

Navigating Mandated Instruction

Omiunota Nelly Ukpokodu, Erica Hernandez-Scott, and Takeisha Brown

In this paper, a university social studies professor and two elementary classroom teachers in a metropolitan urban community share their perspectives, experiences, and commitment to keeping social studies in the curriculum. Specifically, we discuss practices that we have engaged in¹ to navigate the school district's mandated programs and high-stakes testing, which tend to leave social studies in the "back seat" of the elementary curriculum.

Finding a Balance

We do not argue with programs that emphasize the teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics in the curriculum; these are critical subjects that provide knowledge and skills needed in a literate and numerate world. However, given our passion for critical thinking, citizenship development, social justice, and culturally responsible and responsive teaching,² we are disappointed by programs that do not provide the resources, or even the time, for teachers to teach in ways that promote powerful teaching and learning. We want to teach with lessons that are meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active.³ Some of the practices of the mandated curriculum and instruction foster "traditional classroom" styles of teaching that do not support a learning community in which students and teachers care about and support each other. As social educators, we have felt frustration with programs that diminish the role of social studies education and the value of creativity in the student-teacher relationship. So we are working to bring social studies and active learning back into the curriculum in many and various ways.

Strive for Self-Empowerment

Teaching against institutional grain is a challenging task.⁴ The way to stand up and teach social studies is to arm oneself with knowledge and confidence. To empower ourselves, we wanted to be politically active, to become members of a community of professional practice. We took membership in professional organizations such as the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). These organizations have been invaluable for offering us opportunities to network with other educators, build knowledge, and gain moral support. Through group discussion and professional camaraderie, we have been able to develop ideas that allow us to meet the needs of our students while covering the mandated curriculum. We challenged ourselves to make a difference by serving on important school committees such as the textbook selection and professional development committees. Participation in these committees allowed us to impact our school's curriculum and to inform our colleagues about social justice, culturally responsive practices, and the broader goal of education in a multicultural democracy and interdependent world.

A culturally conscientious social studies classroom must be a place where students experience diversity in action, learn as a community, and affirm the realities of their everyday lives. Teachers can forge a relationship with students' families and communities in which there is a two-way flow of information and service.⁵ In addition, while specific social studies content helps students develop knowledge and skills, students learn more about the democratic processes and habits of citizenship when they have relevant experiences outside the classroom that enhance academic learning.

Working in Partnership

We wanted to teach our students about democratic attitudes, values, and processes. Partnership and team learning guided the norms and structures of our classrooms. Students learned course material and got to know themselves by working constantly in partnerships. In such a community, teachers and students are co-learners, with shared governance and decision-making. For example, students can help create classroom rules and norms. (For example, "We should encourage each other because it helps us succeed together." "We should not interrupt because it keeps others from learning.") Students help determine the classroom structure by deciding what jobs/responsibilities are needed. ("We need to have a book helper so that we can keep books off the floor.") This begins by having the students brainstorm

what makes a pleasant and responsible social environment. Students determine the rules that will make our classroom a good place to be. For example, the students want to have fun at school. So, in order to have fun, people can't be mean. Therefore, bullying is not allowed because that keeps us from having fun. This sort of discussion is very exciting for students. Not only does it make the students more likely to adhere to the rules, but also helps them develop skills for participating in and shaping our mini-society and heightening their awareness of their roles and responsibilities.

Family Involvement

Further, as community teachers, we strive to forge relationships with students' families and draw on their resources to make learning meaningful for students. Contrary to opinions that student families do not get involved in their children's education, our students' families are actively involved, although we really had to work hard to accomplish the goal.

Our students are predominantly Latinos (many of whom are recent immigrants from Latin and South American countries) and new immigrants and refugees from Africa. We realized that most of our students' parents are from a working class background and have limited English skills. Many of them feel intimidated by schools and teachers. Thus, we use non-traditional channels to communicate with them—sending home information both in Spanish and English and avoiding condescending and patronizing overtones. In addition, we reflected and deconstructed our own middle-class values and beliefs that might judge the families as uncaring and not valuing education. Our bold step was to reach out to the families by going into their homes and having conversations with parents about our love for their children, and our hopes for their academic success. We especially convey to parents that we need their support. Gloria Ladson-Billings, author of *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers*

of African American Children, suggests that teachers attend community events to strengthen our relationships with students' families.⁶ These simple acts have helped us gain the trust and involvement of our students' families. We could not successfully complete most of our project-based learning experiences (such as the family history project or the social action project on hunger) without family support and involvement.

