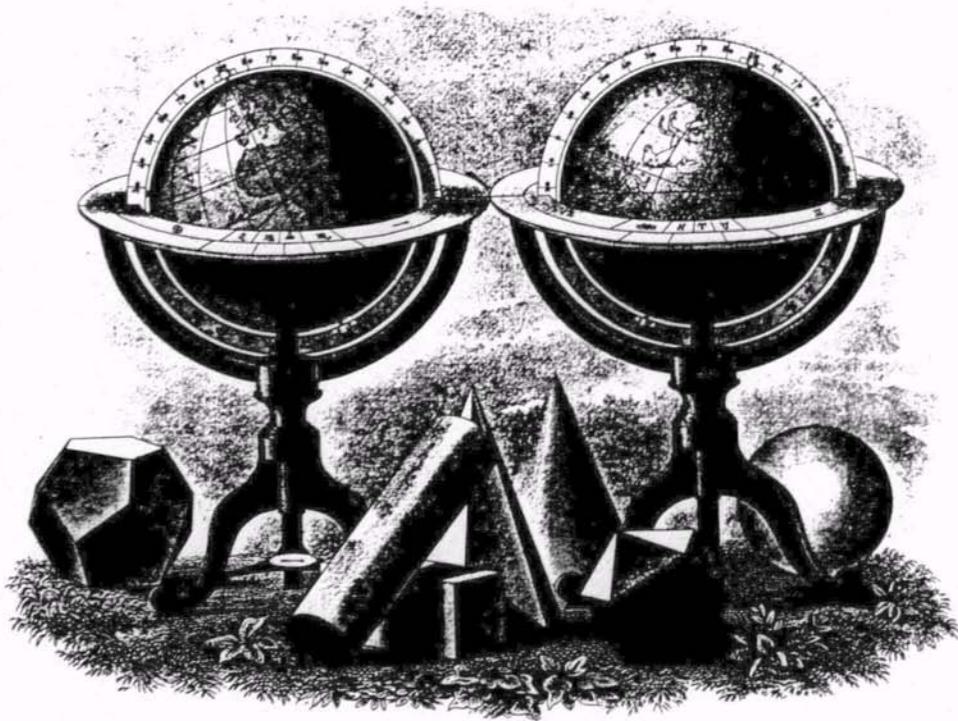


Getting Real: Suggestions for Revising the Social Studies Curriculum

Project SPAN identified current and desired states of social studies education. Here are some practical ways to attain those desired states.



GERALD PONDER

ASCD's recent publication of the Project SPAN report on the social studies (Morrissett, 1982) calls needed attention to an area "too long honored by benign neglect," as ASCD President O. L. Davis, Jr., describes it in the book's foreword. These days, feelings of low-spirited self-consciousness seem to characterize much of social education, perhaps with good reason. The social studies curriculum, traditionally the first to feel the pressure of mandates to solve social problems, is also among the first to feel the cuts of money and time when districts establish priorities. The social studies could use some good road signs to guide its direction.

The SPAN report contains some of those road signs. Certainly the book provides a detailed picture of the status of the social studies in the late 1970s, as well as an historical framework for interpreting social studies reform efforts. And it recommends several steps for reviewing and revising the social studies curriculum. All of these are worthy fodder for developing curriculum. But I wish the SPAN report had added more procedural dimensions to its recommendations. What should a district do first? Then next? And so on.

The purpose of this essay is to offer a few suggestions of procedural reality. The title came from a group of ninth graders who, having been lovingly exhorted by their teacher to strive toward some idealized "desired states" of behavior, advised her to "get real." While the students agreed that their teacher's hopes for them would be desirable, they also knew that many of those hopes were outside any presently possible reality.

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This may also apply to much of the literature on social studies. In efforts to move beyond the current status, the hopes of advocates also move beyond presently possible reality and fail to describe adequately how to get there from here.

Evolution and Consolidation

One pattern of the social studies curriculum that emerges from the literature is that of active, sometimes fevered change, followed by long periods of stagnation and inattention, with periodic interludes of fretting and wheel-spinning, followed by renewed efforts to move in new directions. As a result, the social studies curriculum never seems to get anywhere. Over the last 30 years, the projects of the new social studies produced a sea of rhetoric and a great deal of curriculum, most with an orientation toward concept development and inquiry skills. But the National Science Foundation (Ponder, 1979) and SPAN studies of the status of social studies found the curriculum of today to be virtually identical to that of 30 years ago. The same appears true of instruc-

tional methods. Moreover, these patterns of social studies curriculum and instruction seem to be common throughout the country.

