

Leading for Success: Turning Professional Disengagement into Teacher Empowerment

By William Murphy, Ed.D., and Catherine DiMartino, Ph.D.

Abstract

During the past two decades there has been a concentrated effort to enact standards-based education reforms at the federal, state, and local levels. Following a grounded theory approach, this article examines the experiences of secondary social studies teachers who have been directly impacted by the incorporation of English Language Arts based critical thinking and analytical skills to the New York State social studies curriculum. The findings reveal that teachers are frustrated by tensions that have emerged between standards-based reform implementation and the core tenets of social studies instruction. Additionally, teacher frustrations are augmented by a sense that they have been effectively silenced in the reform implementation process and seek relief through various means. This article originates a new theory about diminished autonomy's effects on professional engagement and contributes to the field by providing a model for school leaders to alleviate teacher frustration by means of professional empowerment. The new theory provides insight for school leaders to leverage a classroom practitioner's desire for self-efficacy and ensures successful adaptation to a continuously evolving educational landscape.

Introduction

One of the many goals of social studies education is to provide students with the knowledge and skills that are necessary to participate in a free and democratic society. The need for a quality social studies education has become a paramount concern as recent studies have shown Americans generally know very little about governmental processes and political institutions (Nie et al.; 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Journell, 2011; Lo & Tierney, 2017). This article is based on a grounded theory study of social studies teachers who attempted to provide their students with a quality social studies education during the period of standards-based education reform between the years 2000 and 2020. Their experiences adapting to the changes that resulted from standards-based reform implementation provide the basis for a new theory that identifies how educators can successfully navigate an ever-evolving educational landscape through teacher empowerment and professional collaboration.

Two Decades of Reform

Beginning with the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and continuing with Race to the Top (2010) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), federal involvement in public education profoundly impacted school-level accountability, learning standards and teacher evaluation. By 2010, the Common Core Learning Standards became the embodiment of Race to the Top's (RTTT) aspiration for common education standards across the nation. The goal of the Common Core Standards Initiative was to provide benchmarks for student proficiency in English Language Arts and mathematics (CCSI, 2019, p. 1). The newly developed standards targeted specific skills for integration across all subjects with the hope of creating college and career-ready students. Since controversial debates over content had the potential to derail implementation, Common Core Standards intentionally avoided the hypothetical pitfalls associated with a mandated social studies curriculum (Thornton, 2005; Hess, 2014; Singer et al., 2018).

As a result of RTTT, New York State enacted legislation in 2010 requiring an annual professional performance review (APPR) of all teachers and principals. For social studies teachers, that meant that their numerical APPR ratings were tied to their students' performance on standardized tests that often included the Global History and U.S. History Regents Exams. When the New York State Social Studies Learning Standards were updated to reflect the new Social Studies Framework in 2014, there were subsequent changes to the Global and U.S. History Regents Exams as well as the mandated social studies requirements for graduation. The adoption of the new Common Core aligned social studies framework in conjunction with implementation of APPR resulted in teachers being assailed with several major educational reform policies within a relatively short period of time. Through interviews, observations and a review of documents, the present study examines the implementation of educational reform through the experiences of social studies teachers. The following two questions guide this study: 1) What are teachers' perceptions regarding the impact of federal, state, and local standards-based education reforms on social studies education? and 2) How do secondary social studies teachers perceive the impact of standards-based reforms on their personal professional practices?

Review of Literature

The Impact of Standards-based Education Reform

Few would argue the nobility of NCLB's primary goal of developing fully literate students. However, Brooks et al. (2007) pointed out that NCLB created a "soft-bigotry" (p.755) of low expectations for educators and ultimately robbed students of a constructivist-based curriculum driven by student inquiry and delivered through meaningful interactions. By the time RTTT was implemented in 2010, NCLB already convinced many teachers that they were losing the liberty to shape curriculum and pedagogy within their classroom. A critical discourse analysis of speeches by former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan found the rhetoric used by policy makers and media organizations during the early days of RTTT perpetuated an "us versus them mentality" that resulted in policy makers taking sole responsibility for school improvement and teachers feeling dehumanized and disempowered (Anderson et al., 2014).

