Social Studies Teachers and Curriculum

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Any effort to understand the nature of the social studies curriculum presents us with at least two fundamental problems from the outset. First, what exactly is “curriculum”? And secondly, what is “social studies”? The answers are not as straightforward as you might expect.

The past eighty years has produced a huge literature about school curriculum, but no definitive definition of what counts as curriculum. Is curriculum a formal document or plan? Or is it what is assessed? Perhaps it is what students have the opportunity to learn, or the totality of students’ experiences of school. Curriculum scholars and practitioners have advanced all these positions, and more.

Euclid may have been among the first to note that “the whole is the sum of its parts.” But surely he was not describing “the curriculum.” . . . [J]udging by what has been written by others attempting to explain the “curriculum field,” we are reminded again why the field is at once so fascinating and frustrating: One seems to get a general sense of what “the curriculum” is without knowing quite how to define it in all its detailed parts; yet, once having made inferences at this level of generality, there remain nagging concerns that much remains to be discovered. (Gehrke, Knapp, & Sirotnik, 1992, p. 51)

If the curriculum field in general is contentious in terms of definition and delineation, then social studies is the beau ideal of curriculum.
Social Studies in Schools

Social studies has had a relatively brief and turbulent history as one of the core subjects in the school curriculum. The fundamental content of the social studies curriculum—the study of human enterprise across space and time—however, has always been at the core of educational endeavors. Recent scholarship has raised questions about the traditional account of the origins of the social studies curriculum; however, it is generally accepted that the formal introduction of social studies to the school curriculum was marked by the publication of *The Social Studies in Secondary Education* in 1916, the final report of the Committee on Social Studies of the National Education Association’s Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Schools, which included an emphasis on the development of citizenship values. Earlier commissions of the N.E.A. and American Historical Association whose respective aims were the reform of secondary education and inclusion of history as a core school subject heavily influenced the Committee on Social Studies. The roots of the contemporary social studies curriculum, therefore, can be traced to at least two distinct curriculum reform efforts: the introduction of academic history into the curriculum and citizenship education.

Since its formal introduction into the school, social studies has been the subject of numerous commission and blue-ribbon panel studies, ranging from the sixteen-volume report of the American Historical Association’s Commission on Social Studies in the 1930s to the recent movement for national curriculum standards. Separate and competing curriculum standards have recently been published for no less that seven areas of the social studies curriculum: United States and global history, economics, geography, civics, psychology, and social studies.

Throughout the twentieth century the social studies curriculum has been an ideological battleground in which such diverse curricular programs as the “life adjustment movement,” progressive education, social reconstructionism, and nationalistic history have held sway at various times. The debate over the nature, purpose, and content of the social studies curriculum continues today, with competing groups variously arguing for a “social issues approach,” the “disciplinary study of history and geography,” or action for social justice as the most appropriate framework for the social studies curriculum. As with the curriculum field in general, social studies curriculum is defined a lack of consensus and contentiousness over it goals and methods.
The Language of Teaching and Curriculum

The language used to describe, explain and justify what we do as teachers constitutes, in part, our work and our social relations with students, teacher colleagues and other stakeholders in education. Embedded within the language of schooling and the images and metaphors it fosters are certain assumptions about means and ends (e.g., how children learn, appropriate teacher-student relations, what knowledge is of most worth, the purposes of schools). For example, some common metaphors used to describe the work of teachers include gardener, facilitator, guide, pilot, navigator, map-maker, gatekeeper, change agent and activist. Each of these metaphors communicates certain assumptions about the teaching-learning process and the interaction between teachers and curriculum. What are our images of teachers in relation to curriculum? How do these images shape the work of curriculum development and teaching?

In the *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*, Clandinin and Connelly (1992) describe how educational research, from its genesis as a formal field, has segregated inquiry into issues of “curriculum” and “teaching.” The distinction between curriculum and teaching has become common place and the effect of its institutionalization is rarely a matter of consideration. For example, “in the United States the land grant colleges institutionalized a distinction between curriculum and instruction (C & I), either by creating ‘C & I’ departments or separating the two by establishing instructional departments alongside . . . elementary and secondary education departments” (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 364). This organizational distinction at the university level spawned degree programs, which produced specialists to work in schools, further entrenching the separation of curriculum and teaching.

