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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, the social studies have been defined as the social sciences adapted and simplified for pedagogical purposes. This definition assumes that the criteria for curriculum selection and development in social studies should come from the social sciences and not from an independent view of what the social sciences should be about. Hence, social studies educators are caught between uttering commitments to education for rational citizenship and creating curricula based on criteria that seem mostly irrelevant to these objectives. A more adequate definition of social studies is needed--social studies education as that part of the general education program which is concerned with the preparation of citizens for participation in a democratic society. Social sciences have much to offer in the way of analytic concepts for determining factual claims about social issues, but offer little where a choice must be made between conflicting values. Several obstacles impede the adoption of a more viable definition of the social studies--certain myths about the learning process, teacher insecurity, and fear over community reaction. We should be directing our attention to questions of what social studies education should be and how we can best accomplish this objective with students of different abilities and interests, regardless of whether they are in a vocational or college-prep program. (Author/JLB)

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SOCIAL STUDIES AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION*

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Our common parlance is fraught with ambiguity. As a matter of fact, it is always rather surprising to me, considering the uniqueness in our experiences as individuals, that words have the amount of common meaning which they do. Ambiguity serves a useful function in the richness it brings to literary imagery, but it is the common meaning which serves as the basis for general communication. It is primarily when we become involved in the discussion of matters of importance, especially as we try to persuade others of the correctness of our own positions on subjects of common interest, that the ever-present ambiguity of our language becomes a definite handicap.

It would be difficult to find an area where differences in word usage have introduced more confusion and frustration than in the discussion of the public school curriculum, especially that part called social studies. Consequently, I have made somewhat of a fetish out of beginning each talk on the social studies with a definition of key terms. This obviously does not insure that other participants will be willing to accept my definitions; it does, I trust, make it more certain that communication will take place. Spelling out the meanings assigned to words also helps, I have found, to make more evident the bases both of disagreement and agreement between differing stands regarding the social studies curriculum.

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As we are concerned during this conference with social studies as an aspect of vocational education, I will begin by defining vocational education. My decision to begin with this term, rather than social studies, is based in part on the belief that the definition of vocational education is less controversial, and therefore easier. Vocational education, as I will be using the term today, refers to education aimed specifically at preparing the student to enter the world of work upon leaving school. There may be an intermediate stage, for example, service as an apprentice or further training in a post-high school trade and technical institute. But this does not detract from the notion that vocational education is geared toward preparation for work--especially skilled type occupations, such as electronics technical work, welding, typing, and machine work--and not, for example, toward preparation for college. Nor is it diffuse general education in the 19th Century liberal arts sense.

The term social studies has traditionally been defined in reference to the social sciences. That is, the social sciences are first defined as the scholarly fields of study of man in his social environment. (This definition includes history which, despite its humanistic and literary elements, is basically a systematic study of man's social past.) The social studies are then defined as the social sciences adapted and simplified for pedagogical purposes. This definition, most commonly attributed to Edgar Wesley, has perhaps done more to stifle creative curriculum work in the social studies than any other factor. For it assumes by the very sequence of definition--from the social sciences to the social studies--that the criteria for curriculum selection and development in social studies should come from the social sciences, not from an independent view of what the social studies should be

about. This is perhaps a supreme example of the way in which language limits our thinking. Social studies educators have become so conditioned to thinking that the curricular flow must be from the social sciences, including history, to the social studies, and that the social sciences are the only legitimate source of content for the social studies, that our curricula belie common statements of objectives for social studies instruction.

