Trying to Revalue Elementary Social Studies: Dilemmas and Insights

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In 2007, the authors conducted a case study of 13 teachers across seven elementary schools. We learned that, due to pressures of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and state mandated testing, these schools were akin to reading academies—focused chiefly on the teaching of reading skills. They promised to share their results with local administrators and teachers, initiating the reconsideration of elementary social studies. To this end, they revisited school sites, revealed their findings, and offered to “fit into” ongoing discussions of curricular change. They attempted to engage teachers in courageous conversations, or honest, frank appraisal of current conditions. Eventually, they talked with approximately 100 K-6 teachers, principals, and district administrators. Framing their inquiry in Giddens (1984) theory of structuration, they present their efforts to build collaborative relationships in three cases of narrative inquiry. They follow it with dilemmas and insights for the field organized into five considerations: courageous conversation, curricular control, integration, social studies advocacy, and courting schools.

Keywords: Elementary social studies, curricular reform, school/university partnerships, teacher agency, and action research

Introduction

The truth of the matter is, every single kid in this school, whether they have autism or are mildly-mentally handicapped, every single kid is expected to pass ISTEP (Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress) or we are in trouble and that’s just the reality of it. It’s super-frustrating for me. I have kids who can’t read, but they are making progress. This [social studies project] is great stuff for them. But, the truth of the matter is the powers that be say what that child should be doing. That’s my reality. I can be courageous but I can be unemployed. (Teacher, December 3, 2008)

In our previous inquiry (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere & Stewart, 2008), we sought to understand the culture of elementary social studies. We conducted descriptive, naturalistic investigations of social studies instruction in six public elementary schools across three different school districts in west, central Indiana. These schools were located in rural areas or small towns and tended to serve lower to middle-income, white, English-speaking families. In compliance with NCLB, Indiana mandates standardized testing of reading and math in grades three and five. Generally, these schools struggled to make Adequate Yearly Progress
AYP) and identified reading achievement as a primary goal. Thirteen Kindergarten-6 teachers participated in the study, with three kindergarten, three first grade, two second grade, one fourth grade, two fifth grade, and two sixth grade teachers completing the field. Six principals were interviewed as well, half of whom served as administrators only in post-NCLB years.

In our first inquiry, we learned that, due in large part to pressures of NCLB and state mandated, standardized testing; these elementary schools were analogous to reading academies whose focus centered chiefly on teaching reading skills. For primary grades, teachers believed that they salvaged social studies through integration, but most of their attempts were limited to momentary, unplanned asides. For intermediate grades, a distinct period for social studies often remained, but instruction paled in comparison to pedagogical possibilities, with teaching-as-telling or oral explanations of text, leading the way. Reading First, a federal program implemented in some of these schools, was metaphorically apt for all of them since reading was prioritized by aim, means, and end.

At the conclusion of our earlier inquiry, we described our goals in the following way: “we challenge teachers to initiate change on their own terms and we challenge ourselves, as social studies educators, to be more proactive in roles as ‘guides on the side’” (p. 250). In this follow-up study, we seek to engage teachers in courageous conversations or honest, frank appraisal of current social studies education. As a result of these conversations, we aimed to support teacher-driven curricular change. Rather than presenting pre-packaged programs of instruction for teachers, our intention was to conceptualize outstanding social studies initiatives with them. Our underlying motivation was rooted in a very simple yet important question: how, if at all, can’t we stimulate and support teachers’ development of exceptional elementary social studies?

Courageous conversation is well-supported within the literature on professional development. Over the last decade, traditional approaches to teacher learning, like in-service workshops, graduate courses, or credential renewal activities, have been strongly criticized (e.g., Boyle et al., 2004; Guskey, 2000). These activities fail to fundamentally alter how
teachers teach (Borko, 2004). New modes of professional development stress the importance of teacher-inquiry (King, 2002), critical friends groups (Bambino, 2002) and action research with trusted colleagues (Mertler, 2009). However, it is noteworthy that teacher-driven curricular reform can be limited without school or district level support (Guskey, 2000; Lester, 2003). Moreover, an integration of two approaches—those that center on classrooms and others that seek to improve test scores --can help district and school levels think together about their desired results (McTighe & Thomas, 2003). For us, these findings affirmed our collaborative intent, accented the value of job-embedded intervention, and acknowledged action research as a means of social studies reform.

In the following pages, we situate this effort in the macro context of schooling, considering the impact of social, political pressures on teachers’ perceptions of agency. Next, we present our findings as three cases. Then, we offer an analysis of our dilemmas and insights.

