

The Teaching of History-Social Science: Left Behind or Behind Closed Doors?

Lisa A. Hutton
California State University, Dominguez Hills

Joyce H. Burstein
California State University, Northridge

Abstract

This descriptive study reports results from surveys and interviews to extend a 2004 study of K-5 elementary teachers. Results show the continued trend of teachers spending a minimal amount of time teaching history-social science compared to reading/language arts and mathematics. Teachers are pressured to focus on reading/language arts and increase test scores on standardized tests and history-social science is being marginalized in the elementary curriculum. In the 2006 data collection, teachers reported their commitment to teaching history-social science and related their struggles in teaching it. Many of the surveyed teachers are finding creative ways to carve out time in the school day to focus on history-social science. The article concludes with an appeal to social studies educators and professional organizations to reaffirm the importance of history-social science in the elementary curriculum with a clear articulation and dissemination of the goals and benefits of history-social science education.

Introduction

As elementary history-social science educators, working with both pre-service teachers and teachers already in the classroom, we are usually focused on ways to *improve* the teaching of history-social science. However, in the past few years, we seem to be fighting for the survival of history-social science in the elementary school curriculum (Burstein, Hutton, & Curtis, 2006; Lintner, 2006; McGuire, 2007). Recently, a teacher, who has been attending a professional development institute for fifth-grade teachers, said that she started an after-school club to teach

United States history. She explained that her principal would not allow her to teach history during the regular school day because it was viewed as “an extra” and not as critical as reading, math, and science which are all tested in the fifth grade. Though we were dismayed at this anecdote, which revealed a total disregard for the importance of teaching history-social science, we were not surprised. We have heard hundreds of Southern California teachers express their frustration that history-social science has been de-emphasized, under-supported, and even prohibited in recent years (Burstein, Hutton, & Curtis, 2006).

Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, a “narrowing of the curriculum” has taken place in many elementary schools. In an effort to increase student achievement and reduce the achievement gap, great emphasis has been placed on teaching language arts and mathematics. Policymakers at the state and district level have increased standardized testing in language arts, mathematics, and, more recently, science (Haas, 1998; McGuire, 2007). Because social studies is not included in the testing agenda in districts and state standardized tests until eighth grade, elementary teachers are choosing to spend time teaching other skills that will boost test scores. With rigid pacing plans and structured, sometimes scripted programs, teachers report they have little or no time to teach social studies (Burstein et al., 2006; Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; Lintner, 2006; McGuire, 2007).

Though we agree with policy makers, teachers, and school administrators that learning to read is crucial in the elementary grades, we do not agree with the idea that the teaching of history, science, and other core subjects can wait until students have learned to read. History-social science is part of a well-rounded, liberal arts education. It is a core subject and should be an integral part of the curriculum. National, state, and district standards have been created to make sure it is part of a balanced curriculum. For example, the California History-Social Science Framework states:

The object of the history-social science curriculum is to set forth, in an organized way, the knowledge and understanding that our students need to function intelligently now and in the future...knowledge of the history-social science disciplines is essential in developing individual and social intelligence; preparing students for responsible citizenship; comprehending global interrelationships; and understanding the vital connections between past, present, and future. (p. 3)

The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) on Early Childhood/Elementary Social Studies (1989) recommends that 20% of the academic day be devoted to social studies instruction, which is approximately an hour a day or five hours a week; however, few teachers are spending anywhere near this amount of time. In a random survey of second-, fifth-, and eighth-grade teachers, Leming et al. (2006) reported that 70% of teachers spent less than four hours per week on social studies “in any form” (p. 323). In fact, of those elementary teachers, 50% integrated social studies and science into their language arts program with themes available from those texts. Besides little time spent on history-social science, the subject area is rated lower on the scale of importance. Ninety percent of teachers reported that language arts and mathematics are important to teach with civics and government important to only 29% of those teachers (Leming et al., 2006).

