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## **Keeping Social Studies Alive in the Elementary Classroom: Countering the Effects of NCLB in Southwestern Illinois Schools**

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### **Introduction: Goals**

This project of examining the effect of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on social science education in southwestern Illinois originated in the fall of 2010 and commenced in the spring of 2011. Two graduate students worked with an assistant professor who teaches Methods of Teaching Social Science (Elementary). Discussion with the professor led to the creation and distribution of the survey as well as data analysis. The graduate students continued their research, which served as their culminating graduate project.

There are three overall goals of this project. First, the authors provide a foundation for the study through a review of literature regarding the effects of NCLB on social studies education. Second, the authors present research data—teachers' perspectives on elementary social studies education within their districts and classrooms in southwestern Illinois. Last, the authors suggest effective curriculum and instructional methods that can be incorporated into a pre-service education as well as elementary classrooms.

### **Review of the Literature**

A review of the literature relevant to the effects of No Child Left Behind on social studies education at the state, district, and classroom levels supports the inquiry regarding the present conditions of social studies education in southwestern Illinois. Au (2006) explains that high-stakes testing influences curriculum content and instructional methodology. The importance of non-tested subjects, such as social studies, is being diminished and pedagogy is becoming more commonly antithetical to effective teaching (Au, 2009). Grant (2006) confirms that high-stakes testing has had a negative impact on social studies education, but the nature of the effect varies on the local community. This suggests that social studies education is valued at various levels within different communities. Leming, Ellington, and Schug (2006) found that “curriculum narrowing” and decreased time spent on social studies education could be attributed to accountability

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assessments. VonZastrow and Janc (2004) also found that elementary principals reported a decrease in the amount of social studies instructional time. A study published by the Center on Educational Policy (2003) found that one-third of school districts that participated in a survey reported decreasing social studies instructional time. The focus of time and depth of social studies education is often affected by whether or not the content is included in state testing.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The authors pursued two goals that could directly affect their educational community: examine the effect of the NCLB on social science education in southwestern Illinois and, develop effective strategies to meet the needs of elementary students in social science education. The authors wanted to gain a better understanding of educators' perspectives on the importance of social science education as well as gain insight on educators' opinions on the effect of NCLB on social science education. They also wanted to acquire knowledge on current practices in teaching social studies. In regards to developing effective strategies, the authors concentrated on curriculum and instruction within *Methods of Teaching Social Science (Elementary)* as well as in local southwestern Illinois classrooms.

From the literature review and personal experiences, the authors developed hypothesis: NCLB has led to a decrease in social studies instruction.

### **Methodology**

#### *Part One (Methods of Teaching Social Science (Elementary))*

During the fall of 2010, and under the direction of the assistant professor, the graduate students developed a survey that was distributed to 30 teachers at three different elementary schools in St. Clair County, Illinois. All of the schools fall within the boundaries of the St. Clair County Regional Office of Education. In order to protect the schools' confidentiality, they will be referred to as Schools A, B, and C. The data below includes the most recent statistics from School Profiles on the Illinois Interactive Report Card website.

School A serves students in PK-4, averaged 477 pupils over the past three years, and has a diverse student population: 41% White, 44% Black, and 12.5% Multiracial. Fifty-six percent of the students who attend School A are identified as low income.

School B serves students in PK-5, averaged 398 pupils over the past three years, and has a population of 70% White, 23% Black and 7% Multiracial. Forty percent of the students who attend School B are low income.

School C serves students in grades PK-5, averaged 296 pupils over the past three years, and has the most homogeneous population of the three schools: 98% White and 1.4% Black. Thirty percent of these students are low income.



The IIRC states that although these three schools are meeting many state standards, (they fall between 83% and 85% for “All Subjects Meets and Exceeds”), one school is “Fully Recognized” but the others have an “Academic Early Warning Status”. Users of this report should consider the limitations of the participant population as well as the geographical and demographical data when transferring the findings to their own educational settings. This project was originally designed to meet the graduate students’ educational research requirements. The lead author is currently analyzing similar survey data from a wider participant population and will produce a comparison in the future.

The instrument was a paper survey with 12 closed-ended, Likert scale items and 4 open-ended items. Demographic items were also included (Table 1). Teachers were asked to complete the survey, which gathered data on their opinions of social studies education, the effects of NCLB on social studies, and their current social studies pedagogical practices. Teachers submitted their completed anonymous surveys to the graduate students in an envelope left in the teachers’ mail room.

