

# Opportunities and barriers: social studies in the absence of mandated curriculum

Adam Huck

*Department of Teacher Education, Roberts Wesleyan College,  
Rochester, New York, USA*

196

Received 12 January 2022  
Revised 3 May 2022  
1 June 2022  
Accepted 1 June 2022

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study sought to identify teachers' overall experiences in teaching social studies, the considerations they make in planning and implementing social studies lessons in the absence of mandated curriculum, approaches to social studies instruction and the role of legislation on social studies instruction.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Two practicing teachers at different grade levels participated in this study to allow for comparative case study analysis. Teachers were observed teaching social studies lessons and then were interviewed to gain an understanding of their perspectives on teaching social studies at the elementary level and the role that administrative and legislative messaging played in their decision-making.

**Findings** – The lack of a scripted and formal program for social studies created opportunities for teacher autonomy and content integration in lessons. This is especially true for teachers that place a high value on social studies content and skills. Persistent issues, such as limited time and mandated testing pressures, continue to create barriers that teachers must work to overcome.

**Originality/value** – Since teachers play a critical role in the enactment of policy and curriculum, when a formal curriculum program is absent, opportunities arise. Control of the classroom and inherent messaging therein continues to create a high value battleground. When teachers are given the autonomy to set lesson outcomes, opportunities for quality instruction, such as project based learning and content integration, are possible.

**Keywords** Policy, Social studies, Content integration

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

“I suck . . . I just do not have time for it.” - Mary, second-grade teacher, describing her social studies instruction.

While public policies have prioritized English and Math, marginalization of social studies predates these recent initiatives. Maguth (2012) argued that marginalization of social studies could be traced to the nuclear arms and space races with the Soviet Union in the late 1950s. This competition led to additional funding in science and mathematics as policy leaders sought to create more scientists and mathematicians. In the 1970s, other content areas became the focus as “elementary teachers [were] backing away from the social studies” (Gross, 1977, p. 198). Therefore, this trend is not new and persists in our classrooms.

When considering the implications of declining instruction time, we must consider the role of social studies in a democracy. According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), subjects of “government, history, economics, law, and democracy . . . are vital to laying the foundation for civic learning and may also contribute to young people’s tendency to engage in civic and political activities over the long term” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). In addition, schools teach values necessary for constitutional democracy, such as “religious toleration, mutual respect, free inquiry, honesty, [and] self-discipline” (Gutman, 1988). In a democratic society, citizens must have a depth of understanding of historical, political and cultural contexts (Pace, 2007). In elementary grades, there is a duty to teach students the knowledge and skills necessary for fulfilling “duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy” (Bailey *et al.*, 2006). A central role in supporting citizenship



education is to develop students' ability to think critically through inquiry and the analysis of evidence (Parker, 2018).

While trends in marginalization have persisted, the current policy has exacerbated this issue. Rock *et al.* (2006) studied the effects of No Child Left Behind on social studies instruction. Approximately two-thirds of the teachers in their study provided limited social studies instruction time due to spending considerable time on tested subjects of mathematics, reading and writing. Increased accountability measures and policies, such as Race to the Top, have added stress and anxiety to teachers' work (Wieczorek and Theoharis, 2015), becoming a driving force for instructional decision-making. Hierarchical pressure persists in limiting teachers' inclusion of social studies content and skills in classrooms dominated by testing and accountability measures, such as NCLB and Race to the Top (Huck, 2020). Specifically, the ability to punish teachers and schools gives power to policymakers to limit students' experiences and create narrow views of content (Passe, 2018). Moreover, we must consider the political and ideological ramifications of accountability measures that sustain hegemony (Apple, 2019).

This study investigated elementary teachers' attitudes toward and practice of social studies instruction while navigating mandated accountability measures. Results further the understanding of how social studies fits in the current elementary instructional model and identify possible implications for future social studies instructional approaches, such as those advocated by C3 Teachers in elementary grades. Four specific questions guided this study: (1) What are the experiences of teachers teaching social studies? (2) What considerations are made in teachers' decisions in planning and implementing social studies curriculum? (3) How do elementary teachers approach social studies instruction? (4) How does new legislative context affect elementary teachers' social studies instruction?

## Literature review

Social studies as an interdisciplinary content area, combined with reductions in instruction time and added pressures of standardized tests, requires a focus on content integration as an instructional method. Consideration of the planning and enacted curriculum are of central focus.

### Curriculum

Johnson (1967) defined curriculum as “a *structured series of intended learning outcomes*” (p. 130, italics in original). Further, “the curriculum is what students experience. It is dynamic and inclusive . . .” (Ross, 2014, p. xi). Therefore, pedagogy and instructional decision-making consider methods as well as end goals. “Curriculum must indicate relationships. Concepts and generalizations do not occur singly” (Johnson, 1967, p. 131). In this regard, the integrated structure of a social studies curriculum demonstrates relationships to achieve intended learning outcomes.

