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### **Abstract**

*In this article, the authors report the results of their pre-service teachers' reflections with regards to observed social studies instruction in kindergarten through sixth grade. Fifty-seven elementary education majors were enrolled in a social studies methods course at a university located in the South. Pre-service teachers share the type of instruction observed, comments stated by their classroom teacher about social studies as well as their overall perceptions. Reflections indicate social studies is taught inconsistently across grade levels, best practices were not used for instruction, and a trend in decreased social studies instruction. Thus, classroom teachers exhibited frustration because of these issues.*

### **Introduction**

Future elementary teachers are receiving mixed messages. Will they be able to teach social studies or not? In their teacher education program, they learn dynamic ways to teach social studies from their university professor. Currently, pre-service teachers are not consistently able to observe social studies instruction. Equity does not exist among the grade levels. As a result, pre-service teachers are not observing social studies being taught effectively. This raises the question, who is modeling effective social studies teaching practices? It is as if social studies is being treated as a distant after thought, if a thought at all.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In a survey of 33 states, researchers found that social studies instructional time had been reduced in sixteen states (Rothman, 2005). For example, Stephan Thornton and Neil Houser (1996) noted elementary teachers spent on average only twenty-two minutes per day on social studies instruction compared to the recommended fifty minutes. In a study of elementary schooling, Robert Wood (1989) reported that school administrators gave the least support to social studies instruction because there is less attention given to non-tested subject areas. These non-tested subject areas such as health, fine arts, physical education and social studies become invisible. Additionally, the results from a study conducted for the Bayer Corporation (Market Research Institute, Inc., 2004) reported that elementary teachers are three times more likely to teach English (95%) and math (93%) every day than they are to teach science (35%) and social studies (33%). It is even more harmful when social studies is taught because it is textbook driven and focuses on the mere memorization of isolated facts, (Zemelman, Daniel, & Hyde, 1998). This type of instruction does not promote active learning nor does it promote retention and student interest. The value of instruction is marginalized.

In actuality, the importance of social studies instruction prior to No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has always been a concern. The lack of instructional consistency across grade levels existed before this federal mandated act. Unfortunately, NCLB has only made it worse.

### **Influential Legislation**

This devaluation of social studies, according to Sandra Kaplan (2002) is in part caused by the emphasis on standardized testing. It appears to be if the subject area is not tested then it is not taught. The No Child Left Behind Act 2001 (NCLB) does not list social studies as one of the curricular areas for which elementary teachers are held accountable. As a result, our nation's youth are not being educated on what it means to be effective citizens. This federally-mandated act was designed to transform American schools from a culture of "achievement" and "results" to mandating the annual testing of all students in grades three through eight in the subjects of reading/language arts, mathematics, and science (U.S. Department of Education 2002). The legislation also required states to establish Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency targets using the mandated test scores, with 100% of all students being proficient or advanced by 2013-2014. Schools not meeting their AYP targets for two consecutive years are identified as "in need of improvement" (INOI), and students attending INOI schools must receive tutoring or can elect to transfer to another school (Bush, 2001).

Because social studies is noticeably absent as a testing requirement, many states do not test students' knowledge of social studies in their high-stakes testing regiment. Currently, only 12 states test elementary social studies as a part of their mandated accountability program (Duplass, 2006). Due to NCLB, the absence of accountability to test social studies allows elementary teachers to focus only on teaching reading/language arts, mathematics, and science. Regrettably, other subject areas on standardized tests take precedence over social studies. It is an elementary teachers' responsibility; however, to model effective teaching practices for our pre-service teachers. Likewise, it is their responsibility to teach students the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to become effective citizens. According to the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS), social studies education can be defined as follows:

Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civics competence. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (National Council of Social Studies, 2008).

How can the United States of America morally, ethically, and intellectually appear not to defend students needing the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that social studies brings? To neglect children learning how to live fairly amongst diverse people, to demonstrate democratic practices, and to make sound decisions is detrimental to today's youth. What is more damaging is that future teachers are observing and often times being told to teach only what is being tested. The absence of successful social studies instruction causes many challenges for assistant professors who teach social studies methods. It is important to advocate teaching dynamic social studies.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study was conducted in order to answer the following: (a) to examine what undergraduate teacher education students observed about social studies instruction in K-6<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms; and (b) to explore practicing teachers' reflections on social studies instruction.