Common Core's authors made a conscious decision to focus on the identification, adoption, and implementation of academic skills necessary for lifelong success. However, the unintended consequence of implementing Common Core Standards across all subjects has been significant. Libresco (2015) found that social studies supervisors tasked with revising end of year assessments purposefully cut content questions in favor of those that emphasized academic ELA skills. Libresco noted that the supervisors avoided discussions about what content elementary and middle school curriculums should contain, and never addressed "the extent to which the civic efficacy purpose of social studies should be reflected in assessments" (2015, p.13). Accordingly, Singer et al. (2018) found that the adoption of Common Core Standards forced content-area teachers outside of English Language Arts to provide students with literacy experiences in place of subject content.

The degree to which standards-based education legislation impacts the purpose and practices of social studies education could potentially affect a teacher's perception of the control one has over pedagogical decisions (Thornton, 2005). When determining the specific implications of Common Core Standards-Based reforms in social studies, Kenna and Russell (2014) found that new state standards generally resulted in instructors "so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of standards that students rarely reaped any of the intended benefits" (p. 78). Richards' (2014) qualitative study of stakeholder perceptions about the adoption of Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) in New York found teachers were discouraged and had developed a general sense of distrust regarding the educational establishment. Richards also found that teachers believed APPR resulted in educators being held accountable for factors that were out of their control.

In summary, the existing literature finds that current social studies teachers navigate an educational landscape that has been heavily impacted by the era of standards-based

reform between 2000 and 2020. As a result, teachers are frustrated by the perception they relinquished control of their classrooms and are largely ignored by the larger educational establishment.

Method

The data for this article are drawn from a grounded theory study conducted by one of the authors during the 2019-2020 school year (Murphy, 2020). Methods of data collection included focus groups, one-on-one interviews and document analysis of submitted lesson plans (with accompanying printed materials and handouts). Conducted in a suburban central high school district located in New York State, participants consisted of 16 licensed secondary social studies teachers who possessed between 1 and 28 years of teaching experience. Participants were purposely selected based on their social studies certification and experience (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data collection was triangulated through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to ensure the accuracy of the study's analysis of secondary social studies teachers' perceptions regarding the impact of standards-based reforms (**Table 1**).

Once an initial round of data was collected through five focus groups, individual participants were selected to participate in one-on-one interviews. As is common with grounded theory, subsequent rounds of interviews followed an interview protocol that emerged out of the previous rounds of categorization, coding, and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1967).

Findings

Tension Between Standards and Core Tenets of Social Studies Instruction

The data revealed that all teachers in the study identified four distinct components of a comprehensive social studies education: mastery of subject content; fostering a sense of citizenship and civic responsibility; providing skills for entering the larger economy; and developing critical thinking skills. Teacher A, who has 13 years of experience, explained that an ideal social studies education would provide students with "an accessible yet comprehensive knowledge of US history, world history, geography, and economics." Teacher P has 22 years of experience and described how social studies should foster civic responsibility by stating, "I think our goal is really to produce informed citizens...We want them to make wise decisions about elected officials; not relying on other people's opinions, but their own decisions." As this data reveals, teachers believe that social studies should provide a comprehensive knowledge of historical content for the purpose of enriching the individual student and larger community.

