The Shrinking of Social Studies

As standards-based reform gains ground, social studies is getting squeezed  

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Social studies is the most important of the academic disciplines. To prove my point to sometimes-skeptical students in our teacher preparation program, I ask them to quickly write down what are the most important things in their lives. The answers can be summarized as money, family, religion and “sex, drugs, and rock & roll.” As it happens, each of these is included in the social studies: economics; different types of human relationships; the status of different consciousness-changing chemicals under laws of different nations (e.g., alcohol, marijuana, ecstasy); and one form of a culture’s arts. I then conclude with a rhetorical question: When was the last time that a crisis in phonics or mathmatics riveted the world’s attention as did the attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001? This crisis, which demonstrated its impact in August on Hiroshima.

In addition to advocating the priority of social studies, the purpose of this article is to document how standards-based reform has had a negative impact on social studies education, especially at the elementary level, and to recommend a course of action.

The Impact of Standards-Based Reform on Social Studies

Since the U.S. Department of Education published A Nation at Risk in 1983, the principal change in public education has been the ascendance of a “standards-based” reform and its impact on state and federal educational policies. The standards movement generated changes in curriculum, evaluation, and accountability (i.e., providing rewards and sanctions based predominantly on the result of high-stakes testing).

The reform movement emphasizes rigorous standards for both curricular content and assessment. Subsequently, each of the major disciplines has created its own content standards, such as the social studies standards developed by National Council for the Social Studies; most states have also created new measures to promote assessment (e.g., the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). The standards movement created “high stakes” incentives (both positive and punitive) for meeting the standards. In some states, teachers and administrators get financial rewards when their students meet or exceed the standard. The punitive measures include a variety of consequences such as “reconstituting” schools, a term that refers to removing the entire educational staff and reopening the school with a completely different faculty and administration.

The two most recent changes in the standards-based movement are the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, also known as “No Child Left Behind”) and the 2002 Zelman v. Simmons-Harris Supreme Court decision allowing, at least under some circumstances, public funds to be used for vouchers. The former adds additional accountability to what was already a high-stakes environment. Both increase the ability of parents to make choices about which school their child attends. Both take major steps towards privatization of public schools (i.e., using public dollars to support private education and schooling).

The changes created by the standards-based movement have a significant impact on social studies. The proponents of standards say their aim is to improve the quality of education and to include all children in this goal. For example, Marc Tucker and Judy Codding write that their aim is to demonstrate that “it is possible to build a system [using standards] from the materials at hand that will enable virtually all American youngsters to leave high school with a fine education.” That is, of course, an empirical claim and the truth or falsity of the claim remains an open question.

Evidence to this claim appears in a variety of contexts. In Sacramento schools, for example, the district adopted a highly structured and time-intensive reading program. According to a local newspaper: “[T]he program is not without critics. Teachers acknowledge they have minimized—in some cases eliminated—science and social studies to make time for the [reading]
Although this data refers to elementary teachers, it is particularly significant. Contrary to middle or high school, elementary school is the place where most teachers have some choice about where to put time, energy, and emphasis, and yet because of the pressure to score well on reading, writing, and math, the social studies suffer.

There is also an impact that goes beyond classroom time and includes professional development. According to another study on the impact of standards-based reform in Washington state, [M]ost of the professional development that teachers participated in focused on the subjects tested on WASL or the state norm-referenced test, that is, mathematics, writing and reading. Fewer than one quarter of the teachers participated in professional development that emphasized social studies, science, arts, or health and fitness. Although this trend towards abandoning social studies is true nationally as well. From 1988 to 1998, during the rise of standards-based education, the number of 4th graders who had social studies daily fell ten percent—from 49 percent to 39 percent. The negative impact on the social studies documented above was in a context of the initial school reform legislation, which required WASL testing for the less essential subjects in the second—and yet to be implemented—wave of testing. However, at this writing social studies is in danger of being demoted to a third-class status (along with art, and health and fitness). Washington’s governor recently suggested eliminating funding for the development of high-stakes assessment for social studies; he sponsored a bill in the state House of Representatives to change the law to reflect these modifications. The superintendent of Public Instruction sponsored a separate bill in the Senate, which is less draconian. In the last legislative session, responding to the governor and state superintendent, House Bill 2195 was created. All three actions help further demote the status of social studies. This year the legislation failed, but only because the Republican Senate would not consider 2195 unless the House voted on a charter school bill. For the moment, the status of social studies in Washington state hovers precariously at second class, but it seems likely that the issue and danger will resurface in the next legislative session.

