream Schools, by Karen Rogers. The author followed 250 gifted children in fifteen schools to answer the question of what teachers should do when they have a child in their mainstream classroom who is considered gifted or talented. The results highlight the difference in outcome between schools that embraced the gifted students’ learning needs and schools that ignored their special needs. The author also identifies resources for teachers, parents, and gifted children. 2007. Routledge (270 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016 or http://www.routledge.com).

Introducing Economics: A Critical Guide for Teaching, by Mark H. Maier and Julie A. Nelson. The authors present theory and curriculum ideas for time-crunched high school economics teachers who want to create real learning and critical-thinking skills in their students. They extend the ideas in traditional economics textbooks, applying them to real-world topics such as the environment, corporate power, labor unions, and discrimination. In addition to describing classroom activities, the authors discuss National Content Standards in Economics and suggest Internet resources. 2007. M. E. Sharpe (80 Business Park Drive, Armonk, NY 10504 or http://www.mesharpe.com).

Social Studies for Social Justice: Teaching Strategies for the Elementary Classroom, by Rahima C. Wade. The author draws on the experiences of more than forty urban and rural teachers to explore the value and impact of including social action and social justice activities in the elementary school classroom. In addition to presenting practical teaching ideas, she describes how teaching social studies for social justice is affected by state curriculum requirements and standardized-based testing. 2007. Teachers College Press (1234 Amsterdam Ave., New York, NY 10027 or http://www.tcpress.com).

Using Film in the Social Studies, by William B. Russell III. The author examines the common and often misused practice of teaching with film in the social studies classroom. He presents the Russell Model, a model that describes appropriate steps and procedures teachers should follow when using film in their curriculum. He also presents findings from a quantitative research study of social studies teachers; a history of the use of film in education; and a review of legal issues surrounding film use in the classroom. 2007. University Press of America (4501 Forbes Blvd., Suite 200, Lanham, MD 2006 or http://www.univpress.com).
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