

STUDYING SOCIAL STUDIES:
USING PERSONAL NARRATIVES TO EXPLORE THE SHIFTING SOCIAL
STUDIES CURRICULUM

By

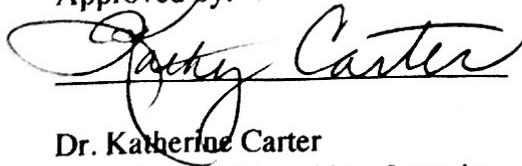
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Abstract

The social studies curriculum has been shifting and developing since the inception of the subject itself. Current trends continue to move toward more inclusion of previously excluded cultures, religions, and experiences, as well as a more student-centered curriculum. This has not been a smooth transition, however, as some attempts continue to seem inadequate and others are met with continued conservative backlash. This thesis examines this shifting curriculum through the lens of well-remembered events from time spent as a student and a student teacher in social studies classrooms. An analysis of these experiences and related literature leads to an investigation of the possible implications for teachers and teacher education programs.

Background/purpose

From its beginnings as a catchall term for history, civics, government, economics, and sociology, social studies has been a muddled and ever-changing aspect of American schooling (Hertzberg, 1981). Debate has raged since 1892 about how to teach these topics, with experts arguing to include recent ideas about “inquiry, extensive use of comparison, informal presentations supplemented by student presentations in the advanced grades, individualized work, field trips, debates, audiovisual aids, and so on, eschewing rote recitation from textbooks, extensive lecturing, and ‘historical catechism’” (Hertzberg, 1981). These interactive strategies, and the avoidance of rote memorization and lecture, are still being pushed for today. The content these methods are used to teach has also been a constant debate, with the same 1890’s recommendations pushing for a social studies curriculum that would give students “some appreciation of the nature of the state and society, some sense of the duties and responsibilities of citizenship, some capacity in dealing with political and social questions, something of the broad and tolerant spirit which is bred by the study of past times and conditions” (Hertzberg, 1981). These aims continue to frustrate policymakers trying to decide which states and societies students can appreciate outside of their own, which duties of citizenship to emphasize, which political and social questions students can discuss, and how tolerant and inclusive the curriculum can be. These looming questions are no closer to being resolved, and as recently as February 2015 lawmakers made headlines as some conservative groups sought to revise the Advanced Placement U.S. History framework due to its stance on issues from Manifest Destiny to the inclusion of more minority perspectives (Hartmann, 2015).

This raging debate has an immense impact on students through a shifting curriculum and its materials and instructional strategies. Students are at the mercy of those making curricular

decisions, and whichever biases they bring with them as they construct the standards and choose the textbooks. This thesis will examine the impact of these shifts through narratives from my time spent as a student and student teacher working under the various continued changes in these standards.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis will examine a section of the continuing shift in the social studies curriculum, using well-remembered events to analyze questions that have been provoked during my experiences as a pre-service social studies teacher that grew from the events I experienced as a student. Well-remembered events are a specific narrative method of analysis that provides a framework for pre-service teachers to consider an “incident or episode that a student observes in a school situation and considers, for his or her own reasons, especially salient or memorable” (Carter 1994). I have chosen a total of six well-remembered events, three events during my experiences as a student in middle school social studies classes and three that took place during my experience student teaching in middle school social studies classes. To explain these events I will follow the structure Carter set in her original research on well-remembered events, providing “(a) a detailed description of the event itself; (b) an analysis of the event, which could be drawn from a variety of sources, including recent research on teaching and learning, class discussions, and/or their own practical perspectives; and (c) the teaching implications [I] saw in the event” (1994). Using well-remembered events allows me to use my own voice to examine a curriculum that frequently left students like myself without a voice. Explaining my well-remembered events will help teachers and teacher educators examine the elements that joined to render me voiceless.

