

Elementary Social Studies

Strategies for Strengthening Teaching & Learning

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Introduction

This white paper provides an overview of the problems facing elementary social studies education and recommends research-based strategies for addressing them. First, it examines the marginalization of social studies due to high-stakes testing and a lack of professional development for teachers. This has led to the predominance of teacher-centered instruction that does little to generate interest in social studies among students or engage them in critical thinking. It concludes with an identification of best practice strategies to ensure the powerful and purposeful teaching and learning of social studies at the elementary level.

Current Challenges

Since the inception of common public schools, the elementary social studies curriculum has been a site of debate over what counts as valuable social science knowledge, which disciplines should be included in the “social studies”, whether disciplinary experts or teachers should control the curriculum, and what the ultimate purposes of social studies education ought to be (Halvorsen, 2014). At the beginning of the 21st century, the question of whether to teach social studies at all has displaced many of these more nuanced debates. The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 was the culmination of a decades-long shift towards high-stakes tests measuring student achievement in literacy and math—it made no mention of social studies (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010). The pressure to improve test scores led to a narrowing of the curriculum and a drastic reduction of instructional time formally allotted for elementary social studies (Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006). As a result, teachers report feeling discouraged from investing time in building curriculum that engages their students in rich social studies learning opportunities (Christensen, Wilson, Anders, Dennis, Kirkland, Beacham, & Warren, 2001; Pascopella, 2007) or pressured to teach watered-down social studies in the service of literacy instruction (Pace, 2012). When social studies is tested at the state level, compliance with test questions has replaced innovative social studies instruction (Linter, 2006) in an attempt to align with standards that are politically motivated (Stover, Hicks, Stoddard & Lisanti, 2010) and ethnocentric (Shear, Knowles, Solden & Castro, 2015). Frustratingly, this “squeeze” on social studies is particularly pronounced in high poverty schools (Wills, 2007).

In addition to these external forces, elementary educators frequently report low levels of confidence teaching social studies due to insufficient preparation (Bullock, Adams & Willox, 2010). This presents a bit of a chicken-and-egg problem: in response to the high-stakes focus on literacy and math at the K-12 level, many universities have narrowed their required social studies coursework. Most elementary education majors take few social science courses during their university training (Thornton, 2001) and their methods courses are often taught by people

who are not social studies specialists (Passe, 2006). In addition, few pre-service teachers have opportunities to witness high quality social studies instruction in their field experiences because of the “squeeze” described above (Lanahan & Yaeger, 2008; Owens, 1997). Given these contextual factors, it is perhaps unsurprising research reports K-6 students believing social studies to be useless and boring with very limited knowledge about basic social studies concepts (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Generally, teachers recognize this and are frustrated by the situation; they know they rely too heavily on the textbook and want to use student-centered strategies connected to better resources that would engage students more (Leming, et al., 2006).

This context is problematic because we know that a thriving democracy demands community members who are knowledgeable and curious about history, geography, economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and civics. They must be able to critique and question information, interact with people from diverse backgrounds, and grapple with social problems in ways that are inclusive and productive. More than any other content area, the social studies afford students the opportunity to learn this content and develop these skills. To reduce, water down, or eliminate high quality social studies instruction at the elementary level not only deprives students of worthwhile learning opportunities about interesting content, but presents a fundamental challenge to the future of our democracy.

Best Practices

Fortunately, there are efforts underway to shift social studies instruction through policy, professional development opportunities, and the preparation of teachers so that it is more “powerful and purposeful”—more meaningful, active, integrative, challenging, and value-based (Berson, Bennett, & Dobson, 2009). Though the “values” involved in this process are inherently contentious and can be difficult to put into practice given resistance in schools (Agarwal, 2011), experts generally agree that public school teachers have an obligation to help students commit themselves to deepening a diverse democracy. Many scholars have outlined specific frameworks that root elementary social studies teaching practices in multiculturalism and social justice (e.g., Epstein & Oyler, 2008; Lucey & Laney, 2009; Wade, 2001, 2007) and are working to implement these approaches in teacher preparation programs (Crowe & Cuenca, 2016).

At the state and national level, organizations like the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS) has helped to develop the “C3 Framework,” which encourages teachers to plan inquiry-based curriculum that engages students in collaborative civic spaces. In units planned using the framework, students develop questions and plan inquiries, apply disciplinary concepts and tools, evaluate sources and use evidence, and communicate conclusions / take informed action (Swan, Lee & Grant, 2014). States are working to provide resources and workshops for teachers that help them shift their practice, and some methods instructors in university preparation programs have followed suit. Organizations like NCSS also provide practitioner publications (e.g., *Social Education*, *Social Studies & the Young Learner*) that offer research-based strategies for improving social studies teaching and learning. Last, but not least, the recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (“Every Student

Succeeds”) has reinstated funding for social studies research and professional development which should help to improve the quality and quantity of supports for K-12 educators—it is too soon to know its real impact on the field, however.

Recommendations

For these efforts to be successful, more work needs to be done at all levels to ensure all students have access to rich social studies educational opportunities. Elementary teachers need to be what Heafner, O’Connor, Groce, Byrd, Good, Oldendorf, Passe, & Rock (2007) call “AGENTS” of change. These are educators who are aware of current issues and problems facing elementary social studies, generate knowledge to share with policymakers and other stakeholders, empower others to organize and work collectively to make a difference, negotiate a path for how to make change, take action, and speak up about social studies to policymakers, researchers, teacher educators, administrators, and families. In turn, policymakers need to craft standards and policies that support best practice social studies instruction as well as ensure funding for these efforts. Researchers need to study how best to engage students in purposeful and powerful social studies and translate this work for professional development. Teacher educators need to partner with model teachers to design appropriate coursework and advocate for more attention to the social studies in pre-service programs. Administrators need to fight against the pressure to narrow the curriculum and honor the importance of social studies through curricular time and resources. And families can communicate their demand for high quality social studies instruction to their children’s schools.

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