

## Understanding Social Studies: Student and Teacher Voices in Relation to Theoretical Orientations

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**Abstract:** Social Studies can be understood, or theorized, in a number of different ways as a consequence of its history (Evans, 2004). This paper presents the findings of a research study of high school students' and teachers' conceptions of Social Studies in relation to four philosophical orientations, labeled the Classicist/Traditionalist, Essentialist, Progressivist and Reconstructionist frames. These four frames are developed from literature in the field. After describing these frames, the research methods of the British Columbia (BC), Canada survey study with teachers and students are summarized. Participants included close to 200 students and teachers in three separate grades. Findings and conclusions are presented next. These findings illustrate that Social Studies is variously understood by participants and that connections exist between participants' views of the subject and perceptions of its usefulness. The paper also describes students' knowledge of the Social Sciences and students' and teachers' comments on the subject. The paper ends with recommendations, developed from the findings, which aim to improve teaching practice and student learning and engagement in the subject.

*Key words:* Philosophies of Social Studies; Student and Teacher conceptions

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### Introduction: Philosophies of Social Studies

Social Studies is a complex subject: it can be conceptualized in a number of ways, depending on the philosophic orientation of the teacher, student, or academic. These varying conceptions are rooted in the subject's history (Evans, 2004; Broom, 2008). Four different views of Social Studies include the Classicist/Perennialist frame, the Essentialist frame, the Progressivist frame, and the Reconstructionist frame. These frames will be described in more detail later in this paper. They were used as the basis for a survey study conducted with 18 classes of British Columbian high school students and teachers which explored how students and teachers understand the subject. These philosophic orientations affect conceptions of and behaviours in the course of study, as explained in the next section. Understanding of the philosophic orientations of school students provides the possibility for teacher actions that may lead to improved student engagement and learning. Findings deepen our knowledge of how Social Studies is conceptualized in practice.

### Research Principles

This study has two underlying precepts. First, Social Studies is understood to be a socially constructed course. As Evans (2004), Broom (2008), and Broom & Evans (2012) make clear, the course has been theorized and developed in a number of ways in different historical and geographical places. The multiple ways in which this course can be understood developed

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from the open and flexible construction of the course in the United States in 1916 and have resulted in manifest interpretations of the aims and purposes, procedures and methods of the subject. Four possible conceptions emerge from different philosophies of education that underlie varying understandings of the subject and are described in the next section. The author recognizes that other Social Studies typologies exist (such as: Sears & Hughes, 1996; Clark & Case, 1999; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004); however, Evans' (2004) typology was chosen as previous research conducted in BC (Broom, 2008; Broom & Evans, 2012) illustrated that BC's curriculum revisions closely matched the general trends identified by Evans. The typologies used here initiated from the work of Brameld (1950) but were substantially reframed and developed with the use of Evans' (2004) American Social Studies typologies and the author's findings in previous historical studies. Evans' framework is comprehensive, covering the political spectrum of opinions on the subject, is clear to use, and provides an effective heuristic framework for identifying varied points of view on the subject.

Each frame is argued to be mutually exclusive in the sense that an individual cannot belong to two frames at the same time. The reason for this is that each frame is underlain by a deep philosophic base, and each base is unique. That is, a person cannot both be a Traditionalist and a Progressivist in the same sense that an individual cannot be both a Republican and a Democrat. Philosophies of Education, of Life, and of Politics, in other words, are comprehensive. They contain within themselves a number of elements that are closely associated and cohesively connected within a particular worldview. Individuals cannot superficially take elements from the various philosophies and combine them, but they can change their philosophies through lived experience and reflection.

The second conceptual precept is that exploring teachers' and students' views of Social Studies is essential to understanding their perceptions of and actions in relation to the subject. That is, students' and teachers' underlying philosophies of Social Studies influence their interactions with the subject in a manner of ways: they affect their views of the importance and purpose of the subject and their actions, such as the methods used by the teachers, or students' behaviours in class. In summary, this research ascertains how teachers and students in this particular case study in British Columbia understand Social Studies in relation to four conceptual frames. This has the potential to have wider implications, being of great importance to Social Studies teaching practice where underlying philosophies create lived reality. The four frames are described below.

