

# National Trends in Elementary Instruction: Exploring the Role of Social Studies Curricula

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Using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics research spanning fifteen years, researchers examined the impact of national educational policy implementation on the role of social studies in elementary schools. Specifically, with the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2007 and the continuation of federal-mandated testing of English language arts (ELA) and mathematics in grades three through five, researchers sought to understand how policy decisions to extend testing to science affected teacher decisions in regard to instructional time allocations for core subject areas of ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies in elementary schools. Results of this quantitative study offer large-scale evidence of the declining role of social studies in an era in which testing is clearly linked to subject-area importance. Findings provide an overview of the national scope of testing and the ramifications for social studies in elementary schools. Researchers conclude that curriculum standardization, accountability, and high-stakes testing have had adverse affects on social studies time allotments in comparison to tested subjects.

**Keywords:** social studies marginalization, instructional time, elementary curricula, standardization and high stakes testing, No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

In a previous national study (Fitchett and Heafner 2010), researchers found that the minimal role of social studies is not new, but rather a trend accelerated by curriculum standardization of the 1980s and high-stakes testing emphases beginning in the 1990s. Researchers projected that these trends would continue into the twenty-first century as further testing mandates were enacted. National education policy, specifically No Child Left Behind (NCLB), has greatly impacted how subjects are perceived and associated time allocations. Results of this earlier study led us to wonder if newly mandated policies of a reauthorized NCLB in 2007 would intensify on a national scale this marginalization trend of nontested curricula. Specifically, how would additional testing mandates in third grade through fifth grade impact instructional time distributions for English language arts (ELA), mathematics, science, and social studies? We hypothesized that teachers' reported instructional time for social studies would decrease in favor of tested curricula. Thus, we examined, from a national perspective, the changing dynamics of the distribution of elementary instructional time among the core content: ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies. Using the most recent national data (2007–2008) on teacher characteristics from the

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES 2009a), we explored the impact of the reauthorization of NCLB and evaluated whether this policy had negative connotations for elementary social studies.

## Theoretical Perspectives on National Trends in Elementary Social Studies

Trends in educational policy over the course of the last two decades of the twentieth century were defined by state-initiated efforts to standardize K-12 learning through mandated standards and associated accountability measures. As an outcome of the state-level curriculum standardization of the 1980s and 1990s, national education policy further extended standardization with emphases on high-stakes accountability. Embodied within the goals of NCLB, nationally mandated testing guided curricular decision-making into the twentieth-first century, bringing assessment to the forefront of contemporary schooling issues. Elementary schools and teachers responded with a curricular revision toward tested subjects (Center on Educational Policy 2007, 2008; O'Connor, Heafner, and Groce 2007), resulting in instructional emphases for ELA and mathematics (Evans 2004; Manzo 2005; Risinger 2006; VanFossen 2005). Nationally documented gaps in instructional time became apparent in elementary schools as reported time allocations were manipulated by administrators and teachers

to ensure academic goals of standardized tests in ELA and math were met for all students (Center on Educational Policy 2008, 2007); creating an environment in which ancillary subjects experienced noticeable and disturbing decreases in perceived importance (Boyle-Baise et al. 2008; McGuire 2007). Elementary social studies found itself among the subjects on the periphery of core-tested content and fighting for instructional time; a trend accelerated by national policy movements.

### *The decline of social studies in elementary grades?*

While social studies has traditionally been classified as one of the four core content areas, earlier researchers argued that social studies has never achieved academic status equal to ELA and mathematics and, thus, has perennially held a minimal role within elementary curriculum (Gross 1977; Hahn 1985; Ochoa 1981; Superka, Hawke, and Morrisett 1980) and consistently receives proportionately less instructional time (Barton forthcoming). Neil O. Houser (1995) supported this notion, observing that social studies has time and again been stigmatized as an “enrichment” discipline or a topic for math and ELA integration. Contemporary policy efforts to create common core, state standards for ELA affirm this view, identifying social studies as a tool for integration to promote literacy goals (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010). In the late 1980s, evidence from research confirmed that external pressures of curriculum standardization compelled elementary teachers to overemphasize math and language arts at the expense of social studies. Time differences of over seventy-four minutes of daily instructional time were observed between ELA and social studies (Shaver 1989). Verifying the insignificant role of social studies, national legislative policy of the 1990s (Goals 2000 Educate America Act 1993) and 2000s (NCLB Act, 2002) emphasized math, reading, writing, and science in elementary education without mentioning social studies. As a result, national perceptions of American education emerged that aforementioned curricula should be the academic focus (Evans 2004), laying the groundwork for an even greater decline for social studies.

