

Fact or Fiction:

Is Social Studies “History” in North Carolina’s Elementary Schools?

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Abstract

Elementary students in North Carolina are not required to take social studies standardized tests. As a result, assumptions about social studies instruction have emerged. The assumptions represent perceptions or misperceptions about whether the subject is being taught, whether it is valued, and whether there are pressures to ignore social studies to focus on tested subjects. Data from a multi-university, longitudinal study examining the state of social studies in elementary grades are highlighted. Selected findings from the statewide research provide a framework for considering the assumptions. Recommendations suggest a team approach to advocating for the social studies.

Introduction

Following a demonstration lesson on how to teach the American Revolution, Jennifer, a preservice teacher in elementary education, raises her hand and tells the social studies methods professor, “Thank you for calling the ‘Civil War’ the ‘American Revolution.’ I like the word ‘revolution’ better than the word ‘war’ ...it is less violent...” The methods instructor corrected

the future teacher by informing her that the American Revolution and the Civil War were two separate events. The preservice teacher added, “It really doesn’t matter...I won’t have to actually teach this subject, right?”

In North Carolina, students are not tested in the social studies throughout the K-6 years; therefore, it is *possible* the subject is not taught during the K-6 years. This teacher candidate’s confusion and ignorance about the Civil War and the American Revolution could be a direct result of social studies not being taught in the elementary schools. Her dismissal of the subject could have been influenced by what she is seeing in her practicum placement as she trains to become a teacher. Her placement is with an excellent teacher who feels pressured to not teach social studies and place more emphasis on math and reading. This is not fair because a preservice teacher is caught in the middle. Anecdotal comments such as the preservice teacher’s comment prompt assumptions to form about the level and intensity of social studies instruction in public school classrooms. Are they correct assumptions? Are they fact or fiction?

There are many assumptions one could make surrounding the impact of standardized tests. These assumptions arise from the anecdotal stories of teacher candidates and other visitors to the classrooms in North Carolina. When asked what unit of study she planned to prepare for practicum experience, Jennifer, the teacher candidate, responded, “I can teach any social studies unit I want because my teacher does not teach social studies anymore—she is not allowed to teach it.” Do you think the social studies are “history” in the elementary classroom? Answer the following questions for your own school: (a) How often is social studies taught? (b) How are decisions made regarding the use of instructional time? (c) How satisfied are you with the amount of time devoted to the social studies? (d) What barriers exist at your school inhibiting the teaching of the social studies curriculum?

A closer analysis of the situation will provide a deeper understanding into the problem. Consider the following five assumptions that have emerged from teacher candidate clinical observations, observation field journals, and reflective writings in elementary social studies methods courses. The assumptions represent perceptions or misperceptions of what is going on in the elementary schools. It is difficult to determine if these are fact or fiction. In elementary schools in North Carolina, the following could be assumed:

1. Assumption: Social studies is not being taught.
2. Assumption: Social studies must not be valued.
3. Assumption: Instructional decision-making and time-allocations are determined without teacher input.
4. Assumption: Social studies content is not being integrated within elementary curricula.
5. Assumption: Lack of familiarity with content standards attributes to limited instructional time spent on these standards for learning.

Teacher education candidates return from their practicum field experience with many of these assumptions based on what they are seeing (or not seeing) in the classrooms. How can teacher candidates, who are training to be teachers, obtain a substantive social studies practicum experience, when the master clinical teachers and administrators feel pressured to remove it or reduce it from the school day? We have all heard, “Teachers, teach to the test”...what occurs when there is *no* test? Should the assumption now be, if it is not tested, it is not taught? One third-grade classroom teacher, who welcomes teacher candidates into her classroom and loves

teaching social studies commented, “My school put a lock on everything but reading and math, so we don’t teach the other subjects.” This is an exemplary teacher who values the social studies; she integrates it throughout the day and goes above and beyond the standards to help her children understand social studies skills, yet she is not able to teach it. We wanted to find out if there was truth in these assumptions, understanding the connection and the importance of teacher training with this matter.

Brief Review of the Literature

Historically, the pioneers of education valued social studies in the foundations of public education. Thomas Jefferson believed the purpose of the public school was to educate citizens, and Horace Mann envisioned an educational system that developed character (Guttek, 2004). Various aspects of the social studies, such as character education and citizenship, would increase in popularity over time. Attempts to elevate the presence of social studies in the elementary classroom were made centuries later, with the direct inclusion of character education in the classroom, as well as affective concerns, attitudes and core democratic values and beliefs (NCSS, 1997). Also, in the 1990s, social studies shifted from national to global perspectives, and effective citizenship was the focus in an increasingly interdependent and culturally diverse world (NCSS, 1994). Even with this shift, the Goals 2000 Educate America Act of 1994 sought to raise the status of students in science and math achievement to first in the world by the year 2000 with no mention of accountability for the social studies and with the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) the social studies has become further marginalized (NCSS, 2007).

