How Elementary Teachers Imagine Social Studies in an Age of Teacher Assessments

Patricia L. Marshall  
North Carolina State University

Ashley L. Jacot  
Endeavor Charter School

Angelita F. Gamble  
Potomac View Elementary School

Teacher assessments are becoming increasingly popular in public school improvement plans. These assessments may inadvertently diminish the amount of time and attention teachers perceive they can devote to a traditionally non-tested subject such as social studies. Would teachers’ orientations toward social studies change in a manner that would elevate its status if an assessment resulted in the teachers recognizing they have more direct say over the manner in which they allocate their instructional time? In this paper, we explore this and other questions to investigate how elementary teachers imagine social studies in an age of teacher assessments.

Keywords: teacher assessment, elementary social studies, professional perceptions, hypothetical teaching scenario, big ideas, teacher de-professionalization

In recent years, concerns about widespread student underachievement and the impact of teachers’ instructional efforts on the actual learning of their students, has garnered attention throughout the nation. The state of North Carolina, in response, has introduced Standard 6, a statewide teacher assessment protocol. This assessment will be used to determine whether “the work of the teacher results in acceptable, measurable progress for students based on established performance expectations using appropriate data to demonstrate growth” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2012, p. 12). Data for Standard 6 will be collected over a three-year period, and will serve as the basis for determining teacher progress. Depending on grade level, the expected growth of an individual teacher may be tied directly to the scores her or his students receive on subjects formally monitored through statewide student assessments. These subjects, historically, have been reading and mathematics, but not social studies.

As a course in the elementary school curriculum, social studies has long struggled for its fair share of instructional attention. In many contemporary classrooms, the struggle is magnified by the realities of district level student testing, state-level student testing, or both. Often teachers feel compelled to devote most of their instructional time to the tested subjects, thereby leaving non-tested subjects including social studies largely unattended. Kenneth Vogler and David Virtue (2007) describe the quagmire testing presents for many teachers by noting, “[w]hen test scores are revealed, teachers either enjoy the accolades or suffer the repercussions” (p. 56). Some teachers offer that, but for testing constraints, they would devote more time to the non-tested subjects. With the introduction of assessments like Standard 6, however, we believe the connection between tested subjects and where teachers focus their instructional energy is likely
to become even stronger. In our view, we argue such assessments may increase the tensions many teachers experience over testing mandates, and perhaps further entrench the devalued status of non-tested subjects. Since Standard 6 became part of our state’s assessment practices, we have found some of our colleagues have become more sensitive to the real or perceived constraints it may place on their professional labor. Many are concerned about the possibility punitive uses will be made of the outcomes of the new teacher assessment. Drawing on the sentiment of the late Elliott Eisner (2002) in his germinal work, The Educational Imagination, we decided to seize upon what we perceived to be the heightened sensitivity surrounding Standard 6 to try to learn about how elementary teachers imagine social studies. We wondered how teachers would structure their teaching if social studies were to become a tested subject. More specifically, we wondered, how teachers would imagine social studies if, as part of Standard 6, it were one of the yearly assessed subjects.

**Imagining How Elementary Social Studies Might Look**

In the elementary grades, the amount of time and attention teachers devote to formal instruction in social studies is not equivalent to what they typically designate for literacy and mathematics instruction (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014; Hubbard, 2013; Kenna & Russell, 2014; Lucey & Meyer, 2013; Passe, 2006; Rock et al., 2006). Scholars report teachers, when asked to explain this inequity, say instruction in literacy and numeracy are important foundations for students’ future learning in middle and secondary school (Kenna & Russell, 2014). This implies some teachers may perceive social studies as representing a peripheral, or at least non-foundational, subject in the curriculum. Based on our collective experience as elementary teachers, however, we have not encountered many teachers who believe social studies is an unimportant subject. Few elementary teachers seem to demur from identifying various de-professionalizing constraints including intensification as working against their own ability to devote as much time and attention to this subject as they would prefer. Intensification, is explained as a phenomenon wherein additional tasks are added to already over-extended workloads without removing any of the pre-existing tasks (Apple & Jungck, 1990). In writing of these realities, Amy Good, Tina Heafner, Tracy Rock, Katherine O’Connor, Jeff Passe, Scott Waring, and Sandra Byrd (2010) state, “with the external constraints on time and the focus on standardized testing, teachers must have a strong grounding in the importance of social studies or they will surrender to these external pressures” (p. 13).

