Practicing Teachers as Elementary Social Studies Methods Instructors: Issues in Preparing Preservice Elementary Teachers

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The threatened status of social studies instruction in elementary schools demands strong methods instruction to preserve the subject. This threatened status and other factors create issues specific to elementary social studies methods instruction. Moreover, university-level methods instruction can be idiosyncratic due to the various educational and professional backgrounds of the instructors. This study examined individuals serving in the “dual roles” of inservice teacher and elementary social studies methods instructor. While teaching the methods, participants encountered issues related to methods students, the filling of dual roles, and the status of elementary social studies and field placements. In addition, filling these dual roles facilitated their methods instruction through their ability to relate/react to methods students’ experiences and concerns.

Introduction

Elementary social studies methods instruction at the university level can often be idiosyncratic and difficult to characterize (Slekar, 2006). While there is generally an agreed-upon need to understand how methods courses can better prepare preservice teachers to engage in social studies practice to meet the needs of diverse student populations (e.g., McCall & Andringa, 1997; Ukpokodu, 2003), portraits of those typically instructing these courses are rare. Elementary social studies methods courses are often taught by instructors from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds, including inservice teachers who are generalists with no specialized background in social studies content. This study examined individuals serving in the “dual roles” of inservice teacher and elementary social studies methods instructor and seeks to add to the research literature concerning elementary social studies methods instruction by extending and updating the findings of Owens (1997) and Slekar (2006).

Elementary Social Studies Methods Instructors: What Are the Issues?

Several studies have identified six specific challenges facing elementary social studies methods instructors. The first challenge for methods instructors is overcoming the general negative perceptions of social studies held by many preservice elementary teachers (Henning & Yendol-Hoppey, 2004; Owens, 1997). Many preservice teachers have described their own past social studies courses as boring (Owens, 1997), a perception formulated during their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975, p. 65) when instruction generally emphasized textbooks and rote memorization (Henning & Yendol-Hoppey, 2004; McArthur, 2004). Attempts to overcome these negative experiences have at times met with little success — an especially unfortunate situation when teachers communicate their own dislike of the subject and reproduce the poor instruction they themselves once received, thus continuing a vicious cycle (Chapin & Messick, 1999; Turner, 1999).
A second challenge for methods instructors is the pervasive belief that other subjects in the curriculum are more desirable to teach than social studies. In Owens’ (1997) study, 33% of the preservice teachers surveyed reported their interest level for teaching social studies as “low,” a finding supported by many methods professors (Benson, 1998; McArthur, 2004; Slekar, 2006). This leads to an even greater challenge: How can preservice teachers get excited about the varied possibilities for social studies instruction when they lack interest in the field itself (McArthur, 2004; Owens, 1997; Slekar, 2006; Wade, 2003)?

A third challenge methods instructors face is confusion over the definition of social studies that, according to Owens (1997), can lead to an inadequate understanding of “the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of social studies” and a belief in social studies as simply “one of the academic disciplines in the social sciences” (p. 114). When teachers are unable to articulate a clear definition of social studies, it seems less likely that they will be able to deliver effective and meaningful instruction. Clearly, this situation is not entirely the fault of methods instructors. The history of social studies is full of conflicting views about its nature and definition (e.g., Barr, Barth, & Shermis 1977; Thornton, 2005); thus, it seems predictable that this lack of clarity might be reflected in teachers’ ideas and practices.

The fourth challenge is to persuade preservice elementary teachers to adopt and teach the social studies goal of working to improve society (Owens, 1997). Often, preservice teachers will agree with liberal and egalitarian ideals but then disagree on specific, contentious social issues related to reaching that ideal. Furthermore, many preservice teachers come from rural areas, small towns, or suburban communities with little experience or knowledge of diverse cultures (e.g., Henning & Yendol-Hoppey, 2004; McCall & Andringa, 1997; Owens, 1997; Ukpokodu, 2003). These preservice teachers bring biases, misconceptions, and stereotypes that prevent them from seeing the need for social change (McCall & Andringa, 1997; Ukpokodu, 2003). When preservice teachers hold conservative social beliefs, they often do not feel the need to teach with the goal of social change, thus putting them at odds with a central goal of social studies: “prepare young people to identify, understand, and work to solve problems facing our diverse nation in an increasingly interdependent world” (NCSS, 1994, p. 159).

A fifth challenge relates to the continuing expansion of the number of topics deemed pertinent to social studies education at the preservice level (Owens, 1997). As content demands increase, so does pressure on instructors to prepare preservice elementary teachers to teach this new content adequately. Currently, methods courses are overburdened with demands, thus begging the question: “How should teachers be educated to tend the curricular-instructional gate?” (Thornton, 2001, p. 72). This burden also relates to the fact that elementary social studies teachers may lack the content knowledge they need to respond to these demands (Chapin & Messick, 1999; Fritzer & Kumar, 2002; Owens, 1997; Parker & Jarolimek, 1997; Slekar, 2006; Thornton, 2001; Ukpokodu, 2003). In such cases, methods instructors are faced with an instructional dilemma concerning how much content knowledge versus how much pedagogical knowledge they should teach.

A final challenge for methods instructors is the difficulty of utilizing concurrent field placements effectively (Owens, 1997). In particular, many of the instructional strategies suggested in most elementary social studies methods courses, such as role-playing, simulation, and inquiry projects, are active and social learning experiences that are often at odds with the more traditional teaching styles of cooperating teachers. In certain cases, cooperating teachers actively discourage the use of activities learned in methods courses and encourage
interns to emulate their own teaching styles (Yeager & Wilson, 1997).