Table 1~ Survey items

*Instrumentation: Closed-ended survey items*

1. Effective social studies curriculum and instruction have a significant impact on students’ preparation for life.
2. Social studies content is vital to students’ overall academic knowledge.
3. Social studies promotes cultural and/or global awareness to students.
4. Character education provides students with essential skills to be good citizens.
5. Students respond positively to engaging social studies lessons.
6. In my *school*, NCLB has led to a significant decrease in the amount of time spent on teaching social studies.
7. In my *classroom*, NCLB has led to a significant decrease in the amount of time spent on teaching social studies.
8. Elimination of social studies curriculum and instruction would negatively affect students’ overall academic preparation.
9. Elimination of social studies curriculum and instruction would negatively affect students’ perspective on diverse cultures.
10. Elimination of social studies curriculum and instruction would negatively affect students’ perspective on their own community.
11. Elimination of social studies curriculum and instruction would negatively affect students’ perspective of themselves.
12. If dedicated time for social studies were removed from daily instruction, I would routinely integrate it into other core subjects.



*Instrumentation: Open-ended items*

1. Please describe your opinion on the role of social studies education in students' overall academic and personal growth.
2. Please explain your opinion on the impact of NCLB has had on social studied education in your classroom.
3. Please describe any ways in which you have promoted social studies education within your classroom.

*Instrumentation: Demographics*

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your race?
4. How many years have you been teaching?
5. What grade(s) do you currently teach?
6. What content areas do you currently teach?
7. Do you consider your school to be urban, suburban, or rural?
8. Do you practice a faith tradition?
9. If yes, what do you practice?
10. Within your faith tradition, do you consider yourself conservative, moderate, or liberal?

*Part Two (Action Research)*

During the spring of 2011, the graduate students conducted face-to-face interviews with four school administrators. The instrument consisted of open-ended interview items. Administrators were contacted for an appointment and the graduate students wrote detailed notes throughout each interview.

Table 2—Interview Item

Instrumentation: Interview item for principals

1. Describe how you believe NCLB has affected social studies school wide.

**Results:** *Survey*

Data results were configured for the closed-ended items using SPSS 10.5 (Cronbach's Alpha = .8034). All closed-ended items were correlated; the most significant correlations are described below (SPSS: .491-.890 at the 0.01 level 2-tailed. See Appendix 1 for specific correlations on all questions.)



- Those who believe NCLB has led to a significant decrease in the amount of time spent on teaching social studies in their *schools* also believe NCLB has led to a decrease in time on teaching social studies in their *classrooms*.
- Those who believe effective social studies curriculum and instruction has a significant impact on students' *preparation for life* also believe social studies content is vital to students' *overall academic knowledge*.
- Those who believe elimination of social studies curriculum and instruction would negatively affect students' perspective on *diverse cultures*\_also believe elimination would negatively affect students' perspectives on their *own community*.
- Those who believe elimination would negatively affect students' perspectives on their *own community*\_also believe it would negatively affect students' perspective of *themselves*.

Data results for open-ended items were analyzed for overall reoccurring themes.

When asked to “describe your opinion on the role of social studies education in students’ overall academic and personal growth”, teachers most often responded with general, overarching comments such as “*Social studies helps students learn about morals*”, “*...the world around them*”, and “*similarities and differences in culture*.” Furthermore, teachers believe that social studies “*Helps students develop and understand identity*”, “*...becoming well-rounded individuals*”, and “*learn about history of their country*.” Additional comments included:

- “Social studies is an integral part of a well-balanced education!”
- “Need to understand history so we don’t repeat “bad” things that have happened. Important to know and understand other cultures.”
- “Social studies education informs students of the history of our country’s growth, development, and diversity.”

Teachers were also asked to “*explain your opinion on the impact of NCLB has had on social studied education in your classroom*.” Most common responses included “*Decline of social studies instruction*”, “*NCLB necessitates more time spent on core subjects*”, and “*Teaching to the test has severely affected the focus of social studies curriculum*.” Additional comments included:

- “NCLB is very time consuming and has reduced instructional time for s.s.”
- “It has caused me to become more creative in integrating s.s. into the reading curriculum.”
- “There is a great amount of stress on NCLB which affects your ability to teach quality education to students. Everything is centered around making all children pass the state test.”
- “Our district recognizes the importance of this subject and learning beyond the testing wall of NCLB; therefore, it has not impacted s.s. instruction in our district.”