Governmentality

In our previous investigation (Boyle-Baise et al., 2008), we utilized Foucault's (1991; see Graham, Colin, & Peter, 1991) concept of “governmentality” to signify institutional scrutiny of teachers toward specific ends. In our case, it referred to intense pressure to achieve AYP via higher test scores as part of in NCLB mandates. Authority and control from such policies radiate throughout schooling, finally residing not at the federal level at all, but in the ambitious “pursuit of perfection and intensification of the processes which it directs; and the instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics” (Graham, Colin, & Peter, 1991, p. 95). That is, schools and their various professionals are supervised without needing direct supervision. Evidence shows how school faculty may internalize and accommodate the language of NCLB-speak and the imposition of its myriad dicta. As Noddings (2007) notes, in her essay “When School Reform Goes Wrong,” administrators and teachers accept the notion that schools are at risk, though the real risk might be a loss of curricular choice, pedagogical variety, and teacher creativity.

Olsen and Sexton (2009) conducted research on curricular reform in a comprehensive high school. They offer an explanatory model that fits with our case in ways we will discuss in our findings. According to these researchers, schools have taken on a besieged mentality. They borrow the term “threat rigidity” from organizational behavior theory to suggest the effects of this condition. When an organization feels threatened, it typically responds by going into survival mode. As centralized control increases, conformity is stressed, accountability is emphasized, and innovative thinking is discouraged. Teachers resent imposed, prescriptive reform as a de-professionalization of their practice. They salvage autonomy by isolating themselves in their classrooms and teaching how they want. Not surprisingly, this response mitigates collaboration and honest conversation about teaching and learning. Distrust, rather than mutuality, characterizes such schools.

Arguably, if curricular reform is to occur successfully, it is vital to understand the structure, or configuration, that contextualizes teachers’ perceptions, as well as the agency, or action, which occurs within organizations. Giddens (1984) calls this interplay of structure and agency structuration. Structuration signifies moments of possibility within a context of constraint. Thus, we sought to grasp both the structure and the agency of the system in this second investigation. We realized that reading might be first in these schools, but we were optimistic about finding opportunities for change within the juggernaut of NCLB.

Status of Social Studies

In the wake of NCLB, diminished time for elementary social studies has been well documented (e.g., Burroughs, Groce, & Webbeck, 2005; Center on Education Policy, 2007; Heafner et al., 2006; Rock et al., 2006; VanFossen, 2005; VanFossen & McGrew, 2010). Integration is seen as a potential solution to this problem, offering holistic, cross-disciplinary, efficient use of curricular time.
Holloway and Chiodo (2009) provide evidence that social studies has been reconfigured as an integrated effort - particularly with regard to the integration of life skills, like cooperation, honesty, and responsibility - throughout the school day. According to VanFossen and McGrew (2010), teachers reported integration as a general approach to studies instruction over 60% of the time at the primary level and over 33% of the time at the intermediate level. However, integration can have false allure. Over a decade ago, Alleman and Brophy (1993) found spurious social education value in many integration activities included within social studies textbooks. Recently, they reiterated their concerns about integration:

Integration across subjects is an appealing idea in theory, but a close analysis of its applications indicates that integration efforts usually either advance the agenda of one of the subjects at the expense of the other or result in content and activities that trivialize both subjects. (Brophy & Alleman, 2006, p. 437)

To illustrate, in the Holloway and Chiodo study, primary grade teachers incorporated number recognition with the three branches of government, first ten amendments to the Constitution, and the number of Senators and Representatives in Congress. Such an activity belittles vital social studies goals, like learning big ideas of democracy or investigating checks and balances. The extent to which language practice intrudes on social studies time prompted Alleman and Brophy to describe the result as “invasion of social studies [rather] than integration with social studies” (1993, p. 287). These trends suggest what needs to be done next: to seek and promote pockets of reform, or potential cracks in the wall of rigidity - work that has been started by some of our colleagues (O’Connor, Heafner & Groce, 2007).

Conducting the Investigation

We conducted focus group conversations with approximately 100 K-6 teachers in six elementary schools, all of which were part of our original study. Several principals also attended these meetings. After the first round of conversations, we focused our efforts on one elementary school that was the most welcoming to and receptive of our presence. We conducted follow-up conversations with the principal and grade level advisory board from this school as well as with central office administrators for this district.