## **Methodology**

The rationale of the study was to reveal that pre-service and classroom teachers were not content with current social studies instruction; best teaching practices were not used. No Child Left Behind 2001 simply uncovered an existing problem of read the book and answer the questions or define vocabulary terms.

### *Participants*

In 2007, 57 elementary education pre-service teachers were enrolled in three sections of social studies methods courses at a university in the South. While these pre-service teachers were enrolled in this course, they were also attending action lab. During this time pre-service teachers observed in kindergarten through sixth grade classrooms with a teacher, called a clinical instructor. They were placed in three different schools located in two northern county school districts and were engaged in observations twice a week for two full school days.

The clinical instructors were predominately Caucasian females who received their baccalaureate degree in elementary education from a southern institution. There were 57 clinical instructors. Over fifty 50% of them had five or more years of elementary teaching experience.

After their first six weeks, pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on the following two questions: "How often is social studies taught in your classroom?" and "What type of social studies instruction do you observe?" These pre-service teachers also were encouraged to include any comments that their classroom teacher mentioned with regards to social studies instruction and most importantly, they were asked to reflect on how they felt during the observations.

In this article, pre-service teachers' reflections will be shared, including the type of instruction observed, comments stated by their classroom teacher about social studies, and most importantly, their perceptions.

## **Data Analysis Method**

Data analysis is defined by Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen (1998) as the process of systematically searching and arranging interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that are accumulated to increase understanding of the data as well as to present the discovered themes and patterns to other professionals. Analysis of data requires organizing, synthesizing, generating themes, patterns, and categories. These procedures were used throughout the research study. Themes were identified during the data collection process by using within case analysis and cross case analysis. All themes were identified and organized into categories.

## Findings

The majority of pre-service teachers observed and stated, social studies was not emphasized or taught at all. Mary Hass and Margaret Laughlin (1998) said, “elementary teachers, principals and school districts put social studies on low priority in the teaching day” (p.42). In this study, all grades were represented and observed. Pre-service teachers noted an absence of real world relevance, peer interaction, and hands-on activities. Also, student-centered approaches were not observed. Pre-service teachers' comments about observation of social studies instruction, integration of social studies/language arts, and addressing diversity can be found in Appendix A.

Pre-service teachers did not witness dynamic social studies instruction in action. These pre-service teachers were in fact getting mixed messages. Early exposure to social studies content and skills were seen inconsistently across grade levels.

## Discussion

According to the 2008 director of research and policy with the International Reading Association, children in kindergarten through fourth grades, who are not exposed to social studies, will not have the essential vocabulary, concept, or world knowledge needed to understand government, the economy or geography by the time they are in middle or high school. In other words, these children will not understand what they are reading because of the lack of prior knowledge. The aforementioned responses reveal how social studies curriculum at the elementary level is increasingly being squeezed out.

Although U.S. history will continue to be taught in middle and high school, will this course of instruction be sufficient? Will this one course be enough to say; our children will know how to become active citizens? Gayle Thieman, the 2008 president of the National Council for the Social Studies, said, “democracy is not a natural state” (Zamosky, 2008, p.48). It has to be taught, it just does not happen. Just because you are born in a democratic society does not mean you will be democratic. Elementary teachers need to be reminded that they are required to teach all subjects areas, not just a few. When social studies was in fact taught it was considered incredibly boring by my pre-service teachers. According to Gahan Bailey, Edward Shaw, and Donna Hollifield (2006), the most popular way to teach social studies is to read the book and answer the questions and define the vocabulary words. Students were uninterested so they could not learn this way. These young learners were seen as turned off to this approach. Consider this as you read how pre-service teachers watched current social studies practices in kindergarten through sixth grades.

By and large, all pre-service teachers noticed social studies being taught in the most unexciting way possible. This occurred in all grades, kindergarten to sixth, with observed social studies methods in only the upper grades, fifth and sixth. Less than 10% of social studies methods were observed in all 57 classrooms. As for best practices, these were observed inconsistently throughout all classrooms.

Pre-service teachers saw activities introduced with no purpose or those activities lacked a clear social studies connection. They also observed a major emphasis on coloring U.S symbols such as state flags, birds, and flowers. There was heavy

memorization of the U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Pledge of Allegiance, or state capitals with no explanation of the meaning of documents or purpose of symbols. Comments about classroom teaching practices can be found in Appendix B.