Teacher Frustration and Silencing

All the teachers in the study recognized a relationship between the focus on assessment-based ELA skills

Table 1. Participant Information

| <i>Participant</i> | <i>Middle School/ High School</i> | <i>Years of Experience</i> | <i>Subject(s)/Levels Taught</i> |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>Teacher A</i> | <i>H.S.</i> | <i>13</i> | <i>A.P., Regents, Electives</i> |
| <i>Teacher B</i> | <i>H.S.</i> | <i>21</i> | <i>A.P., Regents, Electives</i> |
| <i>Teacher C</i> | <i>H.S.</i> | <i>22</i> | <i>A.P., Regents</i> |
| <i>Teacher D</i> | <i>M.S. & H.S.</i> | <i>14</i> | <i>8th Grade S.S., Electives</i> |
| <i>Teacher E</i> | <i>M.S. & H.S.</i> | <i>12</i> | <i>7th Grade S.S., Regents</i> |
| <i>Teacher F</i> | <i>M.S. & H.S.</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>8th Grade S.S., Regents, Electives</i> |
| <i>Teacher G</i> | <i>H.S.</i> | <i>13</i> | <i>Regents, Collaborative, Electives</i> |
| <i>Teacher H</i> | <i>H.S.</i> | <i>20</i> | <i>A.P., Regents</i> |
| <i>Teacher I</i> | <i>H.S.</i> | <i>25</i> | <i>Regents, Electives</i> |
| <i>Teacher J</i> | <i>M.S. & H.S.</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>8th Grade S.S., Regents</i> |
| <i>Teacher K</i> | <i>M.S.</i> | <i>13</i> | <i>8th Grade S.S., Electives</i> |
| <i>Teacher L</i> | <i>M.S.</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>7th Grade S.S., Electives</i> |
| <i>Teacher M</i> | <i>M.S.</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>8th Grade S.S.</i> |
| <i>Teacher N</i> | <i>M.S.</i> | <i>4</i> | <i>7th Grade S.S.</i> |
| <i>Teacher O</i> | <i>M.S. & H.S.</i> | <i>28</i> | <i>Social Studies Department Chair</i> |
| <i>Participant P</i> | <i>M.S. & H.S.</i> | <i>22</i> | <i>Social Studies Department Chair</i> |

and a sense that they were micromanaged in their classroom activities. Most of the teachers qualified this idea with the caveat that they were not personally micromanaged by their building or district administrators, but by the larger education system. A 20-year veteran at the high school level, Teacher H explained, "As a teacher, I know if I could just have more control over what I do in the classroom... my students would love my class and be more engaged." Teacher F who has been teaching for only two years described a similar experience, "I think it just handcuffs social studies teachers. When it comes to direct instruction, I'm so paranoid that if I don't give the exact lesson they're looking for, someone somewhere is going to be angry with me."

Unfortunately, traditional avenues that could have potentially helped teachers adapt to standards-based reform implementation proved to be ineffective. Most of the teachers in this study believed that professional development was too focused on merely identifying specific aspects of standards-based reform implementation. Teacher I described personal antipathy by stating, "Basically, when our professional development is just alerting us to all the changes that are being implemented, it's deadening... It's frustrating that we don't get to do much in terms of how we can enliven our classrooms." Such repetitive, non-collaborative professional development added to teachers' frustrations because it reinforced a perception that teachers lacked real opportunities to navigate the negative effects of standards-based reform implementation in their classroom.

Teacher Empowerment: Disengagement or Collaboration

The initial reaction shared by most teachers in the study was to avoid the impact of standards-based reforms altogether by retreating into elective courses and grade levels that did not have standardized assessments. The alternative to disengaging from courses impacted by standards-based reforms was for teachers to increase their professional engagement by collaborating with other social studies professionals. Teacher F explained, "I think I have a lot of opportunities within my social studies department to ask questions and share thoughts. I work with several different chair-people and colleagues, so I have multiple sounding boards to help me figure things out."

Untenured teachers within the district where the participants worked are contractually required to regularly meet with administrators and each other. While such opportunities may be the result of contractual obligations, they need not be. In fact, most participants explained that collaboration with other social studies professionals through informal settings helped to mitigate their isolation and frustration. By way of informal and regular collaboration, teachers inadvertently initiated professional learning communities where concerns were addressed with other social studies professionals. Teachers who were reluctant to retreat into the sovereignty of elective courses cited informal collaboration as the key to alleviating the stress-filled reality of contemporary social studies education. Teacher F recalled the benefits of collaboration this way:

Just this week we had a meeting and we talked about different methods that we as teachers could use to develop certain skills and help students dive into what the framework is asking us for. I thought that was immensely helpful. The minute the other teachers were sharing, I started thinking, "How can I bring this into my own classroom?"

