

PROGRAM RESEARCH

NCLB

Facing Facts/Shifting Realities: Elementary Social Studies and the No Child Left Behind Act

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The effects of NCLB are bandied about in the media on a daily basis. Government officials, from the President of the United States to White House spokespeople and Department of Education staff regularly laud the achievements and improvements that NCLB has wrought. They cite increases on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and have the support of some of the nation's urban leadership. Elected state officials, educational researchers and teacher organizations often argue an opposing view, however. Many say that the high stakes testing emphasis of the NCLB Act is misguided and an inappropriate set of solutions to the nation's educational challenges. They also argue that the expectations of the Act are not commiserate with the funding set up by the federal government. (Wood, 2004; Baker, 2007)

From the first days of the republic, instruction in history, geography, and civics was vital to education efforts in the United States. In 1820, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but with the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take power from them, but to inform their discretion through instruction."

A growing body of research, however, clearly shows how NCLB as currently constructed has had a major impact on narrowing the curriculum and decreased the time many of the nation's schools and teachers give to curriculum areas not tested or connected to the adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements of the federal law. (Van Fossen, 2005; Bailey, Shaw and Hollifield, 2006; Rock, Heafner, O'Connor, Passe, Oldendorf, Good and Byrd, 2006; O'Connor, Heafner and Groce, 2007; McMurrer/Center on Education Policy, 2007). Social Studies, especially at the elementary grades, has clearly been negatively affected by NCLB.

Social Studies: From Center to Margin

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In the earliest days of compulsory education, social studies instruction was at the very center of the curriculum. Even if not called “social studies,” the curricular goals of schooling in the 18th and 19th centuries were consistent with contemporary understandings of social studies instruction. Influential educators viewed the common school as central in promoting social harmony and ensuring that the republic would be guided by an intelligent, moral citizenry.

Social studies as a discrete content area has always borne special responsibility for inculcating the citizenry with moral values and for readying students to assume adult roles in our democratic republic. It has, however, become somewhat of an Achilles’ heel of the curriculum, particularly in elementary schools, where it is relegated to “second string” after literacy, math, and science. The issue of access to social studies, then, is really twofold: 1) In many places there is little to no elementary social studies being taught, and 2) when social studies is taught, it is often a perfunctory

coverage of events or is reduced to celebrations of heroes and holidays. How has this happened? The answers are plentiful and quite easy to understand. High-stakes testing in reading and math as emphasized in NCLB, standardized assessments, and even local standards documents usually minimize the importance of social studies or just leave it out of the elementary school curriculum altogether.

Every K-6 classroom teacher in the nation knows that her/his primary responsibility is to teach children to read and to understand basic mathematical concepts. This message is underscored boldly by principals, parents, and school board members in every district and in every school. When this message is supported by the administration of high-stakes tests that focus exclusively on reading and math skills, most classroom teachers find little reason or support for taking time out of a busy elementary school day to teach social studies, science, or any other content that won't appear on the assessment.

Another reason for the dissolving social studies instruction in the U.S. today is the fact that over the last decade, many scholars have argued that the classic "widening horizons" or "expanding environment" (me→family→neighborhood→community→state/region→nation→world) (Maxim, 1999, p. 21) social studies curriculum has become too weak and outdated. Many have written about the need for more history or more geography starting at the earliest grades to shore up an otherwise boring and redundant primary social studies curriculum about family and neighborhoods (Ravitch, 1998; National Center for History in the Schools, 1994).

In addition, the proliferation of standards documents in the social sciences published in the past decade add to the complexity of effective curricular actualization. While reading and math discussions and debates focus mainly on *pedagogy* (whole language, phonics, arithmetic, constructivist math, etc.), only social studies has major academic and research lobbies fighting over the *content* that

should be taught to our students. Note, for example, that standards documents (many in multivolume works) in world history, U.S. history, geography, economics, civics AND in social studies have been published since 1990. How can we expect elementary curriculum developers and teachers to deal with all these documents and the expectations they assume? Elements of these academic arguments and some understanding of standards have filtered down to the district, school, and classroom levels. In some cases they have helped classroom teachers and local curriculum developers define a scope and sequence for instruction but have more often caused confusion at the local level. This helps expand the vacuum in social studies instruction that is easily filled by the ever increasing expectations (and the tests that follow them) in reading and math.

So What Do We Do Now?