More recently, mandated curriculum and national testing emphases have challenged, at a faster pace, the position of social studies in elementary instructional time distribution (Fitchett and Heafner 2010; Heafner, Good, et al. 2007; Manzo 2005). A nationwide study from Brown University’s Center on Education Policy (2008) emphasized the ramifications of test-centered legislation between 1999 and 2004, documenting an approximately one-third percent decrease in instructional time for social studies. Findings from this study identified a loss of seventeen minutes a week of social studies instructional time as compared to an increase of forty minutes for elementary reading instruction because of district-based decisions to increase instructional time for English language arts and mathematics (Wallis and Steptoe 2007). Paul G. Fitchett and

Tina L. Heafner (2010) confirmed significant reductions in instructional time for elementary social studies with an approximate national decline of thirty minutes a week following the inception of NCLB. Moreover, the number of states that test social studies declined from thirty to twelve over the last ten years (Executive Summary: 50-State Report Card 2009). Although recent research offers evidence of a declining role of social studies in elementary schools (Center on Educational Policy 2007; Fitchett and Heafner 2010; Heafner, Good, et al. 2007; Manzo 2005; VanFossen 2005), skepticism concerning the impact of testing still exists (Anderson 2009; Au 2009; Barton forthcoming). Keith C. Barton (forthcoming, 3) suggests that although national studies argue the demise of social studies, “What has not been established is that it receives less time than it ever did.” He comments that these are just rumors of a crisis, and social studies has maintained a consistent role in elementary curricula. In response to continued debate over the affect of testing on social studies, we designed a quantitative study from a nationally representative sample of elementary school teachers to further explore data trends associated with time allocations for core content over the course of fifteen years. We hypothesized that over this time period social studies has not maintained consistent instructional time allocations, and teachers report teaching social studies significantly less than in previous years. In this article, we report initial findings from the study.

### **Methods**

Using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] Schools and Public School Teacher Staffing Survey (SASS) (NCES 2009b), we examined the continued marginalization of social studies on a national scale by exploring the influence of recent educational policy on defining the role of social studies in elementary school curricula in the twentieth-first century. In particular, with the reauthorization of NCLB in 2007 and mandated testing in grades three through five, we sought to understand how the policy change has affected instructional time decisions for the core content areas of ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies. Thus, we restricted survey data to only teachers in grades three through five. Our purpose was to determine if a statistically significant difference existed across content areas and survey years (1993–1994, 1999–2000, 2003–2004, and 2007–2008). While evaluating the social studies instructional time in grades three through five, we examined the extent to which teachers reported teaching social studies in comparison to language arts, mathematics, and science. Specifically, we evaluated whether the proportion of reported instructional time varied within each subject area between survey years 1993 to 2008 as well as how reported social studies instructional time changed over time.

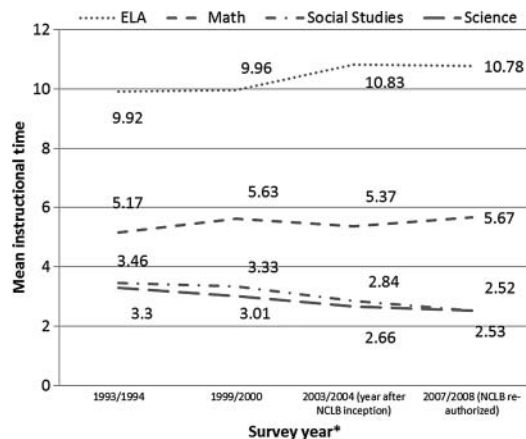
NCES Schools and Public School Teacher Staffing Survey (SASS) data are the most comprehensive source of teacher data in the nation (Coopersmith and Gruber 2009). Data are collected from teachers selected from a national, stratified sample of schools. For our research design, we narrowed the sample to self-contained grade three to five public school teacher data from the last four survey years.<sup>1</sup> We eliminated elementary subject area specialists from our dataset by excluding departmental, pull-out (enrichment), and team-teaching data. Our purpose in restricting the data set was to control for variables that might skew instructional time reports.

