

Why We Need to Save (and Strengthen) Social Studies

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Commentary

Why We Need to Save (and Strengthen) Social Studies

By Judith L. Pace

Amid the chorus of much-needed criticisms of the No Child Left Behind Act, hardly a note has been heard in the media about the “squeezing” of social studies, a significant consequence of the pressure to raise test scores in reading and mathematics. Only a tiny body of published research on the problem exists, but it, along with widespread anecdotal evidence, indicates that high-stakes accountability based on reading and math scores is marginalizing the social studies curriculum in elementary schools.

Surveys have reported reduced instructional time in various states, and organizations such as the National Council for the Social Studies have responded with letters and statements to Congress. Social studies educators have begun to lobby their lawmakers. But the apparent mainstream acceptance of drastic reductions in the amount of time and attention given to one of elementary education’s core academic subjects is shocking. We are in danger of losing a generation of citizens schooled in the foundations of democracy—and of producing high school graduates who are not broadly educated human beings.

In my own state of California, where history/social studies is not tested until 8th grade, this trend began with the state’s Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, and has accelerated with the No Child Left Behind law. The social studies squeeze occurs disproportionately in low-performing schools with large minority and low-income populations that are under intense pressure to raise scores. And this, too, has alarming implications for educational opportunity and civic participation.

In one of the few qualitative research studies on this topic, the University of California, Riverside, researcher John S. Wills examined the dilemmas faced by teachers in a poor, rural school in California when social studies instruction was curtailed by high-stakes-testing demands in other subjects. He found that teachers managed these dilemmas differently, but with a common consequence: Elements of thoughtful teaching were eradicated. Wills asks whether the drive for accountability is leading not only to lost content knowledge, but also, and paradoxically, to the elimination of thoughtful, student-centered instruction “disproportionately from the education of poor students and students of color.”

Anecdotal evidence is disturbing, and cries out for more systematic investigation. Some large school districts in California and other states have now virtually eliminated social studies instruction from all of their elementary schools, and some middle schools. Many students are not getting social studies instruction until the 10th grade. Teacher-educators, including myself and colleagues at other institutions, have discovered that elementary school preservice candidates are not having an opportunity to observe or practice social studies teaching. Especially in schools where teachers are required to spend more hours on reading and math, often using scripted programs, little time is left for social studies. With the advent in California of science testing in the 5th grade, this subject, too, will trump social studies.

This past spring, I interviewed 5th grade teachers in three Northern California districts about the teaching of social studies for a small pilot study. My sample was skewed, because many teachers in low-performing schools declined the invitation to talk and I purposely recruited teachers who love history. Still, the interviews were revealing, and may hold some significance for other school systems nationwide.

In the suburban, high-performing district I studied, teachers reported that history is a centerpiece of the curriculum. Although this district’s report card de-emphasizes history-social science, its teachers are free to give the subject area priority in their classrooms.

The other two districts in my study were urban, with a wide range of schools represented. Teachers at these districts’ low-performing schools talked about the huge difficulty of teaching social studies in the face of such daily curricular requirements as 2.5 hours for reading and language arts, 1.5 hours for math, and a half-hour for English-language development. Teachers at high-performing schools, meanwhile, spoke of having some flexibility in making curricular decisions because of their high test scores. District mandates need not apply, it appears, in better-performing schools.

In essence, the data point to a social studies divide, caused by the confluence of high-stakes accountability and school segregation by race and class.

Perennial debates over whether social studies is even a valid academic subject are an unfortunate distraction. The social studies wars, though real enough in academia, are irrelevant to schoolteachers and their students. At the elementary level, the social studies curriculum is, appropriately, an integration of history, geography, economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science. And California's standards for "history-social science," while flawed, constitute a serious and substantive document.

Why must we save social studies education for all students? A voluminous literature, written by scholars, curriculum makers, and practitioners alike, speaks convincingly to that question. I will only add—at the risk of repeating bad news—that, internationally, public opinion of the United States, both its government and its people, worsens every day. The domestic and international issues facing us are so complex and pressing that, to preserve democracy as we know it, citizens must have some depth of historical, political, and cultural understanding. Making good decisions requires that. It's one thing to have a nation of diverse opinions, which is crucial for democracy, but opinion before knowledge, or without tolerance, leads to demise. We've seen more than enough evidence of that in recent years.

Granted, social studies education historically has had its problems. The quality of instruction and students' attitudes toward the subject often have been found lacking. In many classrooms, teachers rely on textbooks and lectures that trivialize, even distort, the subject matter. But examples of excellent social studies education also are abundant.

We need not only to save, but to strengthen social studies education. Many argue that young people today are not educated to care about political matters, understand complex issues, make informed decisions, and contribute to a just society. Studies point to a glaring gap in civic knowledge based on test scores correlated with socioeconomic background and race or ethnicity. While ineffective school practices may fail to address the current realities of students, especially students of color in economically disadvantaged circumstances, throwing out the baby with the bath water is certain to exacerbate the biggest evil in our education system—inequality.

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision this year to disallow the use of race in school assignments has set back progress toward racial integration. We must now address inequality in other ways, the foremost being by improving the quality of teaching and the curriculum in poor, segregated schools. We are cheating already marginalized children if social studies is squeezed out of their elementary school education. We also are setting up their high school history teachers for failure. Worse, we may be paving the way for potentially dire consequences for our democracy.

I am not ready to support testing in social studies in elementary schools; we need less standardized testing, not more. (Social studies is "high stakes" in states such as Virginia, and there the press for "cultural literacy" has turned elementary school teaching into a coverage craze.) We need fewer mandates that dictate classroom schedules and scripted curricula. Policymakers must understand that subjects like social studies actually develop reading and writing skills in meaningful and enriching curricular contexts. When teachers have resources, such as time for planning and good professional development, many become passionate and knowledgeable about teaching social studies, which goes a long way toward engaging students in powerful learning.

For now, however, the situation calls for educational researchers to carefully document the problem, how it plays out in a variety of school settings, and what its consequences are. As Stanford University's Linda Darling-Hammond says, we practitioners and scholars must educate our government about how to educate our children.

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