Teachers have reported that more than 60% of their day is spent teaching language arts and mathematics, leaving social studies, science, arts, and physical education to “left-over” time (Burstein et al., 2006; Dobyans, 1992; Haas, 1998; McGuire, 2007; Risinger, 1992; Stark et al.,

1987). This is a recurring theme found in the research literature when social studies researchers have analyzed how instructional time was spent. In one study of the Delaware schools, Hauser (1994) found that social studies had been put on the “backburner.” He believes that social studies is “undervalued and underrepresented in the classroom” (p.14). Teachers in Hauser's study reported that pressure from administrators to focus on increasing test scores influenced the amount of time spent on social studies teaching. When faced with this pressure, one teacher stated, “The first thing you cut out is social studies and science” (Hauser, p. 14).

After surveying elementary teachers throughout Indiana, VanFossen (2005) concludes that social studies is being marginalized in the elementary curriculum. The three factors he identified as playing a role in this marginalization were “(a) perceived lack of administrative support for implementing state social studies standards, (b) lack of state-wide assessments for social studies at K-5 level, and (c) teachers’ lack of a clear understanding of the goals and mission of the social studies at the K-5 level” (p. 376).

Although the place of history-social science in the curriculum is marginal across the United States, the situation in California urban districts is even more alarming. In 2004, we designed a survey to gather information about the teaching of social studies in elementary school classrooms (Burstein et al., 2006). We sought to determine if the teaching of social studies was being neglected, and if so, the reasons behind this neglect. We surveyed 172 elementary school teachers of grades K-5 in a large urban school district in Southern California. Schools were chosen randomly from different geographic regions in the district using the district website.

The data showed that teachers are spending the majority of the school day teaching subjects that are tested by standardized measures, particularly reading/language arts and mathematics. In fact, 81% of the teachers teach reading/language arts for at least four-to-six hours per week with many spending well over ten hours. Additionally, 61% of the teachers reported spending a minimum of four-to-six hours teaching mathematics.

The results of this previous study revealed some enlightening information on the state of social studies in one urban district. It appears that teachers are spending considerably less time teaching social studies; results indicate that 70% of the K-5 teachers spent less than two hours per week on social studies with 49% spending less than one hour. In addition to lack of time, 29% of teachers felt that teaching social studies was not a school priority; 31% stated that they had no materials or outdated materials, while 9% indicated that social studies was not tested on the state standardized test; thus it was not given much time or attention.

One important question raised by the data in the first survey was “Why are some teachers better able to handle the mandates than others?” Some teachers find ways to work around the constraints and teach social studies for two hours per week. We decided that it would be interesting to explore why some teachers spent more time teaching social studies as well as investigate the strategies they used to maintain the teaching of history-social science with the increased pressure to focus on reading/language arts and mathematics.

2006 Survey

In order to add to the data from our first survey and explore why some teachers were able to find time to teach history-social science while others were not, additional data were collected in the spring of 2006. A survey was sent to teachers who had recently attended a conference or professional development institute through the History-Social Science Project at California State University, Dominguez Hills, to explore whether these teachers were having similar experiences

as the teachers from the first survey. In particular, how have teachers who chose to attend professional development in history-social science, on their own time and at their own expense, deal with the lack of time and emphasis on history-social science?

The survey consisted of nine open-ended questions that asked teachers to provide the amount of time they spent teaching history-social science, to list their strengths and needs in teaching history-social science, and to explain any changes in the way they had been teaching history-social science in the past few years. The survey also asked the teachers about the strategies they employed to make time to teach history-social science (survey questions can be found in Appendix A). A total of 24 kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers from 10 Los Angeles County districts responded to the survey. Teachers' experience ranged from one to 22 years with an average of 8.87 years spent in the classroom.

Time Spent Teaching History-Social Science

Though Table 1 demonstrates that the primary teachers in the more recent survey are teaching history-social science for longer periods of time than teachers from the 2004 survey group, 44% of the K-2 teachers and 40% of the 3-5 teachers are teaching one hour or less. None of the teachers are spending close to the five hours recommended by National Council of Social Studies (NCSS). These teachers, who demonstrated an interest in improving their teaching of history-social science by attending professional development, appear to be impacted by the same constraints as the first survey group.

