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AUTHOR Thornton, Stephen J.
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ABSTRACT

An enhanced understanding of both practice and research in the social studies has been provided by researchers who presented narrative accounts and case studies of actual classroom teaching. The sort of examples of social studies teaching that emerge from narrative and other types of qualitative research are useful for constructing "fine-grained images of the possible in social studies teaching." Such positive, hopeful images are especially needed in teacher education, in the development of the thoughtful and caring teachers everyone agrees are necessary in the social studies and other fields. A 25-item list of references is included. (DB)

Identifying Issues in the Criticism of Social Studies Teaching

Identifying Issues in the Criticism of Social Studies Teaching[1]

Stephen J. Thornton
Teachers College, Columbia University

My premise in this paper is that research methods should be selected by the criterion of what needs to be illuminated in some identified field such as educational policy, mathematics education, or, of concern here, social studies education. Following from this premise, I will argue that an enhanced understanding of both practice and research in social studies has been secured from narrative accounts of teaching and its circumstances. Finally, I will suggest that currently there is special need -- particularly in teacher education -- for the construction of fine-grained images of the possible in social studies teaching.

I

There is a long history of assessments of the state of social studies in the schools. These assessments have often been boldly negative: Students are not learning enough history and geography (e.g., Ravitch & Finn, 1987; see Wesley, 1944), teaching is too tied to the textbook (e.g., Gross, 1952), and the curriculum is too dominated by "life adjustment" (e.g., Bestor, 1953; Ravitch, 1989). Partly, in response to these indictments of social studies in the

schools, periodic reform movements have arisen -- and fallen (Hertzberg, 1981).

Until the last 10 to 15 years, however, few of either the would-be reformers or researchers spent much time in social studies classrooms. Although surveys revealed that the teaching of history was closely tied to the textbook, for example, it was unclear what this showed about the qualities of classroom life. Did all teachers use the textbook in the same way? Which parts of the textbook were emphasized on tests? Did differently structured textbooks result in differing instructional arrangements? Similarly, while short-answer tests showed that students retained few of the facts of American history, little was known about how this was related to the teaching they had experienced. In brief, there was scant evidence of what happened in social studies classrooms (Cuban, 1991).

The evident failure of most teachers to embrace the New Social Studies movement of the 1960s and early 1970s presented a clear challenge to researchers and to teacher educators. Why, in the face of longstanding condemnation, did teachers cling to conventional teaching practices? Why was curriculum reform so hard to secure? Why did teacher education programs seemingly have so little effect on how

teachers taught? Answers to these questions required looking behind the classroom door -- and a growing number of researchers began to do so. The late 1970s, in this regard, were to prove a turning point in the history of social studies research.

The most notable single development was the comprehensive investigations of social studies in the schools sponsored by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The researchers went beyond traditionally employed methods such as surveys to conduct ethnographic case studies of 11 high schools and their feeder schools in diverse regions of the United States. These case studies provided both corroboration for survey data and the most detailed view of social studies classroom life to that time. In an influential overview of the NSF-sponsored studies, James Shaver and his colleagues (1980) spoke to the richness of the case studies for understanding classroom life:

> We ... found ourselves drawn to the contrast between the National Survey -- well designed and executed, but sterile in its remoteness from the classroom -- and the richness of the [case studies].... [They] provide a strong feeling of reality that it is impossible to capture through questionnaires and observational instruments. (p.16)

A growing number of social studies researchers conducted narrative and other kinds of qualitative case studies in the 1980s (see Thornton, 1991). As had the NSF-sponsored studies, these newer studies confirmed the presence of many

previously-noted and frequently condemned practices such as most teachers' heavy reliance on textbooks (e.g., McCutcheon, 1981).

These newer studies also, however, modified the popular view of an almost monolithic uniformity in social studies classrooms. For example, in several studies it was shown that practices widely condemned as unmotivating for students -- such as teacher-led recitation -- varied widely in their pedagogical effectiveness (e.g., Thornton, 1988; Wineburg & Wilson, 1988). Moreover, a number of researchers illuminated the complex relationships among teachers' goals, their actions in the classroom, and what students learn (e.g., Evans, 1988; Thornton, 1988). In brief, researchers seemed to be bearing out Robert Yin's (1984) contention that case studies are particularly helpful for answering "how" or "why" questions about some set of contemporary events (p.20) -- precisely what was not known about social studies for so many years.

Thus far, I have suggested that research methods are tools and should be selected on the basis of their utility for addressing the needs of some identified field. I have also suggested that fuller understanding of life in social studies classroom required fine-grained narrations of what goes on behind the classroom door. These narrations have contributed to research-based understanding of social

studies teaching, particularly its problems. There have been relatively few attempts, however, to identify the high points of social studies teaching: What does good social studies teaching look like? How is it nurtured and sustained? And, most important for educational reform, how can this knowledge be employed for purposes of teacher education?