### **Conceptual Frames and Literature Review**

The Classicist frame is the oldest tradition of Social Studies and the most familiar to the general public. It draws on the Ancient Greek inheritance and British Liberal Education theorists, such as Oakeshott (1989). It views education as the process of inducting (or socializing) individuals into our rich inheritance of knowledge developed in the past, so that students can then take part in "conversations" about and within this knowledge. Individuals are thus made into "humans" through education. This process, though, is more than that of giving students factual knowledge. It also requires teaching students to think critically about

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and with this knowledge, through the study of philosophy and logic that enable students to come to see the “truth” (Plato, 1999). Activities that develop this critical thought include Socratic questions, discussions, and debates. In this view, the teacher is an expert who guides students through the process of acquiring and then critically reflecting on knowledge. Many supporters of this orientation view Social Studies as primarily a History-based course (Seixas, 2004, 2010; Clarke, 2011). Evans (2004) classifies individuals in this frame as “traditionalists,” which is the category that is used for this study. This is a simplification of the Classical model. It views Social Studies as the teaching of History and morals (with a little Geography), primarily through old-school teacher-centric methods such as lecture and textbook work. Content is primarily fact based, and learning is evaluated through tests or exams, including standardized exams.

The second frame through which Social Studies can be understood is the Essentialist view. Evans (2004) calls this the Mandarin view. This frame developed largely in the 1960s when the Social Sciences established themselves in universities as legitimate disciplines, was theorized by Bruner (1962; 1987) and popularized in Social Studies by Fenton (1967). Bruner argued that each discipline has its “structure,” or organizing concepts. Teachers were to understand the structure of each discipline and its methods, and to teach these to their students using the discipline’s methods. History and Geography study could be expanded to include more of the Social Sciences, such as Anthropology, Archaeology, Political Science, and Sociology. As History was understood to be research into the past using primary documents, teachers were to teach their students how to conduct historical research through the process of trying out its methods. The classroom was a place of discovery learning. Students were to be mini-Social Scientists and teachers were to be guides. Critical thinking and student-centred learning were key features and were embedded in a spiral curriculum (Bruner, 1962).

Moving along the spectrum towards pedagogies that focus less on content and more on students, we have the third frame, the Progressivist. This philosophic orientation draws on the work of Dewey and can be argued to be the foundation out of which much current practice in Social Studies emerged (Broom & Evans, 2012). Dewey argued that content only had significance to students as it was used by them when they were engaged in real activities, or experiences. He criticized the traditional frame for presenting information in a manner that was divorced from students’ worlds, and thus largely irrelevant or meaningless for students. It is not that knowledge is not valuable but that it only becomes meaningful through real activities, experiences, or projects that engage students in a “study of social life” (Dewey, 2007), in learning through interdisciplinary projects. Problems or issues explored in projects should be tackled with the use of facts and “scientific”-like procedures, such as observation, research, and thinking, and then “tested” in order to discover their validity. These problems can include, “such perplexing problems as insanity, intemperance, poverty, public sanitation, city planning, the conservation of natural resources, the constructive use of governmental agencies” (Dewey, 2007). Projects should be framed within, as well develop, students’ knowledge of their social world, and they should be relevant to the students: “the segregation which kills the vitality of history is divorce from

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present modes and concerns of social life...past events cannot be separated from the living present and retain meaning. The true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems" (Dewey, 2007). This study should develop students' critical thinking skills by "...extending the limits of experience...to enlarge the mind...by remaking...meaning" (Dewey, 2007). The aim is to socialize students in a manner that also develops critical thinkers with community consciousness who work to bring continued "growth" to their democratic society. The teacher is to establish environments conducive to students' work. Facilities such as "laboratories, shops and gardens where dramatizations, plays, and games are freely used...for reproducing situations in life" (Dewey, 1916, p. 162) are encouraged.

The fourth frame, the Reconstructionist according to Evans, aims to remake society through education in order to increase Social Justice. It views the socialization aims of the other frames with distrust, as it understands all knowledge to be situated knowledge embedded in power structures. Foucault (1980, 2006) argued, for example, that knowledge is power, as it shapes understanding. That is, knowledge is embedded in particular "truth discourses." In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) illustrates this concept by arguing that the "statement" is key and could be understood by looking at its surrounding conditions. Systems and rules determine a statement's meaning, but they can be invisible. They can be made visible, and their meaning discovered, by looking at other discourses. This distrust of knowledge as oppressive results in teaching pedagogies that aim to develop students' critical thinking through means such as dialogic inquiry. Freire (2000) illustrated this approach by distinguishing between a "banking model" of education where knowledge is "deposited" into students (the "traditional" model) and a transformative pedagogy in which teacher and students together create a (living) curriculum embedded in a particular time and place. The teacher is teacher and student; the student is teacher and student too. Together, they explore issues in society, with the aim of remaking and transforming understanding and life views that provide possibilities for freedom from oppression and the remaking of a more socially just society. The development of students' critical thinking abilities, exploration of multiple texts, and use of dialogue and discussion on social issues are key components of the reconstructivist approach to teaching Social Studies.

