

Social Studies Curriculum Revision, K-8: The Boston Experience

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IN 1981, THE BOSTON Public Schools embarked on an ambitious program to develop new, city-wide curriculum objectives and curriculum tests in all subject areas. That program presented a golden opportunity to take a fresh look at each field and to avoid mistakes made in the past. As luck would have it, there has been a good deal of thoughtful criticism of social studies in recent years, much of which proved useful as we experienced the difficult process of writing a philosophy, compiling sensible objectives, and getting agreement on all those elements. This article examines the state of social studies as we found it, and presents some basic premises and a general statement of philosophy on which our new curriculum is based.

The State of Social Studies

Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977) described the field of social studies as "caught up in ambiguity, inconsistency, and contradiction . . . a smorgasbord" (p. 1-2). Social studies educators seem to be on the defensive about the back-to-basics movement, about the demands being made by various interest groups for a piece of the curriculum and about allegations of a lack of academic rigor.

To add to the distress of social studies teachers, there is evidence that students and parents do not have a very high regard for the sub-

ject. John Goodlad's (1981) study of American schools found that students ranked social studies as only moderately important compared to other subjects, and consistently felt it was the subject they liked least. In most areas, the status of social studies is declining: less time is devoted to it in elementary and secondary schools than ever before.

For a field experiencing such stresses and strains, there is an astonishing amount of agreement on the basic, K-12 social studies curriculum. For almost 60 years, the curriculum has been dominated by the "expanding horizons" model. This widely used curriculum is built on the assumption that students should begin studying their immediate surroundings in kindergarten (family, neighborhood, etc.) and move outward to the larger world by the sixth or seventh grade. The model also makes provision for a spiral repetition of United States history at three grade levels—5th, 8th and 11th—each time in more depth. The most commonly used, grade level topics are summarized below:

Kindergarten—Self, home, school, community
Grade 1—Families
Grade 2—Neighborhoods
Grade 3—Communities
Grade 4—State history/U.S. regions
Grade 5—U.S. history
Grade 6—World cultures, eastern hemisphere
Grade 7—World geography/western hemisphere
Grade 8—U.S. history
Grade 9—Civics or world cultures
Grade 10—World history
Grade 11—U.S. history
Grade 12—American government

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This outline has been held in place in most schools by informal consensus, state laws, district requirements, textbook offerings and inertia. Under the surface unanimity, however, a rising tide of opposition has surfaced to certain aspects of the expanding horizons model. In most communities, as in Boston, there is little agreement on what should be taught in social studies. Individual teachers have their own ideas about what knowledge, skills and values should be covered at each grade level, a situation with clear implications for the kind of curriculum we would ultimately develop.

Other Problems and Issues. Critics of the current state of social studies education have suggested other points and issues that have had a bearing on our forthcoming curriculum, including:

- Many social studies teachers over-emphasize the memorization of facts; although factual knowledge is important, facts are quickly forgotten unless they are tied together by deeper understanding and made part of broader themes.
- At the other end of the spectrum, some social studies teachers—believing that facts are unimportant—stress only concepts, skills and current events. Their students emerge with little in-depth knowledge of conventional history, thus contributing to the public backlash against schools that do not provide children with what many consider to be basic literacy in history, government, civics, economics and so forth.
- Some social studies teachers present material, such as abstract concepts from political science and economics, for which students in the elementary grades are not intellectually ready. Although students may be able to parrot back some of this information on tests, their real understanding is limited.
- Many teachers—sometimes with the best of intentions—tack multicultural education onto the fringes of the curriculum, relegating material on minority groups and other

cultures to Black History Week, Chinese New Year, etc., and paying more attention to the exotic aspects of other cultures (food, clothing, songs and dances) than to the common ground of all cultures.

