

The New Social Studies: A Historical Examination of Curriculum Reform

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Abstract

In the 1950s, social studies education came under attack from both citizens and the government for the failure to promote citizenship. Events both at home and abroad eventually led to a collective reexamination of the overall purpose and goals of social studies. As a result, over fifty curriculum projects were developed to promote individual social sciences and advances in curriculum design. The purpose of this article is to examine some of the major projects developed during the new social studies movement. As well, this article provides readers with an explanation of the various causes that led to curriculum changes. Due to the large number of projects, the authors have selected eight of the major projects to discuss and highlight.

Introduction

The curriculum movement known as the new social studies illustrated not only society's push for curriculum change within the social studies but also some of the most innovative and controversial teaching practices to be developed. Pursued with vigor during the 1950s, curriculum reformers, politicians, and average citizens pushed for change within the social studies. Through a series of national events, curriculum failures and communist fear, the Office of Education, along with the National Science Foundation and private donors, began to fund a variety of content specific projects from 1960 to the early 1970s to reform the social studies. In the end, more than fifty projects attempting to revitalize a perceived dying curriculum were created.

A Decade of Turbulence

The 1950s have been known for great accomplishments. The civil rights movement and advances in technology are only a few examples of this decade's success. However, with success also comes controversy. Despite the social studies often obscured presence after World War II, this discipline would be considered the focal point of both public frustration and change. The fire for this collective re-examination for the social studies came in the form of four events. These four events and possibly others served as a catalyst for curriculum reform in social studies

curriculum. The Korean War, closed areas of society, the Purdue public opinion poll, and the launching of Sputnik were all contributed to the eventual change to the social studies.

The first of the events which questioned the purpose and goals of the social studies occurred during the Korean War. Conservative Americans were upset at the absence of decisive victory in the war. Many Americans blamed the lack of will of home, church, and school to develop good character among the nation's youth (Wubben, 1970). An example of this can be noted in the behavior of American prisoners in the Korean War. According to Bonner (1958), while in captivity, a large amount of Americans had the most elementary understanding of loyalty, democracy, or the basic system of American government. Several prisoners showed no courage and compassion toward their fellow prisoners.

Communist Chinese interrogators acted simply on their own political and psychological analysis of the American soldier. A Chinese official described many American prisoners as easy to break down:

The American soldier has weak loyalties: to his family, his community, his country, his religion, and to his fellow soldier. His concept of right and wrong is hazy. He is basically materialistic, and he is an opportunist. By himself, he feels insecure and frightened....He is ignorant of social values, social conflicts, and tensions. There is little or no knowledge or understanding, even among American university graduates, of U.S. political history and philosophy; the federal, state, and community organizations; states and civil rights, freedoms, safeguards, and how these allegedly operate within his own decadent system. He is exceedingly insular and provincial with little or no idea of the problems and the aims of what he contemptuously describes as "foreigners" and their countries. (Bonner, 1958, p. 181)

Many accepted the action of prisoners as examples of both society and the education system. Although they rejected the communist subversion theme, liberals claimed that American materialism and the lack of citizenship education lay at the root of the problem. In 1952, 21 American prisoners of war defected to North Korea which merely added to the debate of morale breakdown and lack of general education skills and fundamentals. The proposed solution included more intellectual rigor in social studies discipline, particularly in United States history and American government.

The second push for social studies curriculum reform occurred in 1955 when two psychologists questioned the structure of social studies curriculum and the content (or lack thereof) being taught in the schools. Maurice Hunt and Lawrence Metcalf thought of a new way to introduce knowledge and skills of social science with the emphasis of citizenship education. They argued that social studies programs should not be organized around individual social science subjects (e.g., United States history, geography, sociology, etc.), but rather around what they called "closed areas of society." It was these closed areas (e.g., homosexuality, interracial marriages, teenage pregnancy, racism, patriotism, etc.) that are often neglected and ignored in social studies curriculum. Hunt and Metcalf suggest that these areas are responsible for the clouded prejudice, ignorance, and controversy closed to rational reflection. Teaching should include the reflective process since the social sciences provide the facts, principles, and theories, while social studies curriculum should provide the decision-making process (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977).

