

The More Things Change . . . : The Status of Social Studies*

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Another in our series of articles summarizing results of a study sponsored by the National Science Foundation, this article gives a discouraging but perhaps realistic view of the status of social studies.

The past two decades have witnessed great changes in the public perception of social studies education. In the mid-1950s, history and geography dominated a social studies curriculum intended by tacit assumption to produce "good citizens" literate in the leaders and landmarks of the past. But the remarkable curricular turmoil of the ensuing years produced a program in many ways typified by the much-debated *Man: A Course of Study*. Receiving much of its impetus from the National Science Foundation, the conglomerate of curriculum revisions that characterized the 1960s and early 1970s sought to move social education from social studies to social science.

The social studies curriculum was to become organized by the concepts and principles that formed the structure of the scientific disciplines instead of the chronological organization of history. Rather than memorizing names and dates, students were to inquire into causality and develop their own generalizations from primary

source material, from direct observation of social events and processes, and from games and simulations. For teachers, the focus was to shift from delivering information to asking questions and raising issues of personal values and social controversy. This indeed was to be a substantially different social science curriculum from that of past generations—or so it was intended.

But the recently completed NSF study of the pre-college social studies program says differently. Using several major sources—an extensive literature survey, national surveys of offerings and practices, and a set of cases studies of actual field sites—to triangulate their finding and support their conclusions, the NSF reports suggest strongly that little has changed

since the 1950s. The impact of curriculum revision has been severely diluted by the daily de-

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mands of school business and the constraints of teaching in classrooms. The set of NSF reports offers far more than a summary judgment of the impact of curriculum revision, however. They are filled as well with the meat and flesh of important information and reasonable inference for those concerned with schooling. For that reason the National Science Foundation decided to disseminate the findings through the media of major national organizations, including ASCD. This article is part of that larger report to the ASCD membership.

Content

The picture of the social studies curriculum that emerges from the NSF studies is one of breadth and diffusion in terms of content and goals. There is little agreement among classroom teachers or among advocates and analysts within the field as to what ends social education is to serve or the most appropriate subject matter to teach, a condition that prevents great internal integrity within the course offerings in schools and provides resistance to attempts to unify the social studies program or to articulate it with the rest of the school curriculum (Wiley and Race, 1977; Denny, 1977).² Further, the social studies curriculum in schools is still more social study than social science, with history and geography the dominant subjects (Weiss, 1978). Content selection in social studies courses is marked by a high degree of personalism, with considerable variation among individual teachers regarding the topics to be taught and the time allocated to each (Denny, 1977; Smith, 1977). In the elementary schools, the social studies receive little attention and, when they are taught, serve primarily as another opportunity to teach reading and writing skills. As one teacher in Fall River, Colorado, candidly reported, "We do math and reading in the morning when the kids are fresh. We do science and social studies in the afternoon, if there's a chance" (Smith, 1977, p. 2-21).

At all levels, the social studies curriculum is a textbook curriculum. Teachers use the textbook to organize their courses, and students encounter the content of those courses primarily through textbook pages. Completing worksheets and answering questions at the ends of the chapters are major classroom activities (Welch, 1977). Few

teachers have even *heard* of approaches oriented toward the social sciences, and fewer still use them (Weiss, 1978; Wiley and Race, 1977). The "back to basics" movement has tended to strengthen the rationale for using textbooks to present factual information and deliver generalizations, contributing to the weakening of problem-solving and analysis as legitimate curricular concerns in social studies education (Denny, 1977). Moreover, despite repeated cries in the literature for greater relevance in the social studies curriculum, content relevance is *not* a dominant theme among social studies teachers at any level. When such concerns occur, they tend to come from high school teachers who, more than any other group, see their role as preparing students for life after school (Denny, 1977; Smith, 1977). Students, in turn, view the social studies as an often interesting, but relatively unimportant area of the total curriculum. In the words of one eighth grader, "Open space classrooms are O.K. in social studies class because you really don't have to concentrate there" (Denny, 1977, p. 1-58).

Method

Despite extensive attention to the skills and strategies of inquiry teaching in the prescriptive literature, it is little used in social studies classrooms, and many teachers who tried inquiry-oriented approaches have abandoned them. This does not mean, however, that social studies instruction is characterized extensively by lecture, but rather by some kind of structured approach to the presentation of information (worksheets, textbook questions, recitation) (Denny, 1977; Welch, 1977). Where individual variability in teaching method occurs, it is most often found at the high school level, also the site of the most frequent use of inquiry methodologies and the materials of the national curriculum projects such as the High School Geography Project (Smith, 1977). Again, however, the "back to basics" movement has weakened efforts at promoting inquiry and problem analysis. This condition is exacerbated by the paucity of clear and rigorously derived information on the learning outcomes produced by in-

² Citations utilized in this report are primarily illustrative, to avoid the clutter of extensive lists of references. Similar statements and conclusions can be found in nearly all of the various studies.

quiry and the scant attention in the research literature to the actual operation of inquiry in classroom settings (Denny, 1977; Wiley and Race, 1977).