Results

Theme 1: Valuing Student Cultures

Pronouncing Pancho Villa

Every time my social studies teacher said the name “Pancho Villa,” she spat out the words “Panch-uh Vil-uh.” The two other Mexican students and I all traded glances every time she did it, grimacing as our ears, and cultures, were defiled. Whenever we arrived at his sombrero-covered face in the textbook, we knew what was coming. These mispronunciations occurred after she began class by mispronouncing our names during roll call, another reminder that Mexican culture was different and unfamiliar. My beloved last name was never pronounced correctly in that classroom, an insult that followed me out of this class and even into my high school graduation.

A teacher has so much power to value or devalue a culture just by taking the time to learn how to pronounce a word or name. For students of color in schools, “a mispronunciation of their name is one of the many ways in which their cultural heritage is devalued” (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). Hearing our teacher mispronounce our own Mexican names bothered us, but for her to continue to mispronounce the names of seemingly all Mexicans sent a distinct message that we were able to decipher even as children: Mexican culture was not valued in that classroom. A study conducted by Kohli and Solórzano found that “whether being culturally disrespectful, unaware of their actions, or even just stumbling over a name they had never seen before, the tone set by a teacher about a student’s name was something significant that participants have remembered for many years,” explaining why I don’t remember anything about Pancho Villa, only that his name and mine both showed that Mexican names were not worth the time it would take to learn to pronounce correctly (2012). I assume that this teacher never set out to devalue

my culture, but intent means little in light of the fact that hearing Villa's name still pulls me back into that classroom trading disappointed glances with the few other brown faces in the room.

Microaggressions such as these can be unintentional yet still cause distress. Racial microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007). Each refusal to learn to correctly pronounce ethnic names exists as a microaggression communicating a negative racial slight to students of those ethnicities. Stumbling over a new name can be an accident, but continued refusal to learn the names of individual students or common curriculum topics crosses the line into an indignity. When microaggressions occur within the already unbalanced power structure between students and teachers, the damage can extend far past the original act. If teachers are seen as "unaware of racial dynamics, appeared uncomfortable with race conversations, or ignored or dismissed race issues, the consequences could be quite devastating to students of color" (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Racial dialogues that can occur when microaggressions are acknowledged and discussed can actually lead to more harm, and even to additional racial microaggressions, when they occur under the direction of such a teacher.

In light of the possible cycle of negativity, educators would benefit from "experience and training in facilitating difficult dialogues on race" (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Focus groups conducted with students who had participated in such discussions found that "successful and unsuccessful dialogues on race depended heavily on the racial sensitivities and skills of the teacher" (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Minority students aren't the only ones at risk either. Microaggressions can occur based on gender, sexual orientation, and

disability (Sue et al., 2007). Many children are thus left vulnerable to the hope that their teacher will know how to handle microaggressions in the classroom and strategies for having a dialogue. In social studies courses, these identities are brought up often throughout the curriculum. A social studies teacher instructing students about the civil rights movement or the Equal Rights Amendment needs to be prepared to address feelings and microaggressions that may come up during these topics.

I Love this Book

When I was teaching eighth grade students about World War II, I selected a set of books from the library to give students different perspectives from the war. I made a conscious effort to select books featuring different cultural experiences, and ended up with a range from Japanese internment camp prisoners to Navajo code talkers. *The Grand Mosque of Paris: A Story of How Muslims Rescued Jews During the Holocaust* was one of the selected texts, and the moment I showed it to the class, a Muslim student demanded that I let her read it first. She immediately picked up the book and hugged it. Rocking it back and forth in her arms, she told me that she loved the book. When I asked her how she could love a book she had never read, she pointed at the picture of the mosque on the cover, squealed that it had Muslims, and began reading. It occurred to me at that moment that this was the first time her culture had been included in the curriculum, and it only occurred because I made a conscious effort to include it.

