
Do Textbooks Belong in Elementary Social Studies?

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Although many children enjoy social studies topics, the textbooks are a turnoff.

On a recent expedition to the local supermarket, we happened to observe a ten-year-old boy trailing his mother up and down the aisles intently reading a book on knights and chivalry. While few youngsters would go as far as to take their books to the supermarket, this boy was a powerful example of the ability of social studies to spark children's imagination, stretch their understanding, and stimulate learning. Indeed, when we interviewed elementary school students to discover their

opinions of social studies, we found that while they had definite likes and dislikes, many students were keenly interested in the myriad topics that the social studies encompass. However, when we asked them what they liked and disliked about their social studies textbooks we heard negative after negative comment:

"Sometimes they just mention a person's name and then don't talk about them anymore in the whole book."

"They should talk more about each topic. For the War of 1812 there



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should be more information about the fighters and the treaties. What did the Treaty of Ghent contain? Who wrote it?”

“There should be more illustrations to help you know what the environment was like, and the captions should say more so we really know what the pictures are showing.”

As we began to analyze ten recently published elementary social studies series¹ for an EPIE Special Art Report, the comments of these and other students became increasingly understandable. We saw little improvement from the textbooks of previous decades. Rather, we observed a retreat from the promising experimentation of *Our Working World*, *Databank*, and *Man, A Course of Study* to a standard format in which virtually all of a typical social studies program for the primary and intermediate grades was rolled into a multilevel series of teachers' guides, textbooks, workbooks, and optional filmstrips. Yet, in the process of reducing the vast content of social studies to fit the page limitations of these textbooks and meet the selection criteria of as many states and school districts as possible, the social studies was reduced to a

facile and shallow treatment of numerous topics. The students we interviewed sensed this even though they could not clearly articulate it.

Below the Surface

The ten social studies basals we analyzed, many of them in wide use throughout the country, are uniformly eye-catching. They are colorful and attractive with many color illustrations, photographs, maps, and charts. Indeed, it is rare for a page not to contain some sort of graphic and, in many cases, graphics make up a hefty—if not disproportionate—part of the textbook. But, as we delved below the surface features, we found that the quality of the layout and design typically did not transfer to the instructional quality. Thus, as we considered issues such as the teaching of skills, the articulation of textbooks between grades, the treatment of the present and future, the representation of women and minorities, family and career role modeling, and “dominant” subject matter, we were impressed by the distance social studies textbooks have yet to go before we can wholly recommend them as effective teaching vehicles. We found six major problems.

1. *The series were basals in name only.* Most of the programs were made up of a loosely related collection of separate grade-level texts rather than an integrated sequence of topics that built concepts, skills, and generalizations from one level to the next. Even within single grade levels, social stud-

ies appeared as it did many years ago—a collection of separate, unrelated topics that often appeared as little more than lists of dates, events, activities, famous and not-so-famous people, and vignettes.

2. *The study of the United States was dominant.* Gone was the emphasis on promoting international and cross-cultural understanding found in earlier textbooks. Instead, in volume after volume the United States predominated in graphics and content. In some series even the 6th grade textbook, traditionally devoted to studying world history and geography, contained extensive chapters and units solely on the United States.

3. *Most series were similar in content, methodology, and scope and sequence.* Many of the series followed the same pattern of organization. Typically the textbooks assumed that teachers would use recitation, reading, and simple exercises when teaching content. There were only occasional case studies and activities that required the use of higher-order thinking skills, and only rarely were anthropological, sociological, or economic concepts and content included.

4. *Many topics were covered superficially.* Because publishers try to include as much content as possible, many topics were merely mentioned outside of the appropriate context or content to understand them. For example, while 5th grade textbooks touched on such topics as space travel, civil rights, the environment, and en-

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ergy resources, the coverage was cursory. The treatment of civil rights was often stylized, always including Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks but ignoring the roles of other notable civil rights activists. In one case an excellent description of the economic forces of the 1970s was preceded by superficial treatment of other topics. In sections on the future, space was the dominant topic; telecommunications, computers, robots, poverty, population trends, and the revolution in medicine were mentioned in only one or two programs. On the whole, areas considered controversial were often avoided entirely or briefly cited without any invitation for further discussion or study.