In analyzing four specific time points (the years of survey data collection: 1993–1994, 1999–2000, 2003–2004, and 2007–2008), we were able to identify patterns in the data to document trends in standardization and the national education policy effects on social studies instructional time. The survey years 1993–1994, 2003–2004, and 2007–2008 coincided with or followed national educational policy reform. The 1993–94 survey year represented the commencement of Goals 2000 (1993); the 2003–2004 survey year represented one year after NCLB received legislative approval and became law; and the 2007–2008 survey year followed one year after the reauthorization of NCLB. Because federal funding was associated with compliance with federal accountability mandates, national policies were enacted on passage. Our interpretation of statistical results at these data points helped to determine whether and to what extent the expanding standardization movement affected social studies instructional time in grades three through five across the nation. Identical survey items were selected for analysis from each of the five survey instruments. Instructional time was determined for each of the four core subject areas (math, ELA, science, and social studies) by a SASS survey open-ended question, “During the most recent FULL WEEK of teaching, approximately how many hours did YOU spend teaching each of the following subjects at THIS school?” (Emphasis in original; NCES 2009b).<sup>2</sup> Instructional time descriptive statistics (mean and variance) were analyzed across subject area for each survey year.

## Results

### *Social studies reported instructional time compared to other core subject areas*

Descriptive statistics indicated that ELA and math consistently maintained higher levels over social studies and science for reported mean instructional time (see figure 1). A closer look at the fifteen-year trend data showed an increase in reported instructional time for ELA and math. Between 1993 and 2008, ELA instruction rose on average 0.86 hours per week (or fifty-two minutes). Math instruction rose 0.50 hours per week (or thirty minutes) over the same period of time. Conversely, social studies and sci-

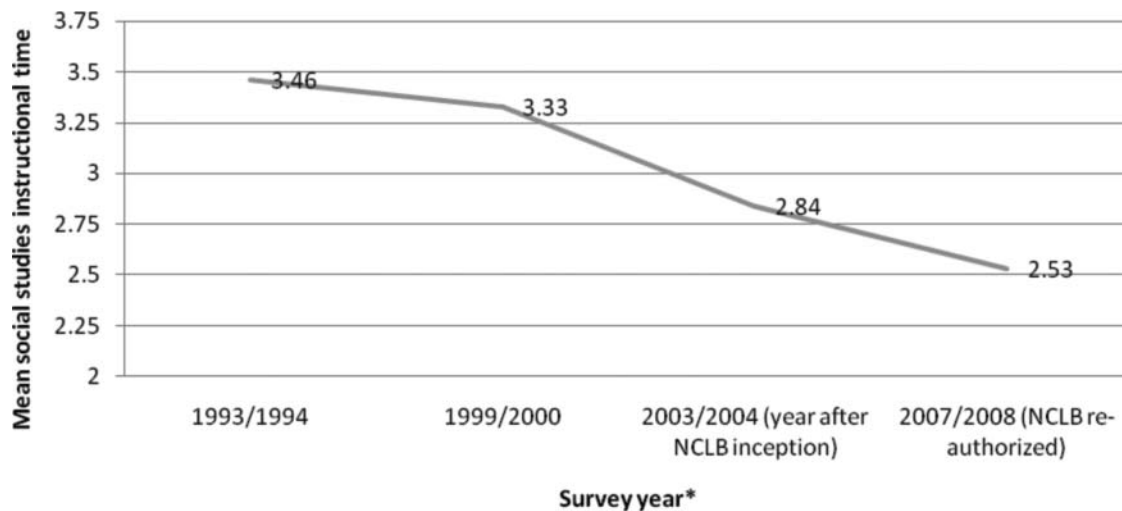


**Fig. 1.** Mean instructional time of subject areas across survey years for grades three through five. \*Intervals between survey years are not equal.

ence indicated a loss of reported instructional time. Within the fifteen-year period, reported social studies instruction within third- through fifth-grade classrooms decreased by 0.094 hours (or fifty-six minutes) per week. Science instruction fell by 0.076 hours (or forty-six minutes) per week.

### *Examination of social studies instructional time in grades three to five across survey years*

In addition, we analyzed reported instructional time within the context of survey years. Specifically, we compared the amount of time that third-grade through fifth-grade practitioners reported teaching social studies over time. Previous studies have found an association between the establishment of NCLB’s high-stakes testing policies and increased marginalization of elementary social studies education (Fitchett and Heafner 2010). We sought to determine if there was a significant relationship between social studies instructional time among third- through fifth-grade teachers and survey year. Descriptive statistics (see figure 2) indicated a considerable decrease in instructional time over the fifteen-year survey period. Between 1993 and 2008, grades three to five social studies teaching decreased by approximately 0.93 hours (or fifty-six minutes). The most substantial decreases occurred within the last decade, as testing policies and curriculum standardization have become more common. Between the 2003–2004 survey year and the reauthorization year of 2007–2008, reported social studies instruction in grades three to five decreased on an average of 0.31 hours (or approximately nineteen minutes) per week. Even more staggering, reported social studies instructional time decreased by 0.80 hours (or forty-eight minutes a week) within the last ten years.



