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Razak Dwomoh
Purdue University, rdwomoh@purdue.edu

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Social studies in non-western contexts: The development, appraisal, and implications of Ghana's social studies curricula

Cover Page Footnote

In this paper, I categorize trade books as social studies books that the government of Ghana does not issue as textbooks for students in middle and high schools. They are books individual authors write and are readily available in the market.

Introduction

Social Studies, as a field of study, is met with a general perception of a *broad field* that hinders students from focusing more on history. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2013) initially recognized subjects like history, geography, economics, and civics as officially mandated courses to be taught in schools. The inception of social studies as a separate field in 1916 characterized contentions about the subject in the school curriculum (Evans, 2004). The struggle over the subject was attributed to the championing initiative to influence the school curriculum (Kliebard, 2004). Different countries structure their curriculum to meet the academic needs of their students.

The goal of social studies, according to the Curriculum Research and Development Division (CRDD, 2010) in Ghana, is to equip individuals to develop the skill and cultural knowledge in identifying problems, core values, and future aspirations of the society they live, so they can fit well and contribute to the advancement of their society. During the 1987 Educational Reform Program (ERP) in Ghana, history was submerged into social studies (Cobbold & Oppong, 2010), a typical reflection of social studies in Ghana's middle and high schools. Ravitch (2000) calls the interdependence of history and social studies "history's submergence in social studies" (p. 150). However, in Ghana, history in the social studies curricula is unclear regarding *what*, *how*, and *how much* should be contained in the curricula. When students are bereft of information about their past, it can pose a threat to the democracy of their country.

The existing educational system in Ghana is rooted in the British colonial system (Amenumey, 2008; Boadu, 2016; Boahene, 1975; Okyere, 2000). History, as a subject of study, gained much popularity and place in the Ghanaian curriculum in the twentieth century (Dwarko, 2007), but the 21st century characterized by the difficulty of finding jobs, governmental roles, and ineffective teaching practices, declined its popularity in the Ghanaian education system (Apau, & Adu-Boahen, 2019; see Boadu, 2016). This paper examines the *quantity* and *quality* of history in the middle and high schools' social studies curricula. The following three research questions guided the study 1) What is the position of history within the social studies curricula in Ghana? 2) How do the content and pedagogy of social studies curricula contribute to students' depth of historical knowledge and critical historical thinking? 3) What are the resultant implications of Ghana's social studies curricula, particularly for history?

Literature Review

The literature draws heavily on Ghana's educational content and context. Placed in the larger context, the education system of Ghana has its root in the British colonial system (Amenumey, 2008; Boadu, 2016; Boahene, 1975; Okyere, 2000). Therefore, knowledge about the structure of Ghanaian social studies curricula can inform its neighboring postcolonial African countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and the global world about Ghana's history in the curricula considering the global trends in education. Among the five postcolonial countries and several other African countries, Ghana gained independence from the British colonial rule in 1957, followed by Nigeria (1960), Kenya (1963), Malawi (1964), Botswana (1966), and Zimbabwe (1980), respectively. Therefore, it is imperative to analyze the quantity and quality of the historical content of Ghana in the social studies curricula to ascertain Ghana's historical placement and indigenous perspectives when teaching European colonization of Africa in U.S. classrooms and other African contexts of global education. This section delineates the nature of Ghana's education system, how social studies curricula emerged in Ghana, the development of social studies and history curricula in Ghana, historical thinking skills, and the role of teachers concerning historical thinking.

The Nature of Ghana's Education System

Ghana's educational system is formal. This formal education system was introduced to the then Gold Coast, Ghana, by the European missionaries on expedition and exploration. Colonialism took over, and Ghana became a British colony. The formal education system, viewed as *western*, was geared towards training the ordinary Ghanaian citizen to read and write (building literacy skills) instead of an inquiry-based model of instruction. The Ghanaian educational system has aspects of the foundational indoctrination of the colonial system of education (Amenumey, 2008; Boahene, 1975; Okyere, 2000). Britain's former colonies like Ghana and other African countries still have social studies curricula and have merged their histories into the social studies syllabus.

The teaching and learning environment in Ghana is predominantly teacher-centered (Oppong, 2019). The current system of education in Ghana rewards rote memorization, which does not help the students develop historical thinking skills. This assertion is evident and substantiated by the conventional mode of students' assessment, which is paper and pencil text writing (Oppong, 2009). How the learning of students should take place in the classroom is initiated and supervised by the teacher. The dominance of the conventional pedagogy, such as the lecture method and regurgitation of historical facts in the classroom, gives a

minimal contribution to students' development of historical thinking and citizenship education.

Scholars believe that social studies stand out as the best subject for teaching citizenship education in schools (Biesta, 2006; Mukhongo, 2010), considering social studies' multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature. When students acquire in-depth historical information, it will equip them with "knowledge, skills, and values on national consciousness" (Oppong, 2019, p. 13). They can be more engaged and contribute immensely to improving their communities with the skills, knowledge, and experience they acquire. When students have a robust knowledge of their history, it can bolster their sense of patriotism (Jarolimek, 1971; Lowenstein, 1967) in "moulding them for the future" (Adjepong, & Kwarteng, 2017, p. 25). The justification for the inclusion of history in the school curriculum is because of the opportunities it presents in critical thinking and knowledge acquisition and the ability to apply this knowledge to modern trends of societal issues (Burston, 1972). Various countries place different degrees of importance on history and social studies curriculum, which may differ in origination.