Bruner (1966) argued that the purpose of education was not to create segregated bodies of information but to create students engaged in learning. Classifying content areas and their strict boundaries communicates power relations (Bernstein, 1981). Boundaries between subjects create power dynamics that perpetuate inequalities of practice (Diaz, 2001). Additionally, the adopted and enacted “curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge” (Bernstein, 1971, p. 203). For social studies, pedagogical considerations and the definition of valid knowledge are made by teachers, administrators, and curriculum developers.

As the enacted curriculum defines acceptable knowledge, experiential curriculum application must be considered in developing conceptual understanding. Dewey (1938) noted that new learning must relate knowledgeably to earlier learning to advance the

understanding of facts and ideas. “History must be presented, not as an accumulation of results or effects, a mere statement of what happened, but as a forceful, acting thing” (Dewey, 1915, p. 156). As social studies is the amalgamation of several disciplines, experience within and across disciplines allows students to actively engage in their community as responsible citizens (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017).

### *Content integration*

“Core democratic values and the skills of effective citizenry are essential in the development of a democratic society” (Schertz and McCormick, 2013, p. 83). Pressure-packed assessments in ELA and math have continued a trend of marginalization of social studies (Pace, 2007). These high stakes assessments are enacted to benefit economic and corporate needs (Ross et al., 2014). As a result, reductions in frequency and duration of instruction (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016) are causing the country to lose “a generation of citizens schooled in the foundations of democracy” (Pace, 2007, p. 26).

Separating content areas creates a hierarchy that communicates levels of importance (Lindquist, 2002). With mandated assessments in literacy and math, these content areas receive significant attention in the classroom and policy discussions. Administrators and policymakers have often viewed the apparent solution to low reading scores as simply more literacy instruction (Tyner and Kabourek, 2021). These decisions resulted in reduced time in social studies and missed opportunities for improved literacy instruction. Tyner and Kabourek found that “*social studies is the only subject with a clear, positive, and statistically significant effect on reading improvement. In contrast, extra time spent on English Language Arts (ELA) instruction has no significant relationship with reading improvement*” (p. 33, italics in original).

Instead of separating content areas through strict boundaries, content integration is one way teachers have attempted to educate their students in social studies. Parker (2001) stated that this is not a new concept but has ebbed and flowed over several decades. Lee and Swan (2013) argued that the Common Core State Standards are a positive gain for social studies because they allow social studies to become a more elevated part of the curriculum. Since much of social studies depends on the reading of text, emphasis on content area reading fits this aspect of social studies instruction. As schools prioritize literacy instruction in the classroom, “teachers should ask what the students are reading *about*” (Tyner and Kabourek, 2021, p. 38, italics in original). Moreover, “the C3 framework encourages direct and explicit connections to the English language arts curriculum” (Young and Miner, 2015). Content integration must be purposeful, developmentally appropriate, and authentic (Hinde, 2005). Drake and Burns (2004) noted three models of integration that depend on the strength of boundaries between subjects – multidisciplinary with strong boundaries, interdisciplinary with weakening boundaries, and transdisciplinary with no boundaries.

### **Methodology**

A case study design was selected to investigate a problem in the context of the school through the investigation of individual teachers (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006). Descriptive research notes were collected and are highlighted here. The researcher used a comparative case study to study the similarities and differences between teachers’ experiences and perspectives.

### *Description of site and participants*

This investigation was conducted in two elementary classrooms in two school districts in one western New York county. Participants were sought with a minimum teaching experience of five years to obtain data related to changes in participants’ instruction and/or curriculum

over time. To investigate the role of social studies in different settings and “to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations” (Shenton, 2004, p. 69), teachers were selected with as many differences as possible. Other differences included prior relationship to the researcher, gender, experience level, grade level, district size and district location. One teaches a grade with mandated state tests, and the other does not. Thus, commonalities in perception and instruction were strengthened.

While differences were sought, similarities became evident upon interviewing subjects. First, both teachers described themselves as lovers of social studies, a similarity unknown before their selection. Second, both participants responded that they would be glad to take part in the study, but each had reservations about the amount of their social studies instruction being sufficient for this study. This revealed early in the process that social studies did not play a significant role in their classrooms.

Mary is a second-grade teacher from a medium-sized suburban school district. Her district has approximately 1,500 students registered in three elementary schools. Mary teaches second grade in a building containing the district’s second- and third-grade classrooms. She has been in second grade for her entire thirteen-year career. A request was made to teachers in Mary’s school to obtain an interested participant. The researcher had no previous contact with Mary. She described herself as a “social studies buff” and enjoys learning about “why things are the way they are.”

