



The De-Emphasis on Social Studies in Elementary Schools: Teacher
Candidate Perspective

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Abstract

The de-valuing of social studies is becoming prevalent as schools shift emphasis to other subjects addressing national and state accountability. The teacher candidate perspective is presented from an original study regarding the de-emphasis of social studies in elementary schools (Rock, Heafner, O'Connor, Passe, Oldendorf, Good, & Byrd, 2006). Teacher candidates gathered data

during their clinical experiences, from five teacher preparation programs in North Carolina. Teacher candidates recognized difficulty in finding instructional time for the entire curriculum, conveyed social studies is de-valued in the elementary curriculum, stated integration is important to social studies instruction, and recognized it is their responsibility social studies is taught.

Keywords: social studies, elementary, teacher preparation, marginalization, instructional time, integration, social studies instruction

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Current Issues in Education

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The De-Emphasis on Social Studies in Elementary Schools:

Teacher Candidate Perspective

In a social studies methods class, a future teacher was assigned to observe social studies lessons in a school setting, as part of the clinical field experience requirement. The veteran clinical teacher, leading the clinical field experience, let the teacher candidate know, “I do not teach social studies; therefore it would be hard to observe. I will teach a lesson for you, if you *need* to just observe the subject being taught ”.

The de-valuing of the social studies is becoming prevalent as schools shift their emphasis to science, math, and language arts addressing national and state accountability. Researchers (Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005; Center on Education Policy, 2008; Gross, 1977; Hahn, 1977; Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006; Lintner, 2006; Ochoa, 1981; Rock et al., 2006; Stecher & Chun, 2001; VanFossen, 2005; vonZastrow & Janc, 2004) raise concerns about the diminishing emphasis spent on elementary social studies instruction. According to Owen (1997), there are five challenges when educating preservice social studies teachers 1) negative past experiences, 2) lack of interest, 3) confusion over the definition, 4) world view taught in a short time, and 5) finding clinical placements where social studies is taught. In what ways can teacher candidates obtain a substantive social studies clinical experience, when social studies is missing from elementary classrooms? Will teacher candidates not see the value of social studies and not teach the subject in their future classrooms?

The purpose of the original longitudinal North Carolina initiative was to gather information regarding the de-emphasis of social studies in elementary schools (Rock et al, 2006). In this study, most teachers reported that students received social studies instruction in 30 to 45 minute lessons for two to three days per week. The authors present the argument that the high

stakes standardized testing of reading and math in North Carolina has diminished instructional time in elementary social studies. It was also found, however, that the more teachers valued social studies the more instructional time they devoted to it. The study recommends that solid actions in the form of research, advocacy, and professional development with in-service and preservice teachers is needed if social studies education is to be revitalized in our elementary schools. The purpose of this paper is to share the teacher candidate perspective, while in their social studies clinical classroom, of the devaluing and de-emphasis of social studies. The impact of the de-emphasis of social studies instruction on teacher candidates and attempt to validate teacher reported responses from the structured interviews are outlined. The following three areas will be reviewed from the teacher candidate's perspective: a) the amount of instructional time allowed for social studies in the elementary classroom, b) corresponding responses from cooperating teacher regarding the nature of the social studies in their classrooms, and c) the impact of the social studies clinical on the teacher candidate's teaching and learning of social studies.

Method

To explore teacher candidate perspectives of social studies within their clinical experiences data were collected from the following sources. At the beginning of the clinical experience, preservice teachers interviewed cooperating teachers using a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 closed-ended and open-ended questions in which teachers were asked to explain their responses [See Appendix]. Interviews were conducted face to face and the teacher candidates transcribed cooperating teacher responses. Candidates then observed their cooperating teaching and documented comparisons between the initial interviews and actual classroom observations. The teacher candidates were students enrolled

in social studies methods classes within the UNC system. The amount of time the teacher candidates spent in the clinical placements varied between 15-30 contact hours over the course of the semester depending on their program's requirements. The nature of the clinical experience varied in minor ways at each institution as well. All teacher candidates were required to observe social studies instruction, plan at least one lesson, teach the lesson, and receive feedback from their cooperating teacher. At the conclusion of preservice teacher candidates' clinical experiences, preservice teachers provided written reflections to the following three questions: 1) Did the amount of instructional time used for social studies as conveyed by the clinical teacher in the interview, correspond with what you observed in the classroom this semester? Explain. 2) Were you surprised by any of the responses your cooperating teacher shared with you? Explain. 3) How did the time you spent in this elementary school classroom impact your thinking about the teaching and learning of social studies? Data from teacher candidate written reflections are the focus of this article.