Table 1

Focused Teaching Time on History-Social Science from the 2004 and 2006 Surveys

Amount of time	Percent of teachers	
	2004	2006
Grades K - 2		
60 minutes or less	62	44
1 - 2 hours	25	33
2 - 4 hours	12	22
4 - 6 hours or more	1	0
Grades 3 - 5		
60 minutes or less	39	40
1 - 2 hours	22	27
2 - 4 hours	28	27
4 - 6 hours or more	11	7

Support and Professional Development Needed

When teachers were asked about the type of support and professional development they would need in order to teach history-social science effectively, their responses included the following: more time, better and additional materials, and more professional development. While these responses were expected, the comments of a few novice teachers were more of a surprise; several stated that they wanted support and recognition for the value of history-social science. A first year teacher wanted “Support from the principal! I think if she found out how much time we spend on social studies, she would get upset. They want us to incorporate social studies with Open Court and this is just not enough.” A second-year teacher said that support “was having people realize that history is just as important as any other subject. History and science seem to keep being put on the back burners of learning.”

Changes in Teaching in Recent Years

Several questions on the survey were about changes teachers had made in their teaching of history-social science in recent years. Two questions were general, asking teachers if their teaching of history-social science had changed in recent years with a follow-up question eliciting details about these changes. Fifty-four percent of the teachers mentioned increased enthusiasm and preparedness for teaching history-social science after attending professional development with the History Project. Others mentioned that team teaching and receiving new textbooks had helped their teaching. One teacher, with ten years of experience, was spending between two and four hours per week teaching history-social science; she stated, “The longer I have taught, the more time I have learned to devote to social studies. As a new teacher, you are trying to keep your head above water. With experience, you learn to manage your time better.” The less positive news was that on these general questions, 30% of the teachers mentioned changes in their teaching due to the lack of time or lack of flexibility to teach history-social science.

Following the more general questions, the teachers were asked specifically if their teaching of history-social science has been impacted by the increased emphasis on reading/language arts and math. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents agreed that the increased emphasis on reading/language arts and math had impacted their teaching. One teacher stated:

The problem is lack of time for history and science during the school day. I know this is a huge concern for other elementary teachers, especially at my school. Our state is concentrating on reading and math, and we lack the support in science and social studies. We, as teachers, do the best we can do with what we have.

In a national survey in the late 1990s, Haas and Laughlin (2001) found that the most common concern reported by teachers was an apparent lack of priority for social studies. Some teachers felt that “new district and state policies were perceived by many teachers as weakening the social studies in favor of reading and mathematics” (p. 5). Similarly in our 2006 survey, 50% of the teachers mentioned that teaching history-social science was not a priority.

In this survey, many of the teachers mentioned that schools were only concerned with reading/language arts or subjects tested on the state standardized tests. Both experienced and novice teachers commented on the lack of emphasis on history-social science in their schools. A ten-year veteran said, “Because language arts and math are what is tested in May, the emphasis

at most schools are on these subjects. Social studies and science get pushed to the side in order to ensure higher test scores.” A fourteen-year veteran declared:

My school’s emphasis is on science, math, and technology...the teaching of social studies has been impacted. Where there was once time, there is so much pressure to raise the bar, raise the bar, raise the bar—that the focus is on only what is going to be assessed.

Perspective of a novice teacher. One novice teacher, with two years of experience, had several telling comments about teaching history-social science, as she explained, “They are only concerned about math and language arts since that is what students are tested on. Math and language arts are the only subjects my school pushes. When I am observed by administrators, it is only in math and language arts.” She also commented on her students’ lack of knowledge in history:

I was very surprised at the beginning of the year when I was asking my students about what they remembered from social studies last year. The only thing they mentioned was the missions. They could couldn’t even tell me the theme of their book—California.

Strategies for making time. The final question on the survey asked teachers to detail the strategies they used to find time to teach history-social science in spite of the demands placed upon them. Many teachers responded with more than one strategy and several strategies appeared repeatedly in the teachers’ responses.