Since these patterns became known, the literature on social studies has been sprinkled with concerned calls for new directions. It is time to devote some significant attention to the social studies curriculum. But several factors suggest that the attention should be based on ideas that have had time to mature.

One of those factors is the evolution of the social studies curriculum. While a review of rhetoric and literature indicates much sameness in the curricula of the 1950s and 1980s, a review of practice detects distinct differences, at least in some places. Some ideas of the 1960s and 1970s have become embedded in texts, supplementary materials, standardized tests, and other forms of curriculum development to the extent that curriculum emphasizing concepts and skills is identifiable in some districts. Further, the basics and minimum competency testing movements make that emphasis an attractive approach for current social studies curriculum revision.

Photo: Nick Anthony



Certainly, some teachers call concepts "vocabulary," and "skills" today involve more than critical thinking, but the properties of earlier ideas are still there, some in evolved form.

Curriculum specialists also have much more information about the processes of development and implementation, thanks to the lessons of the 60s and 70s. Those lessons point to a much greater emphasis on local development, with appropriate selection of some externally developed materials. The development and implementation processes must have their advocates and gatekeepers, but teachers have to re-invent some wheels to develop ownership and understanding of the curriculum.

Developing a local social studies curriculum that focuses on important concepts and skills in an appropriate developmental sequence requires extraordinary time, effort, and husbandry. It also requires a good sense of procedure and a suitable beginning. I believe we should regard current curriculum revision more as a means for consolidating gains than as an opportunity to chart untested new directions. To that end, the rest of my comments are primarily procedural and addressed to consultants, supervisors, and others responsible for leading teams of curriculum writers who also are teachers. My suggestions cover three areas: scope, sequence, and classroom realities.

Scope

Questions of content selection are central to any consideration of curriculum. The information that kids are asked to learn and the ways they are asked to use that information on tests form the academic task structures of schooling and the operational definitions and purposes of the social studies curriculum. Abstract discussions and rhetoric about the goals of social studies do not directly affect students' understandings of what they should learn. Classroom experience and test-taking do.

That does not mean rhetoric and discussion are unimportant. They have their purposes and places in curriculum development. However, discussing the goals and purposes of social studies education may not be the most productive place to start, if such discussions lead to frustrating complexity or unrealistic hopes.

Instead, we need to approach curriculum development in manageable chunks, examining current realities with the intent to produce a clear and congruent core of academic tasks for

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students and a set of workable procedures for teachers. That intent suggests several steps.

1. *Use standardized achievement tests to define the scope of the social studies curriculum.* The past decade has witnessed a heavy emphasis on testing to measure the "products" of schooling. It now seems that the pendulum of history may be about to swing the other way, as the public begins to react against the limitations of the basics movement, and such respected leaders as Goodlad (1982) assail the reductionism of minimum competency testing. But rhetoric over reductionism should not mask the fact that standardized assessments have gone far toward clarifying the major purposes and definitions of social studies through the content chosen to be tested. In fact, reductionism could be highly beneficial in local efforts to produce a clear, manageable social studies curriculum.

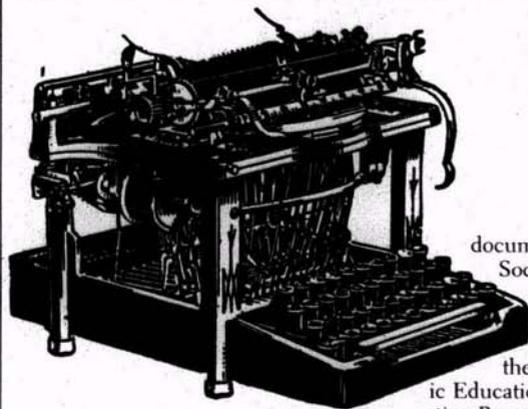
The idea of beginning a curriculum revision by analyzing standardized tests instead of discussing goals and purposes is hardly new. I happened on the idea because I needed a practical, task-oriented procedure to begin curriculum revision with a group of secondary social studies teachers who were concerned about student performance on the PSAT and SAT. These teachers had neither the time nor energy to engage in abstract discussions, so we began at the end and debated issues of definition, purpose, and operational reality. English (1980) calls this process "backloading" and has developed a replicable system for using it in curriculum development. Some may complain that the procedure is simplistic. To a degree, they're correct, since anything simplified to the point of practical utility is too simple to account for all possible contingencies. But the procedure also is

straightforward and workable, and it produces a list of content items and problem-solving behaviors that are remarkably consistent from test to test and among teachers of similar courses. My own experience indicates that, while some teachers initially resist something that smacks of "teaching to the test," most feel relieved by knowing what they must teach, and many are *delighted* that they already have been teaching much of the content that will be tested.