The third open-ended item asked teachers to “*describe any ways in which you have promoted social studies education within your classroom*.” The most common response involved specific social



studies curriculum and instruction (25 statements), integrated materials and methods (14 statements), and content integration (11 statements). Many teachers also provided specific curriculum and instructional methods and included content areas.

- Content integration: thematic units, reading integration, writing, other curriculum, other subjects
- Integrated materials and methods: technology, guest speakers, class magazines, trade books, learning centers, non-fiction books, videos, music, posters, costumes
- Character education: getting along with others, holidays and people, voting
- Civics: studying elections, conducting mock elections, voting and rules, discussion panels, the Illinois Constitution, the Federal Constitution
- History: holidays and people
- Geography: states and capitals throughout the year, creating maps, continuous learning
- Culture: holidays
- Service learning: letters to military veterans in St. Louis

Finally, teachers were given the opportunity to “*provide any additional comments which were not addressed in this survey.*” Although most teachers did not respond to this item, those who did gave statements that focused on the positive attributes and effects of social studies education: “Students’ awareness of relationships between USA and other countries leads to increased social studies content engagement.” “Near elimination of elementary social studies has led to students’ ignorance about functions and purpose of government, core principles of democracy.” One teacher wrote that she/he hears “a lot of talk around the building that not enough time for social studies and science.”

### **Results: Demographics**

Data results for demographics were configured using SPSS (Cronbach’s Alpha = .8034). All demographic variables were correlated; the most significant correlations are described below (SPSS: -.466 to .670 at the 0.01 level 2-tailed). They are divided into experience, location (rural, urban, suburban), and those who teach Language Arts. It must be noted that the survey allowed the participants to indicate their location as rural, urban, or suburban. A definition or qualification for the different types of location was not provided.

### Results: Demographics

- Gender: Women (F=26), Men (F=4)





- Years teaching: (F=30); Minimum- 4 years; Maximum- 29 years; Mean- 14.3 years
- Age: (F= 28); Minimum-27 years; Maximum 62 years; Mean 40.4 years
- Type of school: Rural (F=13), Suburban (F=10), Urban (F=5); Missing (F=2)
- Content areas taught: Math (F=22); Science (F=30); Social Studies (F=26); Language Arts (F=26);
- Faith: Yes (F=28); No (F=2)

### Teaching Experience

Data suggests that teachers with more experience believe that social studies content is vital to students' overall academic knowledge. Teachers with more experience and those who are older stated that if social studies were removed from daily instruction, they would routinely integrate it into other core subjects.

There were differences in teachers' responses from rural, urban, and suburban locations. Rural teachers are less likely to believe that NCLB has led to a significant decrease in the amount of time spent on teaching social studies—school and classroom. They also stated that elimination of social studies curriculum and instruction would negatively affect students' overall academic preparation.

Urban teachers were less likely to believe that character education provides students with essential skills to be good citizens. They were also less likely to believe the elimination of social studies curriculum and instruction would negatively affect students' perspective of themselves. Furthermore, urban teachers were more likely to believe NCLB has led to a significant decrease in amount of time spent on teaching social studies

Suburban teachers are more likely to believe that social studies content is vital to students' overall academic knowledge and that NCLB has led to significant decrease in amount of time spent on teaching social studies—in the school as a whole as well as in individual classrooms. Additionally, suburban teachers were more likely to believe that the elimination of social studies curriculum and instruction would negatively affect students' overall academic preparation as well as students' perspective on their own community

Teachers were asked to identify all content areas they were currently teaching. There were significant correlations related to responses from teachers who teach language arts. These teachers indicated they are less likely to believe that effective social studies curriculum and instruction have a significant impact on students' preparation for life and that social studies content is vital to students' overall academic knowledge. Language arts teachers were also less likely to believe that the elimination of social studies curriculum and instruction would negatively affects students' perspective of themselves.





## Results: Administrator Interviews

The data from the face-to-face interviews with principals was analyzed by identifying common themes. Principals believe that teachers are under pressure to commit to standards and they encourage their staff to fit in social studies when possible. They also believe that younger students still focus on social studies, but they fear it starts to dwindle in the upper grades. Additional comments included:

- “Because of the strict focus on NCLB, teachers are feeling the pressure to commit to the standards. Unfortunately, sometime social studies has to be cut. I try to encourage my staff to fit in social studies curriculum into other core subjects when possible.”
- “I feel the younger students at this school are still focusing on social studies. From third grade on, educators are having to put more of an emphasis on core subject matters, which does not include social studies. My concern is that social studies education is dwindling.”