The Emergence of Social Studies Curricula in Ghana

In the early 1940s, social studies was integrated into the school curriculum of the then-teacher training colleges (Adjepong, & Kwarteng, 2017; Tamakloe, 1991). The social studies instruction did not flourish since both the students and the teachers at the teacher training colleges had misconceptions about the subject and approached it negatively (Agyeman-Fokuo, 1994). Ten years later, in the early 1950s, some subjects taught separately and as single subjects like history, geography, and economics replaced the existing integrated social studies curricula. It was multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, drawing ideas and concepts from single subjects such as history and geography to solve emerging societal problems at the teacher training colleges.

The graduates in the social sciences at the teacher training colleges trained to teach social studies struggled to cope with the integrated nature of social studies because they specialized in single subjects. That led to the recommencement of the single-subject approach at the colleges (Tamakloe, 1991). Also, the students in the teacher training colleges welcomed the single-subject approach because they realized that was the medium through which they could better their grades in subjects like history, geography, and economics. As part of the then government's policy to train teachers to teach social studies at the primary schools in Ghana, this policy proved viable for introducing social studies programs at the teacher training colleges (GES, 1993).

In 1976, grades seven to nine—the experimental junior secondary schools—were established, and social studies was the spiral school curriculum (revisiting topics and learning of facts rather than details). The spiral nature of the school curriculum at the elementary level necessitated the need for the student-teachers at the training colleges to specialize in social studies to help teach at the experimental junior secondary schools. Three successive batches of social studies teachers received training. There was an oversupply of teachers because the glut of teachers did not correspond with the numbers of the available experimental junior secondary schools. That resulted in the removal of social studies as a program of study at the training colleges for the 1981/1982 academic year (Tamakloe, 2008). Five years later, in 1987, the Educational Reform Program (ERP) was introduced into the curriculum, and a review committee was inaugurated to investigate the educational structure in Ghana. The review committee recommended six years of primary education, three years of a junior secondary school system (JHS), and three years of the senior secondary school system (SHS) (see Adjepong, & Kwarteng, 2017). The recommendations were implemented without hesitation that same year, resulting in the rebranding of middle schools as junior secondary schools. The reform's rebranding led to the re-introduction of social studies as an elective course of study at the teacher training colleges to train the student-teachers to teach the subject at the junior secondary schools. The 1987 ERP aimed to change the content of education at the basic levels and make sure the subject became relevant to the needs of the individual and that of society. The New ERP program resulted in the teaching of social studies at the basic levels in Ghana.

The Development of Social Studies and History Curricula in Ghana

The 1987 Education Reform Program by the Ghana Education Service (GES) brought a change in the content of study at the primary levels (grades 1-6) ostensibly so that the content could impact the needs of the individual student and the Ghanaian society (GES, 1993). The program postulated five goals to address those needs: (1) history and geography should be the unifying core of the social studies curriculum and should be integrated with concepts from economics, political science, and the social sciences (2) social studies should be taught and learned consistently and cumulatively from kindergarten through grade 12 (3) the curriculum should impart skills and knowledge necessary for effective citizenship in democracy (4) the curriculum should balance the study of the United States with studies of other cultures (5) superficial coverage of content should be replaced with in-depth study of selected content (Mullins, 1990, p. 1). With the initial goal of history and geography as the unifying content to teach in social studies (Mullins, 1990), assessing the contribution of the history content to students' depth of historical knowledge and critical historical thinking is worth

examining. Students seldom gain opportunities to be involved in historical inquiry as the typical history instruction in the classroom is reading, hearing, and the ability to recall historical stories told and written by historians (Lee & Weiss, 2007; Nokes, 2010). According to Boadu (2016), some main problems associated with effective history teaching include limited resources for teaching the subject, poor incentives, excessive strain on the syllabus, and large class sizes.

Currently, apart from Nigeria, most post-colonial African countries like Ghana have a history subsumed into the social studies curricula. Nigeria and the United States have had some developmental changes in their curricula. Nigeria has recently re-introduced history as the main subject in primary and secondary schools (Channels Television, 2016). America has also developed new educational standards (CCSS) to incorporate historical thinking such as sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration in history content and instruction (NCSS, 2013). Ghana incorporates rote memorizations, a traditional instructional method, and dominates classroom instruction of history and other reading subjects (Agyeman et al., 2000).

Young students often viewed history as primarily factual but unknowable because, as one-fifth grader put it, “nobody alive today was there” (Lee & Ashby, 2000, p. 205). That is a very typical response by Ghanaian students towards history-related topics. VanSledright (2002) asserts that perhaps the focus on literal conceptualization in the early grade levels tends to create an assumption that there is not much need to do an in-depth, critical, and comprehensive analysis of historical facts. The way students perceive historical inquiry to gather and recall information is not how historians in the field make their inquiry (Nokes, 2011). Historians use the process of imaginative interpretation and critical analysis (Gaddis, 2002). There needs to be a prioritization of historical thinking skills to ensure effective history instruction across the various grade levels in the social studies curricula.

Historical Thinking

Allowing students to make inquiries in history like what they do for other disciplines such as science and mathematics would contribute to their historical thinking. Historical thinking focuses primarily on the cognitive process of historical inquiry, such as framing questions, historical understanding, conceptualization, analysis of evidence, corroboration, and critiquing a text-based document (Nokes, 2011; Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008). History teachers should prioritize it to engage students in developing those skills (Oppong, 2019). When introducing students to historical thinking, Wineburg (2001) posits that historical thinking skills are not developed automatically in an individual’s psychological

development, neither do they come through natural processes—that take place without any conscious effort.