As a veteran high school teacher with 21 years of experience, Teacher B summed up the importance of informal collaboration with colleagues by saying, "It's all about the support. I need a lot of support from other teachers who share the same struggles and have great ideas about how to address them. That is the biggest thing." All the teachers in this study agreed that if they could not take part in school or district created professional collaboration opportunities, they desired time specifically designated to seek them out on their own. Data revealed that teachers recognized they were their own best resources due to the tangible benefits provided by a collegial sharing of practical strategies for successful integration of literacy and critical thinking skills.

Discussion and Implications

For many teachers, standards-based reform implementation has come to represent a movement away from their ideal vision of a comprehensive social studies education. While recognizing the theoretical benefits of reading, writing and higher order thinking skills in their curriculum, social studies teachers are nonetheless frustrated by the need to cut historical content from their lessons in favor of standards-based literacy skills. Lacking avenues to effectively communicate concerns regarding the successful integration of learning standards into classroom activities, teachers in this study have developed an "us versus them mentality" regarding the larger education system (Anderson et al., 2014). The Theory of Diminished Autonomy's Effects on Professional Engagement (**Figure 1**) provides insight about standards-based reform implementation's effects on classroom practitioners (Murphy, 2020). Teachers are frustrated by the perception that reform implementation

has resulted in a lack of autonomy. The underlying imbalance of power within the current structure of social studies education provides teachers with no effective means to redress their grievances and has left the impression that their opinions are not valued. Having been essentially rendered powerless, social studies teachers seek to regain autonomy through two distinct means. Social studies teachers either alleviate their frustration by engaging in meaningful collaboration with other social studies professionals or escape the impact of reforms altogether by retreating into courses and grade levels that fall outside of accountability mandates.

Following the Theory of Diminished Autonomy's Effects on Professional Engagement, school administrators can provide meaningful collaboration opportunities as a productive alternative for teachers seeking to regain a sense of autonomy. Collaboration was repeatedly described as an indispensable coping mechanism for teachers struggling to adapt their practices to standards-based reforms. In addition to expressing appreciation for the cooperation and support that they experienced, teachers who participated in collaborative events cited less frustration with the current state of social studies education than their more isolated peers. Veteran teachers lauded the efforts of administrators who reserved time throughout the school year for teachers to informally discuss strategies for implementing new aspects of the social studies framework. Since organic collaboration increased their sense of self-efficacy, all the teachers agreed that if they could not take part in formal collaborative professional development, they preferred a designated time to create similar opportunities on their own.

School leaders need to maximize the potential benefits afforded by collaborative professional circles by empowering teachers to grow and adapt in an environment where their voices and opinions are heard and respected (DuFour & Eaker 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy 2001). School leaders can maximize their greatest resource by empowering teachers to develop their own solutions for an ever-evolving educational landscape. By increasing individual teacher autonomy through professional collaboration, schools can alleviate the

Figure 1. Diminished Autonomy's Effects on Professional Engagement



entrenched "us versus them" mentality, decrease the overall sense of frustration that has developed over the past two decades and allow teachers to provide a truly comprehensive social studies education (Anderson et al., 2014).

While this article is derived from a study about the effects of standards-based reforms on social studies education between 2000 and 2020, it is applicable to current mandates and future reform policies across all grade levels and subjects. As districts continue to revise their current practices to reflect the N.Y. State Department of Education's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Framework, it would be wise for school leaders to leverage their classroom practitioners' desire for self-efficacy while promoting successful adaptation to an evolving educational landscape.

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Dr. William E. Murphy is a social studies teacher at Wellington C. Mephram High School in Bellmore, New York.

Catherine DiMartino, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership at St. John's University.