II

Lee Shulman (1990) has argued for the use of cases of images of the possible in teacher education. Although images of the possible may have considerable promise for teacher education, much will depend on what kinds of cases are used and how they are used. The "lessons" of narrative case studies, according to Elliot Eisner (1991), are to be found in "perception refined" and "meaning deepened" (p.211). Such qualities would certainly rank high among the qualities that many informed teacher educators would want to cultivate in prospective or in-service teachers (e.g., Holmes Group, 1986).

I have seen the benefits of which Eisner speaks in my own teaching of prospective social studies teachers when I have used images of the possible. For example, Samuel Wineburg and Suzanne Wilson (1988) crafted a study of two exemplary secondary-level history teachers. Wineburg and Wilson describe how the two teachers taught effectively, but in

contrasting ways -- a non-trivial issue in these days of standardized teacher evaluation schemes. Wineburg and Wilson also document how it was possible for these teachers to teach so well: a rich knowledge of their subject, their careful selections of instructional materials, their employment of engaging teaching strategeies, and so forth. Confronted with numerous pessimistic tales of teacher burnout and student apathy, my students seemed to find the Wineburg and Wilson study both instructive as a model for thinking about their own teaching as well as heartening news about how they might fare in the schools.

Why then the worry about how images of the possible may be used in teacher preparation? Put simply, images of the possible, like any other educational model, may be construed not as one approach to be used when a teacher judges it right for his or her students at this time, but as the one best system. For example, a few years ago I wrote about an exemplary teacher's use of simulation in the teaching of the Great Depression (Thornton,1988). Although this teacher was highly successful in both engaging his students and in effecting learning, it is a model of teaching that many good teachers might legimately reject. After all, there are normally many worthwhile ways to teach a particular piece of subject matter. Another good teacher, at the same school as the simulation teacher, for instance, believed that there is

simply not enough time in a one-year survey of American history to allow for the use of simulations. In other words, simulation is a way to teach the Depression, not *the* way. With that teacher, with those students, in that school, it worked well.

Now, it could be said, and fairly so, that I have heard no one, least of all Shulman, suggesting a prescriptive use of images of the possible. I sound a cautionary note, nonetheless, because so many good and not-so-good educational ideas have become commodified, marketed, installed in the schools, usually to little good effect (see Stanley, 1991; Zumwalt, 1988). The Deweyan notion that t ~ching is more than a collection of commodities, tricks, and techniques frequently gets lost in the rush to "implement" reforms. The unavoidable role of the teacher as curricular gatekeeper, for instance, has been discounted in the widely-adopted Madeline Hunter (1984) teacher evaluation scheme. Further evidence of how seemingly good ideas can be distorted is provided by Barbara Arnstine (1990) who pointed out that we are now witnessing the almost bizarre spectacle of coercing teachers to use "cooperative" strategies (p.243).

Images of the possible, if they are to contribute to the development of the thoughtful and caring teachers virtually everyone says we need, must be used in a manner consistent

with cultivating those very qualities. The images must be, as Nel Noddings (1986) has observed on the content of teacher education courses, " material to be analyzed, discussed critiqued, and considered" (p.504). If this kind of dialogue is to occur, it would be important to assure that whatever images of the possible are used are open to multiple, reasonable interpretations. Our purpose as teacher educators should not be to impose a vision of what good teaching is -- and there is strong reason to believe we cannot do so anyway (see Thornton, 1991). Rather, we should aim at student teachers working towards formulating their own philosophies of teaching (see Bolin, 1988). As Noddings (1988) suggests, and as I have experienced with my own students when I have recommended this textbook as "good narrative history" or this teaching as "engaging" 2, it must be possible for "some thoughtful student teachers to reject entirely some of the methods to which we expose them on the grounds that they violate their own ethical sense of what it means to teach" (p.504).

III

In conclusion, a good deal has been learned about social studies teaching in recent years. We now have at least the beginnings of a research base which explains how and why social studies teaching looks like it does. Since, as Dewey (1929) noted, there is much to be learned from "an analysis

of what the gifted teacher does intuitively" (pp.10-11), it makes sense to use images of the possible in teacher education. It would be a grave error, however, to assume that images of the possible will yield prescriptions for educational practice. Philip Jackson (1968) perhaps put it best: " the path of educational progress more closely resembles the flight of a butterfly than the flight of a bullet" (p.166).

Notes

[1] This paper was prepared for a Division B symposium, Beyond Narrative Inquiry: Recent Trends in the Practice of Educational Criticism, at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, April 1991. I am indebted to Frances Bolin and Michael Whelan for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

[2] Both of these examples come from my students in "The Teaching of Social Studies" at Teachers College in the fall of 1990. The book was *A History of the American People from 1492* by Allan Nevins (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). The videotape was a widely-distributed one of the

then Secretary of Education, William Bennett, teaching a social studies class in a Washington, D.C. high school.

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