The logic of the distinction between curriculum and instruction is founded on the belief that decisions about aims or objectives of teaching must be undertaken prior to decisions about the how to teach (see Popham & Baker, 1970; Tyler, 1949). The distinction between curriculum and instruction then is fundamentally a distinction between ends and means. For researchers, this distinction provides a way to place boundaries on their inquiry into the complex worlds of teaching and schooling. In schools, this distinction fits into a bureaucratic structure that seeks to categorize areas of concern with an emphasis on efficiency in decision-making. This distinction has produced abstract categories of research and discourse that
bear little resemblance to the lived experience of teachers in the classroom, where ends and means are so thoroughly intertwined. This does not mean, however, that the language and categories of research are irrelevant to teachers.

Language use, educational practices, and social relationships contend with each other in the formation of teachers' professional identities and the institutional culture of schools (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). For example, when curriculum and instruction (ends and means) are conceived as independent entities, curriculum development activities become the work of one group and curriculum implementation becomes the work of another. This division of labor, in turn, affects the social relations between these groups as one group defines the goals or conceptualizes the work and the other is responsible for accomplishment of the goals. The apparent "indifference" of educational research and bureaucratic decision-making to the reality of classroom teaching creates unequal participation and power relations.

The implication is that we must closely examine the language of educational practice because it influences our activities and social relations within education. The strict distinction between ends and means in curriculum work is problematic in a number of ways. First, the ends-means distinction does not accurately reflect how the enacted curriculum is created. Secondly, it justifies the separation of conception and execution in teachers' work, which reduces teachers' control over their work. Thirdly, it marginalizes teachers in formal curriculum decision-making.

The ends-means split between curriculum and teaching narrows the professional role of teachers to the point where they have little or no function in formal curriculum development—this has never been more true than in the current era of curriculum standards and high-stakes tests. Many teachers have internalized the ends-means distinction between curriculum and their work, as a result, they view their professional role as instructional decision-makers, not as curriculum developers (Thornton, 1991). What is clear from studies of teacher decision-making, however, is that teachers do much more than select teaching methods to implement formally adopted curricular goals (see Ross, Cornett, & McCutcheon, 1992a). Teacher beliefs about social studies subject matter and student thinking in social studies as well as planning and instructional strategies, together, create the enacted curriculum of a classroom—the day-to-day interactions among students, teachers, and subject matter. The difference between the publicly declared
formal curriculum (as represented by curriculum standards documents) and the actual curriculum experienced by students in social studies classrooms is significant. The enacted curriculum is "the way the teacher confirms or creates doubt about assertions of knowledge, whether some opinions are treated as facts while other opinions are discounted as unworthy of consideration" (Marker & Mehlinger, 1992, pp. 834–835). For example,

One teacher may proclaim that one of democracy's virtues is a tolerance for many points of view, but in the classroom choke off views inconsistent with his or her own. Another teacher may offer no assertions about the value of democracy, while exhibiting its virtues in his or her own behavior. (Marker & Mehlinger, 1992, p. 835)

When examining the enacted curriculum in the classroom, as opposed to the formal curriculum, the teacher as mediator or curriculum-maker is the more appropriate metaphor. The orientation of this book is toward the teacher as the key factor in curriculum development and change.

*Rethinking Teaching and Curriculum*

If we conceive of social studies teaching and learning as activities that require us to pose and analyze problems in the process of understanding and transforming our world, the limitations of an ends-means approach to curriculum is clear. Social studies teaching should not be reduced to an exercise in implementing a set of activities pre-defined by elite policy makers or a high-stakes test. Rather teachers should be actively engaged in considering the perennial curriculum question—what knowledge is of most worth? Social studies learning should not be about passively absorbing someone else's conception of the world, but rather it should be an exercise in creating a personally meaningful understanding of the way the world is and how one might act to transform that world.