Research shows that the content of history can be made meaningful to the student when their experiences, age, and cognition are considered (Thompson, 1972). The content of the history taught should be consistent with the depth of students' prior knowledge and experiences coupled with the recognition that they will often possess faulty logic and misconceptions (Nokes, 2011). Students may struggle to make a historical inquiry when misrepresentations in stories are not adequately balanced for subtle differences with supplementary primary sources and scarcely using historical documents in elementary and middle-level classrooms (Wineburg & Martin, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to introduce historical thinking into the elementary schools (Bickford, 2013), even though much emphasis is not placed on the curriculum within the elementary schools (Lintner, 2006; McMurrer, 2008).

Historical thinking serves as the platform for students to create and interpret historical facts as historical reasoning done through logic (Scott, 2014). This practice helps students use their prior knowledge to analyze historical events from a historical perspective (Chowen, 2005). Teachers can help students establish the historical significance of documents they review, use primary sources for textual evidence, corroborate their findings with various primary sources, and critique the documents they review. Students can build on their historical thinking skills the more they engage in historical inquiry. Historical inquiry helps historians to seek answers to historical questions. This process involves digging into archives, discussing with other historians, analyzing the collected evidence, and interpreting them through writing. Students who take history classes could be permitted to make their inquiries within their age range. According to Bransford et al. (2000), students can only learn best when the students are active participants in the learning process. And teachers have a vital role to play in ensuring that.

The Role of Teachers in Relation to Historical Thinking

Teachers have a role to play in initiating historical thinking in their classrooms. Considering the emergence of the social studies curricula in Ghana, the history of the social studies curricula can be viewed as limited from its inception. That may be due to the emphasis on the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of the social studies curricula. Teachers must allow students to engage in their own historical inquiry (Murray, 2013) and facilitate their own learning (Bickford & Rich, 2014). Teachers can do that when they demonstrate expertise in fostering historical thinking in the classrooms. Expertise-building can either be engaging in

professional developments (Oppong, 2020) or adapting teaching strategies to actively engage all students in a discussion, especially those who show apathy in class (Dwomoh, 2020). Students should be motivated and guided by teachers to initiate their learning, critique texts and historical documents, contextualize and corroborate, and engage in historical argumentations in the form of debates in the classrooms and during history instructions (Nokes, 2011).

Students should be allowed to pursue their historical questions and conduct original research such as a *Project Citizen*—where students work in groups to a) identify a public policy problem in their community, b) research the problem, c) evaluate alternative solutions, and d) develop their solution (Serriere et al., 2010; see also Center for Civic Education, 1996) in the form of a public policy and create an action plan in the form of a poster or portfolio and present. Studies over the years have revealed that document-based instructions help students' historical content knowledge retention as they gain the opportunity to refer to primary documents (Oppong, 2019) rather than regurgitate the fixed narrative of mandated textbooks (Nokes et al., 2007; Reisman, 2012).

According to Oppong (2009), history textbooks are the primary source of materials in teaching the history subject in Ghana. Inclusive teaching must be profitable to all students regardless of their physical, mental, emotional, or learning challenges. The optimal goal of history teaching will be achieved if teachers are willing to adapt their mode of instruction—to help increase students' performance. Parker and Beck (2017) assert that teaching current events and enduring public issues “is a must in elementary and middle school classrooms” (p. 174). Nokes' (2017) study also shows that students at the higher grade levels can source, analyze documents, and apply them in their writing than students in the lower grade levels. Therefore, it is crucial to introduce historical thinking into elementary schools (Bickford, 2013) and middle schools.

Method

Instrument

The primary data collection method for this qualitative study was in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews with the social studies teachers helped explore their perceptions and experiences in rich detail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and gave a hearing to their voices and opinions. Document analysis served as a complementary data collection procedure for triangulation, corroborating findings, and “reduce the impact of potential biases” (Bowen, 2009, p.28). The documents I analyzed include the Social Studies Junior High School (JHS)

syllabus, Social Studies Senior High school (SHS) syllabus, two textbooks, and five trade books (see Appendix B).

Participants

I conducted interviews with middle (JHS) and high schools (SHS) social studies teachers from one district in the Eastern region of Ghana. There were 22 social studies teachers and 19 schools (ten middle-grade schools—eight public and two private, and nine senior high schools—all public) in the district. There was no private senior high school in the district. Three participants—two from the middle schools and one from the high schools, did not participate due to their unavailability.

The Participants in this study were 19 social studies teachers from 18 middle and high schools in the district. I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015) because it helped me to “discover, understand, and gain insight...and... select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Out of the 19 participants, three were females, and 16 were males. At the middle level, nine out of the ten schools in the district participated in the study. One private school did not consent to participate in the study. Nine ($n = 9/19$) social studies teachers from the middle grade level and ten ($n = 10/19$) social studies teachers from the high schools participated in the study.

Data Collection

I consulted with and sent a letter of request for data collection to the District Education Director. Upon receiving the introductory letter, the director issued a cover letter to all the 19 schools in the district to allow the data collection. I collected the contacts and email addresses of the 19 teachers and sent the interview questions to them to peruse before the interview. I developed five semi-structured open-ended interview questions. I contacted each participant to schedule interview appointments, and I conducted the interviews myself to better explain the rationale for the study and encourage independent work. That enabled me to clarify questions to the participants and to receive appropriate responses to the questions asked. The interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes. Participants’ responses were recorded with an audio recording device and later transcribed. For the document analysis, I retrieved the syllabi from Ghana education websites. I collected the textbooks and trade books from grade-specific teachers.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data from the interviews together with the documents for emerging themes to answer the research questions. I analyzed the interview data thematically using Braun and Clark's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. In phase one, I familiarized myself with the data through verbatim transcriptions, close and repeated reading of the interview transcripts, and noting ideas to generate codes. In phase two, I coded manually to generate initial codes using highlighters to mark patterns. In phase three, I collated all the codes to generate themes. I reviewed and refined the emerging themes for coherence and defined and assigned names to the themes in phases four and five, respectively (see findings for themes). Phase six incorporated the analysis and a coherent report of the data. I noted whether there was an emphasis on individual differences and unique features from participants' responses, including but not limited to gender, race, age, political affiliation, and socioeconomic status—to give a holistic representation of participants' individualistic views and perceptions. Participant's names were de-identified and anonymized using pseudonyms.