### **The Study: Background**

Previous work (Evans, 2004; Broom, 2008) has demonstrated that Social Studies is a constructed course with multiple possible frames through which it can be theorized and, consequently, practiced. Research also shows pendulum swings in theoretical conceptions in government curriculum documents over time (Broom, 2008). Further, vibrant discussion over the meaning, aims, and methods of Social Studies continues down to the present. For example, Americans and Canadians have recently engaged in discussions over progressivist and traditionalist conceptions of the course and over discipline-based (history-focused) versus progressivist (interdisciplinary, social studies) conceptions of the subject (Evans, 2004; Shields & Ramsay, 2004; Crocco, 2003; Saxe, 2003). The questions framing this study were developed from this background:

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(i) What Social Studies philosophic frames do teachers and students hold in BC?

(ii) Are there connections between students' and teachers' conceptions and students' views of the usefulness of, and engagement with, the subject?

(iii) How much knowledge of the academic Social Sciences do students hold?

### **General Context of the Study**

The study took place in BC, Canada. BC provides a good location for conducting a study on Social Studies, as the Ministry of Education has generally been open to curriculum reform over the twentieth century, and Ministers have looked overseas (particularly to the United States) for contemporary curriculum conceptions. The Ministry has often expressed a desire for BC's educational system to be modern and so has carried out regular curriculum revisions. These revisions have closely associated with American trends (Broom & Evans, 2012). This openness to curriculum reform, which resulted in regular revisions emerging from varying philosophic orientations to the subject, provides a fertile ground for investigating how conceptions of Social Studies are manifested in curriculum documents and how these conceptions "live" in teachers and students' views of the subject. The latest curriculum revision occurred in 2004 as part of a general high school revision which changed graduation requirements. It did not largely change the curriculum but it did institute a standardized grade 11 Social Studies exam, which is primarily fact based (Broom, 2012).

The claim is not made that the conclusions of this study apply to all locations, as each location provides a unique sociocultural, political and economic space within which curriculum conceptions are negotiated (Broom, 2011; Broom & Evans, 2012). However, as curriculum is always lived and created in spaces, the study provides a unique, useful, and intriguing "deep" case study look at how Social Studies has been understood in one location that has been open to curriculum reform. Further, some of the findings regarding the associations between conceptions of the subject and sociocultural conditions, as well as the implications of divergent conceptions of the subject for student engagement, are generalizable and provide insights into both how the subject is understood and how teaching practice can be most effective.

### **Methodology**

Eighteen grade 11 Social Studies classes, two grade 12 History classes, and one grade 9 Social Studies class took part in the study. Students and teachers were invited to participate in the research. If they agreed, they were all asked to fill out consent forms and to complete the anonymous survey during class time.

Approximately half the students in each participating class agreed to take part, resulting in a total number of participants (both teachers and students) of close to 200. The majority of participants (all but two private school classes) were at public schools in a range of different socioeconomic and sociocultural neighbourhoods across British Columbia.

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With the aim of uncovering how teachers and students understand the course, the survey asked students and teachers to select their view of what Social Studies is in all grade levels including the History 12 class (as compulsory “Social Studies” finishes in grade 11, and divides into the optional “History 12” and “Geography 12” classes). The first question asked participants to select one of the four philosophies described above: Social Studies as (factual) History and Geography study (Traditionalism), as the study of the Social Sciences (Essentialism), as the study of citizenship for democracy (Progressivism) or Social Studies as the study of critical thinking in order to improve society (Reconstructionism). They were also given the option of “I don’t know” and “none of the above,” and space for general comments. In addition, students and teachers were asked to identify the purpose of Social Studies, again based on the four philosophies described, in order to see whether they had a consistent conception of the course, and with the options of “I don’t know” and “none of the above.” Students were then asked to match each Social Science to its appropriate definition in order to explore their knowledge of each Social Science and to consider connections between an Essentialist orientation and their introductory knowledge of each social science.

In order to consider correlations between philosophic orientation and views of the value of the course, participants were also asked to identify the usefulness of the subject on a four point scale (very useful-somewhat useful—a little useful—not useful). Participants also identified whether they had had all of their education in the same geographical area in order to explore whether place has affected conceptions. Teachers were asked when and where they were certified as teachers. Both students and teachers were given two optional open-ended questions in which they were invited to write any comments they wanted to make on the subject to ensure that participants had a voice in the study.