Recent studies (Rock, Heafner, O’Connor, Passe, Oldendorf, Good, & Byrd, 2006; VanFossen, 2005; Wills, 2007) have begun to focus on the unintended consequences of the high stakes accountability movement. In particular, these studies emphasize the diminishing value and often absence of curricula that are not tested (ASCD, 2007; Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005; Rock et al., 2006; VanFossen, 2005). School administrators, as well as teachers, are feeling the pressure to place significant emphases on tested subjects at the expense of non-tested content. Instructional time has been reallocated for the purpose of focusing on tested curriculum, and non-tested subjects become occasional indulgences or are completely absent from the curriculum (Turner 2004; vonZastrow & Janc, 2004). Even if a classroom teacher, administrator, and/or an instructor in higher education find value in the social studies, the educator must find creative means to squeeze in the social studies in little to no allocated time.

Testing has had a significant impact on social studies instruction. In an article about social studies instructional time compared to math and reading, Manzo (2005) states that since the approval of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the amount of instructional time devoted to social studies is decreasing, particularly within elementary, middle, and low performing schools. These findings are supported by a comparative analysis of the impacts of testing between two states: one in which social studies is tested and another where social studies is not tested (Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006). Results of this study revealed that the testing of social studies doubled the amount of social studies instruction for elementary students. Students in the state that tested social studies were more likely to receive social studies instruction all year; whereas, students in the state that did not test social studies received social studies instruction for half the year and when it was taught, received significantly less daily instructional time. Data revealed the major barriers to teaching social studies in the state that did not test social studies were end-of-grade-testing pressures and the pressures to teach only tested curricula.

Review of Marginalization Study

Data presented in this article are from a larger multi-university longitudinal study examining the state of social studies and tracking curriculum changes in elementary grades as the state introduced testing in science to meet NCLB requirements. See Rock et al. (2006) for an overview of the research design and validation of data collection instrument. Data represent practicing K-6 elementary teachers (n= 408) who were interviewed in year three of this study. Participants were from all geographic regions of the state. The purpose of this paper is to highlight selected findings from the statewide research project which may or may not debunk the assumptions about social studies instruction in elementary schools in North Carolina. Are these assumptions fact or fiction?

Assumptions Paired with Results of the Marginalization Study

Assumption #1: Social Studies is not being taught.

ACTUAL FINDING #1: 33.8% of the teachers reported that students received social studies instruction at least 2 to 3 days per week all year.

Lower elementary grade teachers reported they taught social studies more frequently than upper elementary grade levels. Approximately half of teachers (48.7%) reported teaching social studies for two to three days per week for half the year. In most of these instructional settings, social studies alternated with science, and this practice was especially prevalent in grades 3-5 when academic testing in reading, language arts, and mathematics occurs. Many teachers (48.3%) reported frustration with not having enough time to teach social studies due to time devoted to language arts and mathematics because of testing. Most teachers (81.6%) identified the main barriers to teaching social studies as time required to teach tested subjects and End-of-Grade tests. Teachers (37.7%) recognized integration could lead to more satisfaction with current time allotments for the social studies, yet many teachers expressed the need for more training in how to develop interdisciplinary lessons that effectively teach social studies in a powerful integrative manner.

Assumption #2: Social Studies must not be valued.

ACTUAL FINDING #2: Teachers ranked social studies below literacy, mathematics, and science in importance.

Teachers ranked social studies below literacy, mathematics, and science in importance. Teacher rankings of science and social studies indicated mixed perceptions of the value of social studies within the elementary curriculum. Close to half of teachers ranked science (47.8%) third, while most other teachers ranked social studies (44.4%) third. Data indicated that teachers valued social studies as either third or a close fourth among four core curriculum subjects, yet teacher perceptions of administrative valuing of curriculum presented a starker contrast. Teachers indicated that their schools' commitments to social studies were clearly fourth (63.4%), while science was ranked third (67.2%) with language arts and reading being ranked first and mathematics taking second. Teachers valued social studies more than their school administrators, although social studies still did not hold a majority ranking of third for teachers.

Assumption #3: Instructional decision-making and time allocations are determined without teacher input.

ACTUAL FINDING #3: The majority (53.3%) of teachers reported that they determined how instructional time would be used in their classroom.

Only a small percentage of teachers (9%) felt they were not participants in the decision-making process and that administrators solely determined how instructional time was used. Even though teachers feel they have a voice in how instructional time is spent, teachers appear to be dissatisfied with the amount of time devoted to social studies (40.8%). The majority (51.8%) indicate that students receive 30-45 minutes or less social studies instruction per day when social studies is taught; while 30.2% of teachers indicate 30 minutes or less social studies instructional time on the days that social studies is taught. Only 8.3% of respondents teach it daily all year.

Assumption #4: Social studies content is not being integrated within other elementary curricula.

ACTUAL FINDING #4: The majority of teachers used “integration” for teaching social studies.