2. *Share responsibility for citizenship education to make the social studies curriculum more manageable.* Education for citizenship always has been the primary purpose of social studies education. Until recently, that purpose was a heavy burden, since the social studies curriculum appeared to have sole responsibility for citizenship education, and the concept of citizenship education was so diffuse that it defied operational definition. Those frustrations have been relieved somewhat by the evolution of the idea that many parts of the curriculum share responsibility for citizenship education, and that citizenship objectives can be divided into two groups: those for which the social studies curriculum has primary responsibility, and those it shares with other curriculum areas. Examples of citizenship skill objectives that are the primary responsibility of the social studies curriculum include reading and interpreting maps and globes and understanding time and chronology. Skill objectives that can be shared with such curriculum areas as reading, language arts, science, and math include locating and using sources of information and interpreting charts, graphs, and tables.

The notion of shared responsibility is worth exploiting for several reasons. First, it provides a practical way to deal with the seemingly overwhelming goal of citizenship education for consultants and teachers unaccustomed to the process of curriculum revision. They can focus on smaller, more manageable chunks of territory by separating concepts and skills into categories of primary and shared responsibility. Second, the idea of shared responsibility provides perspective on the place of social studies in the curriculum.

For secondary social studies teachers, looking at concepts and skills that are taught also in English and science classes but with different content may open avenues of communication and reduce their sense of curricular separation. For elementary teachers, curriculum revision



documents in the collection of the Social Science Education Consortium, and statements, papers, and related documents prepared by the Joint Council on Economic Education and the Consumer Education Resource Network. (Addresses for these organizations appear in the bibliography.)

Sequence

The social studies curriculum needs a far greater developmental perspective than it now has. Few ideas about the social studies curriculum enjoy wider support than that. The "locally accepted nationwide curriculum" pattern of expanding environments followed by cycles of contracting environments is a product of history and needs informed restructuring. However, again it seems unlikely that large reordering—such as basing the curriculum on social roles—will be carried out. Two things, again with a focus on codifying and consolidating, are worth considering as a means for developing local social studies curriculum with a more rational, considered sequence.

1. *Assess the usage patterns of major concepts, principles, and skills for articulation within buildings and districts.* "Mapping" the occurrence of and emphasis on the concepts, principles, and skills taught at each grade level provides a vehicle for teachers and consultants to redistribute instruction and plug holes. Moreover, it does so on the basis of stated, if not observed, practice and produces a more user-oriented curriculum than externally developed scope and sequence charts. The results of this procedure may not fit perfectly the textbook patterns of the intellectual and social development of children and adolescents, but they can ensure the more orderly and appropriately distributed introduction, development, and extension of essential content.

At least two cautions apply to the process of mapping the curriculum in use. One is that the process should be approached as a collegial sharing of curriculum practice. Anything that has

the smell of an "audit" is often viewed by teachers as invasive evaluation, and the list of topics and time allocations they turn in more often resembles their perceptions of what they are supposed to do rather than what they really do. The second caution is that procedures for determining content and time allocations should not result in extra paperwork for teachers. In one district, the curriculum director decided to map usage patterns by having teachers list on Fridays the topics they covered and the times allotted for the preceding week. These exercises in irritation quickly became known among teachers as "Friday headaches." All the curriculum director received was about two minutes' worth of quickly jotted notes and several muttered words of disgust. Questionable data at best.

2. *Use complementary skills continua such as those in reading and math to organize social studies skills in elementary and middle/junior high schools.* The social studies curriculum is a relative newcomer to the idea of a skills continuum. Sequences of skills recommended by NCSS and other agencies must therefore be used locally as sketches rather than blueprints if successful implementation is the goal. Modifying and adapting recommended plans of scope and sequence to fit reading and math sequences with histories of use in schools is a better strategy than imposing a social studies skill continuum developed outside the context of school use. The elementary school day is already crowded and social studies is not a top priority of teachers. Elementary teachers are more likely to use social studies content and materials to teach reading and math than they are to find more time to teach social studies skills per se. Again, the goal is to have more time engaged in social studies instruction. The skills continuum should carry through the secondary level and culminate in independent research and social inquiry skills in high school.

