

Reinventing Social Studies: By All Means!

Mr. Garcia thoroughly agrees with Mr. St. Jarre that the social studies curriculum needs to change. But he stresses that the improvement process won't be easy.

BY JESUS GARCIA

WHEN I was asked to respond to “Reinventing Social Studies,” I began by considering the many points Kevin St. Jarre raises about the beginnings of social studies, the place of history and the other social science disciplines in social studies education, the characterization of secondary social studies teaching, and how best to reinvent social studies and put the subject area squarely on the path of “preparing our students to live in a globalized world.” While I initially selected my involvement in teacher education programs as the primary lens for my analysis, on further reflection, I decided to take a wider view and include my many other experiences in the education community.

I want to use Mr. St. Jarre's commitment to secondary education and his passion for social studies as a springboard to elaborate on the main issues he raises and to describe why reinventing social studies is no easy task. Thus it is unnecessary to devote much space to discussing the role of history and the other social science disciplines in the development of a social studies curriculum. There is no question that in 1916 the National Education Association (NEA) viewed history as the discipline that should play the major role in the early development of a social studies curriculum. At the turn of the 20th century, history was well positioned in the schools and uni-

versities, and, along with content from geography and political science, was viewed as the core subject area in a social studies curriculum for K-12 schools.

American historians believed in “the value of historical knowledge to strengthen the individual, sharpen the mind, broaden the horizon, and give depth to the soul.”¹ Social studies proponents also viewed history as providing the framework (i.e., chronology) by which to examine events, issues, trends, and personalities in social science contexts. While other social scientists were forming separate organizations (e.g., the

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American Anthropological Association, the American Psychological Association) and accurately perceived the advantages of playing a role in the development of the social studies curriculum, they were too inexperienced to counter the influence of the American Historical Association. As a result, well into the late 1900s, social studies/history was one of the core subject areas in the K-12 curriculum, with few of the social science organizations challenging its primacy.

After reading “Reinventing Social Studies,” I believe Mr. St. Jarre and I agree on what is meant by social studies and its intended purpose in the curriculum. The definition he quotes, adopted by the NEA Committee on the Social Studies in 1916, may seem vague — “those [disciplines] whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups” — but it is quite similar to the one the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) developed and continues to use: “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence.”²² In NCSS position statements on social studies education, the promotion of civic competence refers to nurturing an awareness and understanding of students’ immediate communities and the many others to which they belong. What I find surprising is that Mr. St. Jarre makes no mention of NCSS, but his notions about creating competent citizens and preparing students to live in a globalized society seem to echo the organization’s definition and stated purpose for social studies education.

However, unlike Mr. St. Jarre, I do not see history as merely a “record, not an analysis.” In *House of War*, James Carroll eloquently describes what history means to historians: “[it] is not a catalogue of events, not just a knowledge of their chronology. . . . History is, rather, the appreciation of how events relate to each other, if not causally, then mythically. Objectively but also personally. . . . Our concern is not only with what happened but how it felt, and how it set other things moving in the public realm and in the human heart.”²³ Perhaps this is what Mr. St. Jarre means when he refers to analysis by historians. It is certainly what teachers strive for when they introduce students to many of the ideas embedded in the social studies.

In the remainder of my comments, I want to explore Mr. St. Jarre’s perspectives on social studies education. To do this clearly, however, it is important to bring up three additional points that I believe should be part of the discussion. First, it’s a bit awkward to respond to recommendations based on anecdotal information. Certainly, such information is helpful, but

it is only part of the total picture.

Second, while Mr. St. Jarre alludes to the student population in America’s schools at the turn of the 20th century when he describes the development of a definition of social studies, he does not address this point when discussing the current status of social studies education. It seems to me that considering the makeup of the student population is a prerequisite for designing social studies programs for the 21st century.