One of the most striking paradoxes of American education is the heavy emphasis in social studies education on teaching information and the marked absence of materials for teaching thought process taken in conjunction with the abundance of grand statements about responsibility for citizenship education and the need to educate reflective, intelligent, rational citizens to participate in the decision-making processes of a free society. The paradox is not surprising, however, if one takes into account our subservience to the notion of the social studies as adaptations and simplifications of the social sciences. The scientific commitment is to adequate description, not to application. Moreover, it is easier for the curriculum worker to simplify and adapt substantive content. The identification and communication of thought process concepts is a most difficult task. Further, social scientists themselves, if one judges by undergraduate course offerings and several of the current social science curriculum development projects for the elementary and secondary school, do not regard their modes of investigation as fit matter for instruction to any but those being prepared for entry to the guild. Social studies educators are caught, then, between uttering commitments to education for rational citizenship and carrying out curricula which are based on criteria that seem in large part irrelevant to this objective. And, myths have been developed and sustained to mask the inconsistencies. I will return to these briefly later.

One way to resolve this objectives-content paradox would be to adopt a more adequate definition of social studies, a definition based on the long standing commitments to citizenship education that have failed to have a pervasive effect on the character of social studies education. I would begin defining social studies by making it clear that social studies education is general education. In discussing social studies, we are talking about a program intended for all students; one which therefore should be based on a rationale that takes into account all students, not just those going on to college or those who come to school with an interest in abstract descriptions of the society and its past. The most reasonable focus for such a rationale is upon the preparation of students for more reflective and effective political participation in their society--a society whose central commitment to human dignity assumes that all citizens have contributions to make to the determination of public policies, and that the schools should foster the ability to participate readily and rationally.

Social studies is, then, by this more viable definition, that part of the school's general education program which is concerned with the preparation of citizens for participation in a democratic society. Social studies is not simply an offshoot of the social sciences, with content to be dictated by the interests and desires of academicians in the social sciences and history. In fact, teachers and curriculum builders willing to structure their work by this definition will need, first of all, to ask themselves, "What are the prerequisites of intelligent political participation?" not "What do social scientists or historians consider to be the legitimate domains of knowledge?" And, secondly, they will need to go beyond the social sciences for their content.

This is not to say that social science content will be neglected. As a matter of fact, in a social studies curriculum truly geared to the education of intelligent participant citizens, knowledge from the social sciences will be of paramount importance. It will not, however, be selected or organized according to the dictates of the social scientist, but according to the demands of general education. There is, for example, no intrinsic reason why social science concepts must be taught as part of the structure of a discipline instead of being taught as they are relevant to understanding specific issues facing the society. Which of these approaches, or what combination of the two, will be most effective for teaching social science concepts is an empirical question that has not yet been fully resolved by educational research. It seems highly probable, however, that the scholar's excitement in creating structure is not akin to the feelings that students are likely to have in learning that structure. There are, moreover, research findings that indicate that John Dewey, and innumerable other educators, were correct--that is, we learn that which we are able to use in construing and grappling with problems of real consequence to us as individuals.

We have found in curriculum work such as that carried out by the Harvard Project¹ that the pressing issues facing the society are of real consequence to secondary school students. Social studies teachers have too often sold the idealism of youth short by assuming that their students were neither concerned with matters beyond athletic and dating prowess nor capable of engaging in intelligent thought and discourse about other matters. What relations with minority groups should be forced on members of the society? What are the responsibilities of the rich for the poor, and of the poor for

¹Donald W. Oliver and James P. Shaver, Teaching Public Issues in the High School. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966.

themselves? How should we balance economic strength with humanitarian notions of equality? These questions, critical to a pluralistic democratic society, are of the stuff that fire up adolescents who are still concerned with ideals. But one can find only rarely a curriculum built around such issues. Even American problems textbooks tend to describe the factual context of issues rather than posing the value dilemmas. Instead of pursuing such issues, we wonder that secondary school students seem to lack interest in discourses on the causes of the Civil War or the economic, political, and social changes leading to the Renaissance. And, we despair because at the age of twenty-one, at the height of their concern with family and occupation, young adults do not automatically make the transformation to participant citizenship.

