

**Awakening the Sleeping Giant:
A Commentary on Social Studies During the Coronavirus Pandemic**

Brad Maguth
The University of Akron

Abstract:

In this essay, I highlight two ways in which the coronavirus pandemic has influenced the teaching and learning of social studies. First, despite its marginalization and under-investment nationally, the crisis highlighted the significance of social studies by serving as a refuge for youth and families to navigate and better understand this disaster. This includes serving as a cathartic space for learners grappling with current events as they unfold. Second, curricular innovations emerged that guided informative practices. Such innovations include “Maslow before Bloom” (attending to basic human needs before focusing on academic learning) and noting the ways in which youth took informed action at home and in the community to make a difference. While the list is in no way comprehensive or mutually exclusive, it does present one picture of social studies in classrooms and communities during this challenging period in our history.

In late December 2019, officials in Wuhan, China, confirmed to the global community dozens of pneumonia cases. Despite news reports of this new strain of coronavirus, many Americans took comfort that this isolated disturbance was half a world away. In addition to a vast ocean that separates the U.S. from China, Americans were given confidence in having one of the world's most developed economies with exceptional hospitals and universities. On March 13, 2020, however, after several confirmed coronavirus cases in the U.S., President Trump declared a State of Emergency. On the same day, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine and Director of Health Amy Acton mandated a statewide closure of all schools. As of July 10, 2020, the U.S. led the world with 3.29 million confirmed coronavirus cases and 137,000 deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Schools in Ohio and around the country were given days to close in mid-March and move to remote learning. Educators courageously moved at warp speed, many without much training, to put instructional materials online. As teachers put materials online for student learning to

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

continue, many were also navigating their fears related to the virus. These fears included the realization that store shelves were emptying, with staples like milk, bread, and toilet paper challenging to find. Most non-essential businesses like libraries, gyms, and community organizations were closed. Realities were jolted as the virus reminded the global community how interconnected humans are to each other and the planet's resources. Events in one region of the world (like China) have and will continue to connect us to an increasingly global community.

Below, I highlight two ways in which the coronavirus has influenced the teaching and learning of social studies. This perspective has been shaped by my experiences working with hundreds of K-12 educators as President of the Ohio Council for the Social Studies and as a social studies teacher educator during the pandemic. While the list below is in no way comprehensive or mutually exclusive, it does present one picture of social studies in classrooms and communities during this challenging period in our history.

First, despite its marginalization and under-investment nationally, the crisis highlighted the significance of learning social studies (Heafner, 2020). In times of local, national, and global distress, social studies, inclusive of the curriculum and teachers, has served as a “civic education first responder.” Social studies allows youth and families to glean the lessons of history, geography, economics, government, psychology, and sociology to better understand current events and the overall human condition (Maguth, 2016). As the destructive coronavirus spreads, the social studies classroom will serve as an essential reflective and inquiring space for learners grappling with current events as they unfold.

During the height of the spring stay-at-home order, Berinato (2020) published a commentary in the *Harvard Business Review* that went viral on social media. He painted a picture of the losses people were experiencing: a loss of normalcy, a loss of economic security, and the loss of physical connection between neighbors, friends, and loved ones. This article pulled from research and theory in psychology to discuss collective grief and the discomfort youth and families experienced during the outbreak. Demand also increased for history content (books, films, podcasts, websites, etc.) related to past pandemics, like the 1918 flu pandemic and the Bubonic plague of the 14th century. Readers were accessing historical content to investigate themes and patterns to make connections to the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. John Barry's *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History* experienced record sales and sat atop the *New York Times* bestsellers list. Netflix's six-part mini-series *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* reached millions of viewers.

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

Social studies skills and content often emerged critical in local, national, and global conversations as citizens sought updated information and insights on public health and the economy. However, an information glut often existed, with opinion and analysis pieces masquerading as breaking news on traditional and new media. Inaccurate and politically biased content reverberated across televisions, computers, and mobile phone screens and applications. Information literacy was of paramount importance, especially for a generation raised and dependent upon the internet for quick and easy answers. Unpacking fake news and teaching learners to be critical consumers of news has been and must be a vital part of a well-rounded and meaningful social studies education; during a national emergency, it is paramount (Journell, 2019).