Table 3

Strategies for Making Time to Teach History-Social Science

Strategy	Percent of teachers who mentioned the strategy
Schedule a specific block of time for history-social science	25%
Alternate between history-social science and science within a scheduled time block	23%
Use themes to integrate history-social science with reading/language arts instruction	18%
Team teach/departmentalize to teach history-social science	10%
Integrate with other subjects such as English language development, science, and art	8%
Plan with colleagues	5%
Shut the door/ignore mandates	5%

The most common strategy, which 25% of teachers mentioned, was working out a schedule that would create time in the school day and decrease the chance that history-social science would be skipped. The second most common strategy was alternating on a regular schedule between history-social science and science to ensure that both subjects were taught with the limited time available. Teachers also talked about trying to integrate the teaching of history-social science with reading/language arts or another subject area such as science, English language development, or the arts. Several mentioned that this did not do justice to the teaching of history-social science or meeting the content standards, but it was the only way that were able to teach any social studies. One ten-year veteran in Los Angeles said, "Sometimes I shut the door and put the testing sign out."

Interviews

After the results of the initial surveys in 2005, we sought to record the experiences of several teachers who had found a way to integrate more social studies into the teaching day. After the first survey, 20 teachers were selected, based on their responses to being asked if they taught social studies regularly despite using structured language arts and mathematics programs. Of those 20, eight volunteered to be interviewed one-on-one. The semi-structured interview protocol included questions on teaching strategies, timesaving strategies, important concepts to cover in social studies, and helpful advice given to new teachers (see Appendix B for interview questions). After each interview was audio taped and transcribed word for word, two major themes emerged: (1) closed the door and rearranged instructional time, and (2) integrated social studies in thematic units especially with arts and science.

Closed-door and rearranged time. Several teachers reported that they rearranged their instructional time to devote part of the day to social studies. While most reported teaching language arts in the first part of the day before lunch, half of the teachers stated they used the time after lunch to teach social studies, science, the arts, and physical education. In order to structure enough time, they found innovative ways to cut out extraneous parts of the language arts program. One fifth-grade teacher stated:

Once you figure out how Open Court works, it is easy to figure out the shortcuts for each section. This leaves some extra time to teach social studies lessons while still practicing reading skills. The kids get bored with reading stories, and social studies gives them a chance to learn something different.

Shelly, a first-grade teacher, limited the number of times her class reread the story for the week; she explained, "After the fourth time, the children were getting so bored now I read the story only three times. Over the week, this cut can add about 15 more minutes for social studies."

Another method used by over half the teachers was elimination of the structured English language development programs. Instead of teaching the structured program from kits, teachers taught social studies content and vocabulary. Teachers reported using themes from social studies with techniques from the kits. Using repetition, rhyme, songs, and movement, many teachers found that children learned more English academic vocabulary because it was attached to a social studies theme. One third-grade teacher asserted that singing reinforced vocabulary while children learned about Native American tribes and culture. Marta stated, "The kids were so excited to learn about the Chumash, they did not realize all the English they were learning."

Finally, many teachers decided they must teach social studies and just closed the door and taught it. All eight teachers interviewed stated that they felt an obligation to teach all subject areas. In addition, most teachers indicated that teaching content was more interesting than teaching hours of language arts. They reported that children were more engaged when learning both social studies and science. Several teachers reported that most principals made classroom visits during language arts and mathematics, so opportunities to teach social studies happened in the afternoon. One particular fifth-grade teacher explained:

I just shut the door and turned my classroom into whatever place in time it needed to be. Learning about our country's development is too important to our democratic society. How are kids able to understand the right to vote or freedom of speech if they never learn how it all started? If anybody asks, I'm just teaching the state standards like I was taught to do. No one is going to fire me for doing my job.

Another teacher reiterated the sentiment that it was "our job-a moral obligation" to teach to all the content standards, not only the ones that were tested by the state. Natalie, a second-grade teacher, commented, "When it comes down to it, how much do they even remember for the test? It is just random facts, but social studies teaches them life skills."