What about my claim that we must go beyond the social sciences for concepts and content for the social studies curriculum? Political-ethical conflict is at the heart of public controversy. Choices between competing conceptions of good are the focal point of most discussions of legislation or other proposed action by governmental or other powerful social groups. Not only does the present so-called "social studies" curriculum ignore value conflicts by neglecting explicit concern with the preparation of participant citizens, but the reliance of social studies educators on the social sciences for the content of instruction means that there would be a dearth of adequate conceptual tools for dealing with public controversy even if teachers turned to this most important task.

The social sciences do offer essential substantive concepts for describing a societal problem. It does not take great imagination to think of the contributions economics, anthropology, political science, and history

could make to a student's adequate comprehension of the school desegregation problems still facing our nation. At the same time, the social sciences, with their orientation toward the systematic, empirical study of social reality, have much to offer in the way of analytic concepts for determining what factual claims about a problem should be accepted. If one is willing to accept semantics as a social science, there are obvious contributions to be made by that field to the understanding of how language functions and of the strategies that might be used to clarify the language that is the vehicle for thought and discussion.

But what can the social sciences offer at the point that a choice must be made between two conflicting values? It has often been naively assumed in social studies curriculum work that the scientific method (and usually the conception of this has been extremely naive, inadequately based on the steps of thinking proposed by Dewey in How We Think) is appropriate to solving all problems--whether factual or evaluative in their origin. Once, however, that the discussants' language has been clarified and any factual questions resolved (for example, about the consequences of different policies) and a difference over values remains, there is nothing in social science methodology that will help the citizen come to a defensible position. Beard has pointed out succinctly the powerlessness of the social sciences when faced with a choice between different courses of action:

Here the social sciences, working as descriptive sciences with existing and becoming reality, face, unequivocally, ideas of value and choice--argumentative systems of social philosophy based upon conceptions of desirable changes in the social order. At this occurrence empiricism breaks down absolutely. It is impossible to discover by the fact-finding operation whether this or that change is desirable. Empiricism may disclose within limits, whether a proposed change is possible, or to what extent it is possible, and the realities that condition its

eventuation, but, given possibility or a degree of possibility, empiricism has no way of evaluating a value without positing value or setting up a frame of value.²

Social studies must, then, draw on sources of concepts other than the social sciences if the intellectual skills taught are to be adequate to the demands of political-ethical controversy. Yet as long as we maintain the traditional definition of social studies as the social sciences simplified and adapted for pedagogical purposes, our vision is obscured in terms both of developing an adequate rationale for the curriculum and selecting the concepts that will be of most service to our students in confronting the crises facing society.

What stands in the way of adopting a more viable definition of social studies--one that will more adequately focus attention on the task of general education and provide a more adequately comprehensive framework for the selection of the concepts to be taught? In the first place, there are certain myths that interfere. I have already alluded to a couple with rather recent standing. One is the myth that if a professor derives pleasure from building a structure for his academic discipline, students will necessarily be motivated if study of concepts is based on that structure. Related to this myth is the notion that social science curriculum projects are social studies curriculum projects.

Another myth that interferes with curriculum reform in social studies involves the "urn" concept of education. This is the approach to instruction which sees students as urns into which data can and must be poured to be dumped back out in the near or far future as pertinent to some pressing

²Charles Beard, The Nature of the Social Sciences. New York: Scribner, 1934, pp. 171-172.

matter. An offshoot is the "ground-covering" fetish; that is, the notion that it is more important to finish the textbook or cover a particular span of history than to go into any one aspect in depth. Ground-covering has been pretty well disseminated in journal articles--although my observations indicate that it is still a prevalent classroom practice. By the same token, although it has been shown that information is forgotten at a rapid rate when it does not fit the individual's structure for construing the world, teachers still can be heard to proclaim the necessity of concentrating on teaching their students the background necessary to understand the problems they will later face. Depth of comprehension for a few societal problems likely to be of critical importance to the society in coming years and teaching thought process concepts thoroughly are rejected because they would take time from filling the urn with all sorts of potentially useful--and useless--information.