Thinking of curriculum not as disciplinary subject matter, but as something experienced in situations is one alternative to the traditional ends-means approach to curriculum (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). This is a Deweyan conception—curriculum as experience—in which teachers and students are at the center of the curriculum. "In this view, ends and means are so intertwined that designing curricula for teachers to implement for instructional purposes appears
unreal, somewhat as if the cart were before the horse" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, p. 365).

Dewey’s image of the teacher and her or his role in the creation of school experiences can be found in *How We Think* (1933) and the essay “The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education” (1964). He argued that teachers must be students of both subject matter and “mind activity” if they are to foster student growth. The teaching profession requires teachers who have learned to apply critical thought to their work. To do this, they must have a full knowledge of their subject matter as well as observe and reflect on their practice. Dewey’s notion of the classroom laboratory placed the teacher squarely in the center of efforts to understand educational practice and develop educational theory.

The professional knowledge of teachers is theoretical knowledge, or what has been called “practical theories of teaching.”

Practical theories of teaching are the conceptual structures and visions that provide teachers with reasons for acting as they do, and for choosing the teaching activities and curriculum materials they choose in order to be effective. They are principles or propositions that undergird and guide teachers’ appreciations, decisions, and actions. (Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986, pp. 54–55)

Such theories are important to the success of teaching because educational problems are practical problems. Practical problems are defined by discrepancies between a practitioners’ theory and practice, not as gaps between formal educational theory and teacher behaviors (where ends and means are separated).

Teachers could no more teach without reflecting upon (and hence theorizing about) what they are doing than theorists could produce theories without engaging in the sort of practices distinctive of their activity. Theories are not bodies of knowledge that can be generated out of a practical vacuum and teaching is not some kind of robot-like mechanical performance that is devoid of any theoretical reflection. Both are practical undertakings whose guiding theory consists of the reflective consciousness of their respective practitioners (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 11)

Problems of teaching and curriculum are resolved not by discovery of new knowledge, but by formulating and acting upon practical judgment (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The central aim of curriculum development is to improve the practical effectiveness of the
theories that teachers employ in creating the enacted curriculum. This aim presents problems in that sometimes teachers may not be conscious of the reasons for their actions or may simply be implementing curriculum conceived by others. This means that reflective practice must focus on both the explicit and the tacit cultural environment of teaching—the language, manners, standards, and values that unconsciously influence the classroom and school environment and the ways in which teachers respond to it. As Dewey asserted in Democracy and Education,

We rarely recognize the extent in which our conscious estimates of what is worthwhile and what is not are due to standards of which we are not conscious at all. But in general it may be said that the things which we take for granted without inquiry or reflection are just the things which determine our conscious thinking and decide our conclusions. And these habits which lie below the level of reflection are just those which have been formed in the constant give and take of relationship with others. (Dewey, 1916, p. 18)

Social studies teaching and learning should be about uncovering the taken-for-granted elements in our everyday experience and making them the target of inquiry. In this mode, teaching and curriculum making become problematic situations. Critical examination of the intersection of language, social relations, and practice can provide insights into our work as teachers and uncover constraints that affect our approaches to and goals for social studies education. As the chapters in this book illustrate, the teacher and curriculum are inextricably linked. Our efforts to improve and transform the social studies curriculum hinge on developing practices among teachers and their collaborators (colleagues, students, research workers, teacher educators, parents) that emerge from critical analyses of the contexts teaching and schooling as well as self-reflection—the exploration of practical theories employed by teachers and the actions that they guide.

The Plan of the Book

The purpose of this book is to present a substantive overview of the issues in curriculum development and implementation faced by social studies educators. This Revised Edition of The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities is thoroughly
updated and expanded from its initial publication in 1997. The focus is on presenting contemporary perspectives on some of the most enduring problems facing social studies educators, with a strong emphasis on concerns for diversity of purposes and forms of knowledge within the social studies curriculum. This collection of essays provides a systematic investigation of a broad range of issues affecting the curriculum, including a series of topics not addressed in the earlier edition, such as citizenship education as a force for oppression/anti-oppression; influence of and resistance to curriculum standards and high-stakes testing in social studies; inclusion and community building. Enabling teachers and other curriculum workers to better understand and act on the nature, scope, and context of social studies curriculum concerns in today’s schools is a primary goal of the book.