Realities of Schooling and Classrooms
On paper, procedural recommendations often sound sterile or naive, and fre-

sion based partly on the idea of shared responsibility for citizenship education may provide more opportunities to use social studies content during reading and language arts. It also provides more opportunity for articulation.

Finally, shared responsibility for citizenship education could provide greater meaning for social studies content as students encounter and use that content in a wider range of contexts. As an obvious example, sources of information studied in English at 9:30 take on greater meaning when used in social studies at 11:00. The same principle applies when issues of global interdependence are discussed in economics class in the morning and biology in the afternoon.

3. *Develop standards to verify and strengthen the local social studies curriculum.* While local curriculum development offers the potential for a greater match between plans and implementation, it also runs a greater risk of idiosyncrasy. Or worse, as the SPAN reports indicate, it runs the risk of mediocrity. Conscious and intentional use of standards could moderate these risks and nudge the social studies curriculum toward broader desired states.

Sets of standards have, of course, been used for many years by state agencies and regional associations as criteria for accreditation. These standards are intended to set a "floor" on curriculum offerings and to establish a curriculum pattern throughout the state or region. In addition to these standards, curriculum guidelines and other documents published by external agencies and associations can be used to verify and justify curriculum efforts that exceed the minimum required for accreditation. Some of the most notable examples include the curriculum guidelines issued by the National Council for the Social Studies,



Teachers also serve vital roles. Without their support, the curriculum will not be taught adequately. One set of procedures that seems to work well in social studies revision focuses on producing an adequate information flow over an extended period. The procedures are highly user-oriented and begin by setting up teams of teachers as curriculum writers in a fashion that once was done frequently within districts.

These teachers make initial scope and sequence decisions about the required social studies curriculum at each grade level, using descriptions of current practice as a baseline. This first phase produces a tentative scope and sequence chart of a required core of topics and skills based on what teachers already do, leaving time during the school year for individual teachers to add or expand content areas according to their personal choice, as long as the core requirements are met.

All social studies teachers in the district then receive this tentative scope and sequence chart, along with forms for reviewing the chart and suggesting revisions. These reviews occur during department, team, or grade-level meetings attended by principals, supervisors, or someone acting for them. The reviews are one major mechanism to increase the flow of information about the new curriculum and to help produce similar understanding among teachers and between teachers and supervisors.

After the scope and sequence chart is developed, the same, iterative process is used to develop objectives and activities. The writers develop drafts of curriculum guides, which then are tried in classrooms and revised according to feedback in a formative fashion. The process is neither clean nor painless, and it takes from one to three years, including parts of summers for writing and revision. But it does allow time for education and understanding, and it can produce a considerable amount of vitality and integrity in the social studies curriculum.

2. *Confirm the value of worthy and time-tested practices.* Teachers receive much of the blame for the state of social

studies in the schools. They lecture, assign readings and papers, conduct recitations, and give recall tests. They don't ask many questions; they don't sequence carefully the ones they do ask; and they don't wait very long for students to answer. Teachers typically use only a narrow range of teaching methods, and researchers and evaluators typically want them to use more. These phenomena are important for curriculum revision since curriculum plans need to be used to be worthwhile.

The time has come for a new approach to the persistence of social studies teaching practices. Many teaching practices are unlikely to change, even with great effort, because they are congruent with the demands of the classroom. The complexity of the classroom means that the primary concerns of teachers will continue to be those of management, of simplifying the environment, so that lecture, recitation, and seatwork are unlikely to be replaced as instructional staples, and textbooks will continue to occupy their central position as teaching tools. Instead of pressing mindlessly for variety in methods and media, it may be more productive to encourage congruence among the written, taught, and tested social studies curricula. One way to do that is to give pats on the back to teachers who already provide clear and well-focused social studies instruction. There is much of value for children in the episodic lessons and units and stories used in elementary social studies, and elementary teachers at times need short lessons that will stand alone without becoming a regular classroom routine. In like manner, substantive fare in the form of separate disciplines like history, geography, and economics can have great merit for the knowledge base of secondary students.

Recognizing the realities of the classroom and confirming the value of much that is done there does not mean that change is unnecessary or undesirable. The idea of confirmation says instead that attaching public value to the things teachers do well is a better starting point than complaining that they ought to use methods not grounded in the realities of classroom life. Staff development programs that focus on producing congruence among objectives, instruction, and evaluation need to do more. They need to provide regular time for teachers within departments or grade levels to develop plans and materials with the help of resource people who are knowledgeable about methods, materials, and

quently they are. In some defense of those offered here, I recognize that they are ideas only and that they do not have the specificity of flow charts with decision points clearly indicated. Further, the ideas are interrelated. In this form, they understate the extraordinary complexity and commitment of time and effort required to enact them. This section provides some cautionary suggestions directed toward the complexities of operating in the real world.