5. *Representations of women and minorities were unrealistic.* Women and blacks were represented, especially in illustrations, more than ever before—often in such outlandish roles as a black female handicapped judge. Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans were not well represented. In 5th grade textbooks Hispanic males were predominately portrayed as hired farm laborers (with the exception of Cesar Chavez); Asians were shown in science-related roles such as veterinarians, laboratory technicians, and doctors; and Hispanic females were shown in teaching roles. In primary grade texts women and minorities were well represented in family and community helper roles. However, social studies textbooks are still largely accounts of white male achievements.

6. *Skill strands emphasized map and globe skills.* The skills found in the social studies series were generally those that were most easily measurable, such as locating information on maps. Most texts contained separate skills chapters despite publishers' claims to have integrated content and skill teaching. Map and globe skills were repeated and usually separated from the main text so that students were not encouraged to apply their skills to maps embedded in the content. Although publishers claimed that they integrated higher-order thinking skills into their series, these were pri-



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marily relegated to occasional appearances in chapter and unit review exercises.

These disturbing findings raise a number of critical questions about social studies textbooks and about the teaching of social studies. Why has the range of skills encompassed by the social studies narrowed, and why are the skills presented not related directly to the narrative content of the textbooks? Why aren't these social studies basals structured around unifying themes and sequenced so that each subsequent level builds on the previous one? Should content related to present history, current issues and problems, and future trends be introduced through sources other than textbooks to provide flexibility and currency? Why are so few alternative approaches offered in these programs?

Recommendations

Many teachers have developed their own social studies curriculum and use a variety of resources including textbooks to fulfill their curriculum goals. Unfortunately, others rely solely on the textbook, placing unwarranted confidence in their instructional quality. School systems and professional organizations need to encourage curriculum specialists and teachers to develop their own curriculum and materials locally, or to supplement the textbooks with a rich array of local resource and audiovisual material. Even with such initiatives in place we still need to work with authors, editors, publishers, and salespeople to bring about improvement in textbooks by:

- Identifying aspects of the social studies curriculum that should be developed by teachers, curriculum specialists, and library and media staff rather than textbook publishers.

- Demanding a range of published alternative approaches to the social studies to provide for a wider range of local needs and interests.

- Devising ways in which textbooks can include not only what is nationally relevant but international and cross-cultural issues of pressing importance.

- Encouraging publishers to conduct "learner verification and revision" with students prior to publication and to change content and approach on the basis of student feedback.

- Developing ways of supplementing textbooks with additional information from print and nonprint sources so that students may delve into a wide range of topics in as much depth as they choose.

The return to textbook-centered programs should alarm all those who have a stake in seeing that social studies lives up to its potential as an engaging elementary school subject. To uncritically leave curriculum decisions to textbooks can result in serious consequences. For learners, what is an inherently stimulating and motivating subject can become a tedious and repetitive chore. How long can youngsters, like the ten-year-old boy in the supermarket, maintain their interest in social studies topics that are given an unsatisfying and compendium-like treatment in their textbooks? □

¹The ten social studies series included *Concepts and Understanding* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1982); *Follett Social Studies* (Chicago: Follett, 1983); *People and Their Heritage* (Boston: Ginn, 1983); *American Book Social Studies* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1982); *Holt Social Studies* (New York City: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983); *Macmillan Social Studies* (New York City: Macmillan, 1982); *Our Nation, Our World* (New York City: McGraw-Hill, 1983); *Scott, Foresman Social Studies* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1983); *The World and Its Peoples* (Morristown, N.J.: Silver Burdett, 1984); and *Scholastic Social Studies* (Austin, Tex.: Steck-Vaughn, 1983).

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