

Contemporary Challenges of Teaching Social Studies in Rural Settings: Local & National Dissonance in the Classroom

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Abstract

This case study examines the political and social pressures high school social studies teachers face in rural areas. In the political sphere, many social studies teachers focus on the end of course exam. The resources that informed this study were public materials on the web. Findings indicate teachers stay to state tested content.

Keywords: rural, social studies, political pressures

This paper examines contemporary challenges faced by social studies teachers who are subject to ideological conflicts in the community and school settings. Since the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump, there has been attention paid to rural communities in politics, sociology, and economics. Considering this turn, rural education is still significantly underrepresented in the research (Their, et al, 2021). As a former social studies teacher who practiced in rural areas, a member of a State Education Department’s social studies curriculum office, and an education faculty member in a rural situated school, my lived experiences (Azano, et al, 2021) in addition to my research agenda, have merged into the question of what, exactly are rural social studies teachers teaching? With the deep concentration of reactionary conservatives in rural areas, and significant racist outward signs, which include flags of the Northern Army of the Tennessee (Confederate Battle Flag), *Lets Go Brandon*, and the recent tragic rural origins of the alleged perpetrator of the mass shootings racially motivated in Buffalo New York, and the continued banning of “Critical Race Theory” and any diversity related works in conservative, Republican dominated states, this paper seeks to explore the intersection of teacher preparation programs, and in service social studies teachers are doing to implement the evolving New York State expectations for social studies.

Examining the work of Grant, Swan, Lee (2017); Gradwell (2010), and others, I posit that the teachers who are implementing the state standards and frameworks are trying to implement teaching for survival, or self-preservation by avoiding controversy and local community objection to their choices by presenting a “Whig” history that is bland and focused on end of course examinations, not social justice or citizenship preparation. The teachers, in rural areas, are often young, untenured, and afraid of losing their positions due to the potential backlash by community members who do not hold similar values as the teachers for social justice, diversity, and Culturally Responsive Education. The rural educators in the districts under investigation are concerned that if they go beyond the conservative, unspoken boundaries in areas of predominantly white students and families, their careers will be essentially over (Frankenburg, et al, 2019).

Using a case study (Stake, 1995) approach, and Krippendorf’s (2014) Content Analysis, I examine the syllabus, and publicly available material resources, textbooks, and websites assigned

by professors and teachers across the State of New York. I found that the higher education faculty and in service teachers hew extremely closely to the state issued guidance on social studies guides in grades 7-12. Most of the lessons, I found, are clearly designed to prepare students for the end of course examinations, but do not actually teach students to grapple with the social justice and change calls that the National Council for the Social Studies have issued to instructors. With the continued anti diversity narratives in public and private space in many small, nonurban areas, as well as the unknown political leanings of the social studies teachers, we may have a “fox in the hen house” moment in rural social studies implementation.

New York is not an urban state. Areas north of interstate 84, which bisects Orange, Dutchess and Putnam counties in the lower-mid Hudson Valley region, are rural. In fact, 40% of school districts in New York State are considered rural by the NCES (2014). Of the nearly 300 plus rural districts in New York State, most grades 7-12 are taught by one, or two social studies teachers. Each of those school districts are required by State regulations (Commissioner’s Regulations Part 100) to implement the Social Studies framework, enacted in 2014 to align with the Common Core State Learning Standards. The end of course exams, called the Regent’s examinations, are required for students to successfully challenge in grades 10 and 11 for graduation. Further, a teacher’s evaluation score is tied to how well students perform on the exam (Annual Professional Performance Review). School and District status in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* is tied to graduation, and with two social studies exams required towards graduation expectations, the teachers within those schools are subject to immense pressures. This paper seeks to examine how teachers in rural areas are negotiating the tensions of teaching to the test, and negotiating the balancing act of implementing state standards and frameworks in social studies while visual representations of racism and reactionary beliefs are readily displayed by individuals in the community.

The paper presents a case study of how two teachers in small rural districts teach social studies (Stake, 1995). The paper seeks to understand what the professionals are doing, in their enacted practice in order to achieve the least controversial pathway to prepare their students for the end of Semester Regents Exam. Through review of instructional artifacts, which were analyzed using Gee’s (2014) Discourse Analysis, for selected units during the year-long 11th grade US History and Government course, the paper found that teachers were adhering to the State frameworks and not delving deeper into enduring issues as recommended in the National Council for the Social Studies C3 frameworks, or the C3 Teachers Inquiry Design Model practices (Swan, Grant, Lee, 2013).