Kevin teaches in a large suburban school district with approximately 2,400 students registered across five elementary schools. Kevin is in his sixth year of teaching and third year in fifth grade. He previously taught grades three and four, and thus, all his teaching experience is in grades with mandated state assessments. The researcher had previous contact with Kevin in a professional setting. Kevin was chosen due to his experience working with Common Core ELA modules and his experience in grades with mandated assessments. Since the researcher had prior experience with Kevin, Mary’s observations and interviews were conducted first to reduce the implications of backyard research (Glesne, 2011). Kevin is “passionate” about social studies and history in particular. At this point in his career, he realized he would have rather taught secondary social studies but chose to remain at the elementary level to maintain employment.

#### *Data sources and collection*

Each classroom was observed teaching two complete social studies lessons. Observations were initially scheduled for thirty minutes each but lasted between 45 minutes and one hour due to longer than expected instruction. Lessons were observed for content and teaching styles. Mary’s social studies lessons preceded a reading block that continued into her social studies time. As Mary thought it is essential for reading lessons to finish, I observed the culmination of the reading blocks in addition to social studies lessons. Kevin’s social studies lessons were also scheduled for thirty minutes but went past his scheduled time, so the researcher stayed for the remainder of the lessons.

Data also consisted of interviews conducted following lesson observations. Interviews were conducted in the teachers’ classroom to provide a comfortable environment for the teacher. Teacher interviews were modeled on Seidman’s (2013) three-interview series. The first interview focused on background and life history. The second interview asked questions about present experience and observations. Finally, the third interview posed reflective questions related to their teaching. Since each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed before subsequent interviews, questions in the second and third interviews included follow-up and clarification questions. The researcher posed open-ended questions to elicit in-depth responses from participants. Following Seidman’s advice regarding spacing, interviews were spaced to allow reflection time for the participant and time for data analysis for the

researcher. To align with the study's theoretical framework, questions were designed to align with Bruner's (1966) concern for application and processes. For example, teachers were asked to describe instructional decision-making procedures, typical lesson structures and their perspectives on the content area. Furthermore, questions were designed to elicit information regarding the curriculum to assess student learning outcomes (Johnson, 1967).

One approach to data collection was grounded theory in that qualitative data was collected systematically and flexibly. Data formed the foundation of theory, and analysis created concepts and themes. Time was allocated between data collection sessions to allow reflection and data coding. Data analysis and coding occurred throughout data collection (Charmaz, 2006) as case comparisons were practiced to examine variations and patterns in participants, settings, and events (Glesne, 2011).

Since grounded theory augments other qualitative approaches (Charmaz, 2006), a case study was also chosen as a data collection approach. Each participant was studied individually to examine the teacher's perceptions and actions. Then, data were analyzed to compare subjects and search for patterns (Glesne, 2011). Teachers were observed in their natural context and addressed a particular activity – social studies instruction. Varied sources of information were used and transcribed to maximize data collection (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006). The researcher sought themes and built categories from the data throughout the data collection process.

#### *Data analysis procedures*

In keeping with grounded theory methods, data were analyzed throughout the process and guided future data collection (Charmaz, 2006). Observations occurred before interviews to observe lessons independent of teachers' perceptions. Within twenty-four hours, the researcher wrote a detailed procedure of the lesson and guided questions for interviews. Interviews kept the structure described by Seidman (2013), and additional questions were constructed based on observation data. Observations were analyzed for data concerning lesson procedures, classroom organization and instructional methods.

Data analysis followed the six-stage model described by Harry *et al.* (2005): open codes, categories, themes, testing themes, interrelating the explanations and theory. While continuing to collect data, open codes were created to classify similarities and differences. Coding was performed with both sets of data and categorized based on commonalities. Constant comparison was applied as each piece of data was compared to previous data to identify similarities (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). For example, after speaking to Mary, the code of grade-level preference was identified early in the process. After interviewing Kevin, this same code appeared, and the two sets of data were combined to form the grade-level preference category. This category of grade-level preference was then combined with testing, Common Core perception, APPR and motivation to create the theme of personal feelings (see Appendix). Themes were tested by applying them to observation and interview data. Specific statements and observations were identified and placed within their corresponding category, creating a detailed listing of data and various features evident in each theme. By investigating the interrelatedness of categories, many factors affected social studies instruction. Finally, intriguing opportunities for content integration are present, with numerous challenges remaining.

Throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher made efforts to safeguard trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). In approaching credibility, familiarity with the subjects was developed. While I had prior experience working with Kevin as a colleague, which did not exist with Mary. Multiple contacts were made with Mary before data collection. This included a site visit, phone call and e-mails to aid Mary's understanding of the project and her role. Triangulation was used through a comparison of data sources. Responses to interview

---

questions were compared to observation data and literature on topics the participants discussed. During theme development, the researcher debriefed with an academic advisor to discuss alternative approaches to data analysis and work as a sounding board.