Third, while Mr. St. Jarre does not describe social studies programs in elementary or middle schools, I think it is only fair to respond to his ideas about reinventing social studies from a K-12 perspective. How do we move forward with his suggestions on what should be occurring in secondary social studies classrooms — depth over breadth, exploring and critically examining ideas embedded in the social sciences, and using “Socratic discussions, critical reading, and analytical writing” without being inclusive? It seems that somewhere in the upper elementary grades and in middle school, students should master a core body of knowledge (content and ideas) and skills and acquire positive dispositions toward social studies. This is a tall order for elementary teachers, whose training typically is limited to survey history courses, introductory courses in the other social sciences, and a course on multicultural education. In my interactions with preservice teachers, I find elementary education majors are hard pressed to use students’ knowledge bases to engage them in learning that places a premium on key ideas in American and world history, geography, political science, and economics. They have difficulty maintaining students’ curiosity and guiding them to explore ideas in social studies. Middle school social studies teachers gain more breadth and depth in their academic preparation and seem more comfortable teaching social studies and the individual disciplines.

One method of addressing student engagement and core knowledge is for districts to create environments where K-8 teachers come together for the purpose of improving their social studies programs. Such a trusting environment leads to more interaction among the teachers and so to improved social studies programs. Where better to begin the discussion of ideas versus discrete information and depth versus breadth than among the teachers initially responsible for social studies instruction?

How do we prepare the secondary teachers described in “Reinventing Social Studies”? These are teachers who have a degree of mastery of the social sciences, who value depth of understanding, who are well grounded on the powerful questions that link the social studies, and who

possess the pedagogical skills to introduce and involve students in meaningful social studies learning. While Mr. St. Jarre does not address the preparation of 9-12 teachers in social studies education, I believe this question is also essential.

The issue I would like to explore centers on universities creating environments that encourage and reward faculty members in colleges of liberal arts and education to collaborate in developing teacher education programs that value the characteristics Mr. St. Jarre desires in secondary teachers. Universities need to reexamine the mission statements of colleges of liberal arts and education. History departments, for example, are interested in recruiting faculty members who are noted scholars and have national visibility. The reward system for tenure and promotion favors those who present papers at social science organizations, publish papers in scholarly journals, contribute to their scholarly organizations, and are competent teachers.

In colleges of education, the emphasis is also on scholarly recruitment and notable activities, but the vision is a broader one that includes creating knowledge that might prove useful to practicing K-12 educators. In departments of curriculum and instruction, educators pursue new knowledge in the areas of teaching and learning while developing and maintaining powerful teacher education programs in social studies education. Faculty responsibilities include examining social studies education programs around the world, interacting with school districts and with social studies teachers, and remaining active in professional organizations. While the reward system is similar to the one employed in colleges of liberal arts (good teaching and writing, presenting, and publishing scholarly papers), the emphasis on program development (at the national, state, and local levels) and involvement with the schools suggests significant differences.

Given this lack of connection between university social scientists and social studies educators, it is not surprising that collaboration between the two groups has been minimal at best. Diane Ravitch alludes to this point when describing the status of history in schools: "Historians did little or nothing . . . to save their subject."⁴ Creating university social science and social studies courses that would prepare secondary teachers with the knowledge and skills to do the things Mr. St. Jarre pro-

poses is a daunting task. While not impossible, it requires faculty members who are committed to improving the preservice preparation of social studies teachers. Likewise, university officials, deans, and tenure and promotion committees will need to develop creative paths that reward faculty members for their intellectual efforts.

At a societal level, there is much the social science and social studies communities can do to inform parents, business leaders, politicians, and others of the im-

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portance of social studies as a core subject in the K-12 curriculum. NCSS, for example, holds leadership institutes each summer with key local and state officers to: 1) develop promotional campaigns to inform the various constituencies of powerful social studies programs; 2) encourage collaboration between the national office, states, local councils, and individual members; and 3) identify successful strategies aimed at reaching out to national news media, education associations, and local, state, and national government leaders. In the last five years, after identifying evidence suggesting that the amount of time devoted to social studies in K-6 class-

rooms had diminished, NCSS leaders have taken the initiative and formed alliances with officers of other education organizations and business and community leaders to lobby for the inclusion of social studies/history as a core subject in the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

At another level, NCSS, other social science organizations, and other education organizations are informing their constituencies, as well as political and business leaders, of the impact NCLB has had on the K-12 curriculum: social studies and other subjects (art, music, physical education) are being squeezed out. As groups lobby to alter the K-8 curriculum to one that is math- and literacy-based at a skills level, educators are learning the value of trust and collaboration as they attempt to counter these efforts. Mr. St. Jarre's arguments certainly highlight the importance of the social studies in the curriculum.