Where We Came From

For instance, during the unit of study on "where we came from," we sent letters home outlining the resources and participation that we needed from the families. We called the project, "Where We Came From: A Child-Family Project." Many families came to school on the day of presentation, and parents and children worked collaboratively to present some of their work. Another example was the "Our Career" unit of study, in which parents and other adult family members came to school to talk about their jobs. Although all of the parents talked about the actual work—construction, restaurants, meat-packing—some also talked about the social aspects of their work. Many had low-status jobs, with low-wages and often poor working conditions. All of the parents wanted their children to do well in school and "experience the American Dream" of quality education, decent employment, and good standard of living. This particular experience had a powerful effect on many students as they listened to their parents or other adult family members share their hardships and dreams for them.

Seeking Grant Opportunities

In our efforts to put social studies in the curriculum, we have sought grant-writing opportunities to secure funding for social studies activities that the school district no longer provides. For example, last year, one of the authors of this paper (E. H.-S.) realized that her students, who were predominantly Hispanics and new immigrants, did

not have the background knowledge that would make studying state history meaningful. She wrote and received grants such as The Sprint Achievement Program that allowed the students to travel to the Missouri state capitol and St. Louis. This trip provided opportunities for students to have a hands-on experience about the branches of state government. The students also visited the St. Louis Arch and learned about Westward Expansion and the Louisiana Purchase. In addition, she received a Family Game Night grant, aimed at strengthening bonds with families and communities. These grants helped the teacher build relationships with families and secure their involvement. For example, many family members volunteered as chaperons on field trips to the Missouri State capitol, and they learned history and civics along with their children. These grants are available to K-12 teachers across the nation.⁷

Using Trade Books

Using tradebooks and other forms of literary art has been valuable in navigating mandated instruction. We overcame some resistance from administrators to create thematic units of study that engage students in deeper, collaborative, and sustained learning. For example, when one of the authors of this paper was teaching one of the mandated books that had concepts about westward expansion, she used other related books to integrate communication arts and social studies. Using a jigsaw approach, she divided the students into cooperative "expert" groups to read and present on their selection of reading material. Some of the books used were *Children of the Trail West* (Picture the American Past) by Holly Littlefield and *Across the Wide & Lonesome Prairie: The Oregon Trail Diary of Hattie Campbell* by Kristiana Gregory. By working collaboratively and cooperatively, the students developed literacy skills, communication skills, and research and presentation skills and, of course, strengthened their historical, geographic, cultural, and political literacy.



Working in small groups of three or four students can promote collective learning.

More than a Script

As passionate teachers, we are not satisfied just being “script readers”—pedagogues in the narrowest sense of the term. Part of doing culturally relevant teaching is to create a learning community where cooperative and collaborative learning are the norms. We especially value partnership learning. In such classrooms, students work constantly in partnerships and small groups. Our predominantly Latino and African American students love to talk with their peers and work together. So within the mandated teacher-directed instruction, we “insert” partnership learning, which promotes collective learning.

For example, when one of the authors of this paper introduces a new vocabulary word, she asked the students to turn to a partner and dialogue about how they have experienced the concept.

In one case, while teaching the unit “Making a Difference in Our World” to her sixth grade students, she opened the unit of study by stating the fact that four new babies are born every second. The Earth has six billion people today and may have ten billion by 2050. She then asked the question, “Can we feed them all?” In their partnership and small group learning, students talked about money, scarcity, the problem of organization and transportation, and the role of governments in guaranteeing a food supply for their populations. Students observed pictures in *Feeding the World* of children at a food kitchen in Bangladesh, a farmer in Madagascar harvesting rice, and a farmer in Nebraska filling a truck with corn. Then they used maps to find the location and discuss the physical and human characteristics of the places mentioned in the

book. In small groups, students talked about their thoughts on these critical issues and summarized their discussions for the class. For example, one student made a comment about a farmer in Nebraska being “lazy because he had a machine to harvest corn.” Another student disagreed, stating that it was okay for him to use the machine if he had the money to pay for it. Other students began to think about the question, and the teacher introduced the idea that one person could harvest many more acres of corn in a day with the use of a powered harvester than could a person working by hand.