Seventy-one (n=71) teacher candidate reflections were reviewed. The teacher candidates were students enrolled in social studies methods classes within the UNC system. Qualitative responses were evaluated by four university researchers using a combination of content analysis (Silverman, 1999) and the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to determine patterns or themes in the data. Teacher candidate reflections were coded to guarantee anonymity. Individual question responses were evaluated, grouped, and categorized based on themes that emerged. Each researcher conducted three independent readings of these data with subsequent collaborative meetings to compare themes, categorical grouping, and discuss implications.

Findings

Overall, the following findings were conveyed. The teacher candidates: a) recognized the difficulty in finding time to teach the entire curriculum, b) conveyed social studies is not valued in the elementary curriculum, c) stated that integration is important to be able to teach social studies, and d) recognized it is their responsibility to make sure social studies is taught. Teacher candidates also noted cooperating teachers felt their students were well prepared for the next grade level in social studies but indicated limited instructional time provided for social studies instruction.

The focus of this research was to examine the teacher candidate perspective, and to give the teacher candidates a voice related to this topic. The following section will highlight the themes found in the qualitative responses. Based on their responses, it is difficult to ascertain whether the teacher candidates are valuing the social studies because they are not seeing it taught. On the contrary, their responses reveal they value the social studies even more following this experience, in spite of what their clinical teacher valued or taught. Some of the teacher candidates observed wonderful social studies instruction while others observed no social studies instruction at all, not even an integrated lesson. When asked about the time spent in the clinical and the impact on teaching and learning social studies, a teacher candidate responded:

I will work hard to be an advocate for social studies. I didn't realize this was such a problem. I think it is crucial to student's academic and social development and I will work harder to push it in my classes, since I know it is so overlooked!

Difficult to Find Time for the Subject

The majority (53/71=75%) of the teacher candidates reported the amount of instructional time used for social studies conveyed by the cooperating teacher corresponded with what was observed in the classroom. With only 14/71 (20%) not corresponding with what was observed in

the classroom, and 4/71 (5%) were not able to report because they felt they were not there long enough to determine correspondence of answers. The 20% who responded “no” to the first question reported their cooperating teacher would teach lessons mainly focused on math and reading. The “yes” responses included the following themes of what was observed: a) social studies taught through ‘integration’ everyday, when possible, b) social studies, science, and health were taught on a three-week rotation c) social studies was taught 1 hour per week or not at all, and d) teachers were ordered to spend more time on other subjects and leave social studies behind. One teacher candidate wrote:

I think I was most surprised by the fact that the school system tells you what you are to concentrate on most. A lot of the time it is not up to the teacher even though you may think you have a lot of freedom. I was totally baffled by the amount of time she spends on the social studies. There are four nine-week terms in one school year. Therefore, this means she covers all of the social studies standards in less than 12 weeks!

Social Studies Under Pressure

A majority, 55/71 (77%) of the responses revealed the teacher candidates were surprised by the clinical teacher responses. A large portion (47%) of those 55 teacher candidates were surprised about the actual amount of time the teachers claimed to teach social studies. Other themes from the responses included when the cooperating teacher reported no familiarity with the standard course of study for social studies and when the school systems allow certain standards to be ignored, so focus can be placed on the tested subjects and when clinical teachers did not seem to value the social studies more than other subjects or enough to teach it anyway, in spite of the pressure to teach other subjects. In

some cases, the teacher candidates could not believe that even if the teacher valued the subject of social studies, they would still not teach it, due to administration pressures.