In record numbers, audiences tuned in to watch the local news and to view presidential and gubernatorial news briefings. These briefings usually included tables and graphs that frequently represented confirmed COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations rates, and mortality rates. In late spring and early summer, this event dominated the news coverage and conversations in households and on social media. Ohio television viewers ritualistically tuned in every weekday afternoon for news briefings with Governor Mike DeWine to better understand the rapidly changing situation and circumstances; these briefings were dubbed “Wine with DeWine,” as some adult viewers would affectionately watch with their favorite spirit in hand (Diadiun, 2020).

Meaningful social studies experiences help youth understand their civic responsibilities and obligations within a democracy. After all, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) notes that the primary purpose of social studies is “...to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (NCSS, 1992). John Dewey (1916) explained the significant role of public schools in advancing and sustaining communities and democracy: For Dewey, democratic education goes beyond preparing youth to vote and centers on schools promoting a mode of associated living together or conjoined communicated experience. This conjoined experience is rooted in young people, as social beings, having the opportunity to inquire and reflect with diverse populations on shared experiences and problems (Dewey, 1916). During the global pandemic, social studies emerged as a reflective space for learners to discuss how the individual actions (and inactions) of citizens affect the overall health and vibrancy of one’s household, community, country, and world. To halt the deadly spread of the virus, all citizens needed to abide by enacted public health guidelines (i.e., social distancing, washing and sanitizing hands, stay-at-home orders, etc.). The crisis reminded communities of the paramount role that schools—as the nation’s largest institution reaching the bulk of youth—play in preparing citizens

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

for associated living. After all, one person alone acting in isolation from the many is unable to flatten the coronavirus curve.

Second, curricular innovations emerged due to the coronavirus pandemic that influenced the teaching and learning of social studies. Such innovations include prioritizing the physical and mental well-being of students and their families, which emerged as essential during these trying days; in education circles, this was called “Maslow before Bloom,” based on the work of two influential thinkers in psychology and education. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) is known for his Hierarchy of Needs, which describes five tiers of basic human needs, including physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow’s two lowest tiers, physiological and safety needs, involve our most basic needs: food, water, shelter, sleep, and security (Maslow, 1943). Youth and families that struggle to meet these most fundamental needs have little opportunity to address Maslow’s higher tiers in positive ways. Benjamin Bloom (1913-1999) is known for his Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, tiers of verbs that organize higher and lower levels of cognitive skills for learning (Bloom, 1956). Bloom’s cognitive demands have had a profound impact on the shaping and design of curriculum in U.S. schools.

As a result of COVID-19, numerous threats emerged that challenged students’ most basic human needs. Already struggling families that once relied on schools for food and social services were now displaced with buildings shuttered. Additional stressors included medical and public health costs for families in a time when a historic number of workers were laid off and furloughed: In the first 10 weeks of the outbreak, Americans filed more than 40 million jobless claims (Romm, 2020).

With families and students’ most basic needs not being met, it is exceptionally challenging to foster learners’ cognitive and affective success in school. “Maslow before Bloom” supports the idea that families and youth must have the foundational physical and socio-emotional safety nets to meet their most basic needs before launching into an advanced curriculum, especially during a historic pandemic.

Children were grieving the loss of their in-person time with friends, their daily school routines, and the predictability of life that often provides a sense of safety and security. Everywhere, children witnessed adults (at home and in the media) discuss economic toil, illness, and death. As educators, we understood the importance of acknowledging and honoring that grief process. Few children, especially those already predisposed to trauma, would be able or motivated to jump seamlessly and successfully into a perfect online learning program, especially in those many

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

households where students had little to no reliable access to a computer or the internet. After all, most kids, parents, and teachers never signed up for remote learning.

Another curricular innovation that emerged was the opportunity to ground social studies teaching and content in a real-world context. As novelist Grant Allen reminds us, we must never let formal schooling interfere with our true education (Allen, 1894). The coronavirus pandemic created a launching pad for some social studies teachers to design purposeful inquiries on the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth wrestled with compelling questions, applied disciplinary tools, evaluated and used evidence, and took informed action. In many cases, America's youth rose to the occasion to take action to help others. For instance, during the stay-at-home order in Arkansas, a junior high school student played trumpet outside his house every morning to uplift his community: "I want to give people in my community hope that it's going to get better," he said (D'Angelo, 2020). In Ohio, two elementary school students joined an army of people making masks for medical workers. In Massachusetts, when a young boy lost a tooth, he wore a mask to bed to protect the Tooth Fairy from illness (Silvia, 2020).