Surveys were chosen as the research tool as the aim of the study was to have participants identify which of four possible Social Studies conceptions they agreed with. The answers for each typology were summed up and studied through correlation-analysis. Open-ended questions allowed participants to develop their own answers if they did not agree with the options provided. However, as the majority of participants selected one of the pre-determined answers, the participants implicitly illustrated that they accepted the options provided. As teachers were educated at universities and developed their understanding of the subject through textbooks written by university professors, they are assumed to be both familiar with and associated with the same social representations (Moscovici, 1963) as scholars. Students, similarly, generally developed their understanding of the subject in and through school structures, processes, interaction with their teachers, and textbooks.

Findings were analyzed using SPSS software that identified frequencies and explored the relations between answers, that is, the significance of the percentage correlation between different answers. Written response answers were analyzed qualitatively using a heuristic with both horizontal and vertical components.

### Findings of the Study

Survey findings illustrate the importance of philosophic frames to students' and teachers' conceptions of the subject. They demonstrate that students and teachers may have different understandings of Social Studies and that these views affect their views of the usefulness of the subject. These findings, described next, are presented by grade level. As grade 11 students were the largest group of participants, their findings are presented first. The findings review students' definitions and views of the purposes of the subject. Teachers' answers are interwoven throughout. This is followed by a discussion of students' introductory knowledge of the Social Sciences and the general comments made by students. The grade 12 and grade 9 student responses are explained next. This section concludes with a general comparative discussion of findings across the grades and with recommendations.

#### Grade 11 Student Responses

Students were fairly consistent in their definition of Social Studies: 58% of students chose the Essentialist frame as their view of what Social Studies is, 21% chose the Reconstructionist frame, 12% chose the Traditionalist frame, and 2.9% chose the Progressivist frame (See Appendix One for a summary of the findings). 3.6% chose "I don't know" and 2.9% chose "none of the above." Thus, the majority of students believe that Social Studies is, "a course where you learn information about and study information from different Social Sciences such as History, Geography, Anthropology, Political Science, Law, and Economics." This answer differs to that of the government's definition of Social Studies, which is in the Progressivist frame: "The aim of Social Studies is to develop thoughtful, responsible, active citizens" (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 11). No differences in answers were found between students who have had all their education in one place (63%) and those who have not (37% of students). This was not the case for grade 9 students (see below).

Further, only 55% of students had the same definition of Social Studies as their teachers did. The majority (56%) of teachers defined Social Studies in the Reconstructionist frame, with (22%) following in the Essentialist frame. Although no teachers chose the Progressivist frame, the percentage of teachers in this frame is actually higher, as 22% of teachers choose the definition "none of the above," and then wrote their own definitions of the subject. These definitions were largely in the Progressivist frame. Teachers might have chosen to write their own answers as they had rich conceptions of the subject which they felt were not adequately summarized in a short statement. No teachers choose the Traditionalist conception of Social Studies. Intriguingly, students who had the same definition of Social Studies as their teachers found Social Studies to be more useful than their peers, perhaps as they have also internalized their teachers' views as to the importance of the subject or because they are able to understand their teachers' aims.

Students were not consistent in matching their view of the most important purpose of Social Studies to their definitions of the subject. Only 36% of students choose the same Philosophical frame for their answers on the purpose of Social Studies as they did for their

definition of Social Studies: 29% of students stated that the most important purpose of Social Studies is “to learn factual information about the history of Canada and British Columbia” (Traditionalist). This was followed by 27% of students choosing the Reconstructionist frame, 19% choosing the Progressivist frame, and only 18% choosing the Essentialist. 2.9% of students chose “I don’t know,” and the same number chose “none of the above.” These are again different to the answers of their teachers, who were split evenly between the Progressivist and Reconstructionist orientations and “none of the above.” For the latter, as in the case for their definitions of the study, teachers’ written answers were primarily under the Progressivist frame.

Students’ mixed answers may mean that students have inconsistent or unclear views as to the meaning of Social Studies, or it might be the result of the imposition of a standardized exam which is heavily fact based, and is thus forcing teachers to teach fact-based material. This seems to be supported by the answers of students in grades 9 and 12, both of whom did not choose the Traditionalist option as the most important purpose of Social Studies as often as the grade 11s. Indeed, many grade 11 students voiced negative comments about the grade 11 standardized exam stating that it is not a good evaluation of their learning:

-I feel the provincial exam isn’t the best way to test the province’s level of understanding of Social Studies. (Student, Survey)

-I think that a Social Studies provincial is quite unnecessary. We do need to know the subject and its many topics for they relate to our everyday lives and our future. However not so much that we have to memorize every date and name in history. (Student, Survey)

-I think writing the provincial exam is unnecessary because it just shows how much we can study, not how much we can learn. We get stressed so much about the exam, and end up not doing as well as wanted and that ruins our marks which in turn affects our future. (Student, Survey)

Students who had had all their education in one place chose a broader spectrum of answers as to the purpose of Social Studies than did students who had not had all of their education in one place. The latter primarily chose Traditionalist and Reconstructionist answers.