The third event came in the form of a public opinion poll conducted by two researchers from Purdue University. Because the Bill of Rights is considered essential to American culture and ideology, it was understood that most citizens support the ideal of justice established within the framework of the amendments. To measure the knowledge and support of these ideals, in 1957, Purdue University, administered a survey about the Bill of Rights to a sample of 2,000 high school students throughout the United States. The purpose of the survey was to test student perceptions about American democracy during and after such events as the Korean War, communist expansion, and the Cold War tension existing between the US and the USSR. The results of the 1957 study were mixed. Compared to a similar poll in 1951, students were generally in favor of freedom for all persons and groups as protected by the Bill of Rights; however, many students still supported or were undecided about Marxist doctrine and government control of basic industry and economic institutions. A sample of the results indicated the following:

- Only 35% of the nation's youth believed newspapers should be allowed to print anything they want.
- Only 34% of the nation's youth believed the government should prohibit people from making speeches.
- Only 26% of the nation's youth believed that police should be allowed to search a person's home without a warrant.
- Only 25% of the nation's youth believed that some groups should not be allowed to hold public meetings (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977, p. 41).

The overall interpretation of the results indicated that democratic interpretation and orientation would increase with grade level was not supported. Remmers (1958) described the decrease in democratic knowledge as a cycle of decreased overall knowledge:

High school seniors are less democratic than juniors who, in turn, are less democratic than sophomores. Students from poorer homes and those who perceive the curriculum as not meeting their needs drop out disproportionately. Many studies have shown that generally these students have a weaker democratic orientation than those who continue. This makes the downward trend apparent here, even more disturbing. (p. 8)

The launching of *Sputnik* in 1957 marks the final major event that led to change in social studies curriculum. When the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik* in 1957, it seemed to confirm the sorry state of American schooling to its critics. Anthony Penna (1995) described the alarm of Soviet advancements came in many quarters when the following occurred:

Vice Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, often called "the father of the nuclear submarine," giving testimony before the Committee on Appropriations of House of Representatives on the assets of the Soviet educational system and the weaknesses of our own, captured the attention of the American public and policy makers. (p.3)

In spite of evidence to the contrary, many Americans claimed the United States school system had lost the technological race with the Soviets and blamed the popular progressive educational philosophy for this supposed defeat. JoAnne Brown (1988) explained that attacks on

public schools and their performance came from two camps: anticommunist reformers and anti-intellectualism. The National Council for American Education considered “the vestiges of John Dewey’s socialistic Progressivism as the gravest threat to American education; they saw the federal policy of ‘life adjustment education’ as dangerously anti-intellectual” (p. 73).

In order to measure the success of the Soviet’s launch of *Sputnik*, Donald Michael (1960) surveyed Americans in January, 1958 to better understand the general significance of *Sputnik*. When asked what they believed the real meaning of *Sputnik* was for America, twenty-three percent indicated that the US must catch up in education, science, and defense. Additional comments suggested that “the Russians worked harder and longer at it,” “Russia has better scientist,” and “the United States space program was badly organized”; these are just a few of those which were commonly expressed by American citizens. In summary, many Americans deemed schools as too liberal and failing in the attempt to prepare children for both technological advancements (e.g., the space race, arms race, communications, etc), the preparation for the Cold War, and the life-and-death ideological and technological global struggle with the Soviet Union. The end result was criticism of school curriculum, which included the social studies for lack of preparation and identification of citizenship and civic participation as well as increased funding for mathematics and sciences to compete with the Soviet Union’s perceived technological advantage.

A Push for Change

In 1950, the National Science Foundation was founded to promote science research and improve science education in both public schools and universities. In addition, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was passed in 1958 with the intent to upgrade schools to compete with the growing postwar Soviet threat. With the creation of the NDEA, the overall goal was to upgrade school science, foreign languages, mathematics, and provide guidance counselors to direct students into the above fields. The concept of national curriculum was introduced to encourage teachers to take academic content of their work more seriously. As a result, an intense and extensive reassessment of the entire American educational system was undertaken.

In 1960, in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, social studies’ most prominent and recognized scholars convened to investigate how to construct new social studies curriculum with a wider range of professionals to include professors, teachers, and practitioners. Martorella, Beal, and Bolick (2005) explained “that mathematicians joined mathematics instructors and anthropologists joined social studies instructors in the search for the underlying structure of their respective disciplines in the hopes that education would be enhanced” (p. 13).