It is ironic that publicly elected officials treat social studies in this manner when only 56.2 percent of registered voters in Washington went to the polls in the last general election. It is ironic that publicly elected officials treat social studies in this manner when only 56.2 percent of registered voters in Washington went to the polls in the last general election. This was the lowest total in over twenty years and was the first general election following the events of September 11, 2001. Given these figures, elected officials should be encouraging rather than reducing their support for civics (and other social studies). The problem is magnified with the youngest voters. In the 2000 presidential election, 36.1 percent of 18- to 24-year-old voters cast ballots (a 13 percent drop since 1972, and an all-time low). Less than half bothered to register. The problem is evident in the National Assessment of Education Progress’s testing of civic knowledge (carried-out every ten years, in contrast to the two-year cycle for reading, math, and science). In the 1998 test, about a third of high school seniors did not have a basic understanding of how the U.S. government operates.

What Is to Be Done? A Recommended Course of Action

Social studies faces a clear and present danger in a standards-based era (made more precarious by deficits in state budgets). To respond to this crisis in the short run, I suggest first pressing the case for social studies being the most important discipline. Ironically, the state of Washington “recognizes” this in legislation. The preamble to the education reform bill states that the purpose of the reform is to:...
“Provide students with the opportunity to become responsible citizens, to contribute to their own economic well-being and that of their families and communities, and to enjoy productive and satisfying lives.” Citizenship, economic self-sufficiency, and pursuing a satisfying life—this is social studies.

Secondly, especially at the elementary level, I suggest integrating social studies with other academic disciplines. For instance, literacy can be promoted by reading good quality social studies literature and historical documents. Science takes on social studies import when, for example, the focus of study is meteorology and students must consider what policies could be implemented to best distribute limited water resources—especially in times of drought—when there are competing claims for the water (e.g., from residents for its use at home, from farmers for agriculture, for the generation of electrical power, and for the survival of endangered salmon). Questions of equity and equality based on gender, race, social class, and ethnicity can provide a context for learning and applying mathematics. Examples include academic opportunity and achievement, salaries, college admissions, insurance premiums, and the odds of being stopped by law-enforcement officers.

Third, academic service-learning can be a vital strategy for teaching social studies. Service learning is a teaching strategy in which students learn academic content through community service. The link between the curriculum and service is crucial. At the same time as voting turnout among youth is at an all-time low, a fascinating counter-current has developed: involvement in community service and academic service learning has mushroomed. One report indicates that “…32 percent of all schools, including nearly half of all high schools, organized service learning as part of their curriculum; 64 percent of all public schools, including 83 percent of public high schools, had students participating in community service activities recognized by or arranged through the school”; and 83 percent of schools with service learning offered some type of support to teachers integrating service learning into the curriculum. Social studies educators can and should use service learning in the service of social studies content, skills, and dispositions.

Through an intergenerational service-learning project in Seattle, Green Lake Elementary first-graders learn much about their community and history through a yearlong commitment to visiting residents of a home for the elderly. In addition to the social studies content, the students use art, reading, and writing in their activities with the elder partners. High school students in Mercer Island, Washington, learn about hunger and homelessness through providing service to the homeless in Seattle’s Pioneer Square. In Newport Beach, California, through a YMCA project, young people grow food for the homeless and hungry. In another form of service learning, advocacy, students from the Center School in Seattle researched poverty issues through visits to community agencies, guest speakers, reading John Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath and Barbara Ehrenreich’s Nickel and Dimed. Armed with new knowledge, the students advocated for the homeless with the Seattle City Council by opposing cuts to programs for the poor at a time when the Council faced cuts in Seattle’s budget.

A final suggestion on how to salvage social studies in our school curriculums is to incorporate social studies into culminating or graduation projects. Many states and districts require students to complete a significant project demonstrating their learning prior to graduation. Making these projects comprehensive and requiring students to address a significant public issue, engage in service as part of the project, and/or provide the public with an issue brief on a topic, is one way to promote social studies. The Bush School in Seattle provides one example of such a project. One senior, after research on Myanmar, made fighting against the repressive regime the focus of his capstone experience. In addition to learning about the history and politics of the country formerly known as Burma, the student honed skills in technology and persuasive writing by drafting petitions. He also learned about the dynamics and politics of international economics. This led the student to participate in a Southern California protest against a corporation with partial ownership of a pipeline in Myanmar. Some groups, including Amnesty International, have charged the corporation with being an accomplice to human rights violations—including forced labor, rape, and murder.

It would be unreasonable to require that all such “capstone” projects have such a strong social studies focus, but the requirements should demand a comprehensive mastery of disciplines—especially in the social studies.

The potential privatization of public education clouds the more distant future. The No Child Left Behind legislation and the pro-voucher decision of the U.S. Supreme Court may prove to be milestones on the path. Citizens with strong knowledge, skills, and democratic dispositions help advance public dialogue and deliberation especially on major policy issues such as these. However, this type of informed and democratic citizenry is jeopardized by the impact of standards-based reform on the social studies.

Notes
1. For example, see Marc S. Tucker and Judy B. Coddington, Standards for Our Schools (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
6. Brian M. Stecher and Tammi Chau, School and Classroom Practices During Two Years of Education Reform in Washington State (CSE Technical Report 550), (Los Angeles, Calif: University of California,

7. Ibid., 27.