Elementary teachers explain the lower status of social studies as a direct, albeit unfortunate, outcome of factors beyond their control such as testing mandates rather than their own disinterest in as well as or their devaluation of the subject. Is this really the case? Would social studies instruction look differently if all (or the most critical) decisions surrounding its teaching were made at the classroom or micro-level of school operations? Based on our own experiences as teachers we know that macro or district and state-level policy mandates like student testing have a very real effect on how teachers allocate their professional time and energy. Yet, most teachers can and often do envision doing their work differently were it not for certain constraints. We, therefore, were curious about how elementary teachers envision teaching social studies.

**Method**

We conducted a qualitative study using a self-report survey to assess how teachers imagine they would teach social studies if their current circumstances, including concerns about
preparing students for testing in other subjects, were different. In order to assess teachers’ imaginations about social studies we created a scenario and asked participants to respond to a set of four structured questions. Use of the hypothetical scenario in self-report research is widespread and has been employed in various professional fields ranging from social psychology to medicine. In general, this data collection technique allows researchers to gain insights into the nature and type of decisions an individual might make if faced with a real-life situation that includes the same distinguishing features as the hypothetical scenario. A primary reason for use of the hypothetical scenario in research is to understand phenomena for which data collection is impossible or not feasible in a real life situation. Researchers, for example, may discover that gaining access to actual data introduces issues of illegality. This dilemma faced Tal Jonathan, Laurence Allison, and Amy Long (2007) in their study that focused on tapping into the mindsets of individuals engaged in the commission of burglaries. Researchers, likewise, may opt to use hypothetical scenarios when moral and ethical issues emerge. This type of situation was found by Renata Fumis and Daniel Deheinzelin (2010), as they sought to capture the nature of decision-making by medical personnel dealing with patient end-of-life cases.

The focus of our study would not have presented us with illegal, moral, or ethical issues; yet, our plan was to ask teachers to consider a contrary-to-fact situation by asking them to speculate about how social studies could be in contrast to how it is. While certainly not the case for all, in our experience we have found many elementary teachers devote little time to teaching social studies. Because their own effectiveness assessments, in conjunction with implementation of Standard 6, will now be based on how well their students perform on standardized tests, many teachers do not feel empowered to divert from district mandates regarding the amount of time they should devote to currently tested subjects such as literacy and mathematics. In light of these realities, we concluded that a hypothetical scenario would be the most feasible way to attain insights into how teachers imagine social studies instruction. A critical part of our study was to tap into their thinking or how teachers conceive decision-making vis-à-vis social studies. To this research end, Anton Kühberger, Michael Schulte-Mecklenbeck, and Josef Perner, (2002) offer a compelling justification we seized in deciding to use a hypothetical scenario for our study. They note at its very core, all decision-making is quite hypothetical.

When making a decision we…consider events that may or may not obtain, and we consider feelings that we do not yet have. For instance, when considering whether or not to accept a gamble, we anticipate possible outcomes and evaluate these outcomes. However, at the time of the decision, none of these outcomes is real, all are hypothetical. Hence, [to understand how teachers imagine they would behave] researchers have some justification in assuming that [teachers’] real decisions can profitably be investigated by asking them to make hypothetical decisions. The reason is that…real decision making consists of imagining and evaluating hypothetical options.…. (p. 1163)

Our study was designed to help us to gain insights into how a group of elementary teachers would respond to the hypothetical of social studies being the only subject upon which their teaching effectiveness would be assessed vis-à-vis Standard 6. We wanted to learn whether, if given the opportunity, the elementary teachers would imagine themselves teaching social in ways that are more in alignment with constructivist models. Such teaching models were described by Jere Brophy, Janet Alleman, and Barbara Knighton (2009), as those that “call for learning by engaging in discussion aimed at co-constructing negotiated understandings or by engaging in collaborative learning activities as members of small groups” (p. 193). Likewise, we
wondered what, if anything, teachers imagined gaining from being assessed on how well they teach social studies. It is unclear to us whether teachers believe formal statewide assessments irrespective of subject really are useful to them as professionals. We wanted to gain insights, therefore, about the value, or lack thereof, teachers place on formal assessment of social studies. Would their valuation about formal statewide assessment of elementary social studies be positive, negative, or indifferent?