Facing the realities of curriculum decisions in the schools is not easy. Ignoring them, however, while far easier is also much more costly. We must begin to help teachers see the need for integrating standards based social studies content while they teach their children to read. I often ask my graduate students (who are all full time elementary classroom teachers) to explain to me the reason we teach students to read. "Literate for what?" is my shorthand query to them as they explain to me all the reasons that there is 'no time for social studies' in their high pressure, literacy and math crammed day.

This question is not meant to tease, but to help them understand that helping children learn a set of discrete reading skills alone is not education. When we discuss the reasons for literacy education, it helps them break down the barriers that are often set up by administration, testing procedures and curriculum materials. They see that standards based social studies can (and must) be

taught in concert with their reading instruction. They are challenged to understand that presenting students with interesting, real life content in social studies helps make them better readers.

When you examine any scope and sequence or standards document in reading/language arts you see a plethora of skills and strategies that students are expected to learn and utilize. Many if not most of these are absolutely transferable when examining a scope and sequence or standards document in social studies. Take, for example, the reading skill of main idea and details or (my personal favorite) sequencing; either of these have multiple uses and application possibilities in almost any lesson on history that we expect elementary students to learn. Imagine all the great practice in comprehension skills or vocabulary development or writing skills that students could be given during any social studies lesson. It seems to make such

sense...but many of us don't take advantage of the natural connections between the two disciplines. Part of the problem is that our materials have never leant themselves to teaching this way. Finally, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill has published a series of elementary social studies books with this very reality in

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mind. TIMELINKS has been created with a particular focus on manageable content which meets standards, explicit connections to reading skill instruction and a vibrant, lively writing style to engage students in social studies. Imagine a fifth grade unit of study on the American Revolution where each and every lesson gives students explicit direction and practice in finding the main idea and details and then asks students to write an expository essay using those main ideas and details to help assess their understandings of the Revolution. The program was developed especially with the realities of today's schools and teachers in mind.

Another place that teachers are asking for more and more help with is the use of non-fiction

in the classroom. Age appropriate resources for non-fiction text and content area reading are needed now more than ever. The assessments and standards documents in reading/language arts as well as social studies continue to demand that students are able to read, interpret and analyze non-fiction texts. Social studies materials are another perfect resource to give students the practice they need in reading non-fiction while exposing them to important content and concepts in history, geography, economics and civics.

Conclusion

Any curriculum—social studies or otherwise—falls short of its potential if it promotes a citizenry that is obedient, passive, and silent (Strom, 1995). If there is something to be learned from social studies, it is that in voice there is power. Our job as social educators is to help students, especially those who have been denied access and voice in the past, to believe that they can make a difference in their world; our world. Parker reminds us that “A mind furnished with powerful concepts is indeed a fertile ground for the germination of new ideas” (2001, p. 13).

There is a current movement to widen the scope of NCLB to include history, art and other neglected curriculum areas (Kennedy-Manzo, 2007). It is still too early to know what kind of effect this effort will have on the future of curriculum organization, teaching, learning (and testing) in our elementary schools. We know, however, that the effects of NCLB on elementary social studies have been severe. We need to re-affirm our commitment to helping teachers understand that ‘no time for social studies’ is an unacceptable response.

Without a strong background in history, geography, economic principles, and systems of government, how will our students make informed decisions about local and global issues? How will

they have the depth of understandings necessary to work together to redefine and re-create the communities they will need to survive? While an exclusionary focus on reading skills and mathematical understandings might make for a literate and numerate society, will that society be a compassionate or just one? While individuals in that society may be able to access and utilize technology, to what ends will that technological knowledge be put? We can't claim that we're giving students "access to academics," much less access to power, when we offer them a watered-down curriculum that is disconnected from their lives. The charge for educators is immense. We need to offer students *more opportunities* to participate in challenging content, and we need to offer *more students* access to power through knowledge. Without a clear understanding of the lessons of history and the civic foundations on which our society is built, how can tomorrow's citizens continue to build a "United" States that truly promotes "liberty and justice for ALL"?

Parts of this article were originally written for a chapter entitled "Accessing Power Through Intentional Social Studies Instruction: Every Day for Every Student" by D. Straut and K. Colleary found in Kluth, Straut, Biklen, Eds., Access to Academics for ALL Students, Erlbaum Associates Publishers, Mahwah, NJ (2004).

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