Surprisingly, considering students’ Essentialist definition of the subject, 66% of students could not correctly match each Social Science to its appropriate definition. Thus grade 11 students have little understanding of what each Social Science encompasses. In fact, some students made comments about how they would like to see more of the Social Sciences integrated into Social Studies:

-In my opinion Social Studies should focus more on Anthropology and Philosophy than History. We need to move forward, rather than look backward. (Student, Survey)

-We should have a course that combines all fields of Social Studies in case someone is interested in all of them. (Student, Survey)



A further correlation is insightful: students who were able to correctly match the Social Sciences also found Social Studies to be more useful than their peers. This could either mean that students who are more knowledgeable of Social Studies find it more useful, or it could mean that students who have knowledge of the Social Sciences see them as valuable, and thus Social Studies as valuable. Since curriculum guides do not give much attention to the Social Sciences as they focus primarily on History with a little Geography study (which might also explain why students identified factual History and Geography study as the purpose of the course), questions arise as to where and how students who have knowledge of the Social Sciences acquired their knowledge.

Students' answers were spread out when it came to identifying the usefulness of Social Studies, with more having a positive view of the subject: 25% of students found Social Studies "very useful," 49% found it "somewhat useful," 22% found it "a little useful," and only 3.6% found it "not useful." Further, those students who found the course useful were the most likely to define Social Studies' purpose as that of learning the Social Sciences (Essentialist frame) or becoming critical thinkers in order to improve society (Reconstructionist frame). Those who found Social Studies less or not useful tended to conceive of Social Studies along the largest spectrum (that is, to have unclear views of the subject) and to include more students who defined Social Studies as the study of factual information (Traditionalist). This can also be interpreted to mean that those students who were clear on their purpose of Social Studies and who view Social Studies as having social purpose find the course more useful. This is reflected in students' written response answers. Students who found the course useful were able to understand how it augments daily living:

-Being well rounded is important. (Student, Survey)

-The information gives you a new mind set about what has happened and why things are they way that are...so I would know what not to do or how we the next generation should deal with problems. (Student, Survey)

-Its everywhere and it helps us understand society and the world around us. (Student, Survey)

Those who did not find the course useful appeared to have a more instrumentalist/utilitarian view of education and felt that Social Studies was irrelevant to the careers they had chosen:

-It will not help me very much in my future. (Student, Survey)

-It will not help you in your professional life. (Student, Survey)

-I think math is more useful for my future. (Student, Survey)

-Instead of learning about Napoleon and history that doesn't seem to relate to my future, I want to learn things I can use. (Student, Survey)

*General comments.*

Standardized exam critiques

As mentioned above, all of the students' comments were negative with regards to the grade 11's standardized exam. Students stated that they found it unfair, stressful, fact-based, and not useful.

More global content

Students made comments recommending more Social Science content and more Global history in the course, as the curriculum is Canadian history focused:

-Canada's history is boring. More about civilizations and their history across the seas. (Student, Survey)

-It would be nice to learn about the histories of other countries as well. (Student, Survey)

-Canada's history is not interesting. I find that my peers and I get really bored and stop listening. (Student, Survey)

-I would really love to learn world History but instead they limit it to just Canada's history. (Student, Survey)

-As a Canadian, I believe that Socials should do more of American history as well. I feel we are extremely biased towards Canadian/British history. (Student, Survey)

Less memorization and more critical thinking

Students also asked for Social Studies to move away from content-based, factual learning to more higher order, critical thinking-based questions and activities and for the curriculum to be made more relevant to their lives:

-The curriculum should contain more debating and discussions about what is being studied (was England's treatment of the cultures in their colonies justified?) ect. (Student, Survey)

-Socials class becomes very boring when all you do is read and write questions from the textbook. There should be current events to capture the interest of students. Socials classes should relate history to real life more often. For instance, class discussions comparing and contrasting, debates... (Student, Survey)

-Social Studies should be less about just reading textbooks and more about getting out into the real world. (Student, Survey)

-The curriculum should contain more debating and discussions about what is being studied. (Student, Survey)

### The teacher and text

Finally, some students made comments about the textbook and the importance of the teacher:

-It can be a fascinating subject but you need to have a very good teacher. (Student, Survey)

