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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the nature and role of social studies in the public school curriculum. As presently used, the term "social studies" encompasses history, geography, economics, sociology, psychology, and government. In the United States, democratic citizenship is typically taught through social science subjects that are themselves a part of the social studies curriculum. The 1916 report of the National Education Association's (NEA) Committee on Social Studies of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education is discussed. Although the 1916 report gave no specific outline or curricular framework for social studies content, the purpose of social studies was established. This purpose was to provide for good citizenship. A good citizen was one who followed social customs, was loyal to national ideals, and had a sense of social responsibility. Later reports and studies also are described in this paper. This document cautions that when coverage of content becomes the primary focus of teaching and learning, then students generally do not understand what it is they have learned, and if content was learned through rote memorization, nearly all of it is forgotten within two years. Social studies advocates think that knowledge-based problem solving, decision making, and participatory activities, yield a more competent and committed democratic citizen. If the social sciences are taught as fragmented bodies of disconnected facts, then the curriculum will not achieve its goal of preparing an enlightened, active citizenry. Contains 12 references. (DK)

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The term "social studies" is presently used to describe the multitude of social science subjects taught in American schools, including history, geography, economics, sociology, psychology and government. As school subjects and as vehicles for citizenship education, the social studies have generated lively debate and discussion among American educators for scores of years. The continuing controversy focuses on pedagogical issues such as curricular goals and standards, instructional methodologies and practices, and assessment. At the heart of the matter is a most important question: What is the purpose of public education in a democratic society?

Many of the early advocates for public education in America (Washington, Jefferson, and Horace Mann, for example) believed in democratic citizenship as public schooling's chief goal. Indeed, citizenship as either a direct or indirect expectation of education is traceable to Pericles and Aristotle. As recorded by Thucydides in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Pericles commented on the importance of active, knowledgeable citizenship: "We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs not as a harmless but as a useless character; and if few of us are originators, we are all sound judges of a policy." Aristotle, writing on

education in the book *Politics*, believed that government should direct its "...attention above all to the education of youth; for the neglect of education does harm to the constitution." Believing that the "character of democracy creates democracy," Aristotle argued for a common, public educational experience for all youth.

In the United States, democratic citizenship is typically taught through social science subjects. As organized bodies of knowledge, or disciplines, the social sciences have been developed only during the last two hundred years. In the United States, this development paralleled the organization of public education. By 1875, geography and history had become integral parts of the elementary school curriculum, and history courses were a well-established part of the secondary curriculum by the early 1900s. Thus citizenship as a goal of education was accomplished primarily through the teaching of history. It was the 1916 report of the National Education Association's (NEA) Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education that precipitated the ongoing discussion and debate regarding the role of the social sciences, especially history, in civic education.

The 1916 report of the Committee on Social Studies of the NEA's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education described "social studies" as "history, civics, and economics" and "those whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society." This definition gave national prominence to the term "social studies" and to the social studies curriculum in schools. Professional associations representing historians,

geographers, sociologists, political scientists, and economists began jockeying to place their respective disciplines at the center of the newly defined curriculum. Hazel Hertzberg, in *Social Studies Reform: 1880-1980*, wrote that "it seemed that the newly named 'social studies' were 'up for grabs'."

The 1916 report gave no specific outline (curricular framework) for social studies content. However, the term "social studies" was defined and the purpose of the social studies was established. The purpose of the social studies was to provide for good citizenship. A good citizen was one who followed social customs, was loyal to national ideals, and had a sense of social responsibility. An American Historical Association (AHA) committee on social studies broadened the concept of citizenship in a series of volumes on social studies, social sciences, and citizenship education published between 1932 and 1941. The AHA committee conceived of good citizenship as a belief in democratic values, a sense of fairness, a belief in universal public education and a desire to improve society and promote its general welfare. A 1940 report by the Progressive Education Association described the goal of education (and especially social studies education) as the development of "personal potentialities" and "the most effective participation in a democratic society."