Further adding to the field placement challenge are school settings in which social studies is omitted from standardized testing and accountability plans, that makes what is learned in a methods course impossible to put into practice (Henning & Yendol-Hoppey, 2004; Yendol-Hoppey & Tilford, 2004). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates an accountability model to be used by America’s public schools, and under its provisions, performance standards serve as benchmarks for improvements that must show “adequate yearly progress” (AYP); all schools must show continual progress toward meeting their AYP goals or face negative consequences (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). Because measures of social studies achievement are not included in the NLCB accountability system, social studies is in sharp decline, prompting some to initiate nationwide discussion of how to salvage social studies in the school curriculum (Howard, 2003). The severity of the situation is such that “members of visiting accreditation teams have heard administrators and faculty proudly announce that they do not teach any social studies or science in elementary school because they focus all their attention and energy on reading and math” (Fritzer & Kumar, 2002, p. 51). Moreover, this situation is exacerbated in schools with poor test scores, “where nearly half of the principals report moderate or large decreases in social studies instruction” (NEA, 2004, p. 27). As a result, the actual amount of time devoted to social studies instruction often ends up being determined by administrators. The influence of high-stakes testing has produced a situation where powerful social studies instruction is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible (Yeager, 2005), and only serves to reinforce the perception among methods students that social studies is of no value, thus increasing the likelihood that Owens’s (1997) second challenge, that other subjects in the curriculum are more desirable and important to teach than social studies, may never be overcome.

**Rationale for the Study and Guiding Questions**

Given the currently threatened status of social studies instruction in elementary schools, there is a need for strong elementary social studies methods instructors. As noted earlier, often teacher education programs are required to seek out methods instructors from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds, including practicing teachers. This study seeks to uncover what inservice teachers serving as methods instructors identify as the issues they face as methods instructors. Moreover, the study seeks to uncover what issues are directly related to serving in these dual roles. Our research questions include the following:

1. What do these inservice teachers serving as methods instructors believe are the issues they encounter teaching the methods course?

2. What issues encountered by these inservice teachers serving as methods instructors are directly related to serving in these dual roles?

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was based on a constructivist framework (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1994), which is especially well suited to an analysis of social studies education and teacher education. Notions of strict objectivity in social studies education have long been dismissed by many scholars (e.g. Novick, 1988; Loewen, 1995). A constructivist stance has also been adopted by many teacher educators who acknowledge the complexity of teaching practice: “The relationship between such knowledge and practice in its complexity is always open to
discussion and interpretation” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 59).

Constructivism is not a strictly dictated set of beliefs or procedures but an overarching descriptor of a family of methods and philosophies to provide researchers with a general direction; it merely suggests “directions along which to look,” rather than “provide descriptions of what to see” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 221). Constructivism views each individual as the central agent in creating his or her own understanding of the world through experience (Crotty, 1998). Central to constructivism is an inquiry into individuals’ experiences and a description of the world as felt and understood by the individuals (Schwandt, 1994). In the case of this study, the experiences were those of the inservice methods instructors as they felt and understood them.

The intent of the study was to determine how the instructors’ constructed meanings of issues, events, situations, and beliefs about elementary social studies influenced how they performed their role as methods instructors. Experience formed the basis of these constructed meanings; this process occurred over time and was influenced by the individuals’ actions, personal histories, and contextual factors (Schwandt, 1994). Kincheloe (2004) recognized the importance of this: “It is naive and dangerous to think that teachers can become the rigorous professionals envisioned here without a conceptual understanding of contemporary and past societies and the sociocultural, political, and economic forces that have shaped them” (p. 51).

Social studies researchers have also noted the importance of studying teachers’ mental constructions (Armento, 1996; Cuban, 1991; Slekar, 1998; Thornton, 1991). In particular, Slekar (1998) has thoughtfully addressed the issue of “how their beliefs (teachers) about the teaching and learning of social studies in elementary school are affected by their view of social studies knowledge” (p. 489). Nespor (1987) also points out that these mental constructions take the form of beliefs that must be examined: “To understand teaching from teachers’ perspectives, we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work” (p. 323).

Methods

Our choice of a qualitative design was based on Patton’s (1990) assertion that the intent of qualitative research is to “provide perspective rather than truth, empirical assessment of local decision makers’ theories of action rather than generation and verification of universal theories, and context-bound explorations rather than generalizations” (p. 491). We employed a case study method-ology to uncover “both what is common and what is particular about the case” (Stake, 1994, p. 238) through the analysis of multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994). For this study, a case was defined as a “single bounded system or an instance...” (Merriam, 1988, p. 153); each participant served as a specific case. One of the most important factors in the selection of a case study methodology is that case studies explore in detail the how and why of specific situations (Feagin et al, 1991). Case studies are suitable for answering not only how, but also what (Yin, 1994).

Study Design, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Data sources included interviews, observations of social studies methods instruction, and document analysis. This approach is based on Patton’s (1990) belief that “[q]ualitative methods consist of three kinds of data collection: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (2) direct observation; and (3) written documents” (p. 10). All of these sources were used to create a comprehensive description of the participants. The use of multiple data sources was also based on Yin’s (1994) suggestion to use multiple sources of data when constructing
case studies in order to increase the reliability of the data and to provide multiple examples of the participants’ approach to the topics of interest. Finally, interviews allowed the participants to explain the issues they experienced during the process, as well as providing a frame of reference for the observations of methods instructors. Data were collected in the following sequence: 1) Following an initial observation, participants provided a copy of their syllabus and were interviewed by the first author; 2) this initial interview was followed by additional observations of each participant; 3) after completion of the observations, a final interview was conducted.

