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The Journal of Social Studies Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jssr

Is it cute or does it count? Learning to teach for meaningful social studies in elementary grades



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 24 February 2015

Available online 3 April 2015

Keywords:

Social studies

Teacher education

Methods courses

Elementary education

ABSTRACT

Using a framework of conceptual and practical tools (Grossman et al., 2000), this study explores ways in which a social studies methods course affected beginning teachers' beliefs and pedagogical approaches for meaningful social studies instruction in elementary grades. Participants included 75 preservice teachers who completed open-ended questionnaires before and after the course, and again one year later as student teachers. Three participants were observed teaching social studies lessons during student teaching to determine how the methods course impacted their nascent instructional practices. The study adds to our understanding about "what sticks" in teacher education and offers insights to researchers and to teacher educators who aim to equip future teachers for "powerful and purposeful" (NCSS, 2009) social studies instruction.

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The decline of instructional time devoted to social studies in the elementary grades over the last several decades is well established in the literature (Burstein, Hutton, & Curtis, 2006; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; Heafner et al. 2007; Houser, 1995; Passe, 2006; Vogler et al., 2007). Reports of schools' focus on standardized math and reading assessment scores (VanFossen, 2005), teachers' and students' general apathy toward social studies (Zhao & Hoge, 2005), and weak or poorly executed social studies instruction (Alleman & Brophy, 1994; Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008; Hinde, 2005) present a bleak image of elementary social studies in the United States.

For social studies teacher educators, this situation is troubling on multiple levels. Prospective elementary teachers may observe very few social studies lessons during field experiences, and the lessons they see may be textbook based (Zhao & Hoge, 2005), emphasize literacy skills (Boyle-Baise et al., 2008), or trivialize opportunities to teach rich social studies content by focusing on making lessons "cute" or "fun" (DiCamillo, 2010; Slekar, 2009). Thus, preservice teachers are likely to have limited access to role models from whom they can learn about meaningful social studies teaching in elementary classrooms. Furthermore, preservice teachers may hold negative attitudes toward social studies (Owens, 1996; Slekar, 1998; 2009), be unclear about the purposes of social studies (see Adler, 2008), and/or convey reluctance to embrace social studies as a core content area worthy of attention (Goodman & Adler, 1985). Preparing new elementary teachers to teach social studies *at all* in public schools—let alone for deep, meaningful learning that leads to young children's preparation for active citizenship—is a critical issue.

As a researcher and elementary social studies methods instructor, I have grown increasingly concerned over the last several years about my students' convictions that "fun pedagogy" (DiCamillo, 2010, p. 189) constitutes excellent social studies teaching.

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These preservice teachers tend to focus on delivering social studies lessons that include hands-on or playful features, often at the expense of striving for relevance, meaning, or substance. While I appreciate these preservice teachers' enthusiasm for promoting student interest and motivation to learn, I feel obligated to challenge them to develop deeper understandings about the role of social studies disciplines in elementary classrooms and to raise their expectations of social studies instruction accordingly. The purpose of this study was to explore ways in which a social studies methods course may affect beginning teachers' beliefs and pedagogical approaches for *meaningful* social studies instruction. Reports of "what sticks" in the minds of preservice teachers after completing methods courses can offer insights about promoting long-term commitment to social studies teaching that involves more than engaging children in activities that are simply fun or cute.

Preservice teachers and elementary social studies instruction

A number of scholars have conducted research to investigate social studies methods courses' effects on preservice teacher development (e.g., Conklin, Hawley, Powell, & Ritter, 2010; Dinkelman, 1999; Ritter, 2012; Pryor, 2006; Sanchez, 2010; Yon & Passe, 1990, 1994). These studies tend to explore how methods courses may foster certain dispositions and forms of teacher knowledge (e.g., content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge). Findings from these studies reveal that methods instructors can be "cautiously optimistic" about their effects on beginning teachers' beliefs and practices (Fehn & Koeppen, 1998, p. 480). In other words, although methods course experiences may lead to new understandings, they are not always accompanied by confidence for teaching or the kinds of practices instructors hope to see.

For example, Sanchez (2010) implemented a series of critical inquiry activities in her elementary social studies methods course to promote critical consciousness and breadth of content knowledge for American historical figures. Findings from 45 preservice teachers' written responses indicated superficial (and sometimes inaccurate) knowledge about the lives of popular figures in elementary grade curricula (Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Helen Keller, and Rosa Parks). After engaging in critical inquiry and demonstrating more complex understandings of these figures as a result of the inquiry, participants nonetheless expressed apprehension about teaching history from multiple perspectives in their future classrooms.

In a related study, Fragnoli (2006) had 38 preservice teachers keep reflective journals about their perceptions of elementary social studies while taking her methods course for teaching social studies and English language arts. The major course goal was to "introduce instructional strategies and new historical understandings" (p. 247); history as an inquiry-based discipline was one area of focus. Fragnoli found that although students enjoyed the experiences in the course, they "lacked confidence in their abilities and their content knowledge to be able to create a historical inquiry" (p. 250). She noted the difficulty in teaching preservice teachers to connect theory to practice, and she suggested that teacher educators should provide opportunities for methods students to reflect on their beliefs in relation to new knowledge presented in the course.

On the other hand, Fehn and Koeppen (1998) found in their study of 11 secondary preservice teachers that a social studies methods course significantly impacted instructional approaches during subsequent field experiences. The methods course emphasized document-based instruction through the use of primary sources, and after completing the course the participants used primary sources in at least one of their student teaching lessons. Fehn and Koeppen pointed out that field experience contexts influenced the degree to which preservice teachers carried out document-based instruction. This study's findings support the notion that social studies methods courses' influences on future practice are rife with complexity (Yon & Passe, 1994).

The Executive Summary of the American Educational Research Association Panel on Research in Teacher Education (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005) called for more research to explore connections between methods courses and preservice teachers' knowledge and instructional practices (p. 16). Adler echoed this call in 2008, pointing out that although research shows how social studies methods courses may alter preservice teachers' beliefs/attitudes, there is little evidence to support the notion that those changes last. Indeed, few researchers follow preservice teachers from social studies methods courses into culminating student teaching experiences (e.g., Fehn & Koeppen, 1998; Pryor, 2006; Yon & Passe, 1994). The current study adds to this limited body of literature by following three purposefully selected preservice teachers into their student teaching placement sites to explore how their social studies methods course impacted their nascent instructional practices. The following questions guided the study:

1. How can a methods course impact beginning teachers' beliefs about the characteristics of excellent social studies instruction?
2. How can a methods course impact beginning teachers' pedagogical approaches for social studies instruction?

Theoretical framework

The notion of *pedagogical tools* for learning to teach frames this study (Grossman et al., 1999, 2000). Grossman and her team, as well as other researchers (Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002) have used this framework to study new teacher learning and identity. Researchers are generally in agreement that teacher education outcomes depend on multiple factors, including preservice teachers' existing beliefs, knowledge, and dispositions; prior schooling experiences; field experiences; and methods courses (Angell, 1998; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Lortie, 1975; Zeichner, 2010). A fundamental and enduring component of

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