### *Role of researcher*

In a participant-observer role, I focused on collecting as much observational data as possible. The researcher was a passive participant during observations without interacting with teachers or students (Spradley, 1980). This role was chosen to minimize disruptions to the regular flow of the lesson and observe the teacher in their natural context.

Interviews were formatted as researcher-subject. Pre-set questions guided each interview, but these questions were used merely to establish focus. The goal for each interview was to explore participants' experiences, and thus, most questions were crafted from teachers' responses (Seidman, 2013).

Limitations are present in the methods of this study. One challenge was scheduling constraints of the researcher's employment commitments. Further observations may have strengthened existing beliefs and understandings in teacher methodologies or created new understandings. While Seidman (2013) suggests using a ninety-minute format for interviews, interviews were limited to thirty minutes each to respect the teachers' time constraints. This reduction in interview time sought to garner useful information while not creating additional time burdens.

## **Findings**

An analysis of collected data found trends related to teacher perception, systemic issues in education, administrative pressure, and the dominance of ELA and math in the elementary classroom.

### *Teacher perceptions*

Each teacher discussed similar areas of concern that adversely impacted their social studies instruction.

*Testing.* Kevin's homeschooling background and public school experience presented a unique understanding of education. Much of his feelings on education are tied to his homeschooling which slants him toward an open-ended learning experience. He questioned the emphasis of testing and, as a student, was only assessed once per year. He pursued his interests through the freedom to choose books to read. Having to perform multiple close reads would have burnt him out for reading. He has young children and is already questioning if he would choose to homeschool his children rather than send them to a public school.

Kevin must give quarterly district writing tests, which he describes as "horrendous" in quality. These tests were created to track writing progress and prepare students for state exams. Some attempts were made to connect social studies text to these tasks. But, as Kevin notes, prompts are often confusing and do not tie to the curriculum taught at that time of year. In this sense, the curriculum's student learning outcomes (Johnson, 1967) are not experiential or designed for deep understanding and application of knowledge (Dewey, 1938). For Kevin, testing in moderation is acceptable, but assessments should be well-designed by teachers with a history of success and align with curricular goals.

*Grade-level preference.* The impact of testing has also played a critical role in Mary's and Kevin's grade-level preferences. Mary was initially hired to teach second grade because, at the time, it was the only position available, but she has grown to enjoy the developmental level of her students. Since she is at the highest grade level without mandated testing, she does not wish to teach beyond second grade. Kevin has taught only grades with mandated testing but

prefers fifth grade because he felt people were more focused on fourth-grade tests than other assessments. Like Mary, he expressed a desire to teach in primary grades to avoid mandated testing. Kevin considered teaching in a private school with a different instructional approach, but these settings do not pay as much as he earns now.

*Common core perception.* Mary's district created ELA modules to parallel ones suggested by the state. Mary worked on the committee to develop ELA modules for her district in second grade and felt they were beneficial in integrating social studies into the ELA block. Mary's district used previously owned texts to connect to new standards and requirements. This approach presents complex text without having to "beg, borrow, and steal" resources. Additionally, ELA homework now has more social studies content. Also, she appreciates the Common Core standards, expectations, and clarity that push students to think deeper and provide more text-based evidence – themes also witnessed in her lessons. Mary felt the future of social studies is in the ELA block, but considerable demands placed on teachers affect social studies instruction.

Kevin's district has not fully embraced a specific program for ELA. This approach allows teachers like Kevin freedom of choice to meet the needs of Common Core standards. Kevin used the New York State modules to integrate reading, writing, and social studies. Since all lessons are created and scaffolded, his lesson preparation is easier. He uses nonfiction texts that connect social studies content and meet ELA needs but do not necessarily relate to the district's curriculum maps. Articles accompanying lessons are also engaging and allow students to practice various reading strategies. He emphasized text-based evidence, close reading in larger quantities, and using higher-level text with students. Kevin remained concerned about the types and frequency of testing and their relevance to college readiness.

While Kevin expressed his approval for much of the Common Core standards, he desires more inquiry-based instruction, such as that supported by NCSS and C3 Teachers. In his experience, students learning through inquiry are more apt to become "lifelong learners."

*Motivation and creativity.* Content integration was considered a positive outcome of the Common Core for both teachers involved in this study. Mary stated that this interdisciplinary approach has always been an aspect of her teaching, but it has become more integrated. Both teachers felt social studies is a valuable part of a child's education and cited the integration of social studies as a reason for more excitement in their social studies instruction. Mary appreciated that her district created modules for her that she felt were developmentally appropriate and included texts to support the integration of literacy.

On the other hand, Kevin was frustrated by a lack of resources and experienced support personnel, so he used the state modules. As a result, he had a resource developed by people with knowledge of the Common Core. Additionally, he felt the texts and activities allowed him to "stretch [student] thinking." While these positive outcomes came from these modules, they were still limited in explicit Social Studies content. For example, provided resources included social studies content but only listed ELA standards and learning targets. Kevin needed to identify the social studies standards aligned with the provided modules and create his learning targets.