**Research Setting**

Florida, where the study was conducted, uses the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) as its high-stakes testing program to assess schools under NCLB. Administered to students in grades 3 through 11, the FCAT contains two basic components: criterion-referenced tests, which measure selected benchmarks in mathematics, reading, science, and writing from the Sunshine State Standards, and norm-referenced tests in reading and mathematics, which measure individual student performance against national norms (Florida Department of Education, 2006). Since the FCAT does not assess social studies achievement, social studies has nearly disappeared from the curriculum in many Florida schools (Fritzer & Kumar, 2002; Henning & Yendol-Hoppey, 2004; Yendol-Hoppey & Tilford, 2004).

**Participants**

Participants were selected as a result of criterion sampling “to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 1990, p. 176). Participants selected for the study met two criteria: They were inservice teachers, and they instructed an elementary social studies methods course, which created dual roles for the participants as they served concurrently as inservice teachers and methods instructors. Traditionally, elementary methods courses are taught by professors and graduate students trained in the specific discipline. However, few advanced graduate students specialize in elementary social studies, thus creating a need to recruit advanced graduate students who are “generalists” or who specialize in other disciplines. In situations when no advanced graduate students are available, inservice teachers with a master’s degree in education are often recruited. Among the participants, two were part-time advanced graduate students specializing in literacy and also serving as inservice teachers; one was an inservice teacher with a master’s degree in Special Education. Furthermore, all three participants were teachers at the field placement site of roughly half of their methods students.

The three participants — two female and one male — were inservice elementary teachers under the age of 35 with at least five years of teaching experience who instructed a section of a social studies methods course. Two of the participants taught fourth grade; one taught first grade. All were White/European American and from middle-class backgrounds. For one participant, this was the first experience with any university-level instruction; another had taught the social studies methods course during the previous semester, while the third had previous experience teaching the social studies methods course, along with a methods course in literacy.

The first participant, Alexis Johnson, was a fifth-year teacher. At the time of the study, she was in her second year teaching first grade at Petty Research and Development School, a K–12 laboratory school affiliated with the university, offering the social studies methods course. The Petty School served students from all parts of the county, and the school population intentionally reflected the race, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics of the state as a whole. Alexis believed Petty was not “as
concerned with high-stakes testing as some other places are” and was more focused on “having kids be very well rounded.” Alexis was also a doctoral student in curriculum and instruction at the university, focusing on reading and literacy and on the professional development of teachers. During her teacher education program, Alexis took one social studies methods course taught by a dynamic instructor whom she described as “very inspiring” (personal communication, March 14, 2006). Her instructor focused on using social studies to integrate all academic subject areas, and Alexis used the unit she created during the course as an example for her methods students. Recently, Alexis became a National Board-Certified elementary teacher.

During the semester in which the study took place, Alexis was instructing the methods course for the second time, having done so the previous semester. The methods students in the social studies methods course Alexis taught were comprised of interns from Petty as well as from Elise Elementary, which is located in a small, predominantly middle-class town close to the university and serving a mostly White population, with a small percentage of African-American and Hispanic students. The school’s web site noted its status as an “A” school the two previous years, which is a grade assigned by the state based entirely on student test scores.

Dan Charles was an experienced fourth-grade teacher in his eighth year at Owen Elementary. His only memories of social studies instruction as an elementary student were “memorizing the states and the capitals, memorize where this goes on the map, memorize whose export…,” all of which he felt was “very, very less than relevant to me” (personal communication, March 17, 2006). Recently Dan became a National Board-Certified elementary teacher. During the semester in which the study was conducted, Dan was teaching the social studies methods course for the first time.

At Owen Elementary, Dan Charles taught third and fifth grades during his first year and fourth grade for the last seven years. In the school year before the study, the NCLB accountability system had labeled Owen Elementary as failing to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) due to poor performance of a student subgroup on standardized tests. This created pressure to improve student achievement in the assessed subjects. The students in Dan’s social studies methods class was comprised of interns from Owen Elementary and Moore Cooperative School, a K–8 school located in a small town 20 miles from the university. Also in a rural setting, Moore served a mostly White population with a very small percentage of African-American students. From comments made by Dan’s methods students, it was clear that instruction at Moore tended to be more traditional and based on a prescribed curriculum in each subject area (class discussion, March 22, 2006).

Nora Iglesias was an experienced fourth-grade teacher at Thebaut Elementary, located within walking distance of the university. During her undergraduate teacher preparation program, she had one social studies methods course, which she described as being “very poorly taught by a retired teacher” (personal communication, March 16, 2006). However, Nora’s teacher education program also included a general methods course, in which she wrote a large unit on the state of Alaska that she used as a model during her methods instruction. The semester during which the study was conducted was Nora’s first experience teaching the social studies methods course.

Thebaut Elementary had experienced scheduling changes in the past few years that limited the time spent on social studies instruction. In spite of these pressures, Nora reported that social studies instruction was valued at her school and instructional time for social studies was a required part of each grade level’s daily schedule. Nora’s methods students came from Thebaut and Howe Elementary school, located
on the outskirts of the town where the university was located. Howe’s AYP status was listed as provisional, but the school had earned an “A” grade from the state the three previous years. Despite this grade, the comments made by Nora and the methods students placed at Howe indicated that Howe was a lower-performing school than Thebaut.

