

Social Studies: Past, Present, Future

JOHN J. COGAN*

The "unfinished business" of social studies is to incorporate at least five humanizing elements into the experiences, planned and unplanned, that we call curriculum to ensure that our programs are indeed "social" and "humane."

AS America's Bicentennial approaches, it would seem appropriate for social studies educators to reflect upon past developments as well as upon directions social studies curriculum should take in the future. We are living in an age when difficult and pressing problems at the local, state, national, and international levels surround us. The mass media continually remind us of potential armed conflicts in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and Portugal; our weakened position in the community of nations; racism; rising crime in the streets; increasing drug addiction; unemployment; environmental decay; declining energy resources; a seeming absence of effective political leadership; and a loss of confidence in public education, to name but a few. Constant and unrelenting change confronts us to the point where "future shock" becomes less and less theory and more and more reality. Many adults—and an even greater number of young people—are "turned off," anxious, confused, lonely, angry, depressed, and burdened with a sense of powerlessness. This

is especially critical with the young who feel the future promises little reason for hope. Social studies curricula in the schools appear to have done little to help children and youth deal effectively with either current or future problems. Let us consider the historical development and future directions of social studies education in America.

Historical Development of Social Studies

Social studies education in America has proceeded through a number of developmental periods during the past 200 years. During the colonial period, education was primarily religious in nature. Secular subjects including history and geography were generally not taught until the inception of the Latin grammar school and then generally through the classical writings of the Greeks. It was not until 1749 that what has come to be known as social studies education gained any visible support. Both Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson endorsed the study of history, geography, and government, believing that education should be more secular and practical as a means to a more enlightened citizenry.

In the early 1800's the inculcation of patriotism accompanied the nationalistic

**John J. Cogan, Associate Professor of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis*

thrust of school curricula, and thus the position of American history in the social studies program was solidified. Its unshakable position remains firm even today. In the mid-1850's Horace Mann, the "Father of American Public Education," championed free, universal public education as the means for socializing the waves of immigrants coming to America's shores. He saw instruction in American history, civics, and geography as important tools in the socialization of immigrants. The popularity and import of these subjects continued to grow throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

In 1916, the National Education Association issued a report suggesting a scope and sequence pattern for secondary school social studies instruction which influenced the direction of social studies education until the past decade, a period of major curriculum reform in the social studies. Social studies programs were widely criticized "because they (a) placed too much emphasis on memorization of facts, (b) were often inaccurate in subject matter or in emphasis, (c) ignored large portions of the world, (d) were dominated by history and geography, (e) developed little depth of understanding, (f) did not develop independent methods of inquiry, (g) relied too heavily on expository teaching procedures."¹ Although tremendous amounts of both human and financial resources have been poured into social studies curriculum reform during the past decade, the impact on classroom practice has been limited. Many of the problems associated with more traditional programs still exist. There is unfinished business with respect to social studies curriculum reform.² In light of these concerns and in terms of what we can realistically predict about the future direction of social studies curriculum development, let us look at several probable trends and needs.

¹ John Jarolimek. "In Pursuit of the Elusive New Social Studies." *Educational Leadership* 30 (7):596-99; April 1973.

² John Cogan and John H. Litcher. "Social Studies after Curriculum Reform: Some Unfinished Business." *Elementary School Journal* 75 (1):55-61; October 1974.

Future Directions

Jarolimek has noted that "the great challenge facing social studies and, indeed, all of education in the years ahead is to teach young human beings how to live with each other peacefully, compassionately, and, above all, charitably."³

In order to achieve this lofty goal it would seem that there are at least five important humanizing qualities that social studies curriculum developers must focus their attention upon.

First, *humanized social studies education should emphasize and amplify the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual learner*. There is a need to develop curricula that are human centered as opposed to being heavily content centered as in the past. Curricula must begin to reflect more accurately and to a greater extent the pluralistic, multi-racial nature of society. Learners need to become aware of others who have cultural and value systems different from their own. Curricula must emphasize the human and interpersonal relations if we are to survive in an increasingly complex world. Individuals must learn how to live with and work for one another toward common goals.