In fact, the curriculum work in which I have been involved indicates that considerable economy in learning can be affected by focusing instruction on important societal issues and on the conceptual tools and information to comprehend and debate possible solutions. The Harvard Project, for example, used two-thirds of what was traditionally a two-year U.S. history sequence for problems analysis (including, of course, the historical background of the issues studied). There were no negative effects on the learning of history and social science knowledge by our students as compared with students in the regular curriculum. Our students did, however, show considerably greater gains in analytic ability.³

³Oliver and Shaver, op. cit.

Not only should teachers discard the myth that students are urns to be filled for storage, but so should the myth that students learn by osmosis be put aside. That is, the notion that students will learn to think better by reading the writings of great thinkers is patently unacceptable. In 1962, I summarized the research on the teaching of critical thinking as follows:

Probably the most conclusive suggestion supported by the research reviewed here is that we should not expect that our students will learn to think critically as a by-product of the study of the usual social studies content. Instead, each teacher should determine what concepts are essential--e.g., that of relevance--if his students are to perform the intellectual operations deemed necessary to critical thinking--such as, for example, the formulation and evaluation of hypotheses. Each of these should then be taught explicitly to the students. Utilizing what is known about transfer of learning, a further step can be suggested: Situations as similar as possible to those in which the students are to use their competencies should also be set up in the classroom, and the students guided in application of the concepts in this context.⁴

I have not read anything or discovered anything in my research since that article was published that would dispute or change the conclusions. And, our research results with the Harvard Project supported the contention that students taught to think critically will be far more able to do so than those in a traditional, textbook-bound curriculum--without any loss in learning of information.

If all of this is true, then why do the myths prevail? Why do we still have social studies courses set up to teach arrays of information not organized around public issues nor accompanied by conscious teaching for better thinking? One reason, frankly, has to do with the insecurity of teachers. One such insecurity has to do with the teacher's role vis a vis the academic

⁴ James P. Shaver, "Educational Research and Instruction for Critical Thinking." Social Education, 1962, 26, pp. 13-16.

professor. Teachers with years of excellent experience dealing with children and worrying about what they should be doing in the classroom feel subservient to the subject matter expert whose competencies lie neither in teaching children or in making judgments about what should be taught in social studies.

Teachers are also fearful of community reaction. This fear is not entirely unfounded. I know from experience that parents are not always appreciative of attempts to teach their children to think more clearly--especially when a student begins to challenge his parents' inadequate thinking. Reactionary community groups will often protest what seems to be a departure from inculcating traditional values of patriotism. This is, however, exactly where the defense of education for rational citizenship must begin--with the commitment of a democratic society to an intelligent citizenry. In other words, the claim that skepticism is being taught must be countered by appeal to the basic commitment of our society to rationality. Finally, parents may complain that their children are not going to learn the important facts which former generations learned as students. Aside from the questionable validity of much of what passes as facts in history textbooks,⁵ there are clear grounds for arguing confidently that a focus on public issues and thought processes is not going to have a negative effect on the student's pool of information.

Also standing in the way of the switch to a social studies curriculum based on a viable notion of citizenship education are the attitudes toward history and the social sciences which some teachers bring to the classroom.

⁵See, for example, Harold J. Noah, Carl E. Prince, and C. Russell Riggs, "History in High School Textbooks." School Review, 1962, pp. 415-436.

Many individuals are teaching social studies because they enjoyed studying history for its own sake. They assume that everyone should find this study interesting, and so are willing to impose their interests on the students. Often the "need for a storehouse of information" is adopted as justification for the imposition. This approach often causes little outward consternation when the students are college-bound or interested in abstract ideas. But often students branded as lacking in intellectual ability are simply not interested in history or social science knowledge for its own sake. Nor is there any reason why they should be.