-I think it depends on who your teacher is and how good your teachers from the previous years have been. That affects how useful and how interested we become in the subject. (Student, Survey)

-The textbook is horrible. It's not in chronological order and it's a massive confusion. Also the glossary doesn't have all of the topics. (Student, Survey)

### Teacher Responses

As described above, teachers' responses were primarily in the Reconstructionist orientation (56%). They viewed Social Studies as encompassing the study of History and Geography, Civics, and Law in order to develop students' skills, particularly that of critical thinking, with the aim of understanding society and cultivating in students a desire to improve society. This definition partly matches that of the government's. Twenty two percent of teachers chose the Essentialist orientation as their definition of the subject. Interestingly, all of the teachers, except one, were educated at the same university. They were all trained to teach Social Studies at university, and they are primarily (66%) between the ages of 35 and 50 (only one is younger, and two are older). The older teachers, further, were the ones who chose the Essentialist definitions of Social Studies. As Essentialism was the philosophic orientation of the curriculum guide developed in 1968 and in use until 1985 and was actively promoted by some professors at the university where teachers studied, by writers in the local Social Studies teachers' journal (*Exploration*) and at conferences during the 1960s (Broom, 2008), it is possible that these teachers' definition of the subject was influenced by these factors. This could mean a correlation between teachers' lived experience and their definitions of the subject. It would be interesting to see if a Reconstructionist conception of Social Studies has been taught at the university more recently (according to anecdotal evidence regarding textbooks it might be, at least by some university professors). More research can be conducted in this area, but it does seem possible that teachers' educations/backgrounds partly correlate with their conceptions of the subject.

### Grade 12

History 12 is an optional course. The majority of these students (53%) had the same definition of Social Studies as their teachers (Reconstructionist), also followed by the Essentialist conception (36%). They had the same views as to the most important purpose of the subject: 42% chose "to make our society and our democracy better" and 26% chose "to learn to become better thinkers." Like the grade 11 students, grade 12 students appear

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to have chosen to take the course, as they have similar conceptions of the subject as their teachers and thus see it as a useful course: 47% of students found the course to be “very useful,” 47% found it to be “somewhat useful,” and only 5% found it “a little useful.” No students found it “not useful.” These answers were the same for students who have had all their education in one place (42% of surveyed students) and those who haven’t (58%). Grade 12 students made similar comments as grade 11 students as to why they think it is useful: it teaches about the past in order not to repeat its mistakes, it gives knowledge about society and allows students to understand interrelations, and it “enables us to become critical thinkers.” Further, also like grade 11 students, the majority of grade 12s (58%) could not correctly match each Social Science to its appropriate definition: students seem to be familiar with History, Geography, and a little Political Science but not as familiar with the other Social Sciences. Students also asked for the content to be made more relevant:

-I wish we had more time studying late 80s beginning of 90s because it is, I think, the most recent time period which many people do not know enough about. (Student, Survey)

#### Grade 9

Grade 9 students had similar definitions of the subject as grade 11 students: 45% chose the Essentialist answer, 27% chose the Reconstructionist, and 27% chose the Traditionalist definition. The only difference was with the latter choice (the Traditionalist) which was chosen almost 3 times more often by grade 9 students than by grade 11 and grade 12 students, perhaps explaining why they found the course less useful than their older peers. Further, there was a correlation between whether students had had all their education in one province or not: those (64%) students who had not had all of their education in one place had a broader spectrum of answers with regards to their definition of the subject. This might mean that younger students who have immigrated are less clear as to what Social Studies is about. All students illustrated some confusion as to the meaning and purpose of the subject: 82% of students were not consistent in choosing the same philosophic frame for their answers regarding the purpose of Social Studies, although there was a correlation between the Reconstructionist definition and purpose, with this being the most chosen answer (36%), followed by the Progressivist (27%), the Traditionalist (18%), and the Essentialist (9%) last. Seventy three percent of students’ answers were not the same as their teachers’ answers, perhaps also helping to explain why less students found the course useful and defined it in a Traditionalist manner. As well, like both the grade 11 and 12 students, 91% of the students could not correctly match each Social Science to its definition. Students in grade 9 also made comments about making the curriculum more interesting and relevant to students and using more student-centred and critical pedagogy:

-Most kids should learn all sides of the story. Only learning one side makes people biased. I think there would be a better understanding between people. It might be hard but so is reality. ...People are like empty paper, teachers can brainwash kids. You should have more people ask questions. (Student, Survey)

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There was also a correlation between those who did not find the course useful and an instrumental view of education (that is, feeling that Social Studies was not relevant to their career choice):