**Course Information**

Because this elementary social studies methods course typically had been taught by instructors without a specialized elementary social studies background, the faculty coordinator for the course developed a recommended syllabus and suggested certain readings and materials in order to facilitate instruction. Nonetheless, instructors were given a lot of freedom to teach the course as they wished, within the guidelines established by the faculty coordinator. The course served as the only social studies methods course in the elementary teacher education program. The provided syllabus stated:

Throughout the social studies methods course, you will learn how to use the tools of inquiry as a teacher in a social studies classroom. Inquiry is a “questioning” stance that good teachers assume as professionals who plan for, carry out, and study the impact of their instruction.

While the course closely aligned to the “reflective inquiry” vision of social studies, it incorporated elements of the “social science” and “informed social criticism” visions into the provided syllabus as well (Martorella, 1994). The “Key Tasks” of the course were stated as follows: “The content exploration should result in the prospective teacher presenting the following: an enduring understanding (generalization) supported by a synthesis of content from a variety of resources, and identification of related standards.” James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, which all of the students read and for which they developed class presentations, was included because it represented an “informed social criticism” vision. The course did not focus exclusively on the three visions mentioned above; it presented all five visions of elementary social studies as described by Martorella (1994); these were discussed in detail during the first class meeting.

The syllabus described a suggested culminating assignment, the social studies integrated teaching project, as “a mini-unit integrating social studies and another content area…This mini-unit will be a culmination of all that we learned this semester and consist of three lessons.” Being the first unit that the methods students had ever planned and actually taught, this assignment turned out to be quite challenging. During the final two class meetings, the methods students made ten-minute presentations on their units by sharing their lesson plans and providing student work samples.

**Interviews**

Patton (1990) stated that “qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (p. 278). In this study, interviews made instructors’ perspectives explicit by giving the participants an opportunity to explain themselves and their situations (Spradley, 1979). Interviewing was a “powerful way to gain insight into educational issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives constitute education” (Seidman, 1991, p. 7). Much of the data was generated from interviews based on Patton’s (1990) statement: “The raw data of interviews are the actual quotations spoken by interviewees. There is no substitute for these data” (p. 347).

Two interviews, lasting approximately 60–90 minutes each, were conducted with each participant. The first interview yielded data about the participant’s personal and professional background, beliefs about teaching, and major areas of interest (see appendix A). The questions for the first protocol originated from
the first author’s personal experiences as a methods instructor, his initial observations of all the participants, and relevant recent research. Three specific articles informed the creation of the first protocol. Owens (1997) provided information about the challenges of elementary social studies. Yendol-Hoppey and Tilford (2004) shed light on the contextual issues facing elementary social studies methods instruction and the lack of professional development focused on elementary social studies. Thornton (2005) highlighted the “content versus methods” tension typically found in elementary social studies methods courses.

The questions for the second interview were developed using the following steps: First, the transcripts from the initial interview were reviewed for missing data and to determine areas in need of clarification, verification, or extension. Next, methods course observation field notes were reviewed to determine actions, events, or statements in need of clarification, verification, or explanation. Finally, a general protocol was developed for use with all participants, and individual protocols were developed for each participant. Included in both of these protocols were specific examples of actions, events, or statements used as text for the participants’ responses, in order to gain deeper access to their beliefs and insights. Included in these examples were statements made by an instructor or by his or her students during the previous interviews or observations, which were presented to all the participants to add further depth to the data. Moreover, some comments made by methods students during class that were unknown to the participants at the time were made known to them, in order to provide another perspective to which the participants could respond.

All interviews were semi-structured based on Patton’s (1990) interview guide approach in which the format, topics, and issues were covered in a specified outline form and for which the interviewer determined the order and wording of each question. The interview guide allowed for adjustments of each interview and participant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher and reviewed by the participant for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Observations**

In order to collect data and gain greater insight into comments made during the initial interview, the first author conducted observations based on Patton’s (1990) statement that in addition to interviews, “the description of events observed remains the essence of qualitative inquiry” (p. 392). During the observations, the first author paid special attention to how the participants’ beliefs about social studies surfaced during methods instruction, including belief statements and actions representing or related to new or previously stated beliefs. Also during the observations, the first author paid close attention to events, actions, or statements that represented an issue encountered during the participants’ methods instruction for future verification.

Data collection included five to six three-hour observations of social studies methods instruction for each participant. These observations were conducted as direct observations (Patton, 1990). Direct observation differs from participant observation in that, as a direct observer, the first author did not become a participant in the instruction and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. In this study, direct observation was the only type of observation possible, given that each instructor was responsible for the section he or she taught. All observations concluded with a conversation with the instructors to give them an opportunity to discuss the class. During each observation, extensive field notes were taken to describe the events that took place and comments made during class. The field notes then became a source of data.
Written Documents

Written documents were examined to provide further data about the participants (Patton, 1990). However, access to written documents in this study was limited. The participants were asked to provide any documents they felt would shed light on their methods instruction, but they had no documents to offer. The majority of the data generated by written documents was from the provided syllabus, which each participant slightly modified to reflect the logistical particularities of his or her section, such as contact information and class days. Nonetheless, the example syllabus did provide insights into the suggested structure and focus of the course. In addition, the books and readings suggested in the provided syllabus were used as sources of data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred as a process of “examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence” (Yin, 1994, p. 102). It proceeded in order to generate useable information about the areas of interest of the study, and it occurred “within-case” and “cross-case” to ensure high-quality accessible data while generating documentation of the analysis, as well as retention of the data and the associated analysis after the study was completed (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Thus, we proceeded with data reductions in the following order:

