

NCSS Presidential Addresses: Reflections on Social Studies Education

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The annual presidential address is traditionally an opportunity for the leader of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) to discuss the state of social studies and to provide insight about its direction. Central to these addresses have been reflections on the purpose of the social studies, which NCSS states 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."¹ Part of the intrigue of the NCSS presidential address is how each leader defines and contextualizes the curriculum and instruction necessary to guide the development of such citizens, as well as what it looks like to live in diverse, democratic, and interdependent communities.

This opportunity to address the NCSS membership has never been more important to the profession, especially because of recent attacks on social studies education and American democracy itself. In the last year, legislation banning or limiting the discussion of race has been passed or introduced in at least 35 states.² NCSS responded to this legislation by saying that "These restrictions impede students' understanding of real-world issues" and "Efforts to ban these topics aim to eliminate any discussion of race or the historical roots of racism in our classrooms."³ The recent legislation limiting teachers' ability to teach history is part of a longer history in social studies education, as discontent over its content and methodologies stretches over a hundred years. However, a sitting U.S. president's attempted coup represents an unprecedented test for American democracy's durability and is a necessary, but disturbing teaching moment.⁴

How the profession should respond to pressing issues like these has been an ongoing subject of NCSS presidential addresses, and that message is often carried out in colorful, passionate, and compelling expressions. Through their efforts to define and achieve the objectives of a social studies education, NCSS presidents have most frequently

touched on three broad topics: the importance of an engaged populace, the essential role of diversity, and the need for leadership and advocacy on behalf of the profession. Through their annual addresses, this distinguished cadre of social studies leaders tells us much about how their perception of the profession has come to represent both continuity and change, especially when it comes to defining the objectives of a social studies education, how to pursue it, and why.

Engaged Civic Participation

We base our understanding of engaged civic participation on Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne's assertion that solving social problems and improving society can be achieved through personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented action-taking.⁵ For example, a person can contribute to a recycling drive, organize a recycling drive, or question why the responsibility to recycle falls on individuals and civic institutions and not the corporations that produce these single-use products. We rely on Paulo Freire who argues for self-actualization and social change by way of "liberating education."⁶ We also draw upon the views of John Dewey, who made explicit links between the health of American democracy and



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students' ability to connect the social studies to current issues and their lives.⁷

On numerous occasions, NCSS presidents have underlined the importance of examining such social connections. In 1938, C. E. Barnes offered a succinct reminder that "Over and over again we have shown our inability to grapple successfully with the social problems that face us...."⁸ A year later, Ruth West declared that teaching methods used in the classroom must be democratic rather than authoritarian in nature, or educators and administrators could be viewed as providing "lip service to democracy" rather than practicing democratic methods in the classroom.⁹ In 1941, F. P. Worth supported West's assertion by affirming that too many teachers view students as future historians rather than citizens.¹⁰

Throughout the Cold War, NCSS presidents continued to link civic engagement with relevant social studies curriculum. In 1951, Myrtle Roberts emphasized that the school's curriculum must prepare students to "be educated and trained in the democratic processes in order to preserve our freedoms and to be able to resist all ideologies that would destroy the democratic way of life."¹¹ In 1955, Edwin Carr delivered a clarion call to construct a realistic, interesting, and worthwhile curriculum conducive to civic engagement.¹² A decade later, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, two presidents, Richard Gross (1967) and Robert Cordier (1968), emphasized the values of heeding opposing points of view while addressing the significant issues of the times.¹³



Hahn

NCSS presidents also stressed the influence of teaching social issues along with building civic engagement. Echoing Freire's call for "problem-posing" education, Shirley Engle, one of the leading proponents for an issues-centered classroom, suggested that teachers build "real life problems" into their curriculums to provide a sense of reality to life after graduation.¹⁴ In 1983, Carole Hahn, a graduate student of Engle's, argued that civic engagement benefitted from an issues-centered approach to learning but

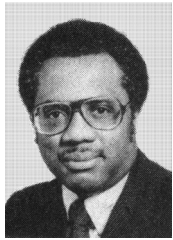
needed to be expanded through the auspices of a global-issues curriculum.¹⁵ Here, Hahn signaled that engaged citizenship required students to think of their responsibilities beyond the borders of their nation state.