The Bradley Commission on History in the Schools reported that “history can satisfy young people's longing for a sense of identity and of their time and place in the human story” (Symcox, 2002). The inclusion of a piece of history featuring a mosque and Muslims gave this student’s culture a time and place in the human story. As the only student in the school to wear a

hijab, she saw few if any other reflections of her identity throughout the day. Seeing her light up about this simple inclusion of her culture brings to light another shifting aspect of the curriculum battle, “the use of history as a means to define or enhance collective identity” (Seixas, 2002). Many agree to this as a goal of history, the conflict arises when one tries to decide which identity is to be enhanced. Too often the defined collective identity does not include women, ethnic or religious minorities, or anyone of a low socioeconomic status. This oversight has hurt students, with a 1989 Task Force on Minorities report “pointing to Eurocentric history as contributing to low self-esteem among minority children in urban schools” (Seixas, 2002). Despite this, many still cling to the belief that schools must “Americanize” students, to the point that a huge source of the backlash against the new Advanced Placement U.S. History standards came from “special emphasis to race, gender and ethnic identities” (Ganim, 2015). Teachers are thus forced to work with an educational system which “remains resistant to global perspectives in the curriculum and continues to favor national identity and patriotism over learning about the world” (Myers, 2006).

Theme 2: Considering New Perspectives

Guns, Germs, and Racial Superiority

The only movie I ever recall watching in my social studies class was *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. The movie explained that Europeans had conquered various native peoples due to advantages in weaponry, the contagious diseases they carried into native populations, and their imperialistic societies. The natives to America weren't shown as weak peoples that put up little resistance to the Europeans. It was a dramatic change of pace from the story of morally and intellectually superior Europeans or happy Thanksgiving imagery. I felt proud to be Mexican

instead of the usual vague discomfort I found when discussing the way the Europeans quickly dispatched native populations.

Students in history classes frequently discuss the triumphs of Europeans over native peoples. Too often these discussions involved explanations that have “either implicitly or explicitly, invoked intrinsic biological differences amongst people as causes for these disparities. These explanations were based on the premise (albeit never validated!) that the Europeans were more 'intelligent'” (Venkatachalam, 2001). New perspectives such as those found in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* about the encounters between Europeans and Native Americans are a positive example of the shift toward social justice in the social studies curriculum. Instead of explaining that Europeans were genetically superior from the start, it uses “ultimate causes' to imply those initial causes which generated significant differences between various (yet 'equal') peoples beginning 13,000 years ago” (Venkatachalam, 2001). Emphasizing the equality of both peoples while focusing on the geographic and immunity advantages the Europeans inherited dispels the idea that superiority came from simply being European. In my social studies class, the only time native peoples were mentioned were when Europeans were conquering them. At least in this case the narrative shifted to show that the Europeans were aided by guns, germs, and steel instead of superior intelligence or morality.

Teachers need to be aware of these types of biases in their textbooks or other given curricular material. Wade conducted an analysis of social studies textbook research and found that some of the most frequent conclusions were that the “text avoided the controversial aspects of the topic (56%), presented biased or stereotypical information (40%), or was written in such a way that it interfered with student comprehension of the material (40%)” (1993). If the given textbook materials tend to be this biased or avoid the controversial aspects of a topic, teachers

need to be mindful of the importance of giving students access to alternative materials such as the film I was exposed to.

Is this Progress?

As a student teacher, I spent quite a bit of time looking through the textbook assigned for my class. In a chapter about World War II, I came across a portion titled “Women and Minorities.” At first I was delighted to see textbook space dedicated to including these often overlooked perspectives, but then it occurred to me that this was just another type of segregation. Seeing the contributions of Hispanic Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and women arranged into neat little paragraphs at the end of the section made me feel that I had to assume that the rest of the section must only include the histories and contributions of White men.

Wrapping up the contributions of these diverse groups of people into a separate section creates an illusion of inclusion, a step in the right direction that still feels inadequate. Choosing to separate the accomplishments of African American soldiers from the other military accomplishments serves only to put African Americans on a pedestal, something the textbook publisher could point to in order to prove inclusivity. In Wade’s analysis of textbook research, “three of the studies (12%) concluded that there was less bias than in previous studies on the same topic” (Wade, 1993). “Less bias” is unfortunately not an acceptable end goal for the social studies curriculum. Including minority contributions is a positive step toward “less bias,” but it is simply not enough for the lived experiences of minority groups to be a footnote at the end of textbook chapters.

Theme: Creating the Curriculum

Did King Arthur have Legos?