- Free coding by the first author after the first round of interviews and then data analysis and development of codes to be used as a starting point to analyze instructional observation data
- Codes verified by the second author
- Data analysis after all observations were completed using the previously generated codes, adjustments of codes as necessary after this analysis, and then use of codes to analyze the teacher-provided documents and the final interview data
- Analysis of data to identify the emerging themes across the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and verification of analyses by each author
- Reduction of the data set on the basis of the identified themes in order to draw conclusions (Patton, 1990)
- Presentation of conclusions to participants for verification

In order to keep the interpretations, reductions, and resulting conclusions closely linked to the data, we incorporated a series of verification steps into the process. Investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1984) was especially important in light of the difficulty of understanding the complex interactions of the two roles that each of the participants performed. We performed member checking throughout the project, including the verification of findings, conclusions, and final presentation.

Findings

The participants appeared to be dedicated to social studies teaching and learning. All expressed hope that their methods students would gain a better understanding of how to teach social studies effectively in the current high-stakes environment. Although they each differed with regard to personal and educational backgrounds and teaching experiences, all pursued a vibrant social studies practice. In doing so, they hoped to provide their students with positive examples of social studies practice and to demonstrate the value of such instruction. While teaching, the participants encountered issues related to methods students, the status of elementary social studies and field placements, and the filling of dual roles.
Issues Related to Methods Students

Beliefs of Methods Students. The use of the book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, more than any other single experience in the three methods courses, provided the most striking illumination of students' deeply held personal beliefs about social studies content. The book provoked strong negative reactions among many students in Dan’s and Alexis’s classes. They voiced concerns such as “kids will end up fighting over history...” (D. Charles, class discussion, March 22, 2006), and questions such as “Do you really think she would teach her kids this stuff, like all the Indians die...now go home and have a feast?” (A. Johnson, class discussion, March 7, 2006). One student asked Alexis, “How do you teach all this bad stuff?” Alexis responded, “I do not teach Thanksgiving... I teach a unit about immigration” (class discussion, March 7, 2006), and then proceeded to explain how and why she did this unit.

Reflecting on these comments during their final interviews, Alexis and Dan made similar observations: “They held their experiences as stronger, so they thought that this guy (the author) was the one who was lying, not their classroom teachers” (D. Charles, personal communication, May 4, 2006) and “It just shows how ingrained those beliefs are and how difficult it is to change beliefs...” (A. Johnson, personal communication, May 10, 2006).

Paradoxically, many of the students in Alexis’s class began the semester wanting to know “how to not teach ‘white man’s history’” (A. Johnson, personal communication, May 10, 2006) but then strongly resisted when presented with an alternative perspective to traditional "white man's history."

The conservative beliefs voiced by Dan’s and Alexis’s students seem to reflect the conservative and traditional nature of teachers as documented by various researchers over the years (e.g., Cuban, 1984, 1993; Goodlad, 1990; Lortie, 1975; Owens, 1997; Sarason, 1996). The disconnect between students’ professed desire to not teach “white man’s history” and their actual encounters with alternative perspectives on history has also been explored (e.g., Hinchey, 2004). Moreover, teaching the traditional narrative of history is consistent with a status quo that thus far had served these mostly middle-class White students well, as was represented by a comment from one of Dan’s students: “You want kids to question things but not everything” (class discussion, March 22, 2006).

In contrast, the students in Nora’s class expressed liberal beliefs when discussing the book and agreed with its perspective. For example, one student stated, “This book made me really think hard about why I was taught the version of history I was...because I was in a mostly White school” (class discussion, April 12, 2006). The main factor that seemed to differentiate Nora's class from the other two sections was a subtle difference in the students themselves. Nora’s class had a majority of female, middle-class White students; two female African-American students and two female Hispanic students were also in the class. While the presence of minority students in the other two sections did not seem to change the tone of the conversation in those classes, the outspoken nature of these four particular students in Nora's class made a real difference. During a presentation on the *Lies My Teacher Told Me* chapter concerning the invisibility of racism in American textbooks, one African-American student’s voice cracked with emotion when she stated, “Some of the things in this book made me mad; these are things I should have known as a child” (class discussion, April 19, 2006). It is impossible to know whether the shift in the class’s opinion could be attributed to this or any other single incident, but this student’s comments made a noticeable impact on her classmates.

Tension between Content versus Methods. All participants noted their students’ lack of knowledge concerning the content of the disciplines that make up social studies, which compromised the participants’ abilities to
instruct the methods students in how to teach social studies. Although content knowledge specific to all social studies disciplines was lacking, the shortage of history content was most conspicuous, as Nora noted, “They actually know a whole…lot less than I do” (personal communication, May 2, 2006). Dan noted a similar situation: “They have had a real, real weak, limited background in the history we’ve taught. And they’ve had to do a lot of work to figure things out” (personal communication, May 4, 2006). The instructors found that they often had to point out historical inaccuracies in lesson plans before the methods students could teach them. Thornton (2001) raised this issue, questioning what specific social studies subject matter preservice teachers needed to study and what they needed to master as the best methods for effectively teaching social studies. He argued that the problem begins before the students get to the methods course, since “what teachers study of the social sciences in their liberal arts courses may be only loosely coupled with the school social studies courses they are expected to teach” (p. 74).