Literature Review

Social studies was born out of the Committee of Ten work in the late 1800s, The debate over what should be taught, when, and by whom created during the Progressive Movement post 1890. As Saxe (1991) points out, the early social studies curriculum focused on history in schools, especially K-12. Now, in 2022-2023, with overlapping issues in civics, economics, sociology, and geography, the National Council for the Social Studies, and the creation of the C 3 (College, Career, and Civics Life) at the national level have tried to influence the state level curriculum/ standards authorities to try and, frankly, include the social studies as a mandated part of K-12. With the No Child Left Behind (2001) focus on the literature, math and science areas, and the National Common Core State Standards, place literacy as the focus for all social studies content. In a difficult reality, New York State recommended the Gettysburg Address (Lincoln, 1863) be read as part

of a “close reading” CCSS Literacy exercise, without *context*. As the Stanford History Education Group, the C3 teachers, and other organizations, founded out of research by Wineburg (2018) and Swan, et al (2021) have produced a number of heuristics for students of history K- PhD levels to learn how to be an historian. One of the most significant parts of becoming an historian is to ensure the documents, artifacts, and resources are read in context.

Levstik, Barton, Monte-Sano, Reisman, Gradwell, and many others have developed research on how to teach social studies better, and with greater impact. Yet the major issue with teaching social studies evolves into two significant concerns. First, there is a strong correlation between difficulties teaching students the skills of history in elementary classrooms and the confusion with teaching literacy skills. These two different areas are interrelated, yet very different. Second, in many schools, social studies may be taught from textbooks, if the subject is taught at all. These two issues create a robust problem as children are often forgetful in both the literacy and the content presented in K-8 grades, and do not have accurate schemas for the works in the secondary (7-12 program). Another concern launched by practitioners is the wide range of tested content at the secondary levels, especially in states with a graduation or capstone exam requirement. Often curriculum decisions are made at the state level heavily influenced by political reasons. These politically influenced curriculum changes have made a number of impactful, detrimental, narratives which intentionally exclude groups who are under-represented, or subjected to real, and now, historically excluded violence. In mostly conservative controlled states, the teaching of history has become a career jeopardizing act. A conflation between Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Culturally Responsive Education Practices became a political ploy of candidates to demand schools teach a more “whig” or “white majority” history. CRT is a legal, graduate school level examination of how structural discrimination has directly impacted the wealth, health, and social status of under-represented peoples (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Critics of CRT are demanding that all K-12 curriculum, instruction, and supporting materials pass a review, and are submitted to parents and outside review changes. The CRT debate has merged with the “Parental Rights” movement that privileges parents directly impacting educational decisions made by schools at a micro level well beyond what previous practices have established as Board-Administration-teacher-parent relationships. These ongoing critiques and frankly, local rebellions to the duly elected, and delegated authorities local education given power by state authorities through law or constitution (Fischel, 2009).

The last concern of the literature over the past 25 years has been the methodologies of teaching social studies in classrooms becoming more diverse. Teachers are seeking to ensure that with growing socioeconomic, language, and cultural diversity, the pedagogy and classroom engagement programs are dealing with students who see reading and writing as “older, less relevant skills” and that map skills are no longer necessary with the development of handheld navigation systems and virtual maps. One of the complaints levied against the New York State Social Studies Civics framework was the theory based nature, with students creating a written policy paper instead of a more civics based, action oriented curriculum (Hinkley & Jakubowski, 2019). With the Jan 6, 2022 insurrection, and the “post-truth” American world, what are social studies teachers, especially in conservative parts of the United States doing in their classroom?

Method

The research study has grown out of earlier research into implementation of the adopted New York State Framework for social studies in grades K-12 (2014). First, utilizing the New York

State Education Department's school district enrollment data for 2022-2023, I identified every K-12 operating district in New York State. Using this data, I found that New York State has 198 districts with K-12 enrollment below 1000 students. I confirmed this data with NCES rural schools (classifications 41/42/43). I then identified districts in two regions: Leatherstocking and Southern Tier. I excluded the Adirondack, Hudson Valley, and Catskill region specifically due to the lack of internet services in the area. Using Creswell (2021) and Stake (1995) as two examples of case study, and qualitative research, I proceeded to collect materials which were published on open access as part of professional development workshops created for social studies teachers. I then proceeded to create a coding scheme using Saldania (2014) open coding methods, with a Krippendorff (2000) content analysis pattern to discover content presented, and verbiage utilized to convey to students expectations.