- The teaching of citizenship and values has often fallen into one of two traps: (a) teachers preach to students on the virtues of certain attitudes and behaviors, which usually turns students off and teaches very little; or (b) teachers take the values clarification approach in which they avoid taking positions on value questions or issues, and in which students are allowed to espouse any arguable position. The result in either case is that students emerge from school with little knowledge of or belief in basic human values.
- The social studies curriculum has taken on too much. In addition to content curriculum, social studies teachers traditionally have been asked to take responsibility for a major part of the job of inculcating citizenship and humanistic values in their students. If that were not enough, new pieces of curriculum have been added to social studies without careful integration with existing content, thus overwhelming many teachers. Such worthy topics as global education, multicultural education, law education, values education, women's studies, nuclear education and others, have been tacked onto the basic expanding horizons model, seriously overburdening the subject for many teachers.
- The traditional social studies curriculum includes no history before the fifth grade, based on the assumption that children are not developmentally ready to study such an abstract subject before that point. But, a strong argument can be made that if history is presented as a vivid, heroic narrative, elementary school children can learn a great deal more than we have traditionally assumed, and will go on to the higher grades with a knowledge base and a feel for the subject that will be a great advantage. The key is that history in the elementary grades must deal primarily with

stories about real people rather than abstractions, and must draw on concepts—such as courage, cowardice, oppression, resentment, victory and defeat—that children experience in their own lives (Egan, 1979).

- A final weakness the critics point out is that links are seldom forged between the skills taught in social studies and those taught in reading, language arts, science and mathematics. In fact, these fields have large areas of overlap, and the content knowledge acquired in social studies can make students better readers, writers, scientists and mathematicians.

The net result of these and other problems is that many teachers ignore the official curriculum and follow their instincts about what students should learn. In most school systems, this practice has been made easier by the absence of specific grade-by-grade objectives and testing in social studies. Many teachers have been able to ignore the lofty goals and curriculum outlines of their system and develop their own materials for topics in which they are interested and with which they feel comfortable; clearly this has happened in Boston. Social studies may well be the area in which central office curriculum documents are most freely ignored. It is also that area most often given short shrift when public pressures demand more attention be given to reading, writing and mathematics.

The Shape of Our Curriculum

The status of Boston's social studies curriculum was similar to that of most other school systems around the country; clearly there was need for improvement. The sentiments of Boston teachers, and data from other literature in the field, led to the development of the following goals for our K-8 curriculum:

1. *There should be clear knowledge objectives for each grade.* Every elementary and middle school teacher should cover certain basic information as part of a logical K-8 sequence.

2. *There should be clear skills objectives for each grade.* Students should move through a logical hierarchy of social studies skills from kindergarden through eighth grade; those skills should be tied as much as possible to skills in reading/language arts and other subject areas.

3. *There should be a link between skills and content.* We should weave content and skills together in a symbiotic relationship so that content serves as a vehicle for teaching skills that can be used in other situations, and so that content knowledge "sticks to the children's ribs" and is not quickly forgotten after the test is given.

4. *Objectives should be appropriate to students' level.* We should ensure that neither content material nor skills are beyond the developmental level of students in each grade, but are appropriately challenging.

5. *There should eventually be competency tests for each grade level's objectives.* When the curriculum and appropriate materials and support are in place, the objectives for each grade level should be linked to city-wide tests, which ensure that students come out of each grade with certain basic knowledge and skills.

6. *Teachers should have flexibility.* The city-wide curriculum should leave decisions on methods and materials in teachers' hands, allowing for the many different ways to convey the same basic content and skills. The city-wide objectives should also allow space for teachers to pursue material of particular interest to them and to their students. Social studies is a field in which most teachers have pet projects and personal avocations; as a consequence, the required content curriculum should take up only about 75 percent of the year, allowing 25 percent for other topics.

7. *More history should be studied in*

the lower grades. We should modify the expanding horizons model by increasing the amount of history—vivid narrative history—taught before the fifth grade. Because most textbooks for these grades do not contain history, this involves drawing on children's books and other nontext materials. It also means giving support to teachers in using new materials and new teaching methods.

8. *Geography instruction should expand gradually from where students are.* The area in which the expanding horizons curriculum makes the most sense is physical geography. Students should slowly expand their knowledge of the world and their application of geography skills, beginning with their immediate environment and moving to the entire globe. As much as possible, the expanding geography curriculum should be linked to history, sociology and other content areas.

9. *We should include other academic disciplines in the early grades.* Social studies instruction should focus on concepts that will continue into high school, and include major ideas from history, geography, economics, sociology, anthropology and civics.

10. *We should take a different approach to citizenship and values.* The social studies curriculum should not become overburdened with unrealistic expectations of students and teachers. Because it is impossible to hold students accountable for believing in certain values—or hold teachers accountable for teaching them—we should present these areas as part of the *knowledge* curriculum. We can hold students accountable for having a thorough knowledge of the origins and reasons for our culture's values. Where preaching at students in schools has clearly failed as a way to inculcate values, and where values clarification has produced a fierce backlash from some segments of the public, teach-

ing the origins of values through vivid historical case studies may be far more effective. The use of the case study method is not mandated, but would be recommended as an effective technique for unifying objectives from different areas of the curriculum into effective presentations for students.