Students’ Negative Experiences. As in Owens (1997) study, the methods students’ prior negative experiences as schoolchildren challenged the participants’ methods instruction. While recalling an activity during the first class, Nora commented, “I’d say over half of them had negative experiences that they shared” (personal communication, May 2, 2006). These negative experiences included reading a textbook and answering questions or rote memorization activities. As Dan explained, “It was all segmented. There were no connections. It was… ‘I had to know the states and capitals’” (personal communication, May 4, 2006). Other methods professors have noted that such negative experiences create a special difficulty for elementary social studies methods instructors (Benson, 1998; McArthur, 2004; Slekar, 2006).

Issues Related to the Status of Elementary Social Studies and Field Placements

Lack of Professional Development in the Field Placement. All participants noted the lack of professional development opportunities for social studies, and this situation challenged their social studies practices in their roles as teachers and methods instructors. Alexis could not remember ever attending a teacher inservice for social studies: “My first response [to why this is so] is that I think it is because it’s not tested on FCAT; nobody cares about it” (personal communication, March 14, 2006). Nora made a similar complaint, “There’s so few inservices and things like that focused on specifically teaching social studies” (personal communication, March 16, 2006). Although Dan remembered attending inservices in the past, he wished more were provided by the district (personal communication, March 17, 2006). This lack of professional development for social studies instruction has been noted previously in the literature. Typically, teachers who wish to improve their social studies skills or knowledge must either study social studies research on their own or seek out and pay for their own workshops (Knighton, 2003; Yendol-Hoppey & Tilford, 2004).

Lack of Time and Respect for Social Studies Instruction. A major challenge to the participants’ methods instruction was the lack of social studies instructional time provided to the methods students by their cooperating teachers. This issue surfaced during the students’ presentations of their units, as each commented on his or her time constraints.

The three participants also reported a subtle, but noticeable, lack of respect for social studies by their methods students, which they related to the fact that the subject was not included on the FCAT exam. Dan and Alexis both recalled situations in which methods students expressed concern about investing instructional time in social studies for fear of losing time that could be devoted to FCAT preparation. One such incident occurred in
Alexis’s class: “One of them was concerned that taking time to do extended projects would detract from ‘real learning’ that they needed to show on the FCAT” (personal communication, March 14, 2006). Dan recalled many incidents “where a lot of people would bring up the FCAT, and say ‘we can’t do that because of the FCAT’” (personal communication, May 4, 2006). Nora was also convinced that this lack of respect was related to the untested status of social studies: “Until it’s tested and used for accountability purposes, I do not think that it will have the respect. I do not think it will get the attention” (personal communication, May 2, 2006). Other researchers have noted the imperiled status of elementary social studies in the high-stakes testing environment (Henning & Yendol-Hoppey, 2004; Rock et al., 2006; Fritzer and Kumar, 2002; VanFossen, 2005).

Lack of Examples of Social Studies Instruction. Concern about the lack of examples of social studies instruction emerged in the methods students’ comments in class discussions. During the presentations of their units at the end of the semester, the issue became even more apparent when some students revealed that their social studies unit was the only social studies teaching that occurred in their field placement for the entire semester. Owens (1997) stated that the lack of instructional examples could be related to cooperating teachers’ simple lack of desire to teach the subject. He found that “[a] third of the participants (33.3 percent) reported their directing teachers were either ‘uninterested’ or ‘very uninterested’ in teaching social studies” (p. 117). The omission of social studies from classrooms has also been reported: “In many cases, social studies was granted thirty minutes a week or was not part of the weekly schedule at all” (Yendol-Hoppey & Tilford, 2004, p. 22). This situation also impacted what was covered in methods courses: “This made connecting what they were learning in methods coursework difficult” (Yendol-Hoppey & Tilford, 2004, p. 22) and “counterproductive” (Owens, 1997, p. 117).

Cooperating Teachers Mandating Content and/or Methods. A field placement issue not directly related to the status of social studies was the practice of cooperating teachers mandating either the content or instructional methods of the interns’ social studies units: “[The provided topic] was our only option because this is the only unit they do this semester” (N. Iglesias, class discussion, April 19, 2006). In other cases, the cooperating teacher mandated the content, instructional method, and amount of instructional time. As one methods student in Dan’s class explained, “We had to stay within the constraints we were given” (class discussion, April 26, 2006). Yeager and Wilson (1997) noted a similar situation at the secondary level: “Cooperating teachers actively discouraged the use of inquiry-based teaching methods and considered them to be too impractical or inefficient” (p. 124). Owens (1997) illustrated how the current situation may be more troubling than in the past: “Over 30% of the participants were placed with directing teachers whom they described as having a ‘traditional’ teaching style” (p. 117).

