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Illinois Council of Social Studies



Grooming Tomorrow's Advocates: Preparing Elementary Social Studies Teachers Today

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Judith Pace asserted in her seminal commentary “*Why We Need to Save (and Strengthen) Social Studies*” that “we are cheating already marginalized children if social studies is squeezed out of their elementary school education. We also are setting up their high school history teachers for failure. Worse, we may be paving the way for potentially dire consequences for our democracy” (Pace, 2007, p. 26). The effects of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) upon teaching and learning social studies at the elementary level are already well known. This educational policy has facilitated reduced time for social studies instruction in grades K through 6, and created an exaggerated emphasis upon high-stakes testing rather than subject matter learning (Misco, 2005, p. 2). A February 2008 report by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) contended that 36% of districts surveyed had reduced time for social studies since the enactment of NCLB, with a 32% total cut in instructional time (a decrease of about 30 minutes per day), and, in fact, 47% spent less than 75 minutes per week on social studies instruction (McMurrer, 2008, p. 1-5). A 2008 study launched by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) echoed this anxiety, noting the “negative impact” of NCLB upon non-tested subject areas like social studies, and the interruption of “multilingual, multicultural and multidisciplinary learning opportunities” needed to flourish in a global society (NAESP, 2008, para. 3). Regional inquiries in North Carolina and Indiana have produced similar results, recognizing that topics under this discipline are taught in the primary grades when time permits (Heafner et al., 2007; Van Fossen, 2005). For example, only 8.3% of respondents in the North Carolina survey teach social studies on a daily basis throughout the academic year (Heafner et al., 2007, p. 506). In light of this increasing exclusion, the methods used to prepare elementary educators for teaching social studies and developing professional advocacy must be reexamined. This article, in the context of relevant scholarship, presents eight key strategies to promote more effective teacher preparation and further discussion amongst the wider educational

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community about how its participants – methods professors, cooperative faculty, pre-service teachers, and placement coordinators – may better work together to advance social studies.

The first strategy is the obvious building-block to the other seven approaches. Surprisingly, many pre-service teachers have little or no awareness about the practical severity of the problems in social studies until they are confronted with them during student teaching. This typically occurs when they discover that their cooperative teachers, because of current testing constraints, spend little time on history, geography, and the like. Exposure to these talking points earlier in their careers is critical. Students must accept the charge that they, as future teachers, will play a substantial role in shaping and enforcing educational policies (Berson, 2000; Evans, 2004). Advocacy in the discipline should be an essential and regular part of the curriculum for social studies education majors (Wade, 2003). Civic participation starts first with them, as individuals, college community members, and citizens. However, their ability to effect change beyond the classroom will certainly fail if progress stalls on strengthening the position of social studies at the elementary level. Create opportunities for discussion and dialogue in freshmen and sophomore classes. Realistically explore the successes and disappointments of current government guidelines, discussing means for reform, modification, and change. Extend this discourse into action by junior year, and, after securing formal acceptance into their preparatory programs, encourage pre-service teachers to accept an *Advocacy Pledge*:

Advocacy Pledge for Social Studies

I commit to advocate and advance the study of social studies throughout my professional career. I will strive to be a good model of content knowledge, intellectualism, professionalism, and citizenship to my students.

Pre-service teachers then initiate some form of action to further the discipline of social studies at the beginning of their pre-student teaching methods courses. The goal is defined by them, and it can vary in scope and range.

To assist in defining the action, the *Advocacy Model for Social Studies*, as first introduced by Katherine O'Connor, Tina Heafner, and Eric Groce (2007, p. 259), should be discussed and debated:

Awareness:	<i>Describe the Problem</i>
Data:	<i>Know the Research</i>
Visit:	<i>Contact Your Legislators</i>
Optimism:	<i>Think Positively</i>
Communicate:	<i>Convey Your Purpose</i>
Audience:	<i>Be Relevant to the Listener</i>
Challenge:	<i>Question the Norm</i>
You:	<i>Be the Role Model</i>