The myriad of commission and committee reports on social studies made clear that while social studies teachers should try to reach the goal of producing good citizens, teachers should not inculcate democratic values by requiring the memorization of a selected portion of American history facts. Most of the reports advocated a problem-centered approach to citizenship that relied on the use of social

science concepts, generalizations and skills. Hence the core of the social studies curriculum was perceived to be the development of democratic character through the investigation of problems confronting American society, and through utilization of knowledge, skills, and ideas gleaned from the social sciences.

One might reasonably think that citizenship education through the social studies curriculum is interesting, informative, lively and engaging for students. One might reasonably infer that students find the social studies helpful in stimulating critical thought and useful in meeting their future needs. But as John Goodlad pointed out in *A Place Called School*, most classrooms in American schools rely on "rote learning, memorization and paper-and-pencil activity" and most students view the social studies as one of the least useful and least liked of their school subjects. And, although citizenship education is an overt aim of the social studies, Goodlad concluded "that we cannot assume the cultivation of goals most appropriate to the social sciences even when social studies courses appear in the curriculum."

In *The Nature of the Social Studies*, Barr, Barth and Shermis describe three general models of teaching social studies. The predominant model, termed Citizenship Transmission, is content-oriented and inculcates students with "right answers, right beliefs, good values and worthy tradition." The emphasis of teaching and learning is knowledge, and the teacher's role is to present and explain information to students. A second model of instruction emphasizes the acquisition and use of social science skills. The Social Science methodology recognizes the

importance of knowledge as it is applied to or derived from research and analysis. The teacher is still usually involved in direct instruction, but the focus is on the concepts and skills essential to the structure of the social sciences. The emphasis of the Reflective Inquiry methodology is rational decision-making. The teacher serves as a facilitator of learning who stimulates thinking, encourages ideas, and raises questions. Students must use knowledge and skills to investigate and resolve important social issues and problems.

Clearly, no teacher engages in only one of the three methodologies described by Barr, Barth and Shermis. Most teachers use at least some practices characteristic of each of the three. However, if the researchers are right then teachers probably have a proclivity to use the Citizenship Transmission method of instruction. That's how most of us were instructed in high school and in college; and, most adults accept a fact-oriented social studies curriculum (that's what they know too).

There is, however, a crucial trade-off when schools and teachers implicity adopt fact-oriented curriculum and instruction. When coverage of content becomes the primary focus of teaching and learning, then students generally do not understand what it is they have "learned" (moreover, if content was learned through rote memorization, nearly all of it is forgotten within two years). If cognitive researchers are correct, this is true even of our very "best" students.

What kinds of citizens do our communities, our states, and our nation need? Do we need citizens, as some have suggested, who can gather and analyze information; who can develop and evaluate alternative courses of action; who can

deliberate and communicate with others on important social issues; who can rationally resolve social problems? If we do, then how are those citizens best developed?

Those who believe strongly in a social science-centered curriculum, think that historical knowledge and perspective combined with social science skills construct the pathway to democratic citizenship. Social studies advocates think that knowledge-based problem-solving and decision-making processes, connected tightly to participatory activities, yield a more competent and committed democratic citizen.

As the national standards movement continues to gather speed, social studies educators will be increasingly forced to grapple with hard questions and difficult choices. What *is* the major purpose, or goal, of public education in our democratic society, and how is it best achieved? Do we want and need, as Pericles noted, citizens who are "sound judges of a policy?" Is there something for us to learn from Aristotle's belief that the "character of democracy creates democracy?" How can teaching and learning best facilitate the development of the democratic citizen?

Ehlers and Lee, writing in *Crucial Issues in Education* in the late 1950s, said that "in a democratic society education has a unique place and quality." If the social sciences are taught to and learned by students as fragmented bodies of disconnected facts, then the social studies curriculum will have failed to achieve its overarching goal of preparing an enlightened, active citizenry. As the problems confronting our increasingly diverse and mobile society intensify in magnitude and complexity, a

citizenry competent in democratic understandings and skills, and committed to democratic principles, is a worthy purpose of public schooling.

We have much work to do.

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