I employed Bowens' (2009) iterative process (skimming, reading, and interpretation) in the document analysis. I first skimmed through the nine documents (JHS and SHS syllabus, two textbooks, and five trade books) to check for patterns, similarities, and differences. Afterward, I did repeat reading to interpret and juxtapose the documents with the interview transcripts. Since the documents were supplementary data to substantiate the interview data, I used predefined codes that emerged from the interview transcripts, and I applied them to the content of the documents. I employed Bickford and Dwomoh's (2021) category distinctions—ED (explicit and detailed), IM (included but minimized), and OM (omitted entirely)—in response to the document analysis (see Table 1). Lastly, I corroborated each document with the other documents for validity.

Researcher's Role

As a scholar in social studies education and a former Ghanaian social studies instructor, I realized the position of history in the social studies curricula is unclear regarding *what*, *how*, and *how much* should be contained in the curricula because history is subsumed into social studies. In Junior high, I noticed some teachers treated history topics superficially. I felt a dearth of Ghana's history in the curricula, so I studied history at high school. During the first year of high school, the history topics were skewed towards the civilization of Africa, with a minimal focus on the history of Ghana. Few students enrolled in the history class, and that piqued my interest in finding out the cause. At tertiary, I asked some colleagues questions about Ghana's history, and they struggled to answer. I

envisaged the struggle could be due to how the social studies syllabus is structured, making students bereft with historical knowledge of their own country. Gauging from those experiences, I decided to explore the experiences of other Ghanaian social studies teachers about the existing social studies curricula from one district in Ghana. I also decided to examine the social studies syllabus, textbooks, and trade books to ascertain the position of history in social studies.

Limitations of the Study

This paper, like all other research, had shortcomings. Although the documents analyzed in this paper substantiates the participants' claims, this study only captures the perspectives of social studies teachers from one district in one out of the 16 regions in Ghana. Hence, it does not generalize about all social studies teachers in Ghana. Also, the documents reviewed are not a holistic representation of all social studies trade books or texts.

Table 1

Document Analysis Tool

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1. What is the position of history in the social studies curricula in Ghana?
 - a. In the JHS and SHS syllabus
 - b. In the textbooks
 - c. In the trade books
 2. What is the content of the social studies curricula? And why?
 3. How are the instructional time allocated in the curricula for the teaching of history?
 4. Do the curricula make provision for historical thinking as a scaffolding technique in history instruction?
 5. Is the history content in the curricula fairly distributed across the various grade levels or concentrated at a particular grade level? If so, how?
-

Findings

Three research questions (RQ) guided this study. In RQ 1, I asked about the position of history within the social studies curricula in Ghana? In RQ 2, how do the content and pedagogy of social studies curricula contribute to students' depth of historical knowledge and critical historical thinking? In RQ 3, what are the resultant implications of Ghana's social studies curricula, particularly for history? Four themes were generated from the interview transcripts and the document analysis to answer the three research questions. The themes were minimal concentration of historical facts in the curricula—that answer RQ 1; minimal

historical thinking skills—that answer RQ 2; students and parents’ misconceptions about the curricula, and a dearth of Ghana’s history in the curricula in response to RQ 3.

RQ 1: What is the Position of History Within the Social Studies Curricula

1.1. Minimal concentration of historical facts in the curricula

Social studies is considered a core subject, and it is merged with history. A closer look into the social studies syllabus, textbooks, and trade books reveal very little historical content. Seventeen ($n = 17/19$) teachers admitted that there is little historical content in the social studies curricula, and those historical contents are not treated in any significant detail. The social studies topics treat Ghana’s independence, the mistakes Ghanaians made after independence, and why Ghanaians are not self-reliant. The subject treats the historical antecedents of the pre-independence topics superficially. Some students are bereft with knowledge about why Ghanaians celebrate certain holidays and the historical background of such holidays. One teacher, Mr. Braimah, indicated,

Assuming I am a social studies teacher, and my bias is economics, when it gets to the history aspects, I will sweep it under the carpet. Social studies is a multi-faceted course, and I feel that if history should stand, history should stand. Geography should stand. Social studies is fine, but I can’t see history in detail in social studies. It is like just bringing everything together in just minute (small) areas.

Some teachers assume social studies to be the umbrella for all the other disciplines. The two remaining teachers argue that social studies is the *mother* (overarching concept) of all the other subjects. They claim that when one subject dominates social studies, the core of social studies would be lost. They claim the amount of history presented in social studies is substantial considering the interdisciplinary nature of the syllabus. Mr. Stephen stated, “when history becomes the central focus of the social studies, the concept and essence of the social studies would be lost as the core of all the other subjects.”