11. *We should infuse multicultural education.* Curriculum dealing with various cultural groups should be an integral, natural part of social studies at every level—not a tokenistic add-on. Students should be taught about the common human qualities that underlie diverse cultural practices, and should be helped to experience vicariously what it is like to be a member of another group. Rather than stressing the differences among various racial and ethnic groups, multicultural education must show students the ways in which seemingly different behaviors around the world are aimed at fulfilling the same basic human needs. Banks (1975) provides a useful model, which suggests that historical and current events should be viewed through the eyes of all the different groups involved.

Students should also have the chance to discuss prejudice and stereotyping so they can recognize them in their own lives. Learning facts and figures about the various ethnic, racial and religious groups in the United States is not enough; neither is it enough to expose students to examples of famous black, Native American, Hispanic, Asian or other minority-group Americans (or to counterstereotypical examples such as Jewish athletes, black scientists, Puerto Rican playwrights, etc.). Students must understand vicariously what it means to be the victim of prejudice and discrimination, and be able to relate instances where people have overcome legal and personal barriers to equal opportunity.

Finally, schools can neither force students to love one another nor can they fail students for not de-

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veloping desirable values. However, we can organize a rigorous academic experience that greatly increases the number of students who have tolerant and positive attitudes toward other groups, who know the roots and development of basic human values, who are independent and critical thinkers, and who participate in the body politic.

These premises and conclusions were instrumental in developing the following statement of philosophy which, in turn, has formed the basis for Boston's curriculum objectives.

Philosophy and Goals

The overall goal of social studies, in conjunction with other subject areas, is to give children access to knowledge and information that enables them to become creative workers and independent thinkers, and to respond in rational, humane and responsible ways to the world around them. To fulfill this ambitious agenda, students need to be taken well beyond their immediate world and taught about a wide variety of human experience so that they find how others have answered the critical questions of human existence and how civilization has developed.

Students must have a detailed knowledge of the origins of key American values—liberty, equality, justice, tolerance, democracy, citizen participation, privacy, due process, human rights, the dignity of the individual, property, self-reliance, self-protection, etc. Questions of good and evil, and right and wrong, must be central to the social studies curriculum, but always in the context of detailed knowledge of how our society ar-

rived at its particular set of definitions on value questions.

Although knowledge of our shared culture and values is critical to students as they face the future, equally important is a set of skills they can apply to new situations. Students need to feel oriented in the world through a thorough knowledge of history, geography, economics and other academic disciplines, but they also need transferable skills for the unknowable future. Such skills include:

- geography skills to get information from maps
- time and chronology skills to make sense of events and sequences
- information gathering skills that enable them to read, listen and observe perceptively
- information-processing and problem-solving skills to organize and make sense of data from a wide range of sources
- critical thinking skills to make up their own minds about issues that affect them
- discussion skills to interact productively with other people of all persuasions
- skills in presenting facts and opinions orally and in writing

With a solid base of background knowledge from a rigorous academic curriculum, and with well-developed sets of skills such as those listed above, students should be ready to face the challenges of the future—to make career decisions, political decisions, consumer decisions, and personal decisions that are rational, responsible, humane and independent.

Beyond the Social Studies Classroom. There are more ambitious goals toward which we, as educators, should strive, but they are difficult to teach directly and impossible to measure through competency tests or even subjective assessments. These broader values and citizenship goals are listed below as hoped-for outcomes that can be part of the mission of each school:

- a positive self image

- a respect for the rights of others
- a knowledge of and belief in basic American ideals and values
- positive feelings about other ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural groups
- a curiosity about the lives and well-being of others beyond the immediate neighborhood
- the ability to work cooperatively with others
- a willingness to look at the world through the eyes of others—empathy
- a willingness to suspend judgment and weigh all sides of an issue
- a preference for rejecting simplistic solutions
- flexibility and adaptability in the face of changing conditions
- a desire to participate actively in the democratic process

Clearly these goals reach well beyond the scope of social studies classrooms and can be achieved only if all teachers and administrators work toward them. Nevertheless, the social studies curriculum is the focal point for the development of the knowledge and skills upon which these behaviors and attitudes are built.

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