Diversity

Alongside promoting civic engagement, social studies education has elevated the importance of embracing diverse constituencies in a democratic society. Geneva Gay wrote that our differences are a positive binding force: "cultural diversity is a strength—a persistent, vitalizing force in our personal and civic lives."¹⁶ Thomas Fallace wrote that diversity in the social studies is an acknowledgement and a respect for difference, and it is an embrace of cultural and epistemological heterogeneity.¹⁷ Within the social studies, Fallace also noted that diversity is a respect of the complexities associated with merging "individual and group identity with democratic values" and for the notion that no one group should be elevated over another.¹⁸

NCSS presidential speeches often addressed themes of diversity as a reminder of the organization's justice-oriented mission. These mentions of diversity include the need to be humane, to develop mutual respect, to challenge stereotypes, and to empathize. While hailing the ideas, beliefs, or philosophies that unite the field, NCSS presidential speeches also highlight the importance of retaining one's cultural identity.

During World War II, two NCSS presidents elevated the importance of respecting differences despite heightened national security. In 1944, James Quillen identified NCSS's goals as "to ensure mutual respect and equal opportunity for all cultural and ethnic groups in our classrooms, schools and communities... All people belong to some minority group and the persecution of one endangers the security and welfare for all."¹⁹ In 1945, Mary Kelty extended NCSS's responsibility to promote the acceptance of difference. She described NCSS "as an integrating force" with the duty of "embracing diverse and even sharply conflicting points of view."²⁰ For this and other stances, social studies scholar Keith Barton called Kelty "the most important social educator no one has ever heard of."²¹



Banks

Later presidents affirmed NCSS's role in challenging assumptions about differences in school's populations. In 1982, James Banks said, "We need to determine the most appropriate educational response to the different and often conflicting behaviors, values, beliefs, and identifications that students bring to school. Our role is certainly not merely to reinforce them."²² Banks also emphasized the importance of unifying values but cautioned against assimilation. Banks said:

Students need to develop a delicate balance of cultural, national, and global identifications and attachments. However, educators often try to help students develop strong national identifications by eradicating their primordial cultures and making them ashamed of their families, folk cultures, and folk beliefs.²³

Other presidents underlined the importance of empathy and respect of diversity in molding successful social studies teachers. In 1998, Tedd Levy said:

To be humane, whatever our loyalties or national, racial, religious, or ethnic background, is to recognize the worth of human life. Whatever our distance from others—geographic, economic, political—we are bound by common human abilities and challenges. The most humane men and women have a vision that cuts across barriers.²⁴

Gayle Thiemann bridged a globalizing world with the need to embrace diversity in many forms. In 2007, she said:

We must help our students understand and address global issues. Our students need to learn from, and work collaboratively with, individuals representing diverse cultures, religions and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue. And our students need to understand people of other nations and cultures, who speak many different languages.²⁵

Leadership and Advocacy

The future of these ideals within the social studies rests in part on transformative intellectualism—how willing are its members to engage in difficult conversations with their students? How willing are they to advocate for reform with specific recommendations? Aronowitz and Giroux's idea of the "primacy of the political" undergirds this kind of leadership and advocacy: it is up to each social studies educator to rethink how civic action can remake its persistently combative political landscape.²⁶ NCSS leaders have similarly messaged the need for all members to advocate on behalf of the profession's future.



McGuire

NCSS presidential advocacy over the last three decades was most visible around social studies education's loss of support from the government and the media. In 1991, Margit McGuire said that recent reforms suggested that social studies should be gaining traction as a major stakeholder in the school's curriculum. However, she concluded "sadly, in fact frighteningly, that is not the case."²⁷ Soon, NCSS presidents encouraged its membership to advocate for the improved status of the profession. In 1999, Richard Theisen claimed that social studies educators must take a stand for their profession themselves. He said, "we can no longer turn the other cheek and politely concede the arena of public opinion to our critics. We put ourselves in serious peril if we continue this posture."²⁸

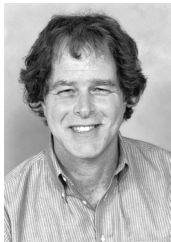


Davis

Responding to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, NCSS presidents used their position as a call for leadership in uncertain times. Adrian Davis addressed the membership to remind them that these moments in history are the times when social studies teachers must redouble their efforts to provide comfort and guidance. In 2001, Davis said:

Citizens need to understand that this moment in history does, in fact, present

a challenge that demands the best that is in all of us. We need a powerful thrust of energy to move this nation through these troubling times, and much of that energy will have to come from us, the educators of this country.²⁹

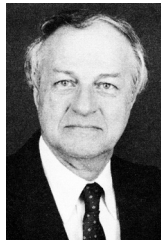


Passe

Presidents also used their time at the podium to address the importance of local leadership on social studies issues. In 2005, Jeff Passe acknowledged that “Times have changed. We have battles to fight in the state legislature, in the governor’s office, at school board meetings, and public forums.”³⁰



Goldberg



Bragaw

Five years later, Stephen Goldberg reminded the membership of President Donald Bragaw’s foretelling a quarter of a century earlier: “We have become a

marginalized discipline in many parts of the nation...’ as Don Bragaw 25 years ago warned us, we must take charge of our profession—not in a dictatorial fashion, but by assuming and asserting leadership. Professional association can empower us.”³¹

In exercising leadership and advocacy for the field, presidents emphasized the importance of local activism, passion for the subject, and respect for diverse stakeholders. In 2006, Peggy Altoff said that for NCSS to be the leading voice for



Altoff

social studies educators, a grass-roots movement of relationship building was imperative. Altoff said “...there is power in passion and power in relationships, but there is also power in numbers.”³² The following year, Gail Theiman sustained this philosophy. Quoting from an NCSS position statement

about effective citizens, Theiman emphasized that these relationships “must be developed within the

walls of every classroom through the auspices of studying global issues with a special focus on diverse cultures, religions and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue.”³³

Presidents also noted the importance of speaking out about a decline in elementary social studies instruction. In 2011, Sue Blanchette



Blanchette



O'Neill

expressed trepidation on this issue by pronouncing “The advent of high stakes testing has radically changed the landscape as well, especially in social studies, as we

try to gain a secure foothold in a world increasingly obsessed with English and math.”³⁴ In 2015, Kim O’Neill revisited this effort by asking NCSS members to “continue to challenge yourself and seek out leadership roles to promote the teaching and learning of social studies.”³⁵

NCSS presidents have also reminded social studies educators of their position as role models for leadership and advocacy. In 1967, Richard Gross said, “Our pupils will benefit from models who, though willing to give opposing views a full hearing and who are fellow-searchers for truth, still believe and act on their belief that there is merit in honesty and decency, and who hold dear the American principles mentioned previously.”³⁶

The Future of the Social Studies

NCSS presidents have used their pulpit to address these and other issues relevant to all social studies teachers, albeit with varying degrees of urgency.



Heafner

In 2019, Tina Heafner underlined the urgency of this responsibility to act on behalf of the profession and of the health of American democracy. Heafner said: “If we do not confront the truth in our social studies classroom, the foundations of democracy will further be eroded.... Social studies educators continue to be tasked with not only raising awareness of the state of social studies in PreK-12, but

also with taking action for change.”³⁷ Perhaps foreshadowing the January 6 insurrection, Heafner’s message was clear: social studies teachers must be willing to speak the truth about history if American democracy is to persist.

Heafner also reminded *all* NCSS members of their role in advocating on behalf of the profession. Recalling an instructive interaction with a state representative, Heafner said: “At the meeting I mentioned earlier, the state representative remarked in his panel talk, “Policymakers are not the problem.... If you are not satisfied with the current state of social studies, schools, or education, then social studies teachers need to be far more active in communicating with legislators and advocating for social studies.”³⁸ Legislators are most likely to respond to the constituency that is the loudest and most persistent. Recommend

a solution in your meeting; you are likely the social studies expert in that room, and you should empower yourself to name the kind of future you foresee and prefer.

The future of social studies education and of American democracy is a responsibility of all of us, if we want it. Ask your students: How do they feel about the passage of laws restricting how history is taught? How do they feel about the attempted coup of January 6? Why did the terrorist attacks of 9/11 happen? Why didn’t *Brown v Board* end segregated school districts? What action do they think is best to secure the kind of America they want to live in, if any? Giving your students an opportunity to respond as well-informed individuals is essential to saving social studies education and American democracy as we know it. ■

Notes

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20. Previte and Sheehan (2001), 89.
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 24. Ibid., 390.
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 26. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, *Education Still Under Siege* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1986/2003), 42.
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