Integrated units. While many teachers found ways to teach social studies by rearranging time, others created integrated units. Each teacher interviewed created at least one integrated social studies unit to teach during the school year. Half of the teachers created units with social studies themes from the California State History-Social Science Standards and integrated science concepts that fit best with those units. Teachers analyzed the content standards and found commonalities that would connect major concepts. Teachers reported that they saved time by covering both subjects. In addition, students seemed to understand the connections better when taught together. For example, one fourth-grade teacher planned a unit for the Gold Rush while integrating science standards about rocks and minerals and the environmental impact of rapid mining. "It just makes sense to teach about the human-environmental interaction of the Gold Rush together. Kids make more connections," stated Jill. A second-grade teacher created a unit on communities and habitats to compare how people and animals shared basic needs for shelter, food, and water. Children made comparisons using Venn diagrams, charts, and graphs as they practiced skills used in both social studies and science.

In addition to integrating science into social studies units, many teachers used social studies as the base to integrate the arts. Teachers reported using the social studies major themes and standards to provide opportunities to integrate visual and performing arts skills and concepts. A third-grade teacher commented:

We have no time to teach any subject separately, so we were forced to be creative with our time. After lunch, I spent the entire time trying to connect my social studies units with arts. Kids are losing their creativity and their attention span, so the arts was a natural way to get them involved and excited. While teaching the Chumash unit, I brought in the visual arts through learning the mythology and rock painting. We learned Chumash dances and instruments to teach about culture.

In a fifth-grade class, drama was used to reenact various events leading up to the American Revolution. Through simulations, students learned the content by putting themselves

in the place of past citizens. The teacher integrated drama skills and used those skills to help students understand content. She stated, “It was amazing how much they remembered and how they really played out the feelings people must have felt during that time.” The whole process encompassed one full hour, yet she managed to cover social studies, drama, writing, and oral language.

Discussion and Next Steps

Though the surveys and interviews revealed that many teachers are finding creative ways to include history-social science in the curriculum despite the constraints, a great number of teachers are not finding the time, and history-social science is being pushed out of the core curriculum. It is an impossible task to meet the California History-Social Science content standards, particularly in the upper elementary grades, with so little time being spent on social studies. The emphasis on high-stakes testing is impacting how the core subjects are being taught, with the social studies curriculum being relegated to the background and only taught when there is time. VanFossen (2005) questions whether elementary social studies is moving from the core curriculum in the elementary classroom into the enrichment category. There seems to be ample evidence that in many places, history-social science is moving out of the center. For the fifth-grade teacher in the opening vignette, for example, history-social science has indeed moved out of the core and into after-school enrichment.

Teachers should neither have to sneak around to teach history-social science nor should it be a leftover subject that is only taught when there are a few spare minutes. In most cases, this marginalization of history-social science does not seem to be deliberate but more of an unintentional consequence of time constraints and the emphasis on standardized testing. History-social science needs to be recognized as an important part of the curriculum in its own right, and history-social science educators need to be positioned at the forefront of this effort.

VanFossen (2005) found that teachers were not clear on the goals and mission of K-5 social studies and this is one possible reason for its marginalization. We concur that history-social science educators and organizations need to come together and articulate a clear set of goals for K-5 history-social science with an emphasis on the benefits and rationale for teaching it as part of the core curriculum. After articulation, these goals and mission need to be communicated with teachers, administrators, parents, press, and policymakers at the local, state, and national level. Judging from recent responses to the 37th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward Education (2006), the majority of American citizens do not support the narrowing of the curriculum and want schools to offer a wide variety of courses instead of a few basic ones. Parents and the public are beginning to see the effects of an overemphasis on preparing for standardized testing. When asked if they were concerned that relying on testing for English and math to judge a school’s performance would mean less emphasis on art, music, history, and other subjects, 82% of the people surveyed said that this concerned them a great deal or a fair amount. Among people with a great deal of knowledge of NCLB, 92% were concerned that art, music, history, and other subjects would be less emphasized.