I then narrowed my search to two districts which were examples of what was presented on line. The teachers were not contacted, nor interviewed, as I wished to treat this as a true content analysis. The process was conducted over the course of the spring, 2022 semester (defined as January 15- May 15, 2022). Initial coding revealed the following themes:

Most of the materials are aligned with the New York State Regents Examination Framework.

Most of the materials are directly used from curriculum resources provided by a textbook publisher to teachers using the textbook.

Most of the materials are directly related to potential examination questions on the New York State Regents exams for 10th or 11th grade social studies.

Findings

Most of the practicing social studies teachers in rural UpState and Western New York were unaware of materials created by the Stanford History Education Group, and the C 3 Teachers. The majority of materials provided to teachers in professional development activities were heavily dependent on materials designed to meet, especially at the high school level, the New York State Regents Examination as end of course tests for 10th and 11th grade. The materials utilized in professional developments were often test exam questions from previous Regents exams. In one district, the materials used were peripheral materials provided by a major K-12 textbook publisher. The students were expected to complete worksheets from the textbook publisher, directly aligned to the textbook utilized in class.

The materials used in professional development and classroom instructions for another district emerged from materials created by the local social studies council on document-based essay questions. The students in this instance were expected to create an essay which utilized the documents and the prompt questions which were modeled on the Regents Exam which was aligned to the Regents exams from the previous decade. The assignment sought to have students look closely at the religions of the world, and identify the major elements of those religions.

College preparation classes for elementary and secondary students focus attention on a wide range of demands, including preparing teachers for the State mandated teacher certification exams. Examining the syllabus for at least three colleges in the regions identified above, I noticed a close relationship between the syllabus and teaching for the state standards, and the state certification exams. In one instance, a small liberal arts college combined social studies, English Language Arts and Arts as one methods course, with math, science and technology as the second

method of teaching course. In a larger, regional college, in service teachers were expected to implement their lessons based on the district's curriculum. In this particular district, the middle school social studies program was combined with Family and Consumer Science, and in no way met the New York State middle school standards for social studies.

Syllabi across multiple colleges demonstrate a concern for compliance by faculty to the accreditation and certification examinations. In many of the syllabi reviewed, policy and procedure was more than 50% of the document. Readings were often traditionally published "methods textbooks" from large publishers. Very few syllabus included assigned primary sources, but every single one included references to the New York State Learning Standards, and the New York State Regents aligned framework.

Discussion

Through informal conversations with fellow social studies teachers, teacher educators, and preservice teachers at the elementary and secondary level (spring 2022), I determined that most of the pre and in service teachers were not engaging with the new New York State Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Educational practices. Because the exams for high school students were in flux, the teachers believed their role was to ensure students were prepared for the test, and to tack closely to the assessment. "It's all about the test" as one colleague mentioned to me during an informal discussion. A preservice teacher communicated "social studies isn't even taught in my elementary school until after the state assessments." The ELA, math and science assessments for elementary students are administered in April. Another preservice teacher reported that the State ELA curriculum provided "enough" social studies and science for her cooperating teacher and building administrator.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates a significant issue with the enactment of social studies in rural areas in the State. Utilizing publicly available information, it is clear that professional development in social studies and during class enactment is almost exclusively aligned to some standard or assessment. In the elementary grades, social studies has been discarded for ELA, math, and science, all tested subjects. In Middle School, social studies is a mandate, but not tested, and teachers are attempting to prepare students for the end of course Regents exams for grades 10 and 11. In high school, the grades 10 and 11 classes are preoccupied with mostly test prep, for both skills and content. Finally, many teachers in practice do not have curriculum material which is not produced by textbook publishers. If civics, and civics engagement are as important as politicians claim, more attention and resources must be devoted to schools, and the undergraduate and graduate programs who are producing teachers must receive support beyond the "accreditation test passage rate."

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