**Fig. 2.** Mean third- through fifth-grade social studies instructional time among survey years. \*Intervals between survey years are not equal.

### Implications and Conclusions

Across all survey years, ELA and math consistently maintained statistically higher levels of reported mean instructional time over social studies and science. Over the fifteen-year period, instructional time in ELA and math increased almost as much as science and social studies declined, suggesting significant restructuring of time allotments for core content. Further social studies instructional time cumulatively decreased in grades three through five by as much as sixty minutes per week. Given that data represent teacher reports of instructional decision-making and were based on teacher reports spanning fifteen years, we conclude that, over time, teachers responded to external policy mandates and testing pressures by emphasizing ELA and math instruction while significantly reducing instructional time for science and social studies. Despite skepticism over the merit of teacher reported data (Barton forthcoming), results cannot be dismissed. On a national scale, teacher data trends indicated declining instructional time for social studies in comparison to fifteen years ago. Moreover, results counter research suggesting that social studies has always held a lower status among core content and that it has not declined in curricular importance as a result of testing mandates and federal policies (Anderson 2009; Au 2009; Barton forthcoming). The findings of this study affirm marginalization research suggesting that teachers are making tough instructional decisions which compromise social studies time in order to meet the demands of a restrictive curriculum (Boyle-Baise et al. 2008; Thornton and Houser 1996; Wills 2007; Wills and Sandholdz 2009) and external pressures of high-stakes testing (Crocco and Costigan 2007).

Results support prior studies implicating an overemphasis on tested curricula in elementary grades (Burroughs, Groce, and Webeck 2005; Heafner, Libscomb, and Rock

2006; Lintner 2006; Rock et al. 2006; VanFossen 2005; Wills 2007), and further substantiate the large-scale impact of standardization, accountability, and testing in redefining what is nationally taught and with what frequency in grades three through five (Center on Educational Policy 2007; Crocco and Costigan 2007; Manzo 2005). ELA and math clearly are the priorities of elementary curriculum, whereas science and social studies compete for remaining instructional time among the core content areas. Findings affirm researchers' earlier hypothesis that reauthorization addendums to NCLB policy would coincide with increased disparity between social studies and leading core disciplines of math and ELA (Fitchett and Heafner 2010).

With emphases on tested subjects, teachers' decisions regarding how they use instructional time were driven by whether or not the subject is tested. Yielding to testing pressures, teachers compromised instructional time for test preparation or remediation for tested curricula (Crocco and Costigan 2007; Hutton and Burstein 2008; O'Connor, Heafner, and Groce 2007). Thus, testing is the most significant determinant of what is taught as well as associated instructional time distributions (Center on Educational Policy 2007, 2008; Heafner, Libscomb, and Rock 2006). The facts are that in most states ELA, math, and science are tested in grades three through five and social studies is not. From our interpretation of data results in this study, we conclude that social studies is likely to be taught much less frequently in the era of national policy mandates and is losing ground in instructional time compared to other tested content. As noted in previous studies, elementary school educators have experienced increased pressure to teach subjects that are tested at the state and/or national level (Crocco and Costigan 2007; Heafner, O'Connor, et al. 2007; Hutton and Burstein 2008). As a result, across the nation social studies has taken a backseat to other content areas; most

notably, math and ELA (Evans 2004; Heafner, Libscomb, and Rock 2006; VanFossen 2005). Consequently, national policy trends, as documented in this study, were associated with a significant decrease in reported social studies instruction in comparison to tested subjects.

Results of this study bring to light the necessity for exploring how the status of social studies instruction in elementary schools might be improved. Although we cannot address this issue based on data from this study, we recommend further research to examine possibilities for change as well as strategies for impacting national educational mandates. What we can deduce is that over the last two decades, teachers, educators, and other stakeholders have been complicit in the continuing diminished role of social studies. Our study offers further evidence of constrained teacher decision-making in regard to instructional time allocations as an outcome of policy implementation. As standardization and high-stakes testing accelerate the “narrowing” of instructional curricula, efforts to increase social studies relevance in the twenty-first century continue to fall short. National data results not only raise awareness of the large-scale impact of marginalization, but also emphasize the need to develop ways to reverse policy trends.

## Notes

1. 1993–1994 (n = 2930), 1999–2000 (n = 2800), 2003–2004 (n = 2080), 2007–2008 (n = 2420). In accordance with NCES publication procedures, all samples have been rounded to the nearest ten to avoid disclosure.
2. A copy of the survey instrument can be obtained at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/pdf/0708/sass4a.pdf>.

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