Confusion Over Integration

Even though the teachers reported ‘integration’ was used to teach social studies, the teacher candidates may not have been able to see this integration or may not know what to look for in an integrative lesson. For example, one teacher candidate reported:

I was surprised that she put social studies as her last priority, even below science. She also said that all of the subjects were ‘covered’ through integration, but I never once saw her doing this. Maybe she did it on days I was not there?

Another teacher candidate reported:

I am shocked that the school system allows the social studies curriculum to be ‘left in the dust’ like it is. Thankfully, I observed social studies being integrated in the classroom, without compromising the quality of the other objectives being taught. This experience inspired me to do what I observed: teach social studies, throughout the whole curriculum using integration and technology...

Of the 71 teacher candidates surveyed, the importance of learning how to integrate was explicitly mentioned in thirty-two (45%) responses. They stressed the desire to learn proper integration methods for their own class of the future.

Planning to Teach Social Studies in the Future

The teacher candidates’ self-report responses revealed themes implying they would take responsibility to teach the social studies to their classes of the future. Perhaps with more training and experience, they will teach the subject regardless of pressures. Other common themes included: a) the importance of making time for the social studies b) the realization that social

studies can be taught in a powerful, innovating, and dynamic manner, while involving the children in the learning process, and finally, c) the emphasis on social studies should not be neglected because it is a natural part of our lives. Even though there is pressure to teach other subjects, the teacher candidates point out the teachers, ultimately, make the decisions of what is taught and valued in the classroom. The teacher candidates report they plan on teaching the subject in some manner in the future. One teacher candidate reported, "I know now that social studies is much easier to include when it is integrated with other subjects. I am no longer frightened of teaching social studies; I am looking forward to it". While another participant stated:

The clinical teacher's classroom was really cool. You could tell she spent a lot of time on social studies integrated with the arts. There were student made Mexican hats and artifacts in her classroom and displayed in the hall because they were studying Mexican culture. I did not get to observe the lessons on Mexico, but there was evidence integration has occurred. I am just not sure how to do it.

Discussion

As teacher candidates reflected on their clinical observations, they expressed frustration with the lack of time dedicated to the subject of social studies and their own inability to differentiate social studies instruction from other content areas. One student wrote, "How can I observe social studies when it is not being taught?" The teacher candidates are required to teach at least one lesson in their clinical experience; however, they indicated barriers to their own course requirements of teaching social studies lessons. Many were unable to teach social studies because of time devoted to other content areas, like reading and literacy (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart; 2008), and the shared

time with science. Teacher candidates reported a concern with a lack of understanding for how to integrate social studies, based on their observations. The level and definitions of integration varied among teachers indicating a need for university instructors to provide models for effective integration. There is, oftentimes, a hidden curriculum or camouflaged social studies being taught (character education, citizenship, classroom management, classroom community, etc.). If preservice teachers cannot recognize social studies instruction then how can we expect K-6 students to know they are learning social studies? As teacher educators, we need to help our teacher candidates to identify social studies in various settings.

The data point to another important role for teacher education promoting the value of social studies. Teachers who value social studies claim to be more prepared to teach it (Duplass, 2007). Plus, they tend to believe their students are prepared for subsequent levels of study. A methods course that is devoted to social studies seems to be an effective strategy for promoting teachers' valuing of social studies goals (McCall, 2008). The teacher candidate responses reveal they recognized, as they observed and participated in their clinical placements, that social studies is not an equally valued component of the elementary school curriculum. For example, one teacher candidate wrote:

I am very disappointed... social studies and the skills and information learned by studying our world are imperative to one's personal and academic development.

However, it is NOT being learned and taught. I spent numerous hours in this classroom and was very disappointed that a teacher of such caliber feels so much time constraint that her students are not learning about their world. It's disheartening that students are graduating high school and have little or no understanding of the world and how it works

but they are quite skilled at bubbling a multiple-choice test. As a result of this methods course, I am DETERMINED to change this pattern of preparing effective test takers rather than effective citizens.