Talking with Teachers

We hoped to engage teachers in collective consideration, not only of social studies’ decline, but of its potential revitalization. To this end, we solicited meetings with small groups of teachers, but, for our first two school contacts, we agreed to share our findings in school-wide faculty meetings. Doing so allowed us to both discuss our investigation and offer our support to about 50 teachers. For the remaining four schools, we met with grade level groups for 30 minutes during professional development days. Over time, we talked with seven focus groups, with 6 to 10 teachers comprising each group. These meetings were open to teachers who were not part of our original study. Many other teachers did decide to participate.

The 30-minute conversations consisted of two parts: a study recollection component and a discussion period. For the first ten minutes, a research team member discussed the essential questions of our previous study and recalled our findings using four key summary points: (1) elementary social studies teaching; (2) the impact of “Reading First,” (3) integration with other subjects, and (4) schools as reading academies (Appendix A). After the study recap, teachers were asked to respond in writing on a four-block, note-taking sheet that included the following questions (Appendix B):

In what ways do our discoveries match or contradict your day-to-day reality?
What needs to change, if anything, to the current reality if social studies is going to be taught effectively?

What is your role in making changes to curriculum or instruction?

How, if at all, can we assist you with effective social studies instruction?
A semi-structured discussion period ensued where participants, along with the researchers, discussed the reflection questions and any other thoughts they had about our findings. Both the recorded conversation and teachers’ reflection notes served as data sources for our inquiry. Regardless of format, we told the teachers that these meetings were meant to be a first step to lay the ground work for future collaboration on enhanced social studies instruction. Our subsequent efforts took an improvisational style in response to conversations with teachers. We tracked down leads, like requests for instructional resources, in order to extend our overtures to improve social studies. This process was one of building relationships that involved finding interested parties, building trust, and considering mutually acceptable actions.

Analyzing Information

Our analysis was collective and ongoing. Each round of data collection was punctuated a team “caucus” in which we reflected on our most immediate school visits, brainstormed new ideas, and developed an agenda for next steps in our advocacy efforts. We often discussed teachers’ requests for assistance, shaping collegial responses in the process. In this way, data assembled during one round informed subsequent approaches, which helped determine to whom we would talk and what we should ask them about social studies. As will become clear when we present our findings, we encountered many obstacles, from logistical problems with setting up meetings to outright resistance to our supposed imposition on teachers’ time. Critical incidents such as these complicated our data and prompted reconsideration of interview transcripts, narrative comments from teachers, and field observation notes.

In order to capture the relevant details of our efforts, we follow the tradition of narrative inquiry and present our data as an experience and a chronological story (Chase, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Our reporting of the data is told via three distinct cases. We tell contrasting tales of school interactions, as well as share our ongoing ruminations about trying to revalue elementary social studies.

Case #1: Failure to Launch

We spent two months courting two larger schools of our study. We recognized that, because of their size, they offered a wealth of opportunities for teacher interaction. Our interaction with these schools, thus, deserves an in-depth look. Both principals for these schools shared with us that the number one priority for their district was reading achievement, as evidenced in improved state test scores. The principals expressed strong commitment to this aim, and one school received federal funding to implement the Reading First program. Yet, after hearing our findings, both principals affirmed the need to teach more and better social studies. They invited us to speak during a faculty meeting; decided to allow teachers’ work with us to “count” as part of their professional improvement goals; and then promised to seek faculty permission for our participation in grade level meetings. We felt buoyed by their responses, keen to tackle promising possibilities to engage with teachers on ways we might collaboratively augment elementary social studies.

One of the principals, however, urged us to go even further. Why not, she wondered, develop a workshop so that teachers could earn course credit for their efforts? Then, she reasoned, teachers’ efforts (and our own) could be formalized and legitimized. This suggestion caused us pause; as noted earlier, we did not want to be perceived as outside experts for “best” practices, but rather as partners for site-specific innovation. So we tried to find a middle ground. We developed a syllabus for a ten-week teacher-led workshop, centered on action research and organized like independent study. We planned to teach the process of action research, along with strategies for powerful social studies teaching and learning. While a course offering might seem like traditional professional development on the outside, it was designed to be collaborative, self-directed, and reflective.

We accepted the principals’ invitation to introduce the course at a faculty meeting. For the faculty meetings, we utilized a conversational tone. We shared our results honestly, but
positively, carefully avoiding the “blame game.” We steered clear of terminology related to instructional “improvement” and, instead, proposed action research as a tool for “enhancing” one’s teaching. Nevertheless, our participation in the faculty meetings seemed to cast us in roles as outsiders, experts, and university people. Teachers listened quietly and respectfully, however, we noted that their body language was, from the start, closed and disinterested. Worse yet, we learned that earning course credit was incredibly expensive and doing the work for no credit presented little to no appeal. Not surprisingly, only one teacher signed up for the workshop. Although the workshop did not make, we did end up working with this teacher on strategies to conduct research in her sixth-grade classroom. Also, a kindergarten teacher from one of the schools worked with us as consultants to enhance a social studies unit.