The Survey

To establish a context for the elementary teacher participants in our study, we wrote the following opening statement to our brief survey: “Hypothetically, consider you are given 18 months to teach social studies in the manner you choose, utilizing what are in your opinion, the best and most effective teaching practices. At the end of 18 months, you will be assessed on your social studies teaching.” This introductory statement was followed by four open ended questions: (1) What are three to five aspects of your social studies teaching you would like to have assessed? (2) What are three to five challenges you think you may face in light of this assessment? (3) Do you foresee any benefits from being evaluated on your social studies teaching? Explain your position providing examples of possible benefits. (4) In what ways do you think social studies teaching should be assessed? If you could decide how your teaching would be evaluated, which way do you think would best capture student knowledge?

Participants

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at our university granted permission to conduct the study. We then contacted targeted school districts in different parts of the state to solicit participation in our study. The superintendent of one rural district granted us permission to conduct the study; thus, a convenience sample of teachers at four different elementary schools in one district was investigated. We subsequently contacted the principals and obtained statistical and demographic information about each of the schools from the website of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

All four schools were classified as Title I (i.e., schools that have high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families. The local educational agency where such a school is located receives financial assistance as part of the U.S. Elementary and Secondary Education Act); three operated on traditional calendars; and one was a year-round school. In three of the schools, 12% of the teachers held advanced degrees; in the fourth school, 22% of the teachers did. Collectively, 15 teachers held National Board Certification. In one school, 66% of the teachers had 10 or more years of teaching experience; whereas for the other schools these figures were: 46%, 55%, and 30% respectively. Based on state school ratings, two of the schools were designated as a “School of Distinction”, which means during the previous academic year, the school had attained its expected growth and at least 80% of the students in grades 3-5 tested on grade level in the areas of mathematics and reading. The other two were designated as a “School of Progress” indicating the schools had met growth projections and that at least 60% of students in grades 3-5 tested at or above grade level on state exams. One school had 709 students; the others had 458, 476, and 306 respectively. Initial interactions with each principal was via an email detailing the nature of our study and requesting permission for the survey to be distributed to all Kindergarten-5 licensed teachers at the school. Through subsequent emails, we arranged a time for a member of our team to visit each school site to meet the principals and to deliver the surveys. At each meeting, the principal of the school was asked to distribute the surveys (along with a document explaining the purpose of the study and detailing the rights of
research participants) to the mailboxes of eligible teachers. Surveys were to be completed anonymously, although a space was provided for participants to indicate their specific teaching grade level cluster (Kindergarten-2 or 3-5). Upon completion, teachers returned the surveys to the principals’ mailbox, and the principals placed all completed surveys in a large envelope. The envelope was stored in a secure location until one of the members of the research team returned to the school to retrieve it. Approximately two weeks after the surveys had been distributed, a follow-up email was sent to each principal to remind teachers to complete the survey. A total of 137 surveys were distributed representing a return rate of approximately 18%. Teachers’ responses to the survey items were analyzed to identify common themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The members of the survey team started by working independently to analyze the data and eventually met as a group wherein we identified similarities and reconciled differences in our interpretations. We reached consensus on all themes and agreed on the rightness of fit for all data examples associated with the different themes.

Our Findings

Responses to the first, second, and fourth questions in our survey yielded a wide variety of responses; whereas the third question prompted a yes or no response with individual explanations. For the first survey question “What are three to five aspects of your social studies teaching you would like to have assessed?” 12 to 14 different aspects of instruction were cited with the top six themes being Content Knowledge (29%); Project Based Learning (25%); Collaboration and Differentiation (tied at 21%), and Material Retention and Creativity (tied at 17%). Numerous teachers expressed a preference to be assessed on students’ content knowledge of specific social studies topics, such as, “government/economics, state symbols, state regions”, and “[state] history, American revolution, civil war”; whereas others focused on the applicability of the content they are teaching. A moderately lengthy responses in this latter category was expressed as follows:

… each aspect modified to be developmentally appropriate for the specific grade level, student involvement/participation in class, evidence of student understanding via group projects, and life experience application (i.e. citizenship, making good choices, tolerance of others).