Integrating Current Events

Teaching communication arts by integrating current events into a lesson creates a space for social studies in the curriculum. Many of our urban students

have questions about what is going on in the world around them. Using the prompt, “What is your news?” a teacher can invite students to discuss issues in their lives. An alert teacher can often tie a student’s “personal news” to significant social issues, thereby raising students’ civic awareness. For instance, many of our students often discuss issues of safety in their neighborhoods. We discuss why their neighborhoods are unsafe, and what young people can do to stop activities that make a particular street unsafe. Our students have written letters to local, state, and federal government officials about safety in their neighborhoods and school community, and they were excited when they received a response to the letters. The class was excited by a response from the White House, although it was a form letter, and studied it carefully.

In another case, most of our Latino American and Mexican students recently participated in “La Marcha—Don’t go to School & Work Day,” a protest against policies to restrict immigration severely. Students and their families participated in the March as they walked from their community to the City Hall. We talked about the wages and working conditions of their family members and discussed issues of equality, social justice, and discrimination. More important, the students discussed their feelings of empowerment and newly found recognition of citizen power and collective action.

Personal and Family Projects

Another strategy we have used to create space for the social studies is through implementation of projects that are connected to students, their families, and communities—that invite students to explore their lives, cultures, and histories. One such project is the Personal Life Story (PLS) in which students research, write, and share about who they are. They research and then tell about their cultures and family experiences. At the beginning of the year, each student was responsible for completing a research project with his or her family, investigating where their


parents or ancestors immigrated from, their traditions, and historical experiences. They brought pictures of their families, important artifacts, and videos to share with the class. We posted their pictures in the classroom so they would constantly see people who look like them. This conveyed to them that their families and cultures are valued. Later in the year students constructed timelines of events that spanned ten years of personal and family history. The timelines included all sorts of information, including birthdays, deaths, first words, weddings, and immigration stories, as well as separation and loss. Timelines were posted and students walked around our “classroom museum.” As students shared about who they are, they learned that many of us experienced the same things. It brought us closer together as a learning community.

The Global Citizen

Although we do not support our district’s mandated instructional approach, we still find the benefits of communication arts for integrating materials that present opportunities for developing global perspectives and awareness of global issues. One of the authors of this paper (T.B.) finds *If the World Were a Village* by David Smith⁸ useful in teaching about world-mindedness, as it raises students’ awareness of issues of population, limited resources, political power, inequities, diversity, religion, education, and geography. The book lends itself to many hands-on activities, dramatic reading, letter-writing, and simulations that help students think critically about current world issues.

Conclusion

Social studies faces a difficult challenge in today’s educational environment as it struggles for a space in the curriculum. Classroom teachers must be the voice of social studies—in the classroom and in the community. Our experiences, discussed in this paper, have shown that it is possible, even in a state where the emphasis is in other academic areas, to teach social studies concepts and perspec-

tives, and develop students’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions for critical and effective citizenship. We must remember that when social studies is missing in what we teach, we jeopardize our chances to prepare students for the “office of citizen.” In this era of mandated curriculum and instruction, teachers must be creative and, in some cases, bold, by standing up for what is ethically right and responsible by bringing social studies into their students’ lives. 

Notes

1. James Banks, *Strategies for Teaching Social Studies* (New York: Longman, 2005).
2. Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Debora Neff, and Norma Gonzalez, “Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms,” *Theory into Practice* 31, no. 2 (2001): 132-141.
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994): 164-169.
4. Marilyn, Cochran-Smith, ed., *Walking the Road: Race, Diversity, and Social Justice in Teacher Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004).
5. Omiunota Nelly Ukpokodu, “Essential Characteristics of Culturally Conscientious Classrooms,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 2 (November/December, 2006): 4-7.
6. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teaching for African-American Students* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994).
7. The Sprint Achievement Program and Family Game Night are sponsored by the Sprint Foundation, www.sprint.com/community/education/faq.html.
8. David Smith, *If the World Were a Village: A Book about the World’s People* (New York: Kids Can Press, 2002).

OMIUNOTA NELLY UKPOKODU is a professor in the Division of Curriculum and Instructional Leadership at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, Missouri.

ERICA HERNANDEZ-SCOTT is a teacher at Hickman Mills Elementary School in Kansas City.

TAKEISHA BROWN is a teacher in the Kansas City School District.