Second, *humanized social studies education should help every learner to become aware of his/her own frame of reference and to understand and appreciate the perspective of others*. Many people today, including students, have a "tunnel view" of life and assume that their personal, cultural, and sociopolitical beliefs and practices are natural, desirable, good, and right. They know little about other individuals and their cultures and often see others' values and ways of behaving as strange, undesirable, bad, and wrong. Social studies curricula in the future must help children and youth to be empathetic, sensitive, caring, accepting, and tolerant of others.

Humanized social studies education will require the use of a broader range of social studies content—content which is relevant to contemporary personal-social conditions,

³ Jarolimek, *op. cit.*, p. 599.

need-satisfying, interesting, challenging and appropriate for children and youth at various stages of development, conceptually based, designed to foster the development of higher level mental processes, and more interdisciplinary in nature. Textbooks will remain strong as always but more multimedia materials will appear to add variety and diversity to classroom instruction.

Third, *humanized social studies education should make it possible for each young person to search continually for meaning which is relevant to her/his life.* Young children are innately curious when they first enter school. They seem to wonder about and question everything in an effort to make sense out of their environment. There is a need for social studies curricula of the future to personalize programs by encouraging active involvement of the learners. In many classrooms social studies consistently ranks lowest in terms of the interest of the learners. Learners generally are taught what someone else thinks they should know. Rarely are they given the opportunity to pursue their own personal needs and interests.

Social studies curricula need to foster approaches to instruction in which the learner is able to pursue his/her own needs and interests. Learners need to find things out for themselves, to become less dependent upon others, and to become more dependent upon their own skills and abilities in learning.

Fourth, *humanized social studies education should help each learner to develop carefully considered and deeply felt values, attitudes, and beliefs.* Social studies curricula of the future should be concerned with helping children and youth clarify their system of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Learners are confronted daily with value conflicts. These conflicts can be used to help the individual clarify his/her own personal values.

The need for values education is closely tied to the need to personalize programs and make them more human centered. Considerable help is already available through workshops, in-service, and university courses. Attention is also being given to this area in the professional literature. Some instructional materials are now available but more

are urgently needed, especially for young children of primary school age. People are cognitive and affective beings who are a mixture of facts and feelings, head and heart. Social studies curricula must begin focusing increased attention upon the affective domain.

Fifth, *humanized social studies education will need teachers who are humane and who can function with children and youth in a humane fashion.* The central task is to examine closely the changing role of the teacher. In the curricular changes noted earlier, the teacher becomes less a purveyor of knowledge and more a stimulator, a prober, a facilitator in mutual inquiry. The teacher needs to be open-minded and to create an atmosphere of openness in which meaningful inquiry can take place. The teacher must be able to help children and youth develop and clarify thoughts of their own rather than adopt the thoughts of others without question.

This new role calls for teacher education programs different from traditional teacher training programs. What is needed is a program that places as much emphasis upon teaching skills and interpersonal competencies as it does upon content. Also, this teacher role calls for a program of continuing education throughout a teaching career. Thus, as school social studies curricula continue to change so must the preparation of the teachers who will implement those curricula.

Social studies curricular patterns in most instances have done little to enhance the development of human capabilities. Far too many courses of study still concentrate upon the date the Magna Carta was signed rather than upon its significance as a basic document of human rights. Perhaps the most important thing we could do as social studies educators in the coming years would be to concentrate upon the humanizing elements of the experiences, planned and unplanned, which we call curriculum to ensure that our programs are indeed "social" and "humane." Let us hope that in 2176, educators can reflect back 200 years and say with assuredness that the curricular challenges and directions outlined here have been met. □

Copyright © 1976 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.