The principal who recommended the plan described herself as “embarrassed” about faculty disinterest, and recommended involvement in grade level meetings instead. But when we tried to schedule the meetings, one teacher considered it an interruption of her instructional time and lodged a complaint with her union representative. We were startled and saddened by this unexpected turn, which labeled us persona non grata. We felt acutely the low priority accorded to social studies.

The other principal simply forwarded an email to faculty, reminding them to sign up for the workshop. When the response was negligible, the principal suggested we “leave well enough alone” (Principal, email, November 4, 2008). Later, during a classroom observation of our undergraduate social studies students who are placed in these schools, a teacher respondent from our previous study drew one of us aside, moving behind her desk, far from earshot. In a whisper, she shared the following:

The problem here is not you or social studies. Morale is low. The Central Office does not treat us as professionals. Neither does the principal. We are tired of all the dictates. We are tired of all the testing. We don’t want to do anything extra. We are staying in our rooms and to ourselves. (4th Grade Teacher, November 13, 2008)

Case #2: Request for Materials

Despite our initial impasses, we were able to secure meetings with most grade-level groups for the remaining school sites from our earlier study. This source of data was ripe with possibilities. At one school, teachers passionately recollected social studies in times past. One teacher even shed tears for its demise: “Social studies just isn’t a priority in our state anymore (begins to cry). That saddens me deeply. It’s time….I’m making changes. We (do) have some flexibility.” Others cheered for social studies’ renewal. Their action spawned a few minutes of brainstorming of ideas for change. Still, here, as in other schools of our focus, social studies took a backseat to reading and math. Teachers described these subjects as mandated and they expressed it with emphasis. As one teacher said:

In our school, social studies is not a priority. Reading, writing, and math are the priorities we have been given. Morning [90 minutes for reading and 60 minutes for math] is sacred. It’s even more than sacred. It’s hard to find a block of time in our day to do social studies because of other things that we have to do; art, PE, and music, recess, and whatever. (Primary teacher, HS October 31, 2009)

Several teachers wistfully recalled social studies before NCLB. For one teacher, social studies was the integrative core; she taught reading and writing within social studies units. “I just don’t teach units anymore. I miss that continuity,” she revealed. Another teacher remembered social studies as mostly history, with geography and economics mixed in as lenses on the times. Yet another teacher recollected district meetings in which social studies topics and themes were articulated from third through seventh grade.

When we asked if their discussion of integration related to then or now, as a group, teachers proclaimed: Then, then!
When asked how they teach social studies now, teachers told us they “notice” opportunities to mention social studies here and there. This comment is illustrative:

I think we need to, whether it’s planned or not, NOTICE (emphasis hers) social studies topics that come up every day during just in the life of the classroom. Notice it and say something when it comes up or when somebody mentions it. Like politics, elections, and government, it comes up now, whether you like it or not. So, stop, take a minute to talk a little about it. (Primary teacher, HS October 31, 2009)

For these teachers, social studies has been relegated to asides or teachable moments during the day.

How did these teachers think that we could help? This school was quite a distance from the university and its resources. Teachers by-and-large asked us to provide them with updated materials. Mostly, however, they defined resources in terms of reading; they asked for leveled readers (books written by reading specialists to match predetermined reading abilities) that could present social studies content more simply than textbooks. One teacher told us her maps and globes were over 20 years old, and another expressed dissatisfaction with staid materials related to the Middle Ages. As a result of these conversations, this latter teacher asked us to identify children’s literature related to the medieval period in Europe. We provided these materials for her, and then invited her to work with us to create a unit of study for this era. Though initially interested, this teacher declined to collaborate further due to lack of time.

In this case, interest was expressed that encouraged further collaboration. Yet, teachers did not invite us to return. If the structure was NCLB discourse and related prioritizing of tested subjects, then the mode of agency was here, in requests for little pockets of materials—a tiny fissure of hope which we had to accept. Still, as our mode of operation was to let teachers initiate further engagement, we were stalled in our efforts for collaborative change.