The results of this reorganization and development of new materials would be known as “the new social studies.” Scattered throughout the nation at different curriculum centers, new social studies programs were extremely critical of the failed mishmash of errors and programs prevalent in the 1950s. The goal of the curriculum centers was to standardize certain aspects found within each particular area (e.g., anthropology, sociology, government, etc.) within the social studies. Regardless of the content discipline, each project placed an increased emphasis on methods, procedures, and models. The end results were independent discipline projects that shared three common traits emphasized at the Woods Hole conference: a) focus on inquiry; b) focus on values; and c) focus on the use of games and/or simulations. Edwin Fenton (1967) suggested the advances in the curriculum reform movement reached the social studies when the following transpired:

Three important developments converged: a) when the educational community saw that social studies had failed to keep pace with curriculum reform in both science and mathematics; b) new knowledge about the way students learned required new teaching techniques; and c) money from private foundations such as the Ford and Carnegie and the National Science Foundation became available to support research. (p.3)

In the end, more than 50 projects were created that either integrated social studies for the purpose of citizenship education or to teach history and the social studies as ends to themselves.

The New Social Studies Projects

Several of the projects have been described in great detail in professional literature. Norris Sanders and Marlin Tanck (1970) along with the November, 1972 issue of *Social Education* give both detailed reviews and critiques of new social studies projects. The authors have selected the most popular and widely used projects from the 1960s and early 1970s. This decision was based on previous research, and the extensive amount of journal space required for a fair and accurate account of each project. As a result, eight projects were briefly outlined and examined. The projects are not list in any hierarchy.

The Harvard Social Studies Project. The Harvard Social Studies Project (HSSP) was designed to teach students to examine and analyze controversial issues through discussion and argument. The project consists of 28 stapled, paper-covered units which covered a wide variety of social studies issues ranging from *The American Revolution: Crisis of Law and Change* to *Communist China: Communal Progress and Individual Freedom*. Each unit consists of a variety of situations and scenarios which students must analyze and examine in order to reach and justify their positions. Units consist of a variety of instructional approaches to better suit the needs of diverse learning styles. A typical unit consists of either authentic or fictional case study materials, historical texts, vignettes, historical journalistic narratives, stories, documents, contemporary journalistic narratives, interpretive essays, and research data (Levin, Newmann, & Oliver, 1969; Oliver & Shaver, 1966).

The High School Geography Project. The High School Geography Project (HSGP) was developed by the Association of American Geography in conjunction with The National Science Foundation. The HSGP was a series of soft-backed individual units developed through financing by the National Science Foundation. The project was considered progressive and student-centered with a majority of decisions centered on student findings and suggestions. One of the goals of the project was to reinvigorate the lack of support and interest associated with classroom geography through the use of active, hands-on student involvement. In order to create a student-oriented program, the HSGP was built around four major objectives complemented by six instructional approaches. The four objectives include the following: “a) to explore geographic principles; b) use geographic concepts and perspectives to explore social policy issues; c) to reinforce values concerning knowledge, ideas, and learning, and d) to practice social skills, to include leadership, cooperation and conflict resolution” (Rowe, 1995; p.12). Each objective was taught through what Gunn (1974) identified as distinctive approaches found primarily with the High School Geography Project. Gunn identifies these approaches as follows: a) openers, b)

concept developers, c) skill development, d) simulations, e) inquiry techniques, and f) value processing. The end results were six diversified self-containing units ranging from geography of cities to manufacturing and agriculture.

Man: A Course of Study. Man: A Course of Study (MACOS) was an anthropological and sociological based project developed by the Educational Development Center Inc. under the funding from the National Science Foundation. The project contained two major sections: animal studies and studying the lives of Canadian Eskimos. The project was considered one of the first student-centered projects that incorporated non-traditional teaching exercises (field notes, journals, poems, construction exercises) into reoccurring themes used in grades four through nine. MACOS director Peter Dow (1975) summarized the overall goals of the project as follows: a) to give students a set of models for thinking about the world, b) to provide students with different intellectual tools for investigating human behavior, and c) to promote an appreciation of the common humanity that all humans share. As a result, three central questions were asked: a) What is human about human beings? b) How did we get that way? c) How can we become more so?