Similar to the first question, our second survey question “What are five challenges you think you may face if your social studies teaching were to be assessed?” prompted varying responses with the top three themes being: Lack of Time (54%); Lack of Resources (54%); and Test is Appropriate (50%). The fourth survey question “In what ways do you think your social studies teaching should be assessed?” yielded seven different responses with Portfolio Assessment being the most prominent theme and highest response cited by fully 63% of the teachers. One survey participated wrote,

If social studies instruction is added to the teacher evaluation it should be introduced in a way that is enjoyable for all parties involved (teachers who present the instruction & the students who respond to it). Students will get more out of the content if they are able to see it and are given opportunities to share their experiences.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the complete range of responses from the teachers to these three questions from our survey.
Table 1
Teacher Responses to Aspects of Their Teaching They Would Like to Have Assessed

Teacher Response to Question 1:
What are three to five aspects of your social studies teaching you would like to have assessed?
In response to our third survey question, “Do you foresee any benefits from being evaluated on your social studies teaching? Discuss why and the possible benefits”, the overwhelming majority of teachers (83%) responded that they do see benefit. For instance, one participant commented, “Yes, it [social studies] is real world information. Students need to have subject matter taught in a way that matters to see their place, part in the global community/economy.”

Discussion

Our analysis of the data from our survey revealed interesting information about what and how some elementary teachers imagine social studies. While some of the teachers’ imaginings are in agreement with the more progressive thrusts of the scholarship in the field, others seem to be at odds. Among the more striking themes in the data were those related to the assessment of social studies and the manner in which teachers would like to be evaluated. We found aspects of the teachers’ responses correspond to our own beliefs and imaginings about how elementary social studies could be. In this regard, the very impetus for this survey study grew out of our discussions in an elementary social studies graduate course in which there was unanimous agreement that social studies instruction should be structured around big ideas (e.g., cultural universals such as food, clothing, shelter, government) which have long been recognized as vital to the achievement of educational goals (Brophy, Alleman, & Knighton, 2009; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Grant & Gradwell, 2010; Holloway & Chiodo, 2009). As noted by Selma Wasserman (2007), “[b]ig ideas make statements rather than ask questions. They have relevance; they matter. Some big ideas contain moral and ethical implications. While they have a clear focus, they also promote open-ended inquiry” (p. 292). Powerful instruction focused on big
ideas leads to what Brophy et al. (2009) call “transformative” learning experiences (p. 58). For us, transformative learning results from experiences that prompt students to reflect critically on their own beliefs and at the same time acquire appreciation and respect for the beliefs of others. Doing so lays the foundation for effective citizenship.

Table 3
Teacher Responses to Their Preferred Method of Assessment

![Teacher Responses to Question 4](image)

The most prominent examples of alignment between our survey participants’ imaginings and extant scholarship in the field surround the issue of authentic instruction. The National Council for the Social Studies (2008) advocates connecting social studies material to authentic situations, or what can be thought of as circumstances and conditions that students are likely to experience outside of schooling contexts. Similarly, several survey participants expressed ideas consistent with this vision in that they mentioned relating social studies to the real world as something on which they would like to be assessed or a benefit they think would come from assessing social studies. One participant wrote,

"Social studies is important for life skills. Everyone does need to know how to read and do math, but social studies is real day to day living. Politics, government, diversity, geography, and history all have an effect on our day to day lives."

Another listed, “[s]tudents’ abilities to apply concepts in ‘real world’ current ways,” as an aspect of social studies teaching on which she/he would choose to be assessed. Still another indicated social studies, “...allows for more real world and high interest learning for each student.”

On the other hand, we found evidence that participants’ imaginings of social studies were sometimes in opposition to the corpus of scholarship in the field of social studies. In this regard,
some participants identified citizenship as a valued part of social studies instruction with a number of them citing it as an area on which they would choose to be assessed. The type of assessment they preferred struck us as incongruous with social studies education for citizenship. In contrast to a vision of social studies instruction that focuses on big ideas, teachers in our survey imagined they would like to be assessed on instruction that focuses on facts and students’ fact retention. It is this anachronistic focus that prominent progressive researchers and scholars have cited as a primary reason for the continuing devaluation of social studies (Brophy, Alleman, & Knighton, 2009; Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014). Some teachers in our survey expressed ideas in opposition to authentic assessments with many calling for use of multiple-choice evaluations. One teacher’s response is illustrative: “Although I think the portfolio assessment would be the best [type of assessment], we also have to be realistic. Having a multiple choice assessment would be the most logical and realistic way to test.”

