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How to Help Students Learn History and Geography

Schools must restore the social studies to their rightful prominence in the curriculum.

It is no wonder that history and geography are not being learned well in our nation's public schools. After all, they are hardly being taught. The social studies have been moved to the curriculum sidelines to clear the way for intense, test-driven instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics. The most important thing schools can do about what students don't know about history and geography is to take these subjects seriously and put them squarely into the school curriculum.

Of course, there are obstacles. First, many teachers, parents, students, and administrators do not grasp the importance of social studies; or, at any rate, they consider social studies understandings less important than reading, writing, and math skills. Second, content selection and sequencing in social studies often is arbitrary and aimless. Too little attention is paid to deciding which understandings deserve in-depth study and how they should be arranged across the 13 grades. Third, many schools give other goals—athletic competition, for instance—priority over academic achievement. Fourth, social studies lessons generally lack the depth needed to render them meaningful to students and useful in everyday public life. Nevertheless, the situation is not hopeless.

Schools can take several steps to improve student achievement in social studies.

**Emphasize Schools' Civic Mission**

Critics of social studies instruction have blamed instructors who are lost to the value of history (Ravitch 1985) or who are more interested in teaching thinking than in teaching anything worth thinking about (Cheney 1987). Both arguments rely on "straw men." Furthermore, they are rhetorical simplifications of an extremely messy problem, a problem that reaches far into dominant ways of thinking in the United States.

I am referring to three trends that now flourish in our society: privatism, materialism, and technicism. Privatism promotes individualism at the expense of grappling with the dynamic tension between private and public interests. Materialism is expressed when students ask their teacher, "How will knowing history help me get rich?" Technicism fuels the contemporary frenzy of skills instruction with a how-to-do-it mentality that skirts the question, "What is worth doing, and why?" These trends are diverting schools from their primary mission: educating for citizenship.

Schools must remember that they are not primarily for helping children acquire jobs, get into college, or develop a better self-concept. As worthy as these goals may be, they are less important than the schools' distinctly civic mission: to educate students to be capable of—and passionately committed to—meeting the challenges of the democratic way of life.

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Our present neglect of social studies has already resulted in a dangerous level of social amnesia, undermining our judgment on public policy and, in turn, our ability to sustain our democracy and contribute to the world community.
Horace Mann asserted the importance of preparing children for participatory democracy in his 1845 plea for common schools:

The great moral attribute of self-government cannot be born and matured in a day, and if children are not trained to it, we only prepare ourselves for disappointment if we expect it from grown men. ... As the fitting apprenticeship for despotism consists in being trained to despotism, so the fitting apprenticeship for self-government consists in being trained to self-government (Mann 1846).

Mann's words are as relevant to schooling today as when they were first spoken. If we want our children to hold well the office of citizen, to care deeply about the common good, and to exercise good judgment on its behalf, then we are wise to begin their training early and continue it systematically over many years.

Teach Social Studies Every Day in Every Grade

Poor student achievement in history and geography is first and foremost a curriculum problem, not an instructional one. Teachers, parents, curriculum specialists, and program administrators should ascertain what, if any, social studies subject matter is planned and taught in each grade, K-12. They may be surprised to find that no world history is required of secondary students and that many primary teachers skip social studies altogether. Once they have learned the present situation, they should revise the plan as necessary to produce a coherent, rigorous scope-and-sequence guide. Plenty of advice is available. The National Council for the Social Studies has identified three scope-and-sequence guides. The state of California has produced another, and the Bradley Commission (1988) another. All emphasize history and geography, although in different ways and to different degrees.

Teaching to this curriculum plan daily, starting in kindergarten, is imperative. The primary and intermediate grades must provide the foundation on which later learning is erected. The humanities, reading, and writing should be focused on social studies themes. In the secondary grades, social studies every day in every grade will permit, at a minimum, a full year of world cultural geography, a full year of world history, two full years of US history, and one-semester courses in state history, economics, comparative governments, and, following New York's wise lead, a discussion course focused on tough public controversies.

Make Learning the Palpable Aim of the School

Teaching and learning the planned curriculum must be the school's goal. Often, however, this is not the case. Especially in the upper grades, schools generally serve other purposes. I will mention three. Prominent among the competing purposes is the celebration of athletic challenge. From the morning announcements, which detail the victories of teams, and pep assemblies, to the notorious tradition of favoring faculty applicants who can coach athletic games, academic learning is subjugated to competitive sports.

A second ulterior purpose is social control. Social control has spawned grouping practices that expose only some students to important content and enlightened instruction. In the early grades, students are divided into three groups—for example, canaries, robins, and sparrows. The canaries get the best curriculum, the sparrows the most mundane. By 12th grade, the groups are still intact. Now, the canaries are doing advanced placement coursework, the sparrows are taking auto mechanics or clerical training, and the robins are getting something in between. Such patterns indicate either that remediation was never the goal of these grouping practices, or that schools do not know how to remediate. In addition, social control promotes teaching practices that sacrifice learning goals to management goals. Consider the principal whose chief concern is a smooth-running building or the teacher who reduces complex ideas to easily distributed lists of facts (McNeil 1986).

A third ulterior purpose of schools is the propagation of teen culture. Open displays of vigorous intellectual effort in school are generally discouraged by the dominant peer culture (and often by adults as well). Often schools are given over to mixing, conforming, courting, clothing displays, team sports, relaxing, and accommodating the after-school job (see, for example, Cusick 1973).