1.2. Findings from document analyses

Table 2

Document Analysis of the Position of History in the Social Studies Curricula

Document	Position of (H) *	Content of SS**	Instructional Time (H) *	Historical Thinking	Content Distribution(H)*
Syllabus	IM	ED	IM	IM	IM
Textbook	IM	ED	OM	OM	IM
Tradebook	IM	ED	OM	OM	IM

H denotes History, SS** denotes Social Studies. *ED signifies Explicit and Detailed, IM signifies Included but Minimized, and OM signifies Omitted.*

1.2.1. The position of history in the social studies curricula

History is included in the social studies syllabus but minimized (IM). The scope of content and sections of the JHS social studies syllabus is threefold: section one (the environment), section two (governance, politics, and stability), and section three (social and economic development) (JHS Syllabus, p. iii). The second goal of social studies in the JHS syllabus is to “appreciate the impact of history on current and future development efforts of the country” (Syllabus, p. ii). However, the only place for Ghana’s history is in section two, units 1-3 for JHS 1 students. There is no historical account of Ghana in the JHS 2 and JHS 3 syllabus.

The SHS social studies syllabus has the exact scope of content and three sections as the JHS syllabus. Contrary to the JHS syllabus, the six general goals in the SHS syllabus do not include a goal for history. However, it is in section two, unit one (national independence and self-reliance) for SHS 1; and section two, unit two (our constitution, democracy, and nation-building) for SHS 2 that discuss how Ghana fought for independence (SHS syllabus, p. iii), but in no significant detail. There is no discussion of the history of Ghana in SHS 3 according to the syllabus.

The contents and structure of *SWL Social Studies for JHS pupil's book 1-3* textbook and the *Primus Series Social Studies for SHS schools* textbook incorporate the three sections of the syllabus in chapters. The structure of the JHS textbook (see Appendix C) is in units under the three sections found in the syllabus. The place of history is in section two, units 1-3 for JHS 1 students. The SHS textbook, chapter four, pages 71-80, and chapter 14, pages 205-245, discuss the history of Ghana's independence and self-reliance.

Global Series Social Studies for SHS includes section two, unit one, but gives no historical account of Ghana's independence in the five trade books. The author gives a simple outline and account of the definitions of political independence and self-reliance, characteristics of an independent country, the relationship and benefits of independence and self-reliance, mistakes Ghanaians made after independence, and the difficulties in self-reliance (pp. 66-77). The *Awuni Concise and Facilitated Social Studies for Senior Secondary Schools* does not follow the structure and organization of the SHS syllabus. Contrary to the SHS syllabus, Awuni (2006), in his book, discusses Ghana's independence for SHS 3 students with little historical narrative (pp. 36-47). Also, *Kowus Series Social Studies for Senior Secondary Schools* omits the historical account of Ghana's history and independence entirely. The *Ark-Social Studies for Senior Secondary Schools* includes Ghana's history, but in little depth (pp. 209-212). However, the last trade book reviewed, *Aki-Ola Series Social Studies for JHS 1-3*, is based on the new Ghana Education Service (GES) JHS syllabus.

RQ 2: How do the content and pedagogy of social studies curricula contribute to students' depth of historical knowledge and critical historical thinking?

2.1. Minimal historical thinking skills

I categorize the minimal historical thinking examined in the social studies curricula where students could make their own inquiry under three contributing factors: the textbooks and trade books, the scaffolds and pedagogy, and students' assessment. During the interview, 18 ($n = 18/19$) teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited government-issued social studies textbooks. The teachers expressed concerns that the student population outnumbers the textbooks for every student to have a copy for take-home assignments. The teachers introduce their students to trade books and other reading materials and encourage them to do further readings. They make recommendations that students must have copies of the social studies textbooks. Mrs. Rebecca stated,

With the current Free Senior High School education system in Ghana, the government has issued a new and free social studies textbook for all first-year students in all the public senior high schools in Ghana. This is limited to only the first years, so the second and third-year students depend on the available textbooks in the market by teacher-authors in the field. I tell my students not to be limited to one textbook considering the multi and interdisciplinary nature of the social studies.

Some teachers are authors of both history and social studies texts. Students are encouraged to have copies of those materials. However, the quality of these materials significantly impacts students' performance because some of the authors are not history teachers and have little to no contextualization of historical facts to include in the books they write. Students who cannot buy those materials rely solely on the notes given by their class teacher. One teacher, Mr. Agbanu, expressed his concern that "in the social studies textbook, it is not clear, for example, who is the composer of the Ghana National Pledge." Upon hearing this from the participant, I analyzed the five trade books, yet there was no clear indication (omission) of the composer of the Ghana National Pledge. Nevertheless, one teacher expressed his satisfaction with the existing textbooks. He claims to use several books in teaching, and he does not see the immediate impact the government textbooks could have on his teaching, considering the varying sources of books he uses.

The second contributing factor is the scaffolding and pedagogy teachers employ in teaching social studies. Teaching in Ghana is based more on a teacher-centered pedagogical approach. Mrs. Ellen said, "there are topics in social studies that need Teaching Learning Materials (TLMs) to teach them, but they are not readily available." As a result, the teacher dominates the instructional process, and the students merely ask questions. Teachers, therefore, must prepare adequately and master the content area before going to the classroom to teach. Sixteen ($n = 16/19$) teachers asserted that the social studies instruction is teacher-dominated and full of regurgitations. Some teachers use scaffolds that build on abstract and complex topics in social studies. The remaining three teachers reported that they use scaffolds that ensure teaching topics in the social studies curricula from simple to complex and from known to the unknown.

Student assessment is the last contributing factor for the minimal historical thinking skills prevalent in the social studies curricula. A teacher indicated that "many students struggle and panic at the presence of external examiners for fear of failure when questions are asked." I asked the teachers about their assessment of the students, and 11 ($n = 11/19$) stated that the students would struggle with

answers to some history-related questions in the social studies curricula. That is because some of the students panic and fear when they see an external education officer. This lurking fear within students can cause them to forget, omit, or misrepresent some historical facts. Some students, too, rely on the historical narratives told by their grandparents. The teachers claimed that until they teach the content with students from the textbook, they will struggle to answer some questions.

