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## Where is the content?: Elementary social studies in preservice field experiences<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Anecdotal evidence has long lamented the status of social studies in elementary classrooms as observed by preservice teachers. As standardized testing has risen for mathematics and language arts, social studies has been pushed aside. In the aftermath of accountability legislation such as No Child Left Behind, research indicates that social studies is less visible in elementary classrooms due to an instructional focus on tested content areas (e.g. math, language arts, reading). In this study, approximately 90 elementary preservice teachers enrolled in a social studies methods course responded to a survey and indicated the frequency and quality of lessons they observed over the course of a single semester. Findings report that preservice elementary teachers witnessed few, if any, lessons in social studies in the elementary classroom. Implications for teacher education are discussed.

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### Introduction

Teacher education researchers describe field experiences as essential for the development of pedagogical content knowledge—or learning about the nuances of teaching a specific subject (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008). Indeed, teacher education programs often herald Shulman's (1987/2004) typology of teacher knowledge which ranges from content knowledge, child development, teaching strategies, and pedagogical content knowledge, as a framework from which to design their teacher education program (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Field experiences then serve as a way in which beginning teachers can both observe teaching practice, and practice teaching within a supportive environment.

Field experiences in teacher education build upon the assumption that preservice teachers (PSTs) can develop deeper knowledge and expertise through their participation within a community of learners (Richardson & Placier, 2001). Drawing on sociocultural theories, field experiences allow for the novice to engage on the periphery of the community and then gradually take on deeper responsibilities within that “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Hence, field-based experience and learning have been noted to provide meaningful context for learning to teach (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008). Indeed, Rodgers and Scott (2008) envisioned the learning to teach as a process of acquiring a teaching and classroom identity. This development occurs as teachers engage more and more in actual classroom settings (Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001; Rosaen & Florio-Ruane, 2008). Working alongside a master teacher helps facilitate an identity change for preservice

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teachers. However, as social studies teacher educators we wonder about the influence of field experiences on facilitating pedagogical content knowledge in the social studies, especially as our students report seeing little, if any, social studies instruction.

With today's emphasis on standardized testing, we have witnessed a shift in the instructional design of social studies content in elementary classrooms. Many scholars lament the "narrowing" effect that accountability testing and standardization policies have on the elementary school curriculum (Milner, Sondergeld, Demir, Johnson, & Czerniak, 2012). As teachers feel increased pressure to prepare children in the tested subjects of reading and mathematics, social studies lessons become marginalized in the curriculum, making it difficult for children to acquire an adequate foundational knowledge in this area (Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005). These changes impact the ability of PSTs to build meaningful connections between social studies methods courses and observed practices in the field. Indeed, research on teacher learning (Cochran-Smith, Feiman-Nemser, & McIntyre, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) establishes that having field experiences are essential for preservice teachers to envision how to actually teach a specific subject. For example, Owens (1997) found when participants were not afforded opportunities to witness the teaching of social studies, they lacked instructional examples and struggled to define what social studies was and how to teach for it. Similarly, Lanahan and Yeager (2008) suggested that when preservice teachers see instructional examples in the field the instruction they receive from their methods course instructors gains important credibility. Generally, concurrent field experiences—field experiences occurring at the same time as the methods course—appear to be most influential in helping preservice teachers to connect theory and research about teaching social studies with embedded instructional examples (Bolick, Adams, & Willox, 2010).

As teacher educators, we feel the need to address the frequency and kind of social studies instruction observed by our teacher education candidates. Such insights might inform our instructional aims and lay the groundwork for further collaboration with our public school partners. Conducting a survey of our students' experiences would provide a comprehensive overview of what was occurring in their field placements. Although we are not quantitative researchers, we recognized the utility of quantitative methodology to provide data from which to make teacher education program decisions.

This paper explores data from our survey of 91 PSTs at a large midwestern university. Findings suggest not only programmatic changes in what we teach and expect from our students relative to their field placements, but also changes within our practice of collaboration with local schools.

### **The status of social studies in elementary classrooms**

Research on the effects of accountability and standardization on social studies instruction is riddled with tension and contradiction (Grant & Salinas, 2008). Some scholars view accountability and standardization as an overbearing force on the ability of the teacher to enact social studies instruction (Mathison & Freeman, 2004), while others document classroom teachers' ability to successfully navigate the constraints associated with these more restrictive curricular policies (Castro, 2010; Gradwell, 2006; Pace, 2008; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007). Regardless of these issues, the research literature about elementary social studies presents a more troubling perspective on social studies instruction. Generally, the literature reports teachers are afforded less time for social studies instruction and that social studies concepts are often subsumed within integrated units focusing on literacy.

First, evidence demonstrates a reduction of instructional time devoted to social studies in elementary classrooms. Fitchett and Heafner (2010) found a substantial difference in instructional time devoted to social studies when compared with other content areas: 2.9 h/week for social studies, while 11 h/week devoted to language arts and 5 h/week dedicated to mathematics. Heafner et al. (2007) discovered that only 33.8% of teachers taught social studies at least 2–3 days per week. Teachers frequently rotated social studies instruction with science content, another subject area that is not included on standardized testing at the elementary level (Heafner et al., 2007). Results from a direct comparison between a state that does not conduct standardized testing in elementary social studies (North Carolina) and a state that does (South Carolina) indicated social studies is taught less and for less time in the non-tested state (Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006). Hence, teachers teach what is tested. Furthermore, due to the perceived lack of importance placed on social studies instruction in elementary classrooms, teachers reported that their students retained a limited understanding of important citizenship skills (Burroughs et al., 2005). In general, studies evidenced a reduction of social studies instructional time, resulting in negative consequences for elementary students.

Second, research also captures the recent trend in content integration as a method to teach social studies in elementary classrooms. Through the use of thematic crossover, Evers Holloway and Chiodo (2009) contended that 47 social studies concepts were taught in elementary classrooms through integration of social studies content into language arts and reading. While others demonstrated mixed findings related to integration. Winstead-Fry (2009) noted that participants agreed that their students "learned better" with interdisciplinary instruction, and that teachers demonstrated greater enjoyment in structuring lessons that featured integration, compared to teachers who were forced to teach using independent instructional blocks. Interestingly, the teachers in the study conducted by Winstead-Fry (2009) were given specific professional development to develop integrated lesson plans that honor all subject areas involved, unlike participants in studies that shared more negative perceptions of integration. One study (Heafner et al., 2007) evidenced that integration was often utilized in combination with standalone social studies instruction (67% of the time), with only 28.3% of teachers indicating that integration was the only method of social studies instruction implemented. Conversely, Boyle-Baise, Hsu,

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