Urge students, however, to modify this established framework to reflect their own particular objective, like displaying enthusiasm for the discipline, challenging those efforts that seem contradictory to student learning, or praising and publicizing student achievement in social studies. This is not meant to be a militant or revolutionary undertaking, but rather a critically reflective experience which, in the tradition of social reconstructionism, promotes awareness of the consequences of policy upon teaching and learning (Genor, 2005; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). The culmination of these reflections may include a range of actions, such as creating an effective social studies lesson plan, arranging an appropriate field trip, or presenting a conference paper. To foster professional unity, cooperative faculty should be included in these conversations when possible and encouraged to adopt similar pledges. Progress on these goals is then tracked through a reflective journal, blog, or discussion forum where advocacy for the discipline is a central theme, with insights from all participants (teachers in training, college professors, and collaborating elementary faculty). Summative comments are shared in a debriefing session held after the completion of field experience. Finally, this pledge is reaffirmed at the start of the student teaching semester and the process repeated with new or more elaborate activities and objectives.

To bring this pledge to fruition, education departments must also provide meaningful coursework and experiences in social studies *before* student teaching. Programs, in adopting this second strategy, emphasize concept learning, cooperative activities, authentic assessment, differentiated instruction, integrative technology, and effective planning in junior-level social studies methods courses. Give pre-service teachers the tools to distinguish and identify teachable moments that will make this discipline more relevant and relatable. Wayne Journell (2007), in his work on progressivism, social studies, and the Virginia Standards of Learning, champions this student-centered learning approach with focus upon critical thinking and public deliberation of issues. Reflecting the philosophy of John Dewey, he concludes that instructors must refrain from making social studies “mechanical” and “restrictive of intellectual power” (Journell, 2007, p. 308; Dewey, 1910, 51). Educators need to create classroom opportunities that link real events, such as September 11th, to concept learning (Finn, 2003, paras. 4-7). Stephen Thornton (2005) takes these notions one step further in *Teaching Social Studies that Matters: Curriculum for Active Learning* and proposes that students assume an active, constructivist role in the classroom, selecting content topics and modes of assessment for chosen units. Unfortunately, in the wake of high-stakes testing, these findings have become the ideal rather than the norm, with critical instruction being overshadowed, dropped, or ignored. Death by worksheet has returned to many elementary classrooms, and reversing this trend will not be easy (Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Methods professors must continue to initiate and innovate to ensure recognition of good pedagogy from bad, and model apposite choices in planning and preparation to attain learning outcomes.



The third approach focuses upon providing opportunities for getting pre-service teachers more actively involved in professional organizations at the national, state, and local levels (NCSS, 2009). Beyond merely requiring passive membership in the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), more fervent encouragement should be directed toward getting students connected to groups in their own communities. Many state and local social studies associations, like the Illinois Council for the Social Studies (ICSS), have affiliation with the NCSS so the message is shared and common. Yet, these satellite councils often lack the complications of distance and expense, a major deterrent for pre-service participants. Methods professors might even consider working with students and cooperative faculty to create a regional organization if no such agency exists. The Bucks-Mont Council for the Social Studies, a local association serving teachers in the Philadelphia suburbs, and the Susquehanna Valley Council for the Social Studies, a local association serving teachers in the Harrisburg suburbs, are two effective models of advocacy, conduct, and scholarship in Pennsylvania (BMCSS, 2009; SVCSS, 2009). For example, the mission of the SVCSS supports

- *Advocating the social studies at all levels of education in the Susquehanna Valley (defined primarily as Dauphin, Lancaster, Lebanon, and York counties).*
- *Promoting the analysis, dissemination and evaluation of social studies materials.*
- *Cooperating with local schools, districts, intermediate units and other interested parties on social studies projects.*
- *Supporting content and pedagogical advancement for best practices in social studies.*
- *Encouraging professional development activities through conferences, publications, and other appropriate outlets especially for pre-service and first-year teachers (SVCSS, 2009).*

Regardless of the scale of the outlet, teacher educators should regularly engage their students in professional development activities to strengthen their content expertise and enhance pedagogy (Little, 1993). These endeavors should include information sharing with cooperating school districts and intermediate units on social studies projects and workshops, and the collaborative analysis, dissemination, and evaluation of social studies materials and resources.