Case #3: Opening the Door

The following case exemplifies the near-success we achieved at one elementary school. This example indicates both what we were able to accomplish in a relatively short period of time and what obstacles continued to hinder real change. Our interaction with this school began as we initially planned: we set up our courageous conversations with teachers after school. Teachers were split up into primary and intermediate discussion groups and members of our research team facilitated conversations separately. The 30-minute format, described earlier, appeared to generate enthusiasm from all participants, especially the principal, who took part in the intermediate level conversation. The principal was intrigued by our overview of an exemplary social studies strategy, though we ran short of time for teacher discussion of it. We were subsequently asked by the principal to model the strategy at a future meeting.

Our team was delighted with this principal’s enthusiasm. During a team caucus, we considered how to model the strategy and under what circumstances. We called the principal to get a feel for what time and resources were available, and she offered us another 30-minute slot. How, we wondered, could we model outstanding social studies in such a short time? We decided to build on the principal’s enthusiasm and propose a broader social studies project. We would demonstrate (teaching in classrooms upon request) the development of a biography for an outstanding citizen, possibly focusing on President Lincoln since it was near the year of his 200th birthday. In this way we could fold reading, writing, and inquiry into a bona fide example of integrated instruction, which we knew from our first inquiry (Boyle-Baise et al., 2008) was a structurally accepted curricular innovation, albeit often focused on language arts. We also prepared to honor the principal’s original request as a fallback position.

We scheduled a conference call with the principal and suggested our plan. The principal admired our enthusiasm, liked our proposal, and
desperately wanted to make it happen. She scheduled a gathering of grade-level representatives to consider the proposal. The meeting was scheduled after school with almost all of our team in attendance. Seven teachers attended, including the principal. In retrospect, this conversation turned out to be the most courageous and open exchange we had with teachers.

The principal lauded our willingness to leave the ivory tower of the university to work in the trenches with teachers. She said it was a “first.” After presenting our ideas, however, roadblocks began to emerge. We learned of the county’s hefty investment in a new reading program. Teachers told us the program was involved and expensive, necessitating travels to New York City for professional development and payment to auditors for review of the program’s implementation. The principal, despite her previous zeal, then spoke against our proposal in the interest of protecting teachers’ time from further impositions. She offered an accounting of all the demands on instructional time, including recommendations from the school counselor to requests from advocacy organizations. Ultimately, the principal utilized the metaphor of a healthy meal to describe the school’s plate as full. According to her, teachers simply could not take any more:

The reading and writing workshop, I don’t want to paint them as prescriptive things that aren’t good. . . We are not hap-hazard. We do not have negative spaces. And although I may have presented it negatively that we are locked into something, I don’t really believe that. It’s like eating a healthy meal, when you’re finished, you’re full. I feel like we have created a really healthy meal for our district and we are full. (Principal, December 3, 2008)

This conclusion did not mean that the school’s plate was full of social studies. Instead, it was a warning that there was no room on the plate for social studies at all. The principal continued to explain what took up space on the plate:

It won’t fit into writer’s workshop because we already have a set curriculum. And our research theme is now, it’s ending in December. And then for fourth grade, we go onto social issues for a month for Readers and Writers Workshop, then, we get ready for ISTEP [Indiana State Test of Educational Progress]; then we do mysteries for a month; then we study fairytales with reading for a month….so that’s all…. (Principal, December 3, 2009)

Two factors justified lack of time for social studies: the need for large chunks of time in reading and math, on the one hand, and on the other the constraints imposed by the county’s curriculum calendar. Apparently, teachers are instructed to teach certain topics in specific months, deviation from which is questioned by the central administration. The principal revealed that she was “called to the carpet” for encouraging divergence from the schedule: To be honest, I’ve been called on the carpet a couple of times recently by my dear friends. We moved a little bit outside of the curriculum calendar on something. And my head was on the chopping block. . . It was fair though. They said that this curriculum calendar is really for all of us. That’s what we’ve decided to do and sure you wanted to write poems about snowflakes and write poems because it was the first day of snow. But it doesn’t matter. This is the curriculum calendar. (Principal, December 3, 2008)

As a substitute, she encouraged us to help develop an after-school, extra-curricular, History Day effort, which we, later, undertook. Subsequently, one-on-one collaboration with the kindergarten teacher, the History Day leader, and two fifth-grade teachers is the subject of an ongoing dissertation by one member of the research team. After this insightful, albeit largely unsuccessful, meeting, we decided to follow our respondents’ suggestions to meet with the assistant superintendent regarding the curriculum calendar. We hoped to learn more about calendar’s apparent regulatory function and to seek spaces within its framework for social studies instruction. This follow-up meeting was
exceedingly encouraging. We learned a great deal about the curriculum calendar and were immediately provided with copies for each elementary grade level. The most intriguing thing about this document was its overwhelming simplicity. We expected a calendar that laid out topics to be taught day-by-day, as impressed upon us by the teachers. Alternatively, the document outlined topics in writing and language arts to be taught each month, often using broad categories, such as “mysteries” or “social issues.” To us, this left a considerable amount of flexibility and potential for meaningful curricular integration.

