Will Teaching More History Result in Better Citizens?

Stephen J. Thornton

Once again we are confronting curriculum reform in the social studies. At the heart of today's proposals is the assumption that history is more worthwhile than most other social studies courses.1 Historical-mindedness, the reformers say, is central to educating tomorrow's voters; other mind-sets shortchange our youth.

I question, however, whether historical thinking is necessarily the one best system for civic education.2 As feminist theorist Nel Noddings (1989) has pointed out, most existing social studies courses—including history courses—are not successful in producing either good citizens or good neighbors (see also Downey and Levstik, in press).

Now, plainly, the history advocates would respond: "We don't want more of the same history courses." But the essential problem remains: Where is the evidence that we should expect the learning outcomes the reformers say will result from studying history? Their case rests more on assertion than on any demonstrated benefits of historical thinking.

The primacy of the reformers place on getting more history into social studies programs distracts attention from a more pressing concern: despite more than a half century of social studies curriculum reform movements, classroom instruction has hardly changed at all (Cuban, in press). As the New Social Studies reformers of the '60s—New York Times editor James Reston's—were quick to note, the major factor in how social studies is taught—found, teachers must have a stake in and a commitment to major changes in curriculum and instruction (see Haas 1977). Similarly, unless teachers change how they teach, the proposed reforms will have minimal effects on what students learn.

What we need far more urgently than more history courses is careful consideration of why social studies teachers teach as they do. Without thorough understanding of the teacher's role as curricular-instructional gatekeeper (Thornton, in press) and the societal, school, and professional contexts in which teachers tend the gate, the addition of more history courses is not likely to result in greater student engagement with either historical content or civic education.

A look back at social studies education reveals a lengthy tradition of one reform bandwagon followed by another. Few have had much effect at the classroom level (Shaver 1979). Until social studies reformers—including the present advocates of history—deal with that stark reality, the periodic cycles of social studies reforms will carry on the tradition.


2For a fuller version of the arguments laid out here, see Thornton (1990).

References


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Public controversies and both "everyday" and well-known democratic role models are featured in the elementary social studies textbooks I helped write, The World Around Us, (1990), (New York: Macmillan/McGraw-Hill).


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