Many elementary teachers were viewed as telling their students what to do as opposed to guiding them to unknown information. This “give it away” method or simply telling the students was mistakenly perceived as teaching. This conflict with what and how pre-service teachers are taught in their social studies methods courses. In social studies methods courses, pre-service teachers are exposed to numerous and varied instructional strategies for this subject (Bailey et al, 2006). 30% of teachers surveyed identified their instructional style when teaching social studies as teacher-centered rather than student-centered (Lemington, Ellington, & Schug, 2006). Teachers were not seen guiding students to seek answers. Teachers did not act as the facilitator where students were encouraged to seek explanations to their own puzzling questions or problems.

In the lower elementary grades, pre-service teachers observed the frequent use of worksheets. The purpose of worksheets was to look up definitions or to locate points on a map to record. No engaging activities were noted. When there was time to teach social studies, completing geography, vocabulary, or factual worksheets seemed to be the preferred teaching method. If students were not being told what to do, or completed meaningless worksheets, then social studies instruction appeared to be delivered in an erratic manner. It was noted that social studies and science were taught on alternating days, or taught twice a week or every other month. This was seen especially seen in upper elementary classrooms. Comments from pre-service teachers in lower and upper elementary grades can be found in Appendix B.

After reading these responses, one might ask, “How can elementary teachers justify their current methods of teaching social studies?” “Do they believe their teaching strategies are effective?” Well, classroom teachers’ voiced their remarks.

### **Remarks from Classroom Teachers**

Pre-service teachers spent one-on-one time with teachers in their clinical placement during various parts of the school day. All teachers in the first through fourth grades reported not having enough time in the day to teach social studies. One teacher said, “I have many activities dealing with American symbols, but with the Saxon math and language arts as a requirement, I do not have time”. Another teacher expressed her anxiety, saying “I am highly concerned about my instructional time for this subject but I am under pressure to increase math skills for the up-coming state test”. On another note, a classroom teacher honestly admitted to using the textbook, suggesting uncertainty with how to teach social studies, “it was difficult for me to teach social studies any other way”.

The personal reflections gave tremendous insight as to how the pre-service teachers felt about current social studies instruction. They noticed what they recognized as inconsistent approaches across grade levels, non-engaging activities, meaningless lessons, and most importantly, little or no opportunities for their classroom students to critically think or problem solve. Since the pre-service teachers learned the value and purpose of teaching dynamic social studies, reality contradicted their beliefs. Many responded as being sad, disappointed, and angry about what they saw or heard. Many

stated their descriptions of how social studies would not be ignored but taught in their future classrooms.

### **Reactions from Pre-service Teachers**

Pre-service teachers thought the comment of there is no time to teach social studies was appalling. Their students were seen as being cheated by their teachers and by their school administrators. The majority of pre-service teachers were passionate about the content knowledge, skills, and values of social studies. Social studies instruction fell short in functional content, constructivist teaching practices, intrinsic motivation, integration cross curriculum, and respect for diversity according to these pre-service teachers. Over all, they concurred, young children will struggle to make informed and reasoned decisions as well as struggle to appreciate diversity. Pre-service teachers' reactions to practicing teachers comments can be found in Appendix C.

As Judith Pace (2007) reported, the United States is in danger of losing a generation of unschooled citizens; producing narrowly educated graduates. She also argued young people today are not educated to care about political matters, understand complex issues, make informed decisions, and contribute to society.

### **Conclusions**

The gap between university preparation for teaching social studies and the current elementary classroom needs to be bridged. Social studies methods faculty must face the incongruence between their recommendations for teaching social studies and what pre-service teachers observe in the real classroom (Meuwissen, 2005). In-service teachers need more pedagogical content knowledge of social studies. A stronger partnership is needed between the professional development in schools and university methods faculty. Inviting in-service teachers to serve as guest speakers in your social studies method course could easily do this. University methods faculty can videotape their courses. This will allow classroom teachers to view integrated social studies and literature lessons that incorporate meaningful activities for students to think critically and problem solve. University methods faculty can provide professional development workshops that emphasize using multicultural literature and alternative assessment. This collaboration should be done on all grade levels.