In fact, the teacher's reactions to the student who finds history as such boring reflect a general failure--despite much worrying about what and how to teach--to examine the basic rationale for social studies instruction. What notions about society--what it should be, what it can be, and what part the school can and should play in shaping the society--determine the teacher's curricular choices? Prospective teachers are rarely encouraged to ask these questions as part of the teacher education program. Professors of social studies education have themselves often adopted unthinkingly the restricting definition of social studies which makes the social studies the hand maiden of the social sciences. It is not surprising that questions about the rationale for social studies instruction are rarely raised in the heat of teaching. By default, a curriculum is perpetuated that is too often seen by students as not only lacking in challenge, but as irrelevant to the realities of life.

(Of course, teachers often do not engage in creatively restructuring their curriculum because they lack the necessary professional commitment to do so. It is probably more true, however, that even the conscientious

teacher cannot find the time or energy for curriculum building given the large number of classes he must teach, the large number of students with whom he has contact, and the many clerical and supervisory duties demanded of him.)

What does all of this have to do with the theme of this conference: Social Studies and Vocational Education. In the first place, it seems to me that the problem that must be confronted is simply that of getting the social studies curriculum on its feet. The crying need is for critical and thorough re-examination of what we mean by social studies, including what we hope to accomplish through this aspect of the curriculum, and a careful examination of the correspondence of our instructional programs to our objectives. If that challenge is met, questions about the social studies and vocational education will take care of themselves. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the theme of this conference is of dubious value. The suggestion that social studies instruction should be determined on the basis of whether or not the students are in vocational education, instead of on the basis of careful examination of the needs of general education in a democratic society, is appalling to me. It implies, for example, that vocational education students are not going to be the same class of citizens as those who will graduate from college--that they do not need to be confronted with the same issues, taught the same conceptual skills, provided the same information. The suggestion of a different social studies program for vocational education often seems to assume that students who choose to go into a vocation instead of going on to college are less intellectually competent. Therefore, watered-down and less intellectually demanding courses are needed for them; conversely, it is assumed,

that because the students going on to college are so bright and will have the benefit of a college education, citizenship education is a waste of time, a redundancy, if not simply superfluous for them. There is, of course, little evidence that college education has a significant impact on citizenship behavior. And, the suggestion that watered-down courses are needed for vocational education students is a supreme insult indicating lack of respect for a significant proportion of our citizenry. Little wonder that students with vocational orientations often see school as soporific and irrelevant. The present content of the social studies all too often is irrelevant and they are insulted by the attitude that they are neither capable nor worthy of engagement in reflection about the pressing problems facing the society--which they too will be called to vote upon.

There are, of course, two very different types of "vocational education" students. The first is the student who because of interests and aptitudes has decided to train for entry into a vocation upon leaving school. His interests are often mistakenly interpreted by teachers as indicating a lack of intellectual ability when, in fact, many of these students are more able than those who go on to college. For this student, the sad fact is that the social studies curriculum fails to treat him as a capable person, deserving of full-fledged respect--including a curriculum premised not on the interests of academicians, but on the critical problems he should help face as an adult citizen.

There is another type of vocational education student. This is the student who is not academically able, but who happens to go to a school which sees as its major task the preparation of students for college. In such schools, the so-called vocational education program (often no more

than a traditional woodworking--metalworking industrial arts program) is used to keep noncollege bound students busy and out of the way. I suspect that the naming, if not the establishing, of these programs is often stimulated by the availability of federal funds for vocational education. The question here is not one of social studies and vocational education, but of the social studies and the less able student. The solution is not to pretend that the social studies curriculum should be different because of the vocational education label attached to the student. Instead, the answer is to use any potentially promising instructional method--mechanical or organizational, including programmed instruction and individualized instruction--in order to insure that the objectives of social studies education will be fulfilled to the extent possible with every student in the school.

What I propose, then, is that to ask what is the relationship of social studies to vocational education is a misleading, probably sterile, question. Instead we should direct our attention as educators to questions of what social studies education should be about and how we can best accomplish these objectives with students of differing abilities and interests, regardless of whether they are in a vocational or a college-prep program.