



Preservice elementary teachers' economic literacy: Closing gates to full implementation of the social studies curriculum



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to determine if the level of preservice teachers' economic literacy might serve as a gatekeeper to teaching economics competencies. The participants ($n=84$) were teacher candidates in an elementary education program in their final methods courses prior to their teacher internship. The findings supported the intuitive belief that elementary teachers lack the economic literacy and confidence needed to teach economics concepts in the elementary curriculum. This deficit can serve as a gatekeeper to teaching economics competencies leading to curricular disjuncture between the established curriculum and actual practice in the classroom.

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Introduction

In the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Economics Report Card the average economics score on the NAEP for twelfth graders in the United States was at the basic level, below the goal of proficient. Only 42% of students scored at the proficient level and 3% at the advanced level (Mead & Sandene, 2007