The role of the social studies methods course becomes one of not only teaching the social studies curriculum and content pedagogy, but that of advocating for teaching social studies (Pascopella, 2005). With the external constraints on time and the focus on standardized testing, teachers must have a strong grounding in the importance of social studies or they will surrender to these external pressures and omit social studies from their instruction, (Willis & Sandholtz, 2009), as observed by many of our teacher candidates. Those teachers who remained steadfast and continued to seek ingenious methods for integrating social studies were those who had a robust training in the social studies (VanFossen, 2005).

In addition, the teacher candidates demonstrated through their reflective writing that they valued the social studies by emphasizing the importance of providing a balance between integrated and stand-alone instruction in social studies and that it was their responsibility as a professional teacher to ensure that students receive instruction in the social studies. These areas are addressed in the social studies methods course and appear to have impacted the teacher candidate's perspectives as they interacted in the clinical schools. The purpose of the social studies methods course is to provide the teacher candidate with the opportunity to experiment with various social studies teaching methods in the clinical placement. Such assignments allow teacher candidates to see that students can engage in and even enjoy learning social studies and may lead to a greater valuing of the social studies curriculum. If the opportunity to try the methods and theories supporting social studies best practices is not available, it is possible the teacher candidates will not value the subject. The results of this study show that the teacher

candidates value the subject at this time but what about when they are under the same pressures and constraints of time and testing that clinical teachers are currently experiencing?

There are limitations to this study. The teacher candidates could have framed their answers to be ‘pro’ social studies, knowing their methods instructor was reading the responses. Another limitation of this study might be the teacher candidate participants may have reported valuing the social studies because they thought it was an expectation of the course. There is also a construct issue, related to a need for common definitions of integration, social studies instruction, and social studies powerful teaching. Perhaps this study will allow educators to continue to re-examine how we discuss and deliberate issues surrounding social studies instruction.

The main and immediate concern for the authors was how can teacher candidates obtain a substantive social studies clinical experience, when social studies is ‘missing’ or not clearly seen often in elementary classrooms? Also, in what ways is the de-emphasis on the subject impacting the teacher candidate’s experience? Following this study, those questions remain for each new class of teacher candidates. From the responses, it appears the teacher candidates, who participated, will be teaching social studies in their classrooms in the near future.

Conclusion

In the elementary grades, social studies has been and continues to be marginalized within state curriculum standards, and a continued de-emphasis has been placed upon it by some administration and classroom teachers alike (Gross, 1977; Hahn, 1977; Heafner, et.al, 2006; Ochoa, 1981; Rock, et al, 2006; VanFossen, 2005). This does not mean the teachers and administrators are “wrong,” it just means the pressures of standardized tests and yearly progress have almost forced schools to reprioritize subject matter. Consequently, many teacher

candidates enter the higher education classroom with a lack of content knowledge and very little interest for the subject. With the lack of coursework dealing with social studies methods and poor modeling occurring in content related courses, many of the students graduate with the same low level of interest and the ability to teach as they were taught. It appears the social studies clinical course can make a difference:

Now that I have seen social studies taught in such a way that the students were directly involved with the decision of their learning was so amazing. My previous idea of teaching social studies strictly from a textbook is completely shattered. To me, learning social studies is a part of our everyday lives as we interact with others, work in groups, meet new people, etc. I do not think I am nearly as intimidated or insecure about teaching social studies as what I originally expected I would be.

Faculty in teacher preparation programs and clinical teachers, especially at the elementary level, have an obligation to instill the passion for social studies and empower teacher candidates with the knowledge and skills to teach social studies in an effective and powerful manner (Heafner et al, 2007). With increased usage and availability of technological resources, educators have access to more resources than ever to help make instruction more meaningful and enjoyable for elementary students. There is also a need for increased collaborative efforts with local school districts and community resources, so that an environment of interest in social studies is fostered. A change in the status-quo is greatly needed. It must begin with a triad approach of teacher educators, clinical teachers, and teacher candidates working together to not only emphasize the importance of the social studies in the classroom, but to develop strategies for instruction and planning, and advocate for social studies (McCall, Janssen, & Riederer, 2008).

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