Content integration mainly connected social studies with ELA for both Mary and Kevin. At times, both teachers would connect math or science concepts, but these content areas were not the driving force of the integration.

*Importance of social studies.* While both teachers voiced many frustrations regarding social studies instruction, they also shared the belief in the importance of social studies for students. Mary believes social studies is the foundation of the country and that students should know how history was made to understand the future. In this sense, her views align with Dewey's concern for the long-term societal impact of education. She loves social studies but does not get to do what she wants in the subject. She would prefer more hands-on activities and field trips to "delve deeper into history." Kevin echoed many of these



---

sentiments, as well. If given time to teach social studies, he would prepare better without worrying about tests. While it may be helpful to provide an assessment in social studies, a portfolio-based assessment would allow students to show growth and remove some pressure on the students and the teachers.

### *Systemic issues*

Four main constraints were present in Mary's and Kevin's instruction that impact social studies instruction. The first constriction is simply time. Mary felt overwhelmed with teaching all subjects and wished for teachers specialized in a specific subject. She supported an extended school day, noting that work that could not be completed in class is sometimes sent home for homework. Also, when Mary must slow down her instruction, "you get behind . . . you can't catch up. Something has to come off the plate, social studies or science . . . we just don't do it." Kevin exhibited the same concerns and frustrations but had an added difficulty with music lessons. Music lessons are conducted in his grade level and district during general instruction time. Kevin echoed Mary's frustration with getting behind in material and worked to preserve his writing and math time.

The second area of difficulty is the topics chosen for instruction. Mary stated that social studies topics have not changed in her thirteen years of teaching. While she feels they are appropriate for students' development, she must vary activities to prevent boredom.

A third constraint was teachers' pedagogy. Due to financial restrictions, field trips were cut in Mary's district. Mary was saddened by the loss of considerable life experiences provided by a field trip. Instructional procedures are also an issue. Mary attempts to tie social studies with ELA as much as possible but must alternate teaching science and social studies by units. Often, students cannot explore deeper learning, "I just don't have time for it," viewing this time as a very explicit "show and go."

Kevin's social studies lessons are created with the goal of project-based learning. In one observed lesson, students learned about the Bill of Rights using an online resource with access to video and text. His district also does not provide a lesson framework, only topics, so he seeks lesson ideas and sources from the Internet.

Both teachers attempt to access new technologies, but money and time restrictions pose limitations. Mary's classroom contains four desktop computers with district-approved programs, and students also use teacher-approved websites. While these websites are typically reading or math related, opportunities exist for connections to social studies. For example, one reading website allows students to read nonfiction social studies books at their reading level.

Kevin uses a variety of websites in his social studies lessons for student use and lesson ideas. Problems exist in time to log in students or with a wireless network connection. According to Kevin, students are typically engaged for only twenty minutes in a forty-minute scheduled computer lab.

Both teachers use visual displays related to social studies in their classrooms. Mary's room had a bulletin board for social studies content. But, during interviews, it was blank because they were not doing social studies at that time. A few maps were also visible on the walls of the room. Kevin's room was organized with book displays representing his social studies content. Books on display connected to studied topics and were in fiction and nonfiction pairs. He chose books to display that engaged students and represented varying text complexities based on conversations with current students and those he read with past students. Kevin states that students frequently take books from these displays to read independently. Kevin's displays represent the integration of reading with social studies.

The fourth constraint established involved instructional materials. Mary uses a weekly student magazine that often connects to her topics and an interactive website to pair text on



her interactive whiteboard. However, in addition to these magazines, she also has social studies specific textbooks that are approximately forty years old. But, since the state has not changed the social studies concepts, these books “match perfectly.”

For Kevin, in addition to websites, various other resources are used. For example, his district created kits of recommended texts that he occasionally uses. These contain shorter, leveled nonfiction and fiction books and connect to a district-created curriculum. However, Kevin noted that it is still the teacher’s responsibility to ensure books connect to the curriculum. While these books are available, “social studies isn’t tested, so there’s not as many resources, both time and physical, devoted to social studies as there is to math and ELA.”

### *Administrative*

Mary and Kevin discussed three issues concerning administrative decisions impacting social studies instruction. Both teachers’ schedules were determined by their building principals. In crafting these schedules, priority was given to ELA and math blocks. Science and social studies were paired and filled in last. This year, Mary felt fortunate that her schedule allowed a twenty-five-minute period to schedule her social studies and science more easily. However, she quickly noted that not everyone has that “luxury.” Kevin’s schedule has a one-hour content block once per week for science or social studies with fifteen-minute blocks for these subjects on the remaining days. He did not believe this was close to sufficient.