In hearing teachers’ thoughts about curricular regulation, which largely marginalize social studies, in comparison to discussion with a central administrator, it seemed as if something was lost in translation among the stakeholders. It did not seem like the calendar forced the inflexibility for innovation we heard from the teachers, especially in light of the integrative project we proposed. We wonder about this disjunction in the discussion that follows.

Dilemmas and Insights

In order to identify our most vexing dilemmas and significant insights, we combed the data separately and brought our ideas to a group meeting. We debated the informative power of each idea. In this way, we selected five considerations which we hope will prove helpful to others: courageous conversation, curricular control, integration, social studies advocacy, and courting schools. Again, we note that these points are drawn from data collected in the Midwest and may not generalize to all contexts. We discuss these ideas separately, though they are actually overlapping.

Courageous Conversation

As a result of governmentality, teachers have been de-professionalized for years. They have been commanded and controlled through regulation, often created by people who have not participated in their classrooms. As one of the teachers in the first case example told us, teachers have a heads down mentality - doing their work, but not volunteering for anything extra. For the most part, an atmosphere of distrust reigns. Worse yet, many younger teachers cannot recall a time when things were any different. When teams like ours come into the schools, inviting the teachers to work with us, but not offering any gain other than intrinsic, professional rejuvenation, we are not speaking the language of reality. Professional development has been redefined as in-service related to the most current, popular school program - usually a literacy or math agenda. In these schools, there was a visceral sense that professionalism as trust in one's abilities, judgment, and classroom wisdom had eroded. In such an atmosphere, the relational approach to reform retains viability, though it is painstakingly tedious. A sense of mutuality, trust, and responsiveness must be built over time through demonstrated commitment. Possibly, our entée to the field through building principals was in error. We approached schools in the very top-down manner. A more beneficial tactic may have been to directly invite teachers with whom we already had a working relationship to collaborate with us. In this way, the probability of fostering a community of teachers willing to explore exemplary instruction may have been higher.

As social studies advocates, we must ask ourselves if we can stand the test of time. Our team weathered initial rejection, and then made progress in becoming identified as available, helpful colleagues. As one of us continued to assist with a teacher’s requests, we saw that potentially, change can build from the bottom up.

Curricular Control

Curricular control, at least in these schools, was mostly top down. In our case, the curriculum calendar signified central control. The calendar determined and preset priorities, essentially closing out other options. Interestingly, our conversation with the assistant superintendent revealed two striking facts about this calendar: its unexpected simplicity and its teacher-prompted design. Regarding the former, the calendar organized reading and language arts
by month. Oftentimes, the monthly description contained just a few words (i.e. a genre of texts such as mysteries or a topic for writing, like social issues.) Yet, teachers felt hopelessly constrained by this calendar. In terms of the latter, teachers from the county approved both the information in the calendar and its arbitrary sequence. Teachers seemingly built their own fences, developing a structure that constricted their agency. They bought into centralized control, and then complained about domination from a distant “they”-- which was in reality themselves. This perception seems to exemplify the internal surveillance effects of governmentality.

Our invitation to collaboratively create a “balanced integration” project that equally weighed literacy and social studies for 5th graders district-wide came at the behest of the assistant superintendent. This request, unfortunately, belied our collaborative, teacher-focused intent. Nevertheless, at the district level, possibilities for flexibility and creativity still can be found. Given enough lead time, even the all-seeing calendar can be disrupted. Although we began talking to schools early in August it was not enough time to get on the annual curriculum docket. Regardless of the level at which we work, it is vital to be seen as integral to rather than an add-on for the district curriculum calendar.

Integration

These teachers talked about integration in ways that trivialized social studies. They mentioned social studies content as a momentary aside when it came up in unplanned discussions, mostly spawned by reading activities. Although literature-based social studies instruction can enliven people, places and events, these teachers mainly requested our assistance with leveled readers to help make textual information more accessible to students. Further, when we proposed an integrated book-making project, we are unable to arouse much interest. Teachers referred us to a curricular calendar that seemed to have ample opportunities to meaningfully integrate social studies and language arts, but which they perceived as literacy driven. While social studies as an integrative unit of study was common in the past, it was now relegated to a helpmate or an aside for reading.