Our system of assessment is one I have problem with because I will teach the child all these things then at the end of the term, I set two, three, four or five questions. I expect him or her to answer those questions. If he doesn't get them right, then it means he has not grasped and understood all that we have done, which is wrong (Alex).

Teachers' diversified mode of instruction determines students' ability to respond to questions asked by examiners. The eight remaining teachers were antithetical to the assertion that students cannot respond to questions asked by examiners. They stated that their style and teaching method help students to be able to respond to examiners' questions. They claimed it depends on the teachers how well they approach the topics that indicate whether the students will perform or underperform. One teacher, Mr. Frederick, mentioned that he engaged some external examiners to assess his students on oral accounts, and the examiners gave positive feedback to him. He asserted that the impressive performance of the students was rewarded with some textbooks by the external examiners. The teachers mentioned that they do not assess students orally but through text-based writing. Text-based writing such as argumentative writing and narratives help them assess whether the students are knowledgeable about the content and can express themselves verbally when questioned. They also claim that some school administrators are examination-oriented. Those administrators focus on the questions that students can answer, memorize, and regurgitate during exams instead of gaining content knowledge of the subject. The teachers claimed those administrators want recognition for their schools as the higher-achieving schools, so what matters to them is how best the students can perform in final exams. Inadvertently, this mindset then becomes the primary objective of most of the teachers in such schools.

RQ 3: What are the Resultant Implications of Ghana's Social Studies Curricula, Particularly for History?

1.1. Misconceptions of students and parents about the social studies curricula

Students, parents, and the community hold misconceptions about social studies. In response to RQ 3, misconceptions by both parents and students and a dearth of historical content were the resulting implications of the minimal history and minimal historical thinking examined in the social studies curricula. During the interview, 14 ($n = 14/19$) teachers expressed their views on how the students, the parents, and the community sometimes have wrong perceptions about the social studies and history topics. The content of social studies focuses on Ghana and the happenings in the environment. The teachers claim students perceive social studies as related to their country and environment and do not attach importance to the subject because they think it talks about things around them. Whatever it is, they will be able to pass social studies exams with ease. However, teachers claim students instead attach more importance to subjects like science and mathematics. Again, they indicated that some students think social studies is boring with stories and has little impact on their future career successes—so they feel there is no need to prioritize its study. A teacher expressed that he offers free extra classes, but most students do not show up because of the “preconceived notion that social studies is not a difficult and rigorous subject like mathematics or science.” The teacher then needs to adapt his teaching approach to arouse and sustain students’ interest during the instructional process.

The misconceptions about the social studies subjects are viewed differently by teachers, parents, and some communities. The five remaining teachers expressed a contrary opinion that people misconstrue social studies. They believe that social studies is a subject the students nowadays are interested in and ready to learn, and, since the students themselves are familiar with the world around them, it becomes more of a dialogue in the classroom. The teachers begin their class by first addressing the misconceptions students have about social studies. Through dialogue, they re-orient the students that social studies is not as dull as they perceived.

1.2. Dearth of Ghana’s history in the social studies curricula

The dearth of Ghana’s history in the social studies curricula is another resultant implication of the curricula’s minimal history content and historical thinking. Many social studies teachers believe that politics and curricula implementation are inextricably intertwined, causing a dearth of Ghana’s history in the curricula. Fifteen ($n = 15/19$) social studies teachers posited that politics play a significant role in the educational system in Ghana. The participants indicated that the textbooks they use differ from region (state) to region even though Ghana operates under centralized governance. Participants claim that when a political party comes into power, they try to develop new textbooks. Some of the authors are affiliates of a political party, so they try to lobby for their books

to be accepted when they come into power. Textbooks are distributed to the regions by different authors. One teacher, Mr. Eshun, stated, “an individual may be a very good author, but it depends on who he or she knows in authority who could recommend his or her book.” Teachers allude that this issue is concerning and alarming in the educational sector.

The four remaining teachers believe that politics do not intervene in social studies. They referred to one parliamentarian who proposed the use of local language in parliament. They opined that it is not politics per se; instead, it is the academic policies made by the curriculum planners. They believe some of the curriculum planners shift the emphasis of the social studies curricula to their field of study so their subject does not become extinct. As a result, subjects like geography and political science make up a more significant percentage of the social studies curricula than economics and history. They claim this happens because a majority of reviewers of the social studies syllabus are experts in geography and political sciences.

The subject history is suffering. The reason why many students in the secondary schools may run from it, apart from the resource persons, the teachers handling it, and apart from the methodology they may not be using to make the students love the subject. The subject itself in the curriculum is not well structured. It is not receiving the attention it should have. So, right from the top [national level], the interest of the subject is waning. If the authorities are not promoting the subject, it dwindles down to the school level, and how students would have interest (Phillip).

Discussion

The position of history in the middle and high schools’ social studies curricula is unclear regarding what, how, and how much should be contained in the curricula because history is integrated into social studies. The social studies taught at the middle and high schools in Ghana incorporate a superficial historical account of Ghana that can erode Ghana’s history in the curricula without careful considerations. This discussion includes (a) Significance for teachers, (b) Significance for curriculum planners and stakeholders, (c) Significance for researchers (d) concluding thoughts.