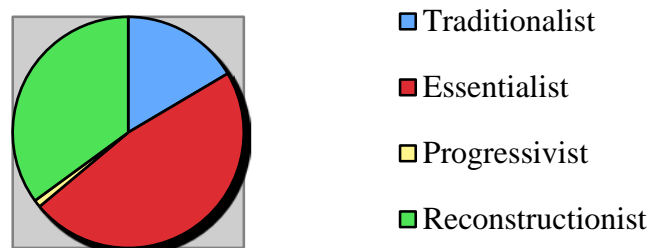
-It's good to know what happened in the past and how our world came to be but I don't think it's as important as, say, math. (Student, Survey)

More students found the course less useful than students in higher grades: 27% found it "very useful," 36% found it "somewhat useful," and 36% found it "a little useful." No student found it "not useful." Those students who have had all their Social Studies education in the province tended to choose the "somewhat useful" category, while those who have not had all their education in one place had a broader range of answers, either finding it very useful or only a little useful. The majority of students, though, (63%) still found the course more rather than less useful, and like older students, they found it useful if they choose the Essentialist or Progressivist definitions of the course.

### Discussion

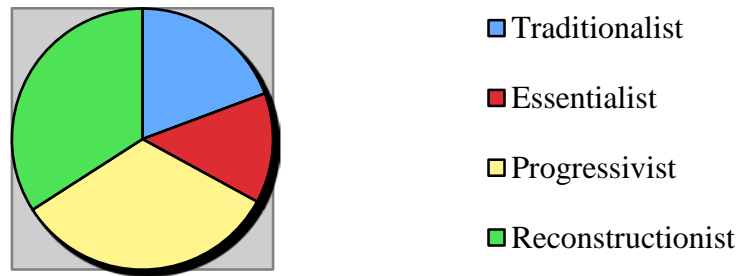
This study found that 46% of BC students in grades 9, 11, and 12 define Social Studies in the Essentialist frame, followed by the Reconstructionist (34%), the Traditionalist (16%) and the

Figure 1. *BC Students' definitions of Social Studies.*



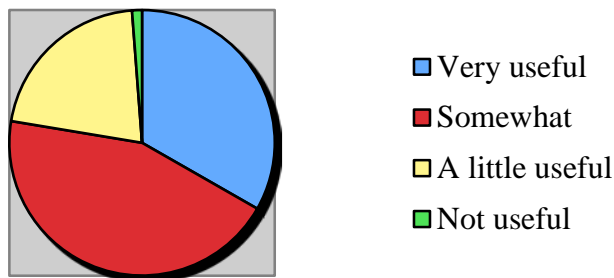
Progressivist (1%) frames. Students, thus, have a broad range of answers as to the meaning of subject, and older students had more Reconstructionist views of the subject than younger students (who had more Traditionalist and Essentialist answers). Further, while there is a correlation between the Reconstructionist definition and purpose (30%), 29% of students chose the Progressivist, 17% the Traditionalist, and 12% the Essentialist frames for their answers as to the purpose of the subject. Students seem to have some confusion as to what the subject's purpose is or are generally unclear about the subject overall.

Figure 2. *BC Students' Views of the Purpose of the Subject.*



As students' philosophy of Social Studies is vital to their understanding of the aims and purposes and methods and behaviours appropriate to the subject, this confusion most likely influences learning and behaviour. It certainly affects students' views of the usefulness of the subject: 33% find it very useful, 44% find it somewhat useful, 21% find it a little useful, and only 1.2% don't find it useful, and older students generally find it to be more useful than younger students, with half of grade 11 students choosing the "somewhat useful" option (Figure 3). In short, 77% of students see the course as having some use and this correlates with having the same definition of Social Studies as their teachers, not having an instrumental view of learning, and not having a Traditionalist definition of the subject.

Figure 3. *BC Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of the Course.*



As perceptions of usefulness correlate with definitions of the subject, students' conceptions of the subject might be improved over all, if teachers spend some time at the beginning of the course exploring with students what Social Studies is and why it is useful to study. This could involve presenting readings on, or framed within, each of the four philosophies of Social Studies described here and then having a discussion as to which students agree with and why. Exploring why Social Studies is useful is important, and this could be done by discussing the skills that are developed through the course and its relevance to enhancing

daily living, whatever one's career ambitions might be. This will be beneficial for all students. A further study can be conducted to explore the impact of discussion about the meaning, purpose, and usefulness of Social Studies on students' conceptions of and behaviours in the class.