As social studies advocates, this evidence, along with the trend toward integration reported by VanFossen and McGrew (2010), suggests the need to assist teachers with integrative projects that incorporate social studies aims and pedagogies while also enriching other subject matter content. As is, integration seems to be an excuse for teaching a little social studies here and there. We need to be quite careful in considering integration as a boon for social studies.

Social Studies Advocacy

We expended a lot of time and goodwill to accomplish minimally identifiable reform. The pertinent question is: “what are social studies advocates willing to accept as worthy of our energy?” Is teacher-by-teacher improvement enough? Is it reasonable to celebrate the exemplary efforts of singular teachers? These questions have no simple yes or no answer. Some of us are quite willing to facilitate powerful social studies in a few outstanding classrooms. One member of our team, who completed her dissertation with a small group of reform-minded teachers, took this position. She remains staunchly hopeful for the promise of individual innovation.

Alternatively, other members of our team came to believe that courting schools and cultivating classroom change is insufficient. For us, the “power of the program” could not be denied. In case #3, during our meeting with the school’s advisory board, we learned of the county’s large investment in a new expensive reading program generated from New York City. In this case, an economically strapped rural school district was willing to spend thousands of dollars to participate in a pre-packaged reading curriculum. Then, with the sanction of the district, this program essentially dictated the definition of curricular reform. Perhaps we, as social studies advocates, should develop and promote our own programs for district-wide adoption. Further, we should focus our energies
on securing funds similar to those allocated for the Teaching American History grant to support professional development programs for innovative social education.

Curricular activism also should not be ruled out. Our data show that, within a structure of rigidity, pockets of agency exist. Some teachers expressed a sense of loss with regard to social studies as it was “then” (in earlier stages of their careers) and “now” (post-NCLB.) Teachers are still willing to fight for social studies, though their visions for reform are constricted. Rather than simply wait for the next imposition to come down the pike, schools and their staffs may need to organize for advocacy so that external stakeholders conform to schools’ needs and not the converse. Perhaps, we, as social studies advocates, should join this battle.

**Courting Schools**

Good intentions matter. Collegial overtures are appreciated. Once we changed course to work more intimately with teachers, which included hosting genuine courageous conversations, we were never turned away. Even in our brief forays, the mood was one of rolling up sleeves and working together. Some teachers asked us to identify resources for their units of study, inviting us in, at least minimally. Others regretfully declined our assistance at the moment, but opened the door for the future. Except for the teacher in case #1 who asked her union representative to make us go away, no one rudely brushed off social studies or our earnest attempts to revalue it.

Regardless of the roadblocks and limitations, the consensus of our research team was that we were doing something valuable when it came to elementary social studies. Yet, we also could not disregard the sense of courtship that marked our work. We were nice, enthusiastic, flexible, responsive, and available, much akin to a jilted lover seeking to rekindle the fire of extinguished affections. There were times when our team played with this metaphor, wondering if our troubles were caused by social studies being “dead on arrival.” By advocating on behalf of a nearly “dead” subject in today’s NCLB era, is our number up before we even get into the principal’s office?

The problem with the metaphor, however, was revealed in some of our conversations with teachers. Social studies was not dead after all; in some cases teachers became enthusiastic about finally having the opportunity to talk about it. But it became increasingly apparent that something else – likely the demands of math and reading – was getting in the way. Due to allegiance to a more demanding and muscular curricular love, social studies continued to be brushed aside.

In our earnestness to get something started, we pursued whoever gave us their time and attention. First, we made concerted appeals about social studies. If this led to a dead end, we scoured our memories of meetings for other opportunities. Even if we eventually failed to garner more interest in social studies for this article, we felt important insights could be gleaned from our efforts. Stated differently, our goal is to bring to the attention of social studies educators the disarray and tentativeness inherent to relationship-driven reform.

**Revaluing Elementary Social Studies**

What shall we do to revitalize elementary social studies? Our data suggest that governmentality influences local school administrators and teachers. Teachers internalize a testing environment and behave for its benefit – even when the external evaluators are not present. These findings are nothing new; they confirm the devaluation of social studies. What is interesting are the conundrums associated with this culture. Teachers feel disrespected and de-professionalized, yet they eschew non-centrally sanctioned innovation. Alternatively, district mandates can be seen as a “healthy meal,” causing teachers to perceive their plates as full. Still, changing the current structure is not impossible. Teachers often know better than to discard social studies. There is still a sense of promise among teachers for enhancement of social studies education.
We find ourselves wrestling with a dilemma: should we, as social studies advocates, foster collegial change or work to change the presence of social studies via the centralized curriculum? The literature stresses the vitality of collegial interaction for teacher professionalization and curricular reform. Yet, centralized mandates are an acknowledged feature of governmentality. Perhaps we should develop innovative programs that can achieve district approval, yet allow teacher input. This report offers evidence that local efforts can work, but it is often within a damaged psyche from outside testing and a self-imposition of curriculum control.

