What Happened to Social Studies?  
The Disappearing Curriculum

In the face of pressures to focus on literacy and mathematics, schools and textbook publishers are attempting to “integrate” social studies into the teaching of reading. Beyond ensuring a superficial treatment of the subject matter, this practice threatens the continuing development of reflective, engaged citizens, Ms. McGuire fears.

BY MARGIT E. McGUIRE

No one would argue against the importance of developing the literacy and mathematics skills of children in poverty. But at what cost? A society that depends on a well-informed citizenry that understands how democracy functions and knows something of the world beyond its own borders cannot afford to overlook the social studies.

A report from the Carnegie Corporation, The Civic Mission of Schools, outlines specific goals for civic education: to develop competent and responsible citizens who are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, act politically, and have moral and civic virtues and a belief in their capacity to make a difference. Such education becomes even more important for children in poverty if they are to participate in and embrace the ideals of American democracy. Moreover, as the report argues, teaching civic education can’t wait until high school: “Research suggests that students start to develop social responsibility and interest in politics before the age of nine. The way they are taught about social issues, ethics, and institutions in elementary school matters a great deal for their civic development” (p. 12). The goals of civic and social studies education do not
need to be set aside in order to achieve the goals of education in literacy and mathematics. Indeed, these goals should work together because the social studies can provide a purpose for developing and applying literacy and mathematics skills.

WHY IS SOCIAL STUDIES DISAPPEARING?

The diminished attention to social studies education began with the standards and testing movement. As the national push for accountability became ever stronger, states focused first on standards in literacy and mathematics. The comprehensive mathematics standards introduced in 1991 set the bar for the development of standards across the nation. As the standards and testing movement gained momentum, literacy and mathematics garnered the attention and energy of educators, pushing the other subjects to the back burner. Fifteen years later, these subjects are still on that back burner, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has exacerbated the situation by placing even greater pressure on schools to raise students’ standardized test scores in literacy and mathematics. This has been particularly problematic for social studies, in which the world, past and present, serves as the basis for the curriculum — a curriculum that has traditionally dealt with the problem of “too much to teach.” Initially, history was a focus of the national standards. But civics, geography, and economics are also important, and the scholarship in all of these areas has meant an abundance of learning expectations that can overwhelm teachers and publishers alike.

It is dicey business to decide what is worth teaching when depth of understanding, rather than simply covering material, is the goal. Social studies educators have been unable to pare down the curriculum, and special interest groups of all stripes have something to say about what is most important. The issue is very political; witness the debate on the history standards in Congress in the mid-1990s that led to revisions to the standards. Thus the social studies standards at national and state levels have remained static, and in a climate of accountability, this is unlikely to change.

How have publishers responded to these challenges? Market forces were already at work as publishers scrambled to respond to the changing demands that came about as a result of the standards movement. One response to the overcrowded curriculum and the need to find more time for literacy and mathematics was to produce curriculum that used social studies content to develop literacy. Reading textbooks began to include topics related to neighborhoods, families in other places, and our historical roots.

For example, the theme of Unit 4 of Open Court Reading Level 5 is “Making a New Nation.” The selection titled “The Night the Revolution Began” begins with two focus questions: “Who was involved in the Boston Tea Party?” and “Why did colonists destroy the tea that had been imported by Britain?” (p. 310). These low-level reading comprehension questions may be appropriate for teaching reading, but they miss the mark for teaching the conceptual understandings so important to the social studies. The unit includes these titles: “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” “The Declaration of Independence,” “The Master Spy of Yorktown,” “Shh! We’re Writing the Constitution,” and “We, the People of the United States.” Such titles would lead one to believe that social studies is well integrated into the literacy program. The teacher’s instructions direct students to visualize, make connections, and summarize their reading. Clearly, these are necessary skills for reading, but they are inadequate for developing social studies understandings or a commitment to the democratic process.