During this time, inspiring stories of youth taking informed action filled the newspapers. This included kids making signs to support first responders, leading letter-writing campaigns to lift the spirits of isolated and lonely senior citizens, and even using TikTok and social media to create public service announcements for people to wear masks and wash their hands regularly. A teacher near Toledo, Ohio, had her middle school students journal and interview family members about their pandemic experiences via an oral history project. Kids around the country creatively engaged in civic action, a hallmark of the C3 Framework for Social Studies (NCSS, 2013).

In the ways noted above, the teaching and learning of social studies has been and will continue to be influenced by the coronavirus pandemic. Citizens across the world are staring down their fears to help one another survive, to push back against injustice, and to create a stronger future for the next generation. The field of social studies (inclusive of its content and pedagogy) has been front and center in this journey. I am optimistic that at the end of this historic pandemic, social studies teachers from across the globe will possess a more robust set of tools and strategies to bring social studies to life in households, classrooms, and communities. We will know what was broken within our system and have renewed courage and insights to solve them. Perhaps, when all is said and done, there will be a newfound resurgence and investment in social studies teaching and learning, for it is the subject most at the center of helping young people and our communities learn from the past.

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

References

- Allen, G. (1894). *Post-prandial philosophy*. London: The Westminster Gazette.
- Berinato, S. (2020, March 23). That discomfort you're feeling is grief. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>
- Bloom, B. E. (1956). *The taxonomy of educational objectives, handbook I: The cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay Co., Inc.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Cases and deaths in the U.S.* Retrieved July 13, 2020, from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/us-cases-deaths.html>
- D'Angelo, B. (2020, March 18). *Arkansas student trumpets good cheer to neighbors to deflect coronavirus concerns*. Retrieved from <https://www.kiro7.com/news/trending/arkansas-student-trumpets-good-cheer-neighbors-deflect-coronavirus-concerns/FM4V3FZJHRDHIIACTJLNRWLC3U>
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Free Press.
- Diadiun, T. (2020, March 8). *"Wine with DeWine" an indispensable refuge in our day*. Retrieved July 13, 2020, from Cleveland.com: <https://www.cleveland.com/opinion/2020/05/wine-with-dewine-an-indispensable-refuge-in-our-day.html>
- Heafner, T. (2020, April 6). *President Heafner's message: "NCSS leads in time of crisis: An ongoing response to COVID-19."* Retrieved July 13, 2020, from <https://www.socialstudies.org/presidents-message/president-heafners-message-ncss-leads-time-crisis-ongoing-response-covid-19>
- Journell, W. (2019). *Unpacking fake news: An educator's guide to navigating the media with students*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Maguth, B. (2016, November 11). *Social studies teachers as front-line responders in times of civic divisiveness and distress*. Retrieved July 13, 2020, from http://globalandsocialstudieseducation.blogspot.com/2016/11/social-studies-teachers-as-front-line_48.html
- Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 170-96.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (1992). *National curriculum standards for social studies: Executive summary*. Retrieved from <https://www.socialstudies.org/standards/execsum>

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

mary#:~:text=Thematic%20StrandsNATIONAL%20COUNCIL%20FOR%20THE%20SOCIAL, NCSS)%20defines%20social%20studies%20as%3A&text=The%20primary%20purpose%20of%20social,society%20in%20an%20interdependent%20world

National Council for the Social Studies. (2013). *The college, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the rigor of K-12 civics, economics, geography, and history*. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS.

Romm, T. (2020, May 28). Americans have filed more than 40 million jobless claims in past 10 weeks, as another 2.1 million filed for benefits last week. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/28/unemployment-claims-coronavirus>

Silvia, K. (2020, April 7). *Gavin loses a tooth, wears mask so the tooth fairy won't get germs*. Retrieved from <https://fun107.com/gavin-loses-a-tooth-wears-mask-so-the-tooth-fairy-wont-get-germs>

About the Author:

Brad M. Maguth is Professor of Social Studies Education in the LeBron James Family Foundation School of Education at The University of Akron. He also was elected by membership President of the Ohio Council for the Social Studies in 2018 for a two year term. Recently, Brad served as co-editor of *Inquiry-Based Global Learning in the K-12 Social Studies Classroom* (Routledge Press, 2020).

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

©2012/2023 National Council for Social Studies International Assembly

<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585