The book is organized into thematic sections representing contemporary arenas of concern and debate among social studies teachers, curriculum workers, and scholars. Part I—The Purposes of the Social Studies Curriculum focuses on the purposes identified for social studies education in North America. This section provides background on disciplinary struggles to control the social studies as well as ways in which state departments of education, textbook publishers, and other actors have influenced the curriculum. Particular emphasis is placed on the “history versus social studies” debate. In the opening chapter I present a broad overview of the struggles for the social studies curriculum, describing a series of tensions and contradictions that have functioned to define the debates over the social studies curriculum since it’s inception. In chapter 2, Michael Whelan explores one of the fundamental questions the field has grappled with since its origins—whether social studies is a unified field of study or a cluster of separate disciplines. Whelan’s case for history as the core of social studies education begins with an overview of the nature of history (and its implications for instruction) then suggests a series of guidelines for social studies teachers to consider in implementing a history-centered curriculum true to social studies’ citizenship objectives. In chapter 3, through a series of case studies of curriculum frameworks, Kevin D. Vinson examines the oppressive and anti-oppressive possibilities of citizenship education and as a result clearly delineates both the problems and possibilities of this, perhaps the most principal part of the social studies curriculum.

Part II—Social Issues and the Social Studies Curriculum, examines social issues in the social studies curriculum, with an
emphasis on issues of diversity and inclusion. While it is not possible to present a comprehensive overview of all the important diversity issues related to social studies content areas, this section does address several of the most frequently raised concerns (e.g., Eurocentrism vs. Afrocentricism, gender, race, class and participatory democracy). This section begins with three chapters that explore social studies as site for remaking social relations both within and outside of schools. “Defining the Social Studies Curriculum: The Influence of and Resistance to Curriculum Standards and Testing in Social Studies” by Sandra Mathison, E. Wayne Ross, and Kevin D. Vinson critically examines the standards based educational reform (SBER) movement and its use of high-stakes tests as the principle means of reforming schools. The authors provide an overview of the curriculum standards in social studies, argue that high-stakes testing fails to meet the expectations of standards-based reformers, and detail the deleterious effects of SBER and the grassroots resistance to curriculum standardization and high-stakes tests.

Michael Peterson and Rich Gibson’s chapter describes efforts by a consortium of schools to implement a unique approach to school reform. “Whole Schooling” emphasizes removing the barriers that separate children within and across schools based on culture, ethnicity, language, ability, gender and age as well as barriers that divide schools from communities. In “whole schools” instruction is authentic (based on real world issues) and adapted for diverse learners; and school workers partner with families to build community and support learning. David Hursh examines schools as public arenas for understanding diversity and provides examples of how a multicultural perspective assists students and teachers in engaging in an analysis of society that leads to the development of a more sophisticated understanding of social studies disciplines as well as their own lives.

In their chapter “Racism, Prejudice, and the Social Studies Curriculum,” Jack Nelson and Valerie Ooka Pang explore the contradictions between the American credo and the rampant racism and prejudice that marks our society. They argue that social studies education is culpable, in part, for the latter condition. However, they also see the social studies curriculum most suited to examine racism and to provide knowledge and critical analysis as a basis for anti-racist action.

Chapters 8 and 9 turn attention to gender-related issues in the social studies curriculum. Nel Noddings provides a provocative analysis of how form and content of the social studies can be
reconstructed through feminism. Noddings argues that the next wave of feminism should be directed toward the articulation of women's culture and that feminists should resist the total assimilation of this material into the mainstream curriculum because such assimilation could be tantamount to destruction. In "Gender in the Social Studies Curriculum," Jane Bernard-Powers provides a historical account of the gender equity movement in social studies education. Bernard-Powers examines how gender equity concerns have transformed social science scholarship and the subsequent affects on textbooks, curriculum frameworks and teacher education. While Bernard-Powers documents significant changes in the curriculum as a result of gender equity work, like Noddings she identifies significant work yet to be done.