The Sociological Resources for Secondary Schools. The Sociological Resources for Secondary Schools (SRSS) was developed in 1964 through funding from the National Science Foundation. According to executive director of SRSS, Robert Feldmesser (1966), the major goal of the project was:

To stimulate the development of instructional materials of high quality that will accurately reflect the character of sociology as a scientific discipline and that will not only be suitable for secondary-school courses in sociology but will also bring sociological perspective into courses in history, problems of democracy, and other subjects. (p.200)

Materials are described as short, self-contained studies (episodes) which build on both sociological theory and civic behavior. Examples of episodes include *Simulating Social Conflict*, *Analyzing Modern Organizations*, and *Images of People*. Each episode is designed for different cognitive levels to reach diverse learning styles and needs.

The Anthropology Curriculum Study Project. The Anthropology Curriculum Study Project (ACSP) was a national curriculum development project developed by the American Anthropological Association in conjunction with financial support from the National Science Foundation. Designed as an inquiry-based study of humankind, students were taught curriculum developed by anthropologists, archeologists, and educators. High school students were taught with a variety of instructional materials ranging from print to visual aids. The ACSP project consisted of the following four units: a) Studying Societies, b) Origins of Humanness, c) The Emergence of Complex Societies, and d) Modernization and Traditional Societies. Each unit provided teaching plans, thought-provoking student lessons, and supplemental materials (Rowe, 1995).

The Developmental Economic Education Program. The Developmental Economic Education Program (DEEP) was established in 1964 through the Joint Council on Economic

Education and the National Education Association to identify curriculum, improve teacher education, create materials for K-12, and distribute lesson plans and materials. The project was to improve economic instruction with increased knowledge through the use of integrated economics into school curriculum. According to Yoho, Underwood and Meszaros (1993), DEEP was considered to be progressive rather than traditional new social studies curriculum. The project was described as “more responsive to an individual school’s characteristics and needs. It also stimulates a greater degree of ownership of the final curriculum and, therefore, is more likely to produce lasting change” (p. 70).

The project is assessed through both formative and summative evaluations. Formative assessment was conducted through in-service programs, classes, workshops, and specific curriculum changes to each district’s economic education program. The summative evaluation was used to measure how much economics students have learned as a result of the program.

Carnegie-Mellon University Social Studies Curriculum Project. Carnegie-Mellon University Social Studies Curriculum Project was established in 1963 through funding from the Office of Education. Directed under the supervision of Edwin Fenton, the project’s purpose was to help each student individually develop as independent thinkers and become responsible citizens in a democratic society. Content was designed for grades nine through twelve. Each set of materials consisted of a teacher’s guide, student text, test book, and audio-visual materials. The content was primarily developed around the major social sciences to include history and the humanities. Ninth-grade students studied economics and political science; tenth-grade students studied Western culture and other selected cultures of the world; eleventh-grade students studied early American history to modern times, and twelfth-grade students focused on the humanities and behavioral sciences.

Regardless of grade level, most classroom activities were focused around two types of directed instruction. The first method was based on a series of questioning strategies through which the teacher lead students through a series of generalizations based on data (e.g., films, worksheets, discussions, etc). The second method focused on value dilemmas which challenged students to logically examine their beliefs on the issues presented. Together, these instructional strategies along with the curriculum were designed to work towards the project objectives of developing inquiry skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes simultaneously (Haley, 1972).

Carnegie-Mellon University Slow Learner Project. Carnegie-Mellon University Slow Learner Project was developed by the Social Studies Curriculum Center under the leadership of Edwin Fenton in 1963. The project, funded by the United States Office of Education, focused on slow learners who were often overlooked by most of the new social studies projects. *The Americans: A History of the United States* and *Living in Urban America* were developed for slow learners and the development of students’ affective behavior by improving self-concepts, attitude towards learning, and clarifying values. Developed chronologically, eighteen units focused on historical issues and contemporary problems which helped students identify and see relationships among historical problems. This teaching strategy, along with student discussions, and audio visual presentations was designed to help junior high students to overcome six specific problems: “1) poor self-concept; 2) poor attitude toward learning; 3) poorly clarified value systems; 4) poor study skills; 5) poor inquiry skills; and 6) superficial understanding of historical content” (Kleiman, 1972, p. 734).

Discussion

One of the goals for the development of new social studies materials was to increase curriculum effectiveness in the classroom through effective practice. VanTassel-Baska et al. (1988) indicated a considerable amount of curriculum projects could respond by the following: a) reorganizing curriculum according to higher level skills and concepts; b) having students engage in problem-finding and problem-solving activities, and c) providing students with opportunities to make connections within and across the curriculum with an emphasis placed on issues, themes, and ideas. While these and other project goals were certainly achievable, most projects had limited success in the classroom. One project, *Man: A Course of Study*, found itself the center of national debate.