Issues Related to Filling Dual Roles of Inservice Elementary Teacher and Elementary Social Studies Methods Instructor

Participant’s Content and Theoretical Knowledge. The participants felt that they lacked a deep understanding of the content of all the disciplines associated with social studies as well as the theoretical basis of social studies education. This issue affected Alexis’s methods practice: “Sometimes I feel like I am talking about things I do not have a lot of depth of knowledge about” (personal communication, May 10, 2006). The participants’ difficulties are similar to those of the methods students described by Thornton (2005). In addition, this issue also related to the participants’ individual backgrounds. As noted earlier, both Dan and Nora had methods
Instruction that they described as “poorly taught” (N. Iglesias, personal communication, March 16, 2006) and “not real thrilled with it” (D. Charles, personal communication, March 16, 2006). However, Alexis had methods instruction she described as “inspiring” (personal communication, March 14, 2006). Interestingly, when the participants did note strength in a particular content area, it was related to specific aspects of their personal or professional background. For example, both Nora and Dan expressed confidence in their knowledge of Florida history, which is covered in fourth grade. Moreover, Alexis noted content strengths related to her experiences in high school social studies classes.

Credibility. The participants’ status as in-service teachers, for the most part, enhanced their credibility with their methods students. Asked about this issue, Alexis reported: “It’s amazing. I think that they listen more to what I say because I am actually doing this work every day than they would listen to somebody who was a professor at the university” (personal communication, March 14, 2006). Nora reported that using her own classroom for methods instruction even helped her credibility: “I loved it. I can’t imagine trying to teach somewhere else like in a college classroom” (personal communication, March 14, 2006). Dan also noted a decisive factor regarding credibility:

In their (methods students) minds, because you’re two feet away from a classroom or one year away, they don’t consider you in the same area or the same field as someone who has been in there this morning or five minutes ago or right there. (personal communication, March 17, 2006).

Negotiations for Instructional Time and Freedom. The participants’ roles in negotiations for instructional time and freedom were quite divergent. When asked about helping methods students talk to their cooperating teachers, Alexis noted: “Another disadvantage for me, especially being on site, is fielding other teachers who may not see social studies in the same light as I do…” (personal communication, March 14, 2006). Alexis mentioned a teacher at another school who was mandating the content of a methods student’s unit: “There would have been an attempt to negotiate using the university supervisor; that’s their job…I would not approach the teacher” (personal communication, May 10, 2006).

Conversely, Dan felt that his ability to negotiate with teachers at his school was an advantage and an opportunity to teach the methods students to do the same: “I am able to negotiate more because I know the conditions. I know most of the teachers…” (personal communication, March 17, 2006). In addition, Dan advertised his services during methods class: “If you are ever having trouble where I can help you, let me know” (class discussion, March 22, 2006). In contrast to the other participants, Nora did not do any negotiating for her methods students; she did not see the need for it.

The differences in the participants’ comments most likely related to their professional backgrounds and differences in the schools in which they worked. While Alexis was experienced, she had been at her current school for only two years. This might account for her hesitation in approaching her fellow teachers. On the other hand, Dan was an equally experienced teacher, but his entire career had been at one school. Dan’s length of tenure and familiarity with the other teachers at Owen might have made him more comfortable in approaching his colleagues and asking for concessions for his methods students. Nora was equally as experienced and had been at her school for four years. However, she did not see the need to negotiate for her methods students, possibly due to the status of social studies at her school. Social studies was included in the daily schedule at Thebaut, although it was of lesser importance because of the practice of remov-
ing at-risk students for FCAT remediation and other pull-out services during that time. Social studies teaching thus took place at times, but the cooperating teachers were less concerned with the substance of social studies instruction, since it was considered “filler” in the schedule.

Miscellaneous Advantages of Filling Dual Roles. Another advantage was the ability of the participants to provide real-life examples of social studies instruction and student work. Through the use of video, Alexis provided her methods students with examples of her teaching first-grade students, for example, from her unit on immigration (personal communication, March 14, 2006). The use of examples from the participants’ elementary practice was evident in almost every methods class observed, as Nora also noted: “All the time I’m talking or showing them something that happens in my fourth-grade room” (personal communication, March 16, 2006). Dan was particularly adept at using student work from his fourth-grade class. On one occasion, Dan provided his methods students with examples of the “RAFT” strategy from his classroom (class discussion, March 22, 2006).

The advantages of filling these dual roles have not been fully chronicled in previous research, but they do possibly represent a means of bridging the gap between the realities of social studies instruction in schools and the social studies practices encouraged by university-based social studies professionals. This gap was described by Leming (1989) as the “two cultures” of social studies. According to Leming (1989), “There exists in social studies a persistent abyss which separates the teaching lives of practicing classroom teachers from the research interests and methods class preparation of future social studies teachers” (p. 404). Leming argued that these two distinct cultures within the social studies profession are separated by their purposes; that is, the university-based social studies “intelligentsia” is more focused on creating social change, whereas real teachers are less concerned with social change and more focused on traditional practices that have been “proven” to work. During the final interviews for this study, Leming’s “two cultures” concept was introduced to the participants, who then discussed the potential of someone serving in these dual roles to bridge the gap. According to Dan:

*I think I can do it a lot more than maybe people in other situations can, because one of the things I’m going to try to do more of is use my video in my classroom. But by having them see that these are real kids, and it doesn’t have to look like the ideal perfect lesson that you might see sometimes, in order to do a good job teaching social studies, I think that it helps the (methods) students see that what’s in this book can happen in this room with these kids, believe it or not (personal communication, May 4, 2006).*

Nora commented:

*I feel like I was successful in that role as an instructor. That was one of the things I really enjoyed, and I could sense [it]...when I would start telling stories about my classroom or students I’ve had, or lessons I’ve taught, or just strategies that have worked or haven’t worked (personal communication, May 2, 2006).*

Alexis confirmed the other participants’ viewpoints but cited the ability of the methods students to see her as a teacher who actually does “in-depth stuff” as the key to bridging the gap between what is espoused in a methods textbook and what happens in a real classroom (personal communication, May 10, 2006).