The third section of The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems and Possibilities examines the social studies curriculum in practice. The focus in Part III is on issues in social studies that are currently demanding the attention of teachers and curriculum workers as a result of initiatives to transform social studies curriculum and teaching. As in the other sections of the book, a plethora of perspectives are offered, however, there are many important issues and initiatives (e.g., economic education, sexuality education, geography, the ecological crisis, etc.) that are not directly addressed because of space limitations. Curriculum themes addressed in this section represent those that are particularly significant for social studies at the turn of the century.

In "Crafting a Culturally Relevant Social Studies Approach" Gloria Ladson-Billings describes an approach to teaching social studies that attempts to empower students to critically examine the society in which they live and to work for social change. In order to do this students must possess a variety of literacies: language-based, mathematical, scientific, artistic, musical, historical, cultural, economic, social, civic, and political. Ladson-Billings describes what teachers can learn from culturally relevant teaching based upon case studies of the successful work of teachers in a largely African-American and low-income community.

The next chapter in this section addresses a central issue that affects social studies curriculum and instruction: student assessment. Sandra Mathison distinguishes assessment practices from tests and measurement and analyzes both the technical and social aspects of assessment. In social studies, as in other school subject areas, there is a recent trend in some quarters away from traditional means of assessing student knowledge and skills and toward
more "authentic" assessment practices. Mathison provides examples of both the limitations and possibilities of innovative performance assessment practices in social studies and the dilemmas inherent in assessment reform in social studies.

Terrie Epstein presents an arts-based approach to social studies curriculum and instruction. In describing her work with high school students, Epstein illustrates in detail how student’s engagement with the arts (as both interpreters and creators) can assist students in constructing complex historical understandings and increase the equity in educational experiences and outcomes. In “Reclaiming Science for Social Knowledge,” Stephen C. Fleury explores the interrelationships of science and technology in society and the role of scientific and technological topics in the social studies curriculum. Fleury’s emphasis is on ways in which the social studies curriculum might better prepare students for the complexities of a scientific technological society.

Whether we choose to ignore or reject the realities of globalization, we will increasingly be affected by the world’s human diversity, the acceleration of inequities from economic, ecological and technological dependence, and the repercussions of global imperialism, human conflict, poverty, and injustice. In “Decolonizing the Mind for World-Centered Global Education,” Merry M. Merryfield and Benaya Subedi challenge the colonialist assumptions that pervade the social studies curriculum. Merryfield and Subedi set out an agenda for a world-centered global education curriculum that removes the nationalistic filters, which only allow students to see events, ideas, and issues through the lens of their country’s national interests and government policy. If we are to educate young Americans for effective citizenship in today’s global age, the authors argue, the social studies curriculum must go beyond European or American constructions of knowledge and also teach the experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of diverse peoples in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

In counterpoint to Whelan’s argument for history as the core of social studies, Ronald W. Evans describes an issues-centered social studies curriculum, which is based upon the perspective that social studies is a broadly defined interdisciplinary field devoted to the examination of social issues and problems. In this chapter Evans provides a rationale for issues-centered social studies and examples of issues-centered curricula and teaching.

Part IV weaves together the various threads of the social studies curriculum, as laid out in this volume, into a coherent pattern.
As with the world itself, it is impossible to provide one true representation of what the social studies curriculum is. However, in the concluding section I argue that conceptions of the purposes, problems, and possibilities of the social studies curriculum as depicted in this book provide an effective starting place for educators who believe social studies should help children and young adults learn to understand and transform their world.

It is my hope that these essays will stimulate readers to reconsider their assumptions and understanding about the origins, purposes and nature of the social studies curriculum. As is evident in the chapters that follow, curriculum is much more than information to be passed on to students—a collection of facts and generalizations from history and the social science disciplines. The curriculum is what students experience. It is dynamic and inclusive of the interactions among students, teachers, subject matter and the context. The true measure of success in any social studies program will be found in its effects on individual students' thinking and actions as well as the communities to which students belong. Teachers are the key component in any curriculum improvement and it is my hope that his book provides social studies teachers with perspectives, insights and knowledge that are beneficial in their continued growth as professional educators.

Note

1. This and the following section draws on Ross (1994) and Ross, Cornett, and McCutcheon (1992b).

References