Explicit directions to give lesser emphasis to social studies in their classroom were received by both teachers. Her principal told Mary that if science and social studies go by the “wayside,” that must be done. According to Kevin, when a fifth-grade state test existed in social studies, the emphasis was on test-taking skills, not understanding social studies or historical concepts. This year, Kevin was instructed by his administrator that social studies is not as important to fit in since it is not a tested subject.

Both teachers expressed feeling pressure from various levels of district administration. Mary frequently hears about the importance of getting the second-grade students ready for the third-grade test. To this end, she is instructed to use the third-grade writing rubric, written in adult language, in lessons with students. Kevin’s feelings of administrative pressure are more expansive. He must stay on the district’s instructional timeline to ensure tested standards are taught before state tests. He also was told that it is not acceptable to move on from a unit when most of his class does not understand the content. However, he felt pressure to “stay on the timeline.” Preparing students for assessments cause disjointed lesson sequencing.

### *Effects of ELA and math on social studies*

For Mary and Kevin, social studies lessons are less concerned with social studies concepts and more about ELA concepts and strategies with social studies text. Mary’s lessons focused on reading, and from that, students learn social studies concepts. Kevin’s aim is typically an ELA strategy, and “social studies tends to be my second focus.”

Testing not only constrains the frequency and duration of the social studies lessons but also affects student attendance during a social studies lesson. Students underperforming in ELA and math require extra assistance in these areas from instructional support teachers. In both of Mary’s lessons, five students left at the same point and missed the second half of the lesson. Students receiving support miss daily application activities and independent practice. There is not enough time for these students to complete missed work during the day.

A reading teacher comes into Kevin’s classroom and meets with a small group of students. As a result, Kevin must modify his lesson to minimize missed content for the small group. Kevin must do a mini-lesson before the support teacher’s arrival, so students not receiving

---

support have something to do independently. He also must be mindful of lesson ending times to allow the support teacher time with students.

During required meetings, ELA and math play a predominant role. Mary's meetings often discuss reading and math assessments. During Kevin's meetings designated as times to discuss students with academic needs, there are frequent discussions on strategies, but no discussion has ever involved students having difficulty with social studies.

Student engagement in social studies is another concern since lessons predominantly focus on reading strategies. Mary noted that the higher the reading ability, the more engaged students tend to be in the social studies lesson. Students have enjoyed hands-on activities, but those have decreased in her classroom due to the emphasis on testing. In one observed lesson in Kevin's classroom, students worked in small groups to explore an Atlas and discuss how goods are needed from all over the world. He felt this was an excellent lesson for student engagement since students were not involved in close reading of a text. Kevin believes getting students engaged depends on how concepts are presented, "even the most exciting concept can be killed if you are doing a close reading with it every other day." Engagement increases when teachers focus on social studies without continually testing them with text and comprehension questions.

## Discussion

Teachers "play a critical role in determining the role social studies has within the enacted curriculum" (Heafner, 2018, p. 48). This curriculum "responds to and represents ideological and cultural resources that come from somewhere" (Apple, 2019, p. 47). While the potential for social change and equity is present in creating the curriculum, hegemony is created and recreated through the selection and implementation of the school curriculum.

Social Studies is and remains critical to the development of intelligent and active citizens, crucial for the sustainability of a democratic society. However, time spent on social studies instruction is not on par with ELA and math or recommendations from the National Council for the Social Studies. This study sought to identify teachers' overall experiences in teaching social studies, their considerations in planning and implementing social studies lessons, approaches to social studies instruction and the role of legislation on social studies instruction.

The theory that curriculum consists of a designed series of planned learning outcomes (Johnson, 1967) guided this study. In both cases, outcomes were ELA based with a social studies byproduct. Furthermore, Bruner (1966) contends that learning must involve many paths to reach these outcomes. However, both teachers created social studies learning outcomes that were either predominantly ELA outcomes or trained students for a variety of assessments. Both teachers understood and desired their curriculum to indicate relationships and connections, but time constraints due to assessments altered their desired instructional focus. Bruner also theorized that the purpose of education was to create engaged learners. While Mary and Kevin provide multiple opportunities for students to be engaged in social studies text, they shared concerns and frustrations that more could not be done to engage students in social studies content or concepts. Inquiry-based learning, guided by compelling and meaningful questioning (Swan *et al.*, 2019), was a desire of both teachers. However, this mode of learning was not a component of Mary's or Kevin's instruction, consistent with Bailey *et al.* (2006).

Many researchers have documented the marginalizing of social studies in education over the last several decades. This trend is significant in its impact on the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy. In this study, teachers used content integration to respond to this trend. Social studies instruction is heavy on reading and writing, thus supporting this method. While this integration of content appears to be on the upswing with Common Core

standards, high demands of mandated testing continue the demands on ELA and math that send social studies to the “wayside” (Mary) or “backburner” (Kevin).