The majority of teachers used integration for teaching social studies: 67% of teachers reported teaching social studies as a combination of both integration and as a stand alone subject, and 28.3% of teachers stated that they taught social studies only through integration within other content areas. The remaining 4.1% taught social studies only as a stand alone subject. Lower elementary grade teachers were more likely than upper elementary grade levels to only use integration for teaching social studies.

Assumption #5: Lack of familiarity with content standards attributes to limited instructional time spent on these standards for learning.

ACTUAL FINDING # 5: Teachers address the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS) goals and objectives 30-45 minutes daily when social studies is taught.

Teachers were asked how much of their social studies instructional time was used to address the state curriculum goals and objectives. On average, teachers stated they address the North Carolina Standard Course of Study goals and objectives (NCSCOS). The majority of teachers (74.8%) reported spending 15-45 minutes on the NCSCOS. There were significant differences among grade levels for time teaching state curriculum standards. Although lower elementary grade teachers teach social studies more frequently than do teachers of upper elementary grades, they tend to devote less time to the state standards.

Discussion

Social studies could become “history” in North Carolina’s elementary schools because it does not seem to be top priority. Other states are reporting testing or lack of testing has impacted the quality and quantity of social studies instruction in elementary classrooms (Lintner, 2006; Stecher & Chun, 2001; VanFossen, 2005; vonZastrow & Janc, 2004). Pressures to increase state test scores and meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) will continue to devalue and marginalize social studies. All public schools in North Carolina and throughout the country must measure and report AYP as outlined by NCLB. Barriers to teaching social studies include limited instructional time and increased time preparing students for tested areas of reading, writing, mathematics, and science. Fewer resources are allocated for teaching social studies and for the

preparation of social studies teachers. The interest and inclination of the individual teacher, administrator, and instructor of higher education can determine whether or not social studies are even taught. It is possible for all key players to advocate for the social studies (Heafner, O'Connor, Groce, Byrd, Good, Rock, Passe, & Oldendorf, 2007; O'Connor, Heafner, & Groce, 2007).

Perhaps the solution can be found in the combination of several possible actions. The first reaction might be to add a test. However, testing does not necessarily ensure best practices (Heafner et al., 2006; Lintner, 2006; Neill & Guisbond, 2005). Teachers are at a crossroads; if/when social studies is tested, will it be taught more often? On the other hand, if/when it is tested, in what way will the test measure a true understanding of the material? Can we be sure the instruction will be delivered in a manner that honors the National Council for the Social Studies five elements of powerful teaching (Brophy & Alleman, 2005)?

Some recommendations to further illuminate and change the marginalization of social studies today include examining the longitudinal effects of the declining role of social studies instruction, defining effective methods of curriculum integration, and unifying a national voice of social studies professionals (Heafner et al., 2007; O'Connor et al., 2007). Other possible solutions are to include training and professional development with substantive integration models and to identify and honor best practices in North Carolina by inviting educators to present their own successful practices. Actions also include inviting other states to replicate the research project to document the national impact of NCLB on social studies in the elementary schools, injecting social studies methods classes and teacher education training with strategies for integration and means to advocate for the social studies, and utilizing data to influence policy decisions.

Subjects not tested are rarely taught, which confirms results of other studies addressing the unintentional consequences of NCLB (Bailey, Shaw, & Hollifield, 2006; Burroughs et al., 2005; Stecher & Chun, 2001; VanFossen, 2005; vonZastrow & Janc, 2004; Wills, 2007). Every child deserves the right to the *entire* general curriculum which goes beyond reading, writing, mathematics, and test preparation. The North Carolina State Curriculum includes Arts Education, Computer Skills, English/ Language Arts, Guidance, Healthful Living, Information Skills, Mathematics, Science, Second Language, and Social Studies. However, in a typical day, reading and math are being taught, and social studies may be squeezed in, when time allows, in a variety of ways. Teachers are incredibly proficient at integration and understand it takes more than coloring a picture of an event or significant holiday symbol or viewing an important document to constitute an integrated lesson. Educators need to identify effective practices in the classroom, where integration, advocacy, and social studies skills are taught at all levels, so our future teachers can learn from those who teach well in spite of the pressures.

When a North Carolina teacher candidate was asked about the social studies lessons observed during her internship year, she shared the only lesson she could identify as a social studies lesson. It was an activity where pictures of groundhogs were colored and hung on the walls in February, after calendar time. This observation is reminiscent of a scene from the movie *Groundhog Day*, when a man experiences that February day over and over again. Perhaps the emphasis on testing other content areas has caused a "Groundhog Day" type of teaching social studies, and it is possible that the intern will teach social studies in the same manner when she has her own classroom. Although the movie is fiction, the repetitious, uninspired, and disconnected social studies lessons that teachers report in North Carolina may become factual

permanently, unless all educators, including teachers, administrators, and instructors of higher education, act together to change the direction of elementary social studies instruction.

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