Organization and Support

The picture of organization and support systems drawn by the NSF reports is one of disparity between the demands of running a school district and those of providing schooling in classrooms. Mary Lee Smith summarily described these different demands:

The administration of the district travels in an uneasy orbit held in place by the centripetal forces of attempted centralization of management and curriculum coordination and by the centrifugal forces of territoriality and building autonomy (Smith, 1977, pp. 2-2).

The spread of social studies content through a variety of seemingly bounded disciplines has hindered attempts by school systems to control the curriculum through statements of objectives and blocked significant efforts at articulation. Moreover, the factors of personalism and particularism that characterize teachers' content selection and methodology also mark their preferences for organizational patterns and support services. And these differences are reinforced by the discrepancy between district-level needs and classroom needs. For example, while district administrators often view social studies classes as places to mediate the social effects of ability grouping in other curricular areas, social studies teachers typically support grouping as a means to decrease the wide range of interests and abilities they must face (Denny, 1977). Further, teachers report their greatest support need is for supplementary materials and resources more closely matched to their students' reading abilities than the textbook. And these teachers want to be able to choose the materials they need themselves. Yet social studies is the curriculum area least likely to have its own district-level coordinator to help locate resource materials, and it is one of the first areas to be affected by budget cuts (Welch, 1977). Thus teachers complain of a lack of adequate assistance in learning about available materials and a lack of funds to purchase them, once they are known.

Interpretations

The picture that emerges from these National Science Foundation reports—a picture drawn in especially telling fashion in the case studies—is one of minimal impact by curriculum revision due to the extraordinary social complexity of schools and systems. This picture may be most interpretable by adopting the perspective implied by Smith (1977) of separate "orbits" or environments, each with its own peculiar set of demands and intentions that resist interaction. From this perspective, the curriculum reform movement of the 1960s can be seen functionally as an effort to produce the kind of social studies curriculum that scholars at the university level believed was needed.

District-level administrators, on the other hand, have little commitment to the self-images of the academic community. Instead, their major concerns are those of responsiveness to the public, as represented by lay boards of control, while providing at least the appearance of being in control of their system. These demands have led to great efforts to produce manageable organizations while responding to recent public demands and for accountability. Thus curriculum directors and supervisors have had little direct contact with teachers other than to exhort them to produce curriculum guides filled with measurable objectives for public consumption.

The world of the classroom, in turn, is distinctly different both from academe and the central office. Every day teachers face the task of meeting with large numbers of students, diverse in their abilities and inclinations to do schoolwork, over fairly long periods of time. Moreover, that time must be filled with educationally justifiable activities. Classrooms are thus characterized by the demands of immediacy and complexity as well as the task of maintaining cooperation to "get through the day" (Doyle, 1978; Dreeben, 1973). Thus teachers are most concerned about their own particular problems, they wish to choose materials and resources that meet their needs, and they tend to stamp content and method with their personal marks to allow them to maximize control of their environment. Methods that increase the complexity of this environment, such as inquiry, are seldom used, and then largely with more cooperative (more able and more interested) stu-



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"Safeness" and "blandness" are the antithesis of the intentions of the writers of this volume. They turn to the affective domain as a strong ally in freeing and extending the curriculum in order to strengthen education.

Writers who contributed to the volume are: Louise M. Berman and Jessie A. Roderick, co-chairpersons and co-editors; Kaoru Yamamoto, Rodman B. Webb, Philip H. Phenix, Madeleine L'Engle, Kenneth R. Beittel, Charles M. Fair, Cecil H. Patterson, Elizabeth Léonie Simpson, William D. Hedges, Marian L. Martinello, and Cathy Pope Smith.

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dents. Since the essential structure of this environment has not changed in the past 20 years, teaching practices have not changed and change efforts are resisted because of their lack of congruence with teachers' perceptions of the most practical and workable methods in their own particular classrooms.

The weight of evidence and inference contained in the NSF status reports and case studies suggests strongly that our notions about the efficacy of curriculum revision need restructuring. We have too long sought change through curriculum revision without understanding the environmental forces that press for stability and continuity by resisting the processes of curriculum implementation. It seems time to ask why things occur as they do in social studies classrooms.

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