1. *Involve teachers, supervisors, and principals in developing a social studies curriculum that is appropriate and acceptable.* Successful curriculum revision requires involvement by all three groups, even though their involvement differs. Principals may become active in the planning process or they may serve only to advise and consent. They must be appropriately involved, however, since their approval and support is vital to building-level curriculum. Supervisors serve as planners, organizers, advocates, writers, errand-runners, and in seemingly endless other ways. Someone must provide focus, direction, and leadership for curriculum revision, and that often is the supervisor's role, to lead without power.

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classroom realities. Those are large bills to fill, but they have a greater potential for cost-effectiveness than the context-free, one-shot presentation on methods that still account for large portions of staff development time.

In like manner, developing, collecting, and disseminating materials that help teach major concepts and skills should be high priorities of state agencies and support groups. Practical, classroom-tested materials that are relatively inexpensive and that complement or extend commercially available texts and workbooks could be useful in schools without damaging commercial markets.

3. *Analyze the demands of local curriculum revision, the need for it, and the commitment to it before proceeding.* Analyzing the ratio between demands, need, and commitment should be the first step. It could save a great deal of frustration. The process of revising the social studies curriculum locally while trying to nudge it toward desired states is a cumbersome affair in which unanticipated problems arise regularly. John Goodlad (1981) described some of those problems concisely and handsomely in a recent article entitled "Curriculum Development Beyond 1980." I can do no better than to summarize selected parts of Goodlad's discussion.

If a major lesson from the externally developed curriculum projects of the preceding era is that local development is a better alternative, saying it will not make it so. One major problem for local

curriculum development is local priorities. Teachers can't accomplish decent curriculum revision in an after-school meeting every other week. They need, Goodlad says, a "tenth month" on the payroll each year. The tenth month could come all at once, in the summer, or it could be distributed throughout the year in released time. But the time and resources must be there, and the process must start by moving curriculum revision to a higher level of priority.

If the time and money are available, there is still the problem of expertise. Teachers are not highly trained or highly practiced in curriculum development, and as the process expands from classroom to building to district, problems increase geometrically. Consequently, if teachers are to be expected realistically to develop curriculum, their professional development needs changing dramatically.

Those are serious problems, as Goodlad suggests, and not easily solvable. There are some scattered signs of hope though. For example, one superintendent in south Texas recently announced a campaign to put his teachers on ten-month contracts. He justified his campaign by saying that this was an idea whose time had come. Public demands for accountability and teacher evaluation had clashed with cries for fairness from teacher organizations long enough for the intimate relationship between curriculum development and instructional practice to become obvious and inescapable, and it was time that teachers helped develop the curriculum they were responsible for teaching.

Some districts employ groups of teachers during the summer to develop curriculum. They do this by underwriting tuition for the teachers at nearby universities and using university faculty as resource people through coursework structures. The practice of university/school district collaboration on curriculum revision projects and other forms of professional development is potentially fruitful and opportune in these days of reduced enrollment in teacher education programs. Goodlad endorses the idea of collaboration in "Curriculum Development Beyond 1980" (Goodlad, 1981).

Finally, one gleam of faith in the potential for local curriculum development lies in the work force of teachers. Teaching is less a high-turnover occupation than it was even a few years ago, and there is a reasonably substantial reservoir of both knowledge and "savvy" among the teachers in many districts.

Many of those teachers have great pride in their craft and could contribute heavily to local curriculum development. That may be a romantic dream, well-intentioned but impractical. But with all the talk in business and economic circles of "Theory Z" and "the Japanese Way" of increasing productivity through shared decision making, it seems time for administrators in American schools to reconsider the character of their own work force. That work force is better educated than it has been in the past, and it has work values that prize respect and a sense of involvement as well as money and work conditions.

Conclusion

Calls for revising the social studies curriculum are reaching a crescendo, and the search for appropriate directions is on. The SPAN study is a major contribution in understanding the status of social studies and in recognizing the major problems of the field. The challenge now is to move beyond the rhetoric surrounding the current status and problems of social studies to a more suitable state in which the social studies curriculum is more clearly defined and sequenced. That requires using information from research and experience to illuminate present and future procedures rather than those of the past. And it requires "getting real" about both the place and the possibilities of the social studies curriculum. □

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