In one of the rare times we weren't simply reading from the textbook, my social studies teacher put us into groups to spend a week building medieval castles using poster boards and Legos. While the activity was admittedly fun, I didn't learn anything about the feudal system contained within the castles. While I enjoyed bringing Legos to class and building the castle with my classmates, I didn't actually make any connections to the content.

This whole event brings to mind a common issue in social studies classes at the elementary and secondary school level. Social studies classes have a stigma for being easy or uninteresting. In fact, several studies have found that students rate social studies courses as the "least interesting and least relevant subject in the US high school curriculum" (Stevenson, 1990). Some teachers, like mine, try to overcompensate for being uninteresting by scheduling activities that will be enjoyable for students to complete. The standards cannot be lost in this effort, however, and students benefit when they can see relevancy to their lives in the activity. Unfortunately, cycling between rote memorization and the occasional enjoyable yet irrelevant activity is commonplace. One cause of this lack of structure in social studies classes comes from an overall "lack of accountability pressures" (Stodolsky, 1988). Standardized assessments tend to focus on reading and mathematics, leaving social studies teachers without the same assessment-based pressure to be accountable to the set standards. Another important issue is the repeated failings throughout the curriculum planning stage. Since the World War II era, historians have been criticized for having little involvement in the process of training teachers, just as "textbook authors have failed to distinguish between history as record and history as instructional material" (Hertzberg, 1981). Social studies teachers are frequently ill equipped to function as historians,

and are working with textbooks and materials that simply skim through as much of recorded history as possible with little emphasis on actual instruction. Teachers of social studies have also been criticized as “inferior to those in other subjects, because of the lack of internal standards that would keep out incompetents” (Hertzberg, 1981).

With a curriculum that alternates between being overly uninteresting or irrelevant, a lack of accountability, and teachers that are seen as inferior, social studies class has an image problem. The accountability issue could be spun into a positive light, however. Stodolsky argues that the “flexibility of content coverage in other aspects of social studies, indeed the arbitrariness and fuzziness, may permit or encourage a broader range of instructional arrangements” (1988). A lack of accountability can be interpreted instead as flexibility, giving social studies teachers more freedom to alternate between direct instruction or modeling and letting students work in cooperative learning groups or problem solving scenarios with increased relevancy to their lives. Teachers can see their lessened accountability as a freedom to experiment with new instructional strategies to encourage students to create meaningful understandings of the material.

Just Google It

Moving forward into my own experience using the social studies curriculum, I spent quite a bit of time discussing lesson planning with my mentor teacher. During my first week of planning my mentor teacher made a point to tell me that in the era of Google and with as much information as there was to cover, our students didn’t need to remember the names, dates, or battles from history. His goal was to teach the students about the generalities in history, the main themes underlying the names, dates, and battles that previous generations were forced to memorize. This idea brings attention to two key questions in the history of social studies

curricula: what exactly should students need to learn and who is responsible for making that decision?

Curriculum tends to be controlled by those with power and privilege. Meyers notes that pressure or involvement from business leaders can be seen as an effort to “make schools subservient to economic needs and market mechanisms” (2006). Powerful politicians are also heavily involved in the curriculum as teachers are asked to implement a “set of activities pre-defined by elite policy makers or a high-stakes test” (Ross, 1997). The push toward the globalization of social studies curriculum is also marred by power as much of the world “considers globalization as synonymous for ‘Americanization’ and an instrument of U.S. hegemony” (Myers, 2006). Voice, power, and privilege are concentrated into the hands of those writing the curriculum at the expense of teachers and students. The powerful few can be considered a “so-called cultural literacy lobby” that spends its time producing “lists of what everybody should know” (Parker, 1991). As the members of this group continue to add more and more items to the curriculum, “whole courses, like U.S. history or world history, may degenerate to parades of mentioned people, places, events, and dates” (Parker, 1991). This overwhelming list of items to cover causes teachers like my mentor to throw their hands up and simply try to teach students a little about a lot, removing the emphasis on memorization or even remembering anything at all in order to focus on speeding through as much material as possible. They argue that they are trying to teach students generalities instead of focusing on facts, but when this isn’t structured in a way that allows students to build deeper understandings of these generalities each year, students won’t remember the facts or the generalities. As students move through material too quickly to keep up, later teachers feel they have to “start at the lowest rung on the ladder, and the construction of more sophisticated understandings is undermined” (Parker, 1991). Students

are introduced to new ideas at rapid fire, but few are elaborated on to help students build a deeper understanding.