Since the pre-service teachers of this study may be more likely better prepared than existing in-service teachers, it is extremely crucial that they do not get discouraged from teaching effective social studies methods when they know how to do so. Their preparation allowed for more practice to teach social studies and their comfort level is higher. Although the complexities of accountability are understandable, pre-service teachers must be careful not to fall into the existing pattern of not teaching social studies. Most importantly, the pre-service teachers should make a personal commitment not to allow their "action lab" experience to alter how they were taught to teach social studies.

The pressures of achieving high-standardized test scores should not control one's teaching style or your philosophy of teaching, it does. Methods instructors have the responsibility of empowering pre-service teachers to become lifelong learners, to care, to be conscientious citizens as well as to function in this diverse society. This can never be

lost just because standardized testing currently dictates schools yearly progress. Because social studies addresses difficult or controversial matters, it is often the only subject area that allows students to discuss such topics as culture, poverty, freedom, racism, homelessness, inequalities of gender, education, or wealth to which students may not otherwise be exposed. If these issues did not exist worldwide, then one could argue it would be justifiable not to teach social studies in elementary classrooms. Social studies cannot be ignored. It cannot be placed on the back seat of education nor be treated as a second-class citizen.

When elementary students are engaged in social studies, they are the very same students who want to effect change. Students find it interesting to learn about cultures and discovering inequalities that children their age have experienced. They become compassionate and want to help solve problems (McCall, Janssen & Riederer, 2008).

We are optimistic that the mixed messages of social studies instruction will not discourage pre-service teachers. They will hold on to social studies' purpose and values. The pressures of decreased instructional time or the pressure to achieve standardized test scores will not deter them. They will integrate social studies and literature. Their goal will not be to produce test takers, but to teach dynamic social studies.



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## Appendix A

### Pre-service Teachers' Comments about Observation of Social Studies Instruction:

#### Comments on frequency of instruction:

- There isn't much emphasis placed in social studies.
- Kindergarteners are being exposed to social studies in small bits.
- Social studies has not been taught at all since I have been in my action lab.
- I am not aware of any type of social studies program.
- Language arts and mathematics are the subjects with the most emphasis.
- There is a time slot for social studies/science; however, science is slightly more emphasized.
- I have observed math, reading and language arts being taught daily.
- It was evident that social studies was the lowest priority since teachers felt the need to focus on specific skills.
- Science and social studies take the backseat during the instruction time in my teacher's classroom.

#### Comments on lack of social studies/language arts integration and lack of addressing diversity within literature stories:

- In my language arts classroom, students read Sam and the Best Biscuits in the Whole World; however, the African American cowboys were not explored.
- I have not seen any explicit social studies being taught, but the students are currently reading a historical fiction novel.
- They read a story about a boy from a different country then their teacher just told them what to color without a lecture about the continents.

**Appendix B**  
**Pre-service Teachers Comments on Teaching Implications:**

Comments on classroom teaching practices:

- The kids read the chapter, and the kids answered [her] questions.
- She discussed with her class the flag and the stars, stripes etc. and allowed the students to color Uncle Sam!
- The students colored the American flag and wrote the U.S. Constitution under it.
- I listened daily to the students recite information.
- Every morning the class says The Pledge of Allegiance and a school pledge.
- There were several so-called activities which had no educational purpose or value associated with them.

Comments by pre-service teachers in lower elementary grades:

- I see a lot of worksheets, A Whole Lot!
- In the social studies portion, there may only be a ten-minute teaching slot, then the rest of the time is spent filling in definitions to a vocabulary worksheet.
- They did a vocabulary worksheet and studied the vocabulary through a game.

Comments by pre-service teachers in upper elementary grades:

- Social studies is taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
- Science is now being taught for the next five weeks because social studies was taught the first four weeks, confusing? Yes!
- I have not seen anything. I cannot believe this!

## Appendix C

### Pre-service teachers' reactions:

- It makes me feel sad to know these children aren't learning this information at an early age.
- I don't like the fact that social studies is not a part of the core curriculum.
- There are plenty of opportunities to integrate social studies and reading.
- I feel sad that the students aren't engaged in field trips or exposed to artifacts.
- I would like to see more cooperative learning and creativity in lessons.
- Social studies instruction is crucial, it teaches students how to become good citizens by making informed decisions.
- We are just training students to become good test takers versus problem solvers and explorers.
- Students do not know why they have freedom.
- History takes place everyday; our children have no clue why things happen

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