Significance for Teachers

Gauging from the analyses, the history content contained in the curricula from the syllabus to trade books are not fairly distributed (IM) across the various grade

levels. There is a concentration of Ghana's independence and historical colonization narrative in only JHS 1, with little depth. Similarly, the history contained in the SHS social studies is concentrated in SHS 1 and 2, with little depth. The history instructional time in the social studies curricula is limited in the syllabus (IM) but omitted entirely in the textbooks and trade books (OM). The curricula make little provision for historical thinking as a scaffolding technique in history instruction (IM). Nevertheless, the social studies contents are explicitly detailed (ED) in the syllabus, textbooks, and trade books.

Teaching in Ghana follows a teacher-centered pedagogical approach, and there are limited Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs) to teach the students, as the participants indicated. Teachers' pedagogy in teaching the social studies subject can contribute significantly to developing students' historical thinking skills. Students can demonstrate their historical thinking skills when they cite, contextualize, and corroborate historical documents (NCSS, 2013). In Ghana, where textbooks are the primary resources for social studies instruction, students' overreliance on textbooks and trade books can hinder developing their historical thinking skills. Teachers should allow students to pursue their own historical questions and conduct original research. Their inquiry could incorporate personal, family, or local historical topics. Studies over the years have revealed that document-based instruction can help students' historical content knowledge retention as they get the opportunity to work with primary documents than the mandated textbooks (Nokes et al., 2007; Reisman, 2012).

Participants expressed that they lacked the number of textbooks that would meet the growing needs of students in their schools. However, it is bizarre to introduce government-approved social studies textbooks for only first-year students at the high schools, neglecting the second and third-year students. That propels the teachers to introduce their students to different trade books to supplement their textbooks. A teacher-author of a textbook or a trade book can face the temptation of forcing students to buy those books. When the teacher-author is not an expert in history, but other fields like Geography and Government, his writing can be skewed to only the geographical aspect of historical facts, giving a minimal concentration to the political and socio-economic aspects of history. That can negatively impact the holistic content-knowledge objectives of the history instruction, and the students will be bereft of some historical information. Providing teachers with the requisite TLMs for classroom instruction can help the students do role-play, interviews, and group presentations after watching a video clip of historical scenes. Teachers should be encouraged to use clear and straightforward statements and information that do not confuse students' minds as they build their historical thinking skills and help students facilitate their own learning (Bickford & Rich, 2014). They can help their

students best when they are tolerant of the different perspectives of their students and thus, help them make history easier to understand, as the students make their own inquiry (Murray, 2013). Teachers can use images, pictures, and demonstrations to give students graphic and pictorial representations of historical facts. The use of audio-visual aids like videos makes the historical content of the past more concrete and realistic and does not make it look abstract to the students (Oppong, 2009).

The traditional method of assessing students in Ghana is the paper and pencil form of text writing (Oppong, 2009). Teachers are encouraged to keep practicing formative and summative assessments, particularly in social studies instruction. A general assumption could be that the rote memorization form of assessing students creates the *panic* when external examiners probe them and ask questions. Students begin to fear missing information memorized, so they become nervous and easily forget or omit vital information. The use of multiple-choice questions might not be the best strategy in assessing students' historical thinking. According to Thompson (1972), the content of history can be made meaningful to the students by considering their experiences, age, and cognition. Teachers are encouraged to desist from using *dictations* (regurgitating previous information) to assess students' historical thinking skills. They should instead introduce project citizen—a summative way of assessing students—where students work cooperatively to a) identify a public policy problem in their community, b) research the problem, c) evaluate alternative solutions, and d) develop their own solution (Serriere et al., 2010) in the form of a public policy and create an action plan to carry out their solution. According to the authors, this project requires participants to develop a portfolio and a poster or presentation of their work and present their project in a public hearing. Also, teachers can assess students on their class participation, project work, text-based writings, presentations, in addition to oral texts.

Significance for Curriculum Planners and Stakeholders

The findings of this study show that there is a minimal focus on historical context in the social studies curricula in Ghana. From the sample of this study, there is concern whether the social studies teachers at the middle-grade levels can handle the historical content since they do not have much experience in teaching history as a subject. Few of them qualify to teach history compared to the high school history teachers certified to teach history. There is a need to recruit history teachers to assist the social studies teachers at the middle level (JHS) in teaching the subject. That means the government needs to consider incorporating history as one of the course requirements at the teacher training colleges in Ghana. Significantly, the Ghana Education Service (GES) must ensure the teachers

sanctioned to teach the social studies subjects have undergone rigorous training and have the requisite qualifications to teach the subject. Such measures can help reduce the rate at which the students view the complexity of giving oral historical accounts of the history of Ghana by the time they transition to the tertiary level.

The nature of social studies and “history’s submergence in social studies” (Ravitch, 2000, p. 150) in this study showed that there is little focus on history in the curricula. Seventeen participants ($n = 17/19$) view the history in social studies as superficial. GES should consider allowing qualified teachers to teach the social studies subject at the middle schools. Since more time is spent on government and geography topics in the social studies syllabus than on history, there could be teacher bias towards the history subject if the teacher’s expertise is political science or geography. Training teachers to be discipline-specific in courses like history, geography, economics, and government at the teacher training colleges can help redress the situation.

History should be prioritized in elementary schools because it would enable Ghanaian students to familiarize themselves at an early age with the rich historical background and increase their sense of loyalty and patriotism (Jarolimek, 1971; Lowenstein, 1967) for Ghana. Since students do not have access to historical basics and only selected portions of Ghana’s rich history are included in the social studies curricula at the middle grades, they lose interest in learning Ghana’s past when they advance in their learning. Bickford (2013) suggests it is imperative to introduce historical thinking into the elementary schools. Suppose history is made a core subject from the elementary level. In that case, there is a need to train more history teachers, increase the enrollment of history teachers, and increase the educational labor force. Students will develop the right attitude towards the subject since it is a core requirement to advance to the next grade level.