## Discussion

From the data analysis, the authors have created ways in which social studies education can be improved within the university course as well as the elementary classroom. Throughout *Methods of Teaching Social Science (Elementary)*, the assistant professor will provide direct instruction to pre-service teachers based on this project, including the overarching themes and results derived from the data as well as practical and effective curriculum and instructional methods, especially those described by the teachers. Pre-service teachers will come to understand that practicing teachers believe that NCLB has led to a significant decrease in the amount of time spent on social studies. This will provide a foundation for class discussion on the effects of NCLB in relation to a specific content area and the pedagogical and developmental effects on teachers and students.

Pre-service teachers will also gain an understanding that practicing teachers’ beliefs on social science education may be greatly influenced by geographic location, teaching experience, and content area focus. Being aware of such information will provide pre-service teachers with insight that will prepare them for the possible climates of diverse educational settings. From this, pre-service teachers will discuss a variety of ways in which social studies content can be celebrated in areas where it is still highly valued (time and materials are devoted to social studies) as well as methods of integration in schools that have decreased or eliminated social studies instruction. It is vital that social studies methods courses increase course focus on the importance of social studies content and methods for integration.

Practicing educators may also apply this data. They can explain the findings to colleagues and help them address the issue at hand; this can be accomplished during a school-wide improvement day as well as team meetings and planning sessions. Informed educators can also make a difference within their schools by encouraging fellow teachers to appreciate the need to teach social studies more often, either by specific social studies curriculum and instruction or by



integrating social studies content with the other core subjects. Educators in all grades who want to work to promote social studies education must also model effective and engaging teaching practices, including those described by the teachers in the data. When educators effectively deliver this information, their colleagues will undoubtedly share the same enthusiasm experienced by the authors.

Administrators also have a vital role in ensuring elementary students receive an appropriate social studies education. They should encourage and support professional development for those teachers who want to expand their teaching skills. Teachers who are responsible for social studies education must be given the tools they need to make the limited time for social studies as engaging as possible. For example, teachers should be given financial assistance to attend conferences sponsored by the Illinois Council for the Social Studies and the National Council for the Social Studies. Administrators can also collaborate with local university faculty and students to promote social studies as a single topic and through content integration. Many faculty and students are available to work with teachers on developing and facilitating social studies projects and learning activities within elementary classrooms. Finally, administrators must encourage and promote social studies competitions, such as National History Day and geography bees. These academic events often include individuals from the local community, including parents, librarians, veterans, and businesses. Such activities would create an educational opportunity for the entire community.

## Conclusion

From this research, the hypothesis is clearly supported: NCLB has led to a decrease in social studies education in Southwestern Illinois. The data provided to the authors by teachers and principals fulfilled the goals~ to gain a better understanding of educators' perspectives on the importance of social science education as well as gain insight on educators' opinions on the effect of NCLB on social science education. From this data, the authors were able to acquire knowledge on current practices in teaching social studies as well as developing effective strategies, concentrating on curriculum and instruction within Methods of Teaching Social Science (Elementary) as well as in local classrooms.

In closing, this project has revealed the significant contributions that must be made by our pre-service teachers, university faculty, elementary teachers, and building administrators. Although NCLB has quite often led to a decrease in social studies education, collaborative efforts put forth by many of us will ensure the continuing respect for and dedication to teaching students about the world around them: history, geography, civics, social systems, and economics.



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Appendix 1: Survey Demographics

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	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Deviation</u>
GENDER (1= Male, 2=Female)	30	1.8667	.3457
AGE	28	40.7586	1.4596
YRSTEACH	30	14.2667	7.3762
GRADE (K=0)	27	3.7037	1.9960
MATH (1=Yes)	30	.7333	.4497
SCIENCE (1=Yes)	30	.5667	.5040
SOCIAL STUDIES (1=Yes)	30	.8667	.3457
LANGUAGE ARTS (1=Yes)	30	.8667	.3457
FAITH (1=Yes)	30	.9333	.2537
URBAN (1=Yes)	28	.1786	.3900
SUBURBAN (1=Yes)	28	.3571	.4879
RURAL (1=Yes)	28	.4643	.5079

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