Participants in our survey commented not only on the assessment of social studies instruction in the classroom, but on the possibility of a larger scale standardized assessment mandated by the district or state and its value to their instruction. Their responses seemed to suggest they would welcome an assessment that would presumably make social studies more important. Many teachers seemed to assume a value added effect of assessment suggesting it would somehow ensure coverage of the social studies curriculum. The response of one teacher is typical for this sample, “Benefits [of an assessment] would hopefully lead to a more in depth curriculum and better resources of teaching.” To us, these responses reflect teachers’ sensitivity to the proliferation of student testing in our state and now the introduction of a teacher assessment.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Through this survey we sought to gain insights into how elementary teachers imagine social studies if it were to become one of the subjects upon which their yearly evaluation is based as part of a new teacher assessment known as Standard 6. We found when offering ideas about how social studies might be, teachers’ imaginations seem to be stymied by an unrelenting focus on external factors (e.g., lack of resources, more rigorous math and reading initiatives, and school mandated scheduling) that represent their current realities. These factors appear to have contributed to the longstanding de-emphasis if not devaluation of social studies in elementary school instruction. Teachers in our survey seemed to perceive potential benefits from formal student testing in social studies with their own assessment or teaching effectiveness being linked to its outcomes. Even so, their descriptions of what they would like to be assessed upon seemed to suggest that, even in a make believe world, many elementary teachers do not imagine social studies much differently than it currently exists in some classrooms.

We recognize a limitation of this study is that our findings are drawn from a convenience sample; therefore, they cannot be generalized to all elementary school teachers. Still, we believe studies of how teachers imagine doing social studies could have important implications for how pre-service teacher education courses and professional development might be structured. As such we offer the following two suggestions for future research. First, we recommend future researchers use a more diverse group of participants for studies of how elementary teachers imagine social studies. Future surveys might draw participants from semi-departmentalized elementary schools where teachers specialize in social studies as well as those from traditional schools where teachers have responsibility for teaching all subjects. It could be that teachers in
Semi-departmentalized elementary schools have different, perhaps more robust, visions of what social studies could be. Drawing upon data from teachers in semi-departmentalized and traditional elementary schools might allow researchers to isolate manners in which pressures to teach multiple subjects impact elementary teachers’ visions for social studies. Second, we recommend future studies include an interview component. While mining and coding our data, we discovered some written responses to the survey questions were unclear and even sparked wonderings among us about contours in a given participant’s vision for social studies. One-on-one interviews could provide the opportunity for participants to articulate more extensive responses to survey items thereby offering more complex insights into how elementary teachers think about and imagine doing social studies.

Imagination is powerful in that it can impact our perceptions and beliefs, as well as what we are driven to do to make them a reality. Elementary teachers who can envision social studies as a subject of great importance are bound to enact a pedagogy that matches their imaginings.

References


**Web-based References**


Appendix A

Please indicate the grade level cluster in which you teach.

[ ] K-2  [ ] 3-5

Social Studies Assessment Study
North Carolina State University

Directions: Please consider the following and answer the questions below. Do NOT write your name or other identifying information on this survey. Hypothetically, consider that you are given 18 months to teach social studies in the manner you choose, utilizing what are in your opinion, the best and most effective teaching practices. At the end of the 18 months, you will be assessed on your social studies teaching.

1. What are three to five aspects of your social studies teaching you would like to have assessed?

2. What are three to five challenges you think you may face in light of this assessment?

3. Do you foresee any benefits from being evaluated on your social studies teaching? Discuss why and the possible benefits.

4. In what ways do you think social studies teaching should be assessed? If you could decide how your teaching would be evaluated, in which way do you think would best capture student knowledge? Choose and then explain.

[ ] multiple choice assessment
[ ] essay/short answer
[ ] portfolio assessment
[ ] other (explain)
**Author Bios**

**Patricia L. Marshall** is a Professor in the Department of Teacher Education and Learning Sciences at North Carolina State University. She has taught social studies methods courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels and is a former elementary school social studies teacher. Her research interests include study of culturally relevant pedagogy. Email: plmarsha@ncsu.edu

**Ashley L. Jacot** is a Fifth Grade Teacher at Endeavor Charter School in Wake Forest, North Carolina. She completed her graduate work in elementary education at NC State University. Her research interests include elementary education and education policy.

**Angelita F. Gamble** is a Third Grade Teacher at Potomac View Elementary School in Woodbridge, Virginia. She is a former elementary education graduate student at NC State University, with research and teaching interests in elementary and middle grades education, social studies education, diverse populations, and transitional counseling.