Implications for Social Studies Teaching and Teacher Education

Progress is clearly being made. A textbook featuring segregated sections about women and minorities is an improvement over overlooking these groups entirely. Unfortunately, when placed against a backdrop of how long change has been debated, this progress is entirely too slow. There is a certain irony found in this issue. Social studies classes exist to educate students about the historical progress of man. Despite the centuries of history covered in the average class, it has taken centuries to achieve what little progress there has been in creating a more inclusive and intensive curriculum. Only a small proportion of textbooks have “less bias,” students still struggle to see themselves in the curriculum, and there is still low accountability for social studies teachers (Wade, 1993). Through my experiences, I believe there is still much that teachers and teacher educators can do to address these deficiencies.

This begins with refocusing the aim of social studies. Rote memorization needs to be replaced with “an exercise in creating a personally meaningful understanding of the way the world is and how one might act to transform that world” (Ross, 1997). Too often “curricula aim at preparing students to ‘think like’ mathematicians, historians, biologists, artists, and so on. Too little thought is given to how students can use the material in their own present and future lives” (Thornton, 2005). Students don’t have a chance to find relevancy to their lives, or even to see how they can use the material at any point in their futures. Rapidly skimming content standards of names and dates does not allow for the creation of any meaningful understandings, and the occasional research paper is not preparation for students to transform their worlds.

If social studies courses are to prepare students to live in our democratic society, students need a chance to practice participating in democracy. This can come in allowing students to participate in curricular decisions so that when “an array of appropriate topics has been identified, students should be invited to choose among them” (Thornton, 2005). Teachers still maintain control of identifying appropriate topics, but students get to exercise choice in which topics they would like to delve into to derive the deeper understandings so many agree that students need. Removing the focus from memorization or the parade of names and dates and instead putting it onto this “process (inquiry and discovery), critical thinking, social science concepts, contemporary issues and relevance” allow students to create meaningful understandings, explore the real-world problems they face, and begin practicing the methods needed to transform their world (Seixas 1993).

Even when faced with a difficult curriculum, teachers still have a role as a “curricular gatekeeper” that chooses how to incorporate the standards into their own instructional methods (Thornton, 2005). Teachers use the given curriculum to create the so-called “enacted curriculum” that encompasses the day-to-day interactions in which the teacher “confirms or create doubt about assertions of knowledge, whether some opinions are treated as facts while other opinions are discounted as unworthy of consideration” (Ross, 1997). The way teachers confirm or discount ideas as they plan lessons and choose materials can have major impacts for students of various minority groups. In 2008, “34% of the nation's population was minority, and 41% of all elementary and secondary students were minority, but only 16.5% of all elementary and secondary teachers were minority” (Ingersoll & May, 2011). When an overwhelmingly White teaching population educates a huge proportion of minority students, the ideas a teacher confirms or discounts can be warped by microaggressions, previous biases, or simply unfamiliarity with

the lived experiences of minority students. These teachers must engage in a social studies curriculum that causes them to examine their voice, power, and privilege in a way that will allow them to be conscious of their biases and work to take them apart. In creating their curriculum, teachers also need to avoid “narrow ethnocentrism when they neglect the critical examination of global issues” (Myers, 2006). Social studies teachers need to take care to include different cultures and global perspectives. With the inclusion of potentially triggering perspectives, teachers also need training in how to lead discussions about biases as the success of these dialogues depend “heavily on the racial sensitivities and skills of the teacher” (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

Since the 1890s history has been shaped with the thought of “preparing boys and girls for the duties of daily life and intelligent citizenship” (Hertzberg, 1981). As we emerge into an era of increased globalization, we must continue to assess our curriculum to ensure that students are prepared to succeed in this world. These preliminary suggestions cannot create the ideal social studies course, but they are steps on a framework for progress.

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