While the potential advantages of serving in these dual roles are real, it could be argued that the participants’ observations are not well-grounded in the social studies research literature and in a thorough knowledge of social studies pedagogical practices. However, their
observations should not be dismissed. They reveal some of the interesting possibilities that arise when inservice teachers form strong partnerships with university-based personnel in order to enhance methods instruction.

Discussion and Recommendations

Overall, filling dual roles gave these teachers unique insights into the status of social studies and the ability to relate and react to the experiences and concerns of the methods students. The participants’ instruction was facilitated by the structured nature of the course materials, the participants’ professional experiences as elementary teachers, and their hard work and professionalism as methods instructors. Yet, while the participants served ably as methods instructors, it must be acknowledged that some things are lost when instructors with limited preparation and content knowledge teach an elementary social studies methods course. Indeed, the participants felt able to communicate a basic understanding of sound social studies teaching practices (e.g., historical inquiry methods) to their methods students. However, they did not have the background to be able to explore or model these practices in any depth. It must also be said that, even if they did have the background, they may have found themselves limited by lack of interest and knowledge among their methods course students.

Nonetheless, there are ways that instructors who serve in these dual roles can be better supported by the universities who hire them. First, at the field placement level, the university supervisors should have a more clearly identified role in negotiating and monitoring the time and instructional freedom that preservice students have to teach their social studies units; this would increase the likelihood of better application of methods course instruction and relieve some of the pressure on students to negotiate a space for themselves in the classroom. Also, university professors and supervisors could offer increased support for elementary social studies instruction by providing schools with more examples of it — for example, through demonstration lessons at the school sites, sample lesson plans, or online video clips.

At the methods course level, four suggestions could bolster the efforts of inservice social studies methods instructors. First, efforts should continue to recruit methods course instructors from the ranks of advanced graduate students with academic backgrounds in one of the social studies disciplines who may even have secondary or middle school social studies experience. Second, as an introductory activity, all methods students and new methods instructors should be able to observe exemplary social studies teachers. The availability of web clips that illustrate such instruction (e.g., through NCSS or the Annenberg Foundation) facilitates this kind of orientation activity. Third, methods instructors should observe each other, as well as university faculty, teaching a methods class in order to share practices and provide examples for new instructors. Fourth, university faculty should develop a common social studies methods reading packet for new instructors in order to build their theoretical knowledge and understanding of critical issues.

Two particular issues should be addressed programmatically within teacher education departments. First, a greater effort is needed to structure methods students’ class schedules so that they can observe social studies instruction within the time constraints of a particular school district. This would enable methods students to make the theory-to-practice connections that are usually the stated goal of a concurrent field placement. Finally, in order to address the content versus methods issue, an alignment of the social science requirements for preservice teachers could be considered to better meet the needs of future teachers. A reasonable place to begin would be requiring all preservice elementary teachers to take at least one U.S. history course and one U.S. government course so that they will be able to
address the content covered in most state curriculum standards.

Three avenues for future research on inservice teachers serving as methods instructors deserve particular attention. First, and most importantly, research needs to further explore the advantages of instructors serving in these dual roles. Although not the primary focus of this study, the advantages of the dual roles were evident, especially in regard to closing the “theory to practice gap” and connecting the “two cultures” of social studies education described by Leming (1989, 1992). Second, further research needs to explore the theoretical knowledge of instructors filling these dual roles. The findings of this study suggest that a lack of theoretical knowledge was not a "deal-breaker," but it was clear that the instructors often felt they were on shaky theoretical ground and perhaps approached the content more hesitantly and superficially than they would with stronger social studies background knowledge. Key readings from social studies research could assist generalist, inservice elementary teachers in developing a working theoretical and/or conceptual knowledge that would enhance their methods practice.

Finally, elementary social studies methods instruction must also address more directly the current high-stakes testing environment. The skills and knowledge teachers need to “fit it in” should be identified and added to the methods literature. Indeed, the participants’ focus on “fitting it in” and their heavy emphasis on “saving” social studies speak to the severity of the situation. Furthermore, research is needed to understand how to enlist better support among cooperating teachers for methods instruction and how to address conflicting purposes and methods between campus and classroom. Research on contextual support for social studies is also warranted to uncover the factors at the district, school, and classroom levels that facilitate elementary social studies instruction.

Concluding Thoughts

The findings from this study show that quality social studies instruction was taking place in only a few classrooms on a regular basis in the elementary schools described in this study and that methods instructors and students encountered a dearth of instructional examples and opportunities. The long-term implications of this situation are indeed sobering. Yet, this study is only one lens through which to view the situation. The experiences of these inservice teachers serving as methods instructors not only provide examples of the downward spiral of social studies but also show how this spiral can be stopped.

Dan and Nora both had poor elementary social studies methods instruction as university students; however their belief in the importance of social studies instruction assured their maintaining some form of social studies practice. Alexis, whose methods course also served as a vehicle for preserving social studies instruction, described her own excellent social studies methods instructor who had helped her develop a strong commitment to social studies instruction and a belief in the importance of the subject. When preservice teachers have strong social studies methods instruction, they are more likely to see the value of social studies education and thus more likely to teach social studies to their elementary students. The basic understanding and motivation that a good social studies methods course can facilitate may help to ensure the survival of elementary social studies. This should be our ultimate goal.

References


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