Effective advocates in the disciplines of social studies must possess and demonstrate knowledge of state and national standards (Ravitch, 1996; Holmes, 2001). These standards may include the NCSS, the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE), the National Council for History Education (NCHE), and the National Council on Economic Education (NCEE). This understanding becomes the foundation of the fourth strategy – the promotion of a student-centered curriculum that emphasizes, as William C. Parker (2009, p. 115) touts, the “doing” of social studies, not just the “absorption” of teacher-directed ideas. Although some concern exists that adherence to content standards actually fosters a more narrow, rigid culture of learning (Evans, 2001; Vogler & Virtue, 2007), Wayne Ross (2006, p. 31), like Parker, sees teachers as “active implementers” whose own understanding can be improved from broad exposure to concepts, events, and theories



required by the guidelines. While constructive curriculum design and lesson/unit planning facilitate comprehension and interpretation of the social sciences, press pre-service teachers to move beyond the traditional partnership of textbook and worksheet and the rote memorization of facts. Demonstrate and encourage the planning and implementation of dynamic assignments where students become part of the action (Maxim, 2006). Technology can enrich this process, with sites such as *BrainPOP* and *MapMachine* fueling concept learning (Kent, 2008). Robert Kubey (2004, p. 69) has thoroughly investigated the importance of media literacy to social studies, and concludes that teachers and students “must be educated in all forms of contemporary mediated expression” in order to be vital, functioning citizens. Michael J. Berson (1996; 2001) has also explored the impact of ubiquitous computing, noting its enormous implications for social studies pedagogy, classroom management, and teacher training in instructional technology. The components of the *ADVOCACY* model, as outlined in the first strategy, become most realized for students through these types of self-motivated tasks. Celebrating such achievement is then the greatest advertisement for the academic and civic significance of social studies.

The fifth tactic demands that teacher education programs expect their elementary social studies candidates to become content experts in the discipline. June Chapin (2009, p. 3) comments that it is exactly this lack of preparation and lack of interest in the subject matter that has contributed to the “less than enthusiastic attitude” put forward by elementary teachers. The need for such knowledge at the elementary level is often erroneously dismissed as a requirement reserved only for secondary educators. However, in order to prepare highly qualified teachers from grades K to 12, there must be a prolific union of pedagogy and content, with subject classes covering the essential fields of social studies – history, politics, geography, civics, economics, and the social sciences. In the tradition of Marilyn Kourilsky (1977, p. 182-183), social studies methods professors have to ask themselves - at what point do we enable our students to become economically, politically and socially literate teachers? Education faculty need to work with content departments to create curriculum synergy across social studies (Ross, 2005), and content liaisons should be established in those departments to assist with overall course design. Implementing a powerful college core curriculum could be the most auspicious route to realizing these expectations, and, while the need for content proficiency does seem to be gaining popularity in certification programs for intermediate or upper elementary grades (meaning grades 4 to 6), it remains largely unsupported at the early childhood level (Winter and Early, 2001).

Curriculum integration has been touted as the solution to the waning significance of social studies instruction under NCLB. Nonetheless, as Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy (1991, p. 66) have reasoned, “carving pumpkins to look like presidents” won’t cultivate the effective citizenry that educators strive to foster. This process has real limitations that must be accepted and recognized. It is performed poorly more often than successfully. Textbooks used in the schools are often selected to accelerate performances on the standardized tests rather than encourage or help facilitate integration of lesser subjects (Mathison & Freeman,



2003). Without clear focus or concept objective, reading lessons obscure social, economic, geographical, and historical topics rather than enhance them. Content distortion is common, and context and chronology are ignored. The sixth tactic calls for education programs to incorporate integration in their own preparatory programs, with methods professors working together with cooperative teachers to demonstrate best practices of this approach, including synthetic and supportive models (Parker, 2009). Restructure and replace the traditional framework of “junior block” methods courses by creating team-taught sections where faculty in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies education construct and utilize similar syllabi, learning objectives, and assessments to facilitate a common, interdisciplinary experience.