While I think "top-down" approaches can be effective at reinventing social studies, I am not convinced they necessarily lead to significant improvements. For example, since the 1960s a number of changes have been instituted to improve the preparation of K-12 social studies teachers. Historians, other social scientists, and social studies educators have lobbied for changes

in the social studies major — changing requirements, adding or subtracting history courses, adding social science courses and electives outside of the social sciences. Meanwhile, social scientists, educators, and school officials have argued for changing education course requirements, adopting (or dropping) a practicum, and spending more or less time in student teaching assignments. While I would argue that the preparation of social studies teachers has improved as a result, the changes in classroom practice are barely noticeable. “Reinventing Social Studies” is a reminder that the task at hand is more difficult than we have thought. I would also argue that we have overlooked the essential players in this reform process — the students who populate our schools.

Who are the students who attend today’s K-12 schools? As a group they are as diverse as in any period in American history. In fact, the challenges and prospects teachers face may be more complex today than ever. For example, while race continues to be a factor, so is the blurring of races; differences in socioeconomic status may be more pronounced today than they were even in the early 1900s. As in the early 1900s, the flow of immigrants continues unabated, but their complexion is changing as more and more children from non-European countries populate our classrooms. Unlike those of a century ago, today’s children and adolescents are expected to attend school for 12 years, and schools are obligated to provide every student with a high-quality education. While this level of diversity could be described as overwhelming, it is also a rich source of experiences that can be used in creative ways.

What message should educators take from these changes as they attempt to forge a social studies curriculum that will prepare “students to live in a globalized world”? Why not ask students what connects with them, what arouses their curiosity, what they would like to know more about in social studies, and how they would like to demonstrate to various audiences their powerful learning in social studies? Once we got beyond the expected answers — “Nothing”; “I want to learn, but I don’t want to work”; “I want to be entertained” — what would students say? I suspect that, if they were in classrooms with teachers who were knowledgeable about their students, who possessed solid backgrounds in social studies, and who had the skills to lead them in a meaningful discussion about learning in the social studies, students would give us responses that would reinforce what we know about social studies in schools and the little we know about students.

I suspect that students’ conversations with these astute teachers would focus on these topics: 1) the simi-


larities and differences between their world and the worlds they read about and view on the Internet and television; 2) the range of colors, races, and genders in the groups they inhabit; 3) the desire to become good citizens; 4) the joys of being alive and living in a safe environment; and 5) the challenges they and others face as they graduate from school. Their conversations would also give us insights into their questions about knowledge and powerful ideas, the many ways people learn, what teachers can do to engage students in learning, how students and teachers feel about competition and collaboration, and how students would like to demonstrate to different audiences that they are becoming responsible individuals ready to participate in society. Let’s not leave out these players as we reinvent social studies.

Finally, regardless of our assessment of Mr. St. Jarre’s comments and those of the respondents, let’s not forget that change is needed if we are to improve the social studies. In that regard, Mr. St. Jarre is clearly on target, and so are the students who constantly tell us that social studies is the most boring subject area in the K-12 curriculum.

1. David W. Saxe, *Social Studies in Schools: A History of the Early Years* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 30, quoted in Ronald W. Evans, *Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), p. 6.

2. *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), p. 3.

3. James Carroll, *House of War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p. 37.

4. Diane Ravitch, “History’s Struggle to Survive in the Schools,” *OAH Magazine of History*, April 2007, p. 28. 

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