### *Implications*

This study noted positive social studies instruction and pedagogy perspectives, such as reinforced reading comprehension skills (Ilter, 2018). Still, higher-order skills, such as making inferences and generating questions, occurred less frequently. Like the present study, this highlights the importance of utilizing a model for instruction that supports student growth in these skills, such as the Inquiry Design Model (Swan *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, the Inquiry Design Model (Swan *et al.*, 2018) represents potential for improvement. Despite both teachers’ interests and concern for social studies, their focus rested primarily on what was provided or not provided by the district. Therefore, significant work must be done to make teachers aware of the use of inquiry in instruction and the presence of resources, such as C3 Teachers. With social studies representing such a limited amount of time in the classroom and administrative focus, considerable work remains to present these resources in various modes. Professional development and updated materials at all levels must be more thoroughly and purposefully planned to allow research-based practices, such as the Inquiry Design Model, to be utilized by classroom teachers.

Further research is needed to understand the effects of evolving legislative policy on social studies. Specifically, are attempts to integrate social studies and ELA creating more time for social studies content and instruction? Also, do teachers feel social studies instruction has improved, or do concerns remain regarding time constraints, lesson objectives and resource materials? Are the feelings of Mary and Kevin regarding pressure typical of elementary educators?

### **References**

- Apple, M.W. (2019), *Ideology and Curriculum*, 4th ed., Routledge, New York, NY.
- Bailey, G., Shaw, E.L.Jr and Hollifield, D. (2006), “The devaluation of social studies in the elementary grades”, *Journal of Social Studies Research*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 18-29.
- Bernstein, B. (1971), *Class, Codes, and Control: Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Vol. 1.
- Bernstein, B. (1981), “Codes, modalities, and the process of cultural reproduction: a model”, *Language in Society*, Vol. 10 No. 3, pp. 327-363, doi: [10.1017/S0047404500008836](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500008836).
- Bruner, J.S. (1966), *Toward a Theory of Instruction*, Belknap Press, Boston, MA.
- Charmaz, K. (2006), *Constructing Grounded Theory: a Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles, CA.
- Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. (2007), “Strategies for qualitative data analysis”, in *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3rd ed., SAGE Publications, pp. 65-86.
- Dewey, J. (1915), *The School and Society*, 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Dewey, J. (1938), *Experience and Education*, Touchstone, New York, NY.
- Diaz, M. (2001), “Subject, power, and pedagogic discourse”, in Morais, A., Neves, I., Davies, B. and Daniels, H. (Eds), *Towards a Sociology of Pedagogy: the Contributions of Basil Bernstein to Research*, Peter Lang, pp. 83-98.
- Drake, S. and Burns, R. (2004), *Meeting Standards through Integrated Curriculum*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.
- Glesne, C. (2011), *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, 4th ed., Pearson, New York, NY.

- Gross, R.E. (1977), "Status of the social studies in the public schools of the United States: facts and impressions of a national survey", *Social Education*, Vol. 41, p. 194.
- Gutman, A. (1988), *Moral Education in Our Public Schools*, Washington Post, June 5, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1988/06/05/moral-education-in-our-public-schools/014417be-4769-4da2-933e-3a3f2bfef50c/>.
- Hancock, D.R. and Algozzine, R. (2006), *Doing Case Study Research: a Practical Guide for Beginning Researchers*, Teachers College Press, New York, NY.
- Harry, B., Sturgis, K.M. and Klingner, J.K. (2005), "Mapping the process: an exemplar of process and challenge in grounded theory analysis", *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 3-13, doi: [10.3102/0013189X034002003](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X034002003).
- Heafner, T.L. (2018), "The promise of policy and action for the reprioritization of social studies", in Fitchett, P.G. and Meuwissen, K.W. (Eds), *Social Studies in the New Education Policy Era: Conversations on Purposes, Perspectives, and Practices*, Routledge.
- Hinde, E. (2005), "Revisiting curriculum integration: a fresh look at an old idea", *Social Studies*, Vol. 96 No. 3, pp. 105-111, doi: [10.3200/TSSS.96.3.105-111](https://doi.org/10.3200/TSSS.96.3.105-111).
- Huck, A. (2020), "Hierarchical discourse in elementary social studies: a teacher's view of decision-making", *Social Studies Research and Practice*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 195-210, doi: [10.1108/SSRP-01-2020-0004](https://doi.org/10.1108/SSRP-01-2020-0004).
- Ilter, I. (2018), "Exploration of Social Studies teachers' experiences of reading Practices: a phenomenological study", *Qualitative Report*, Vol. 23 No. 9, pp. 2123-2142.
- Johnson, M. (1967), "Definitions and models in curriculum theory", *Educational Theory*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 127-140, doi: [10.1111/j.1741-5446.1967.tb00295.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.1967.tb00295.x).
- Lee, J. and Swan, K. (2013), "Is the common core good for social studies?", Yes, but . . .", *Social Education*, Vol. 77 No. 6, pp. 327-330.
- Lindquist, T. (2002), *Seeing the Whole Through Social Studies*, 2nd ed., Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.
- Maguth, B. (2012), "Defense of the social studies: social studies programs in STEM education", *Social Studies Research and Practice*, Vol. 7, pp. 65-90.
- National Center for Education Statistics (2016), "National teacher and principal survey", available at: [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/ntps1516\\_20180125001\\_t1n.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/ntps1516_20180125001_t1n.asp).
- National Council for the Social Studies (2013), "Revitalizing civic learning in our schools", available at: <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/revitalizing-civic-learning-our-schools>.
- National Council for the Social Studies (2017), "Powerful, purposeful pedagogy in elementary school social studies", available at: <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/powerful-purposeful-pedagogy-elementary-school-social-studies>.
- Pace, J.L. (2007), "Why we need to save (and strengthen) social studies", *Education Week*, Vol. 27 No. 16, pp. 26-27.
- Parker, W.C. (2001), *Social Studies in Elementary Education*, 11th ed., Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- Parker, W. (2018), "Foreword", in *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies*, National Council for the Social Studies and C3 Teachers, pp. 1-4.
- Passe, J. (2018), "Defining social studies: the key to bridging gaps", in Fitchett, P.G. and Meuwissen, K.W. (Eds), *Social Studies in the New Education Policy Era: Conversations on Purposes, Perspectives, and Practices*, Routledge.
- Rock, T.C., Heafner, T., O'Connor, K., Passe, J., Oldendorf, S., Good, A. and Byrd, S. (2006), "One state closer to a national crisis: a report on elementary Social Studies education in North Carolina schools", *Theory and Research in Social Education*, Vol. 34 No. 4, pp. 455-483, doi: [10.1080/00933104.2006.10473318](https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2006.10473318).