Critiques of MACOS, which included several conservative politicians, religious groups, schools, parents, and administrators, claimed the project exposed children to analyze cruelty to animals, divorce, cannibalism, and murder (Barnes, Stallings & Rivner, 1981). On April 8, 1975, Representative John B. Colon (R-Arizona) deplored the content of MACOS as “wasteful” to the taxpayer. Colon described MACOS as “a course for 10 year olds mainly about the Netsilik Eskimo subculture of Canada’s Pelly Bay Region. Student materials have repeated references in stories about Netsilik cannibalism, adultery, bestiality, female infanticide, incest, wife-swapping, killing old people, and other shocking condoned practices” (Walsh, 1975, p. 426).

The debate over MACOS and the new social studies projects also seemed to relate society’s criticism of schools. Walsh (1975) explained the social and behavioral scientists, which were looked upon as agents of social change, were determined to influence children against the values and beliefs of their parents.

While project reformers and designers likely produced sound educational materials, the teaching approaches were what proved to be the biggest disadvantage for new curriculum efforts. The evidence for most social studies projects was similar. Lazerson, McLaughlin, and McPherson (1984) suggested that many of the curriculum programs were plagued with problems. Many of the project writers came from college or university settings. Often the instruction and content was structured around college curriculum with little emphasis on the realism of teaching in the K-12 classroom. It was the curriculum planners who relied on classroom teachers to teach their programs. In reality, many of the teachers were asked to implement new concepts, ideas, and instructional techniques, which often went against their teaching ideology. As a result, “the new social studies similarly became a part of ongoing debates within the profession about the proper definition and purpose of social studies education. It raised questions about the proper content of social studies: history, civics, social science, or some combination thereof” (Lazerson, McLaughlin & McPherson, 1984, p.17).

Criticism continued with the inadequacies in projects instructional programs. The Harvard Social Studies Project along with other projects required that students engage in lively arguments and analyze and evaluate their own discussions. However, in a free discussion environment, most students were unable to bring sufficient analytical skills to make most lessons, debates, and activities work. Malcolm Levin (1972) suggests these failures may be contributed to four factors. First, in order to carry on a small group discussion, students must be able to think about the substantive issues and the argument. Second, several projects require students to use both analogies and productive discussions—something that most teachers themselves had great difficulty. Third, most case materials were historical in nature. Fourth, the handling and implementation of affective skills required for effective communication was not included in teacher training. While students enjoyed contemporary analogies, they often lost

interest in historical situations. Most projects did not provide enough training (e.g., affective skills) for effective communication and project implementation. Finally, Lockwood (1985) suggested three basic reasons for the limited effects of new social studies curriculum: a) Adaptations required changes in state and school curriculum scope and sequence, b) most projects readings were too advanced for students' comprehension, and c) students generally lacked the intellectual capacities to understand materials found within new social studies projects.

Yet, through the criticism and possible failures, important lessons were learned about adolescents and effective pedagogy:

First, the project suggested that children are curious and perceptive. They want facts about how people and animals function—how they are born, reproduce, die, and how they take care of one another. Second, children transform information. Children learn best when they have the opportunity to play with new information in many different forms to include direct observation, data gathering, reading, role-playing, constructing projects, and watching films. Third, children accept diversity. Young children have a tolerance for diversity. When asked to do so, children often approach the study of human behavior with an openness that goes beyond the typical moralistic approaches to social studies education. (Dow, 1979, pp.37-39)

In addition, there is evidence that new social studies programs contributed to the evolving social sciences. While the new social studies projects failed in eliminating the textbook as the primary source of instructional material, it did help expose the textbook as the main choice of transmission. New social studies projects helped stimulate and create a new series of commercial and teacher-made supplementary materials used in the classroom. Martorella, Beal, and Bolick (2005) summarized the success of the new social studies:

It increased the use of instructional strategies that emphasized students' inquiry in the learning process, presaging later constructivist arguments for greater engagement of students in the learning process. The new social studies also helped to establish the principle that affective concerns relating to significant beliefs, attitudes, and values should have a place in social studies classes. (p. 16)

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