Furthermore, providing social studies teachers with enough TLMs to teach the social studies subjects has become necessary. The items can be a refurbished library with social and historical artifacts, digital resources, and computers to incorporate the technological aspects of instruction for students to access primary-source documents like speeches, videos, music, autobiographies, biographies, oral histories, and manuscripts. The government and GES are encouraged to introduce and make accessible to students government-approved textbooks. Also, the voluminous nature of the social studies content could be dispensed evenly—where the historical aspects can be incorporated solely into the history syllabus—and the environment, social and civic engagement topics could be explicitly designated into the social studies syllabus. Doing this will help teachers complete the topics on time, effectively assess students, provide feedbacks to examine students’ progress, and devise strategies to improve instruction.

Significance for Researchers

The findings of this study highlight the misconceptions the students, parents, and the community have for social studies and the role government (Apau, & Adu-Boahen, 2019) and politics play in curricula implementation. Those misconceptions were prevalent during the inception and integration of social studies as a program of study at the teacher training colleges in the 1940s (Agyeman-Fokuo, 1994). Students perceive the content of the social studies syllabus as focusing on the social, cultural, and political environment in their country. They view the subject as boring and insignificant to their future career prospects. They prefer to dedicate more time to study subjects like mathematics and science than to social studies. Some teachers can relate historical accounts, but not in a detailed and systematic manner. They may, for example, omit and misrepresent vital historical facts.

The government plays a significant role in curriculum development in Ghana. The study by Apau and Adu-Boahen (2019) reveals that the role of government brought the decline in the “patronage of history as a subject in the Senior High School” (p. 21). In this paper, fifteen participants ($n = 15/19$) expressed that politics significantly influence curricula implementations in Ghana. According to them, politics and curricula implementation are inextricably intertwined. Due to politics, social studies teachers have concerns about how their textbooks differ from one region to another. The introduction of new textbooks each time a political party comes to power can stifle students’ academic progress. The same is true when political parties introduce favoritism into the selection and distribution of textbooks. That is particularly egregious when only political party affiliates receive the textbooks, other educational materials, or funding. The government should relinquish all power concerning curricula implementation and textbook allocation to the Ghana Education Service (GES) and serve a supervisory role to ensure that the GES does not partake in partisan politics in its administration as far as the learning achievements of students are concerned. Again, the government can set up an independent review committee that will occasionally review the social studies curricula, perhaps, every two years, to meet the educational needs of Ghanaian students.

Implications for Future Research

Further research is needed in ascertaining teachers’ perceptions in the various regions and a systematic review of other social studies texts or trade books about the position of history in the social studies curricula and how the existing syllabi

and textbooks foster historical thinking in classrooms. Researchers can explore further the misconceptions students and parents hold about social studies and how those misconceptions have shaped their attitudes and perceptions about social studies and career prospects in the social studies field. Additionally, researchers should probe further into the proliferation of politics and the role of government in the implementation of the social studies curricula.

Conclusion

This paper recounts the minimal position of history in the social studies curricula at Ghana's middle and high schools. The paper extends the principal discussion on promoting historical thinking skills and students' ability to cite sources using primary-source documents, contextualize, corroborate, and use critiques in text-based writing. A teacher-centered pedagogical approach could be reviewed in the instructional process to introduce students to their own historical inquiry. The findings of this study can inform educators about the dearth of historical context in the social studies curricula and facilitate the importance of introducing history as a core subject at the elementary levels. Also, appropriate textbooks and TLMs can be made accessible to teachers for teaching history topics. Those measures can help ameliorate the misconceptions students and parents have about the social studies curricula.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions

1. As a teacher, how do students perceive your content area (not your teaching and your class, but your content area specifically)?
2. As a teacher, how is your subject area perceived by parents, the community, and your country?
 - a. Do politics intervene in your discipline? If so, how?
3. As a teacher, do your students have access to history textbooks? Does each student have a copy of the history textbook to read through and for take-home assignments?
 - a. How do you assess your students?
4. As a teacher, how have you assessed your students' response in being asked by an external examiner to give an oral account, if not all, at least the major happenings in the history of Ghana?
5. Do your students find the teaching of history exciting?
 - a. What time works best for your students in teaching history, and how have you observed its improvement towards teaching?

Appendix B. Syllabus, Textbooks, Trade Books

Selected Document	Document Type	Year of Publication	Data Analyzed
JHS Social Studies syllabus	Syllabus	2007	Position of History
SHS Social Studies syllabus	Syllabus	2010	Position of History
SWL Social Studies for JHS pupil's book 1-3	JHS Textbook	2008	Do history content and pedagogy promote historical thinking?

Primus Series Social Studies for SHS schools	SHS Textbook	No publication date	Do history content and pedagogy promote historical thinking?
Aki-Ola Series Social Studies for JHS 1-3	Trade book	Revised in 2010 Reprinted in 2016	Do history content and pedagogy promote historical thinking?
Global Series Social Studies for SHS	Trade book	2009	Do history content and pedagogy promote historical thinking?
Awuni Concise and Facilitated Social Studies for Senior Secondary Schools	Trade book	Published in 2000 Revised in 2006	Do history content and pedagogy promote historical thinking?
Kowus Series Social Studies for Senior Secondary Schools	Trade book	1998	Do history content and pedagogy promote historical thinking?
Ark-Social Studies for Senior Secondary Schools	Trade book	No publication date	Do history content and pedagogy promote historical thinking?

Appendix C. Textbooks