- Ross, E.W. (2014), "Preface", in Ross, E.W. (Ed.), *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities*, SUNY Press, pp. xi-xii.
- Ross, E.W., Mathison, S. and Vinson, K.D. (2014), "Social studies curriculum and teaching in the era of standardization", in Ross, E.W. (Ed.), *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities*, 4th ed., SUNY Press, pp. 25-50.
- Schertz, M. and McCormick, T.M. (2013), "Elementary social studies: an examination in practice", in Passe, J. and Fitchett, P.G. (Eds), *The Status of Social Studies: Views from the Field*, Information Age Publishing, pp. 77-87.
- Seidman, I. (2013), *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: a Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 4th ed., Teachers College Press, New York, NY.
- Shenton, A.K. (2004), "Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects", *Education for Information*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 63-75, doi: [10.3233/EFI-2004-22201](https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201).
- Spradley, J. (1980), *Participant Observation*, Wadsworth, Belmont, CA.
- Swan, K., Lee, J. and Grant, S.G. (2018), *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies*, National Council for the Social Studies and C3 Teachers, Silver Spring, MD.
- Swan, K., Grant, S.G. and Lee, J. (2019), *Blueprinting an Inquiry-Based Curriculum: Planning with the Inquiry Design Model*, National Council for the Social Studies and C3 Teachers, Silver Spring, MD.
- Tyner, A. and Kabourek, S. (2021), "How social studies improves elementary literacy", *Social Education*, Vol. 85 No. 1, p. 32.
- Wieczorek, D. and Theoharis, G. (2015), "We're going to make lemonade out of lemons: urban principals, emotion, and race to the Top implementation", *NASSP Bulletin*, Vol. 99 No. 4, pp. 281-303, doi: [10.1177/0192636516636960](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636516636960).
- Young, T.A. and Miner, A.B. (2015), "Guiding inquiry with biography breaks and the C3 framework: can one person make a difference?", *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 69 No. 3, pp. 311-319, doi: [10.1002/trtr.1415](https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1415).

## Appendix

Category: systemic issues in social studies.

- (1) Time
- (2) Topics
- (3) Pedagogy
- (4) Materials

Category: administration.

- (1) Lack of teacher control in schedules
- (2) Science/social studies given lesser emphasis
- (3) Time/money
- (4) Pressure

Category: effects from ELA/Math.

- (1) ELA concepts focus on social studies lessons
- (2) Student push-in/pull-out support
- (3) Meetings

(4) Student engagement

(5) Scheduling

Category: legislative effects.

(1) NCLB

(2) Common Core

Category: personal feelings.

(1) Testing

(2) Grade-level preference

(3) Student focus

(4) Common core perception

(5) APPR

(6) Motivation/creativity

(7) Importance of social studies

**Corresponding author**

Adam Huck can be contacted at: [huck\\_adam@roberts.edu](mailto:huck_adam@roberts.edu)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)