Although more recent studies exist (Robinson & Schaible, 1995; Benjamin, 2000), Jack Coffland’s (1974) analysis about junior blockers at the University of Miami still offers the most insightful commentary about the advantages and disadvantages of this style of collaboration. Authentic assessment is critical to effective modeling of this approach. Maintaining a professional portfolio, especially in electronic formats, provides the most accurate measurement of progress in such an experience, where shared context and methods may be explored across the domains of teaching - *Planning and Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, and Professional Responsibilities* (Danielson, 2007). The portfolio signifies the capstone project of a pre-service teacher’s career, and accentuates achievements in coursework, field experience, pedagogy, and professional development. It is the ultimate representation of where a teacher has been, who that teacher is now, and where that teacher is going.

The seventh strategy centers upon securing appropriate field experiences from freshmen to senior year that expose students to dynamic lessons and reinforce classroom theory (Goodman, 1986; McDiarmid, 1990; Maxim, 2006). Working with cooperative teachers who properly integrate curriculum is important. Working with cooperative teachers who are devoted advocates of social studies is essential. Placement officers in education departments must make a conscious effort to interview cooperative teachers regarding frequency of social studies teaching before fieldwork begins. Such interviews could be conducted through individual meetings, in group forums with methods faculty and pre-service teachers, or by electronic medium, such as *SurveyMonkey* (Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006). While the logistics of information collection and the number of placements may complicate this strategy, departments must nonetheless commit to achieving these objectives with due diligence. However, as testing mandates increase and the pressure to perform accelerates, finding schools that do not have reduced time for social studies is clearly difficult. In two separate studies, Jennifer O’Day and research partners Sandra Mathison and Melissa Freeman found that “outcomes based bureaucratic accountability” is becoming an almost insurmountable barrier which frustrates educators, confuses their duties, and interferes with successful teaching of all subjects (O’Day, 2002, p. 300; Mathison & Freeman, 2003, p. 3). With reputations and professionalism hanging in the balance, most



cannot deviate from teaching to the test, not even for the sake of cooperative modeling. This reality makes a team approach to the training of new social studies educators especially fundamental.

Preparing the next generation of social studies teachers is challenging under the current system. The seven strategies discussed thus far target ways to improve teacher education programs, enhance social studies instruction for elementary education, and strengthen advocacy at all levels. The eighth and final strategy calls for the revision of the main impediment to successfully implementing these previous proposals - the *No Child Left Behind* legislation. Some academics have argued that the only way to save social studies is to fight for it to be recognized and included in the high-stakes testing game (Van Fossen, 2005). Yet, this addition seems unlikely given the multiplicity of fields defined under its domain, and the veritable war these areas have waged against one another. "The key question haunting social studies", asserts Ronald Evans (2004, p. 178), is "its definition and its vision and of the approaches to the field that will be practiced in the schools". Without greater dialogue and consensus, this debate turns into an "unfortunate distraction" that detracts from the broader concern of teacher training in a confining and contemptible atmosphere (Evans, p. 178). Yet, even beyond the question of "to test or not to test", comes the more fundamental issue for this discipline under NCLB - what do we need our students (and future educators) to know to promote effective citizenship in both national and global terms (Heafner, et al., 2006)?

The prospect of real policy changes under the new Obama administration is still uncertain. Although educational reform continues to be promised, with specific emphasis upon better funding, improved assessments to track student progress, and a simplified accountability system, math and science education remain the "national priority" (Obama, 2009). The realization of a federally-supported rigorous and relevant social studies curriculum will continue its indeterminate existence, at least in the short term, and, in truth, the state of social studies may only worsen with the continuing shift to handle the crises in science and math education. Marginalization, reduced teaching time, and devaluation of social studies remain the grim realities of the present policies. These eight strategies do not pretend to offer absolution from these complicated problems, but rather the hope of an integrated effort to defend curriculum integrity. The virtual bright spot in this bleak scenario is the knowledge that, in grooming tomorrow's advocates, today's teachers and teacher educators are keeping the promise of geographic literacy, economic competency, civic engagement, historical proficiency, and social aptitude alive for throngs of American students, even if only for 75 minutes per week.



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