Our experience tells us that social studies advocates should stand resolute. Probably, those of us who are university professionals need to rethink our perceived authority. We need to ask ourselves how we can serve as allies with teachers, rather than as another set of authorities. How, in essence, can we disturb governmentality? Should we continue to prompt courageous conversations, committing ourselves to follow teachers’ requests for assistance? Or, should we opt for programmatic, grant-funded curricular change? Regardless of our false starts and limited results, our team remains committed to a collaborative methodology. We need to find ways that honor teachers as social studies partners.

While it is important to continue to document elementary social studies’ decline, it also is imperative to intervene on its behalf. Teachers still regret the diminishment of social studies, but they tend to be those who can recall its better days—before NCLB. It is heartening to hear about exceptional teachers who sustain the field (e.g., Alleman, 2008; Passe & Wheat, 2008). However, our efforts indicate a need to further analyze why certain teachers are able to teach social studies well while others are not. The implicit message is that those of us who cannot teach social studies, or generate its reform, simply are not trying hard enough. This message fails to acknowledge a host of underlying structural factors – curricular control, governmentality, and threat rigidity – that preclude the teaching of social studies. Our inquiry, even with its limitations, foregrounds many of these obstacles.

The following questions remain. Is it reasonable to rebuild confidence and encourage ingenuity through courageous conversation? What do social studies advocates, like us, really have to offer teachers? Can our assistance with action research become a viable resource? Is this the kind of road that teams of researchers should tread together? Or, in a context of district-initiated, centralized, pre-packaged curriculum, should we devise exemplary programmatic initiatives? In sum, how can we provide leadership, yet support grassroots collaboration?

We urge educators to consider these questions further, learning from our trials and our modest inroads, so that an effective agenda for elementary social studies reform can be developed.

References

effective? The Curriculum Journal, 15(1) 45-68.
Appendix A

Research Overview

Social Studies in Elementary Classrooms

Research Questions:

What are your perceptions of outstanding social studies teaching, and what do you see as barriers and facilitators to that kind of teaching?

What characterizes the teaching of social studies in elementary schools?

How does “putting reading first” impact what counts as social studies?

What does it mean to integrate social studies with other subjects, particularly with reading?

Major Discoveries:

Elementary Social Studies Teaching: Social studies teaching is much lower on the list of priorities relative to other subjects, such as reading, writing, and math. Social studies is taught mainly through textbooks, along with teacher explanation. It also is used as a vehicle to practice reading strategies. Teaching strategies unique to social studies, like teaching big ideas, doing inquiries, developing role plays, or holding discussions or debates are rarely seen.

The Impact of “Reading First”: In some cases, we sensed some discomfort from teachers when discussing social studies teaching. It seemed that teachers understood that the subject was the on back burner and did not necessarily feel it was justified. Some teachers felt that administrators set the curricular agenda and should share a portion of the blame for the lack of social studies teaching. Principals felt accountable to their own supervisors, like superintendents and the legislature, who set the agenda for reading instruction.
Integration with Other Subjects: Teachers tend to use integration as a way to enrich reading with social studies, rather than the other way around. When a basal reader included a story on a historic event, that event was briefly discussed. Integration seemed more of moment of happenstance than a planned enrichment of content. Children’s literature, for example, was rarely used to enrich study of a social studies topic.

Schools as Reading Academies: Overall, local elementary schools are focused primarily on reading instruction. The majority of learning that takes place has to do with some kind of text; visuals, conversations, drama, and other strategies are used proportionately less than forms of reading. Yet, we sensed that teachers do not necessarily feel comfortable with this arrangement and would like more flexibility in the curriculum.

Appendix B

Survey

Initial Reactions to Our Discoveries

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<tr>
<th>In what ways do our discoveries match or contradict your day-to-day reality?</th>
<th>What needs to change, if anything, to the current reality if social studies is going to be taught effectively?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your role in making changes to teaching or curriculum?</td>
<td>How, if at all, can we assist you with social studies instruction?</td>
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</table>
Any other comments or ideas?

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