On the surface, this curriculum may appear to be a logical response to the pressures placed on schools to teach “skills for the 21st century.” Administrators, feeling the pressure, organized the school day so that substantial time was placed on literacy and mathematics to the exclusion of other subjects and even recess in some districts. Educators making curriculum decisions about textbook adoptions could point to such a curriculum as having “integrated social studies,” essentially killing two birds with one stone. However, simply reading about topics in the social studies for comprehension and skill development does not address social studies goals or the civic mission of schools.

A closer examination of the curriculum that is supposed to teach social studies reveals that teachers are indeed teaching social studies topics solely as a literacy endeavor. Students are asked to find main ideas and supporting details, to compare and contrast, to make inferences, to scan, and to understand graphical material — all important reading skills. But social studies is more than reading for comprehension. It is learning powerful ideas that demonstrate how social systems work, in the past and in other places, whether next door or around the world. It is about being committed to democratic values and their importance for personal, social, and civic decision making.

The problems posed by using social studies to teach literacy are especially apparent in the primary grades,
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social studies that addresses political action and complex material is often claimed to be too difficult, especially for young children at risk.

The teaching of social studies should be organized around powerful ideas, and these ideas must be revisited from multiple perspectives. Too often, the social studies curriculum dissolves into disconnected bits of information, and memorization of facts is the norm. Children are then left on their own to figure out how the bits of information connect, and the bits are soon forgotten or trivialized. Textbooks typically reinforce such notions of the social studies, and only in the hands of skilled teachers are textbooks used to advantage. As Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe emphasize, teaching what matters most is critically important for teaching for understanding. They list four criteria for deciding what to teach: the material should be enduring (have value beyond the classroom), at the heart of the discipline, needing uncoverage, and potentially engaging. Teaching to the big ideas requires careful planning to ensure that students understand, can make personal connections, and can apply what they are learning.

Thinking about social studies from this perspective repositions the role of literacy. The skills of literacy enable students to understand and communicate about the powerful ideas. Knowing how to access information from a nonfiction text is an important skill for the social studies curriculum. Recognizing perspective, inferring meaning, and making connections are critically important, not in and of themselves, but for understanding powerful ideas and making personal meaning from them.

WHY DO WE NEGLECT CIVIC COMPETENCE?

There is another critical component to educating students in social studies and one that educators have typically let slide: teaching for civic efficacy. It is not enough to understand how the nation was founded. We also need to know what that means for living in a democratic society and an interdependent world. We need to know how our actions affect the world and what actions we can take to make a difference. Service learning is an excellent means to help students pursue civic engagement, but there is more we can do, and civic efficacy must go beyond service-learning projects.

WHAT ABOUT YOUNGER CHILDREN?

Four teachers agreed to pilot a kindergarten curriculum that I co-developed. Titled “The Park,” it uses a narrative as a way to tie the curriculum together and organize disparate learning experiences into a meaningful set of powerful civic and social studies learning experiences. We wanted to develop children’s understanding of how the physical environment interacts with human needs and wants, how people shape the environment to meet their needs and wants, and how the en-
virement can change over time. We also wanted to introduce young students to civic discourse and how communities can come together to solve problems.

Because we knew the kindergarten teachers were always pressured to address literacy skills, my colleague and I wanted to ensure that in our curriculum these skills would serve the social studies and civic understandings. Thus the curriculum focused on listening for information, examining illustrations for details, contributing to group discussions, and suggesting solutions to problems. Reading was also reinforced through the use of word banks, visual aids, and text — all related to the main narrative. Children also communicated in writing by drafting simple sentences that reflected on their own experiences and understandings.

We introduced the narrative in the four pilot classes by reading a letter inviting the children to create an imaginary park for their community. They were eager to participate. The setting for our story began with a description of the park, reinforcing and developing such skills as listening with a purpose, noting details, and visualizing a place for the park. From the description, children created a visual representation of the park. Vocabulary was introduced in context, and, as children talked about the setting and discussed where various features of the park would be located, they were also considering how people interact with such environments. Creating a word bank reinforced vocabulary growth by binding together concrete experiences with social studies and science vocabulary. The whole class then dictated a description of the place they had created to reinforce and build on the literacy component of the learning.