Secondly, despite students' definition of the course, this study found that a surprisingly high number of students were not able to correctly match each of the Social Sciences to its correct definition. Students were comfortable with History, Geography, Law and Political Science, but confused Anthropology, Archaeology, Economics, Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology. Further, students voiced interest in their comments as to having more study of the other Social Sciences.

Social Studies content can thus be enriched through the addition of a contemporary study of the nation and the world today that includes an introduction to and a study through various Social Science lenses, as is partly done in the grade 9 Atlantic Canada course in Nova Scotia (Broom, 2010) and in some American states, such as Oregon. Further, as students also requested, this study recommends the expansion of content beyond that of national history to include more Global or World History. A pilot curriculum can be developed and tested out in order to see if students benefit from and appreciate a diversified program of study.

Finally, this study recommends the amendment of the new grade 11 standardized exam. Of the three grades, only the grade 11 students chose the most important purpose of Social Studies as that of learning factual information. Grade 9 students chose the option of becoming better thinkers and grade 12 students chose that of improving our democracy. Most will agree that the latter two purposes are more important. Grade 11 students' choice of factual learning is most likely a consequence of the heavily factual and content-based nature of the new grade 11 exam, which is affecting how teachers teach the course. Students made many comments to the effect that the new exam is not a good measure of their learning of Social Studies and that it causes them much fear and stress.

Social Studies learning can be evaluated by teachers using a number of varied assessments. Further, it is best taught—as the students themselves also commented—through methods that are not focused on content-learning (such as lecture and textbook work). These better methods match all of the four philosophic frames of Social Studies (including the Classicist but excluding the Traditional) that were described in the first part of this paper and comprise methods that include discussions which present multiple points of view and activities that foster the development of critical thinking, such as debates and critical questioning.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In 1916, Social Studies was formulated in the United States by the Committee on the Social Studies. As the committee was composed of individuals with varying views on the purpose and meanings of the new subject being developed, consensus was reached through a document that was fluid, porous and subject to various interpretations (Evans, 2004). This

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has resulted in multiple conceptions of Social Studies grounded in varying philosophies of education, as illustrated in the pendulum swings of one government's curriculum documents over the twentieth century (Broom, 2008) as well as in the American "Social Studies Wars" (Evans, 2004). As the subject has been conceived in multiple ways in different times and places, the question emerges as to what teachers and students think the subject is about. This study has found that students are confused as to the meaning of Social Studies and that this correlates with their views of the usefulness of the subject. Further, those students who have the same conceptions as their teachers find the course more useful. Teachers are much more clear and consistent in their views of what the subject is about. They also seem to be affected by their own lived histories of the subject. Evidence of students' confusion is illustrated in the finding that the majority of students define Social Studies in the Essentialist frame, yet they cannot correctly match each Social Science to its appropriate definition.

In addition, unlike students in both grade 9 and grade 12, grade 11 students choose the purpose of Social Studies as being the learning of factual content. This appears to be a direct result of the implementation of a standardized exam in grade 11, which is criticized by students (and many teachers). Students also commented on the narrow scope of the curriculum. This study thus supports the importance of exploring the philosophies undergirding a subject's conception as this will influence how it is understood, taught, learned, and valued. As philosophies are viewed to be constructed by individuals through their lived experiences in relation with schemata processing in the mind, the study grounds itself within a sociocultural perspective. This approach provides possibilities for positive transformation through conscious awareness, reflection, and—consequently—changed action.



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Appendix One: Summary of the Findings

Question/Group	Traditionalist	Essentialist	Progressivist	Reconstructionist	Other
1. What is Social Studies?					
Teachers	0%	22%	0%	56%	22%
Grade 12	10%	36%	0%	53%	0%
Grade 11	12%	58%	2.9%	21%	6.5%
Grade 9	27%	45%	0%	27%	0%
2. What is the most important purpose of Social Studies?					
Teachers	0%	0%	33%	33%	33%
Grade 12	5%	10%	42%	26%	15%
Grade 11	29%	18%	19%	27%	5.8%
Grade 9	18%	9%	27%	36%	9%
3. Percentage of students who could correctly match the Social Sciences to their definitions					
Grade 12	42%				
Grade 11	33%				
Grade 9	9%				
4. How useful do you think Social Studies is for your future?					
	Very Useful	Somewhat	A little	Not Useful	
Grade 12	47%	47%	5%	0%	
Grade 11	25%	49%	22%	3.6%	
Grade 9	27%	36%	36%	0%	
5. Has all your schooling from kindergarten to grade 11 been in British Columbia?					
	Yes	No			
Grade 12	42%	58%			
Grade 11	63%	37%			
Grade 9	38%	64%			

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