Schools that take seriously the learning of the planned curriculum give attention to two important factors: providing expert personnel and teaching more about less.

Personnel Teachers and principals must be properly educated for the school's primary aim. At a minimum, elementary teachers should have an undergraduate major in an academic subject; secondary teachers should have a graduate degree in an academic subject or a field of education relevant to leading a school (for instance, curriculum and instruction or educational administration). These requirements should exclude from building leadership those persons whose knowledge base (e.g., athletic competition) is clearly peripheral to the school's central aim.

More on less. Learning should not be confused with covering material. Covering is a euphemism in social studies for teaching by mentioning it. Covering typically means the teacher tells students a few facts about a person or event and then moves on to telling a few facts about another person or event. This parade of facts approach to social studies misrepresents the curriculum plan and undercuts authentic learning. More on less means that students will go into greater depth on a limited number of important topics. When topics are studied in depth, lessons can challenge students to perform near the ceiling of their abilities, going beyond the facts gathered to form durable and flexible understandings. Consider one high school student's comments on an opportunity he had to study a topic for at least two weeks:
I got totally immersed in a project when the teacher had us do a paper on some guy. We couldn't pick him, but we had to read at least four books and write at least 100 note cards—big cards—and develop at least a 10-page paper. I got Montaigne. It ended up being real interesting. As Mr. Foster pointed out, it was kind of cool that I got to be a real expert and to know more than millions of people in America about this guy. I'm not sure what made it so interesting—whether it was Montaigne's own works and life or just the fact that I got to know so much about him (Newmann 1988, VI:23).

This student added that he had not been given many of these opportunities.

Much of the time it's a total skim, it's very bad. In one course we covered 2,000 years. Every week we were assigned to cover a 30-page chapter. We had 30 dates a week to memorize. The pity of it is that now I don't remember any of them. I worked so hard, and now basically all I remember is Montaigne.

Selecting which topics should be given sustained attention will require deliberation about which understandings are of most worth. This process will be awkward at first, as content selection in social studies has become a lost art. And, because social studies is lobbied by many interest groups to include their specialized contents, curriculum guidelines typically include so many topics that superficial instruction is practically guaranteed.

It is unfair to impose on teachers alone the awesome task of content selection. Historians, geographers, and political scientists should follow Gagnon's (1988) lead and give some serious attention to this task. Gagnon has suggested four key understandings that students should develop in their studies of U.S. history: the evolution of democratic ideals and practices, the gathering of many diverse groups of people into a nation of immigrants, the economic transformation of the United States from an agrarian to a post-industrial society, and the evolution of the United States' role in the world from quarreling colonies to major power.

**Improve Instruction**

None of the best teaching methods that instructional theory has to offer—from concept formation (Taba et al. 1971) to reciprocal teaching (Palincsar and Brown 1984)—can overcome a weak curriculum. Nor can they overcome a teacher's weak grasp of the very understandings he or she is trying to help students learn. Nonetheless, instruction is an important element in the school success equation. Without it, the additional time given to important content will be squandered.

Are there general rules of thumb that characterize good instruction in social studies? There are, but they incorporate a tremendous degree of instructional diversity. Clearly, there is no one best way, no magic checklist that evaluators can use when judging lessons. The needed openness to diversity, however, does not excuse a teacher's weak grasp of the very understandings he or she is trying to help students learn. Nonetheless, instruction is an important element in the school success equation. Without it, the additional time given to important content will be squandered.

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to help teachers and students avoid having to go over the same facts again and again, the plan unfortunately appears to be based on a less-than-rigorous conception of learning as the warehousing of facts. It will likely discourage the progressive construction of key ideas.

Make Participatory Citizenship Part of the Curriculum

Finally, I recommend that participatory citizenship be made a regular part of school life. We can improve achievement in social studies by affording students firsthand experiences of civic life that they can incorporate into their evolving understandings of rule by law, popular sovereignty, public policy, and the like.

Three forms of participatory citizenship are basic to the social studies curriculum—and they are feasible. One is democratic classroom and school meetings. Here real problems of school life are discussed openly and perhaps resolved. Meanwhile, students are learning the arts of discussion on public controversies and the challenge of formulating fair and wise public policy. JoAnn Shaheen of the South Orangetown schools in New York has produced impressive results even with primary grade students (Shaheen in press). The problems children bring to these meetings range from identifying how to sched-
In a school where learning is the primary goal, parents will be encouraged to create programs by which the home curriculum can be improved. Some ingredients of a home curriculum that foster school success are plenty of talking, reading, and writing, both for pleasure and for everyday purposes; structured use of home time; a quiet place to study; a substantial block of time daily for study; and emphasis on good conduct (for example, persistence and civic-mindedness over immediate gratification of individual wants). Such an initiative by parents, by which the whole parent community is mobilized to create home conditions that support school success, would be invaluable. While ambitious, it surely is not an unreasonable expectation.

But Schools Can Do Something

I have recommended that schools concentrate on their civic mission, without which other purposes are vacuous, and that history and geography be taught every day in every grade. Instruction on reading and writing, as well as personnel selection practices, must be put to the service of these ends. Furthermore, our preoccupation with athletics must be brought swiftly and sharply under control. Schools can't do everything about what our students don't know, but they can do these things. It will be a pity if they do not.

References


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