Substantive learning in social studies calls for the careful development and scaffolding of ideas so that they become personally meaningful and transferable to other situations. For some of the children, a park was not a familiar place or a place where they were allowed to play. For some of them, a park was a place where drug deals happened or where undesirable people congregated. Thus the teachers needed to be aware of children’s notions of a park and to take such notions into account when discussing the setting. In fact, this issue surfaced in one of the pilot classrooms, creating a teachable moment in which the teacher acknowledged the children’s existing understanding of parks and at the same time provided a new concept of a park, one that these children had not considered previously.

Once the place was established, the children imagined themselves as park planners. Their understanding was guided by questions such as: What kind of park do we want? What kind of plants and trees do we want in our park? How will people use the park? Should the park be just for children or for people of all ages? These questions helped the children deepen their understanding of parks and the role they play in a community. This questioning is critical in the narrative, as it guides the learning and introduces ideas to children that they might not have considered.

As the children discussed the park and imagined its possibilities, they were led to consider the tasks involved in creating a park: the work of the park planners. What kinds of tools would they need to do their jobs? What kinds of clothes would they need to wear to do their jobs? These questions introduced such vocabulary as tape measure, shovel, rake, bucket, trowels, gloves, and work clothes. To make their roles more concrete, the children created paper dolls of themselves as park planners dressed for work and included the tools they would need to do the job. To reinforce speaking and listening skills, the children introduced themselves to the group as park planners and used the vocabulary associated with their roles.

There is also a natural science connection to planning a park. What do plants need to grow? Investigating plant growth resulted in three experiments: how water helps seeds germinate, how water travels up the stem of a plant to supply it with nutrients, and how plants grow over time. As children participated in the science investigations, they talked about the plants, trees, and flowers they wanted in their park and shared and discussed nonfiction books on landscaping and horticulture. Sophisticated discussions ensued about what kinds of plants grow where, how much care different plants need, and the role of sunlight in plant growth.

A park planners’ meeting was held to discuss what the class wanted to include in the park. The teacher guided the learning by posing problems, providing technical information about plants as needed, and reinforcing the importance of negotiation and compromise in deciding where to place the plants and trees in the park. Literacy skills were a natural outgrowth of the experience as children learned new vocabulary related to plants and the science investigations. Introducing writing and reading about their investigations helped level the playing field for all the children because everyone had been involved in the investigations and the decisions about where to locate plants, trees, and flowers in the park.

Children next considered the best uses for the park. Play areas, sports activities, and social gathering places all had their champions. Working together to figure out how to accommodate these uses provided more practice with negotiation and compromise. The park plan-
An engaging and powerful learning experience in the classroom can create an authentic context for such experiences. From the standpoint of social studies and civic efficacy, the children in the pilot kindergartens were learning about problem solving in the public arena. Among the important skills for civic discourse that they learned were careful listening, asking questions related to the problem, making suggestions that are consistent with the problem, and thoughtfully evaluating the suggestions of others. Civility, an important component of civic competence, is characterized by such behaviors as showing respect for others, engaging in civil discourse, keeping an open mind, making compromises, and showing compassion. The young children began to learn about these processes within the context of a critical incident in the park. Research on the effectiveness of the use of narrative has demonstrated that children connect with the learning cognitively, affectively, and operatively through role-play. Simply reading about civic action and social studies is not enough.

Lisa Delpit makes the case that children of poverty, who often view schoolwork as unrelated to real life, must have learning experiences that are personally meaningful. An engaging and powerful learning experience in social studies is even more important if students are to believe and engage in the democratic process. Perhaps most important, lower-income children deserve as rich and engaging a learning environment as middle- and upper-class children, an environment that engages their imaginations while developing their ownership of their social world and their role in it.

If educators continue to narrow the curriculum, reading and mathematics test scores may rise, but at what cost? If our young people, particularly children in poverty, do not understand or value our democracy and their role in such a society and do not believe that they can make a difference, why does school matter? If they drop out of school because they don’t value what school has to offer, how will we raise the level of achievement for all students and close the persistent inequities of the achievement gap?

With these questions clearly before us, do we have the political will to invest in the civic mission of schools? If not, what cost is our society prepared to pay?