History-social science provides a context for understanding the past, present, and future in order to participate in a democratic society. Children need to understand America’s past and current history in order to be informed citizens—citizens who participate in critical thinking and decision-making with empathetic and compassionate perspectives. Instead of fighting for the

existence of history-social science in the elementary school classroom, we hope to return to the more essential issue of engaging all students in the study of history-social science and ensuring academic achievement in this important curricular area.

References

- Burstein, J., Hutton, L., & Curtis, R. (2006). Elementary social studies: To teach or not to teach. *Journal of Social Studies Research, 30*(1), 15-20.
- Dobyns, S. M. (1992). Getting from there and now to there and then. *Gifted Child Today, 52-55*.
- Haas, M. E., & Laughlin, M.A. (1998). *A contemporary profile of elementary social studies educators: Their beliefs, perceptions, and classroom practices in the 1990s*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Diego, CA.
- Haas, M. E., & Laughlin, M. A. (2001). A profile of elementary social studies teachers and their classrooms. *Social Education, 65*, 122.
- California Department of Education. (2005). *History-social science framework for California public schools*. Sacramento, CA.
- Houser, N. O. (1994). *Social studies on the "backburner": Views from the field*. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED 381 461).
- Leming, J. S., Ellington, L., & Schug, M. (2006). The state of social studies: A national random survey of elementary and middle school social studies teachers. *Social Education, 70*(5), 322-328.
- Lintner, T. (2006). Social studies (still) on the back burner: Perceptions and practices of K-5 social studies instruction. *Journal of Social Studies Research, 30*(1), 3.
- McGuire, M. E. (2007). What happened to social studies? The disappearing curriculum. *Phi Delta Kappan, 88*(8), 620-624.
- National Council for Social Studies. (1989). *Social Studies for early childhood and elementary school children: Preparing for the 21st century*. A report from NCSS task force on early childhood/elementary social studies. Washington, DC.
- Risinger, F. C. (1992). *Trends in K-12 social studies*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 351 278).
- Rose, L. C., & Gallup, A. M. (2005). The 37th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. *Phi Delta Kappan, 87*(1), 41.
- Slekar, T. D. (1995). Preservice teachers' attitudes concerning elementary social studies instruction. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 398 097).
- Stark, J. S. et al. (1987). *Professional education*. Association for the Study of Higher Education, Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education.
- Torff, B. (2004). No research left behind. *Educational Researcher, 33*(7), 27. *Voices of teachers: Report of a survey on social studies, 1991*. National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hart Publishing.
- VanFossen, P. (2005). "Reading and math take so much of the time...": An overview of social studies instruction in elementary classrooms in Indiana. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 33*(3), 376-403.

Appendix A
Survey Questions

Number of years teaching:

Grade currently teaching:

School:

District

1. How much time do you spend teaching history- social science each week?
 2. What do you feel that you do well in the teaching of history-social science?
 3. What could you do better?
 4. What kinds of support would you need in order to optimize your teaching of history-social science?
 5. What kinds of professional development would be most helpful to you?
 6. Has your teaching of history-social science changed in the past few years (amount of time, what you teach, materials to use)?
 7. If your teaching of history-social science has changed, please describe those changes and what circumstances have contributed to those changes.
 8. Has your teaching of history-social science been impacted by the emphasis on reading/language arts and math? If so, please explain.
 9. Many teachers have stated that they are unable to teach history-social science because of other demands/school priorities. If you are impacted by these same demands but still find ways to teach history-social science, how do you do this? Please list ways you make time to teach history-social science. Give as much details as possible.
-

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

-
1. How has your teaching of social studies changed since you started teaching?
Probe: What were some of the causes for that change? Explain.

 2. How do you negotiate your time when you plan to teach social studies content?
Probe- What elements do you leave out of the day in order to teach social studies?
Probe- What elements of your language arts/math program do you cover in order to make time for social studies?

 3. What timesaving strategies do you use when making time for social studies?

 4. What do you feel are the most important aspects to cover when teaching social studies at your grade level?
Probes: Why do you make time for social studies in your curriculum? Tell me more about the ways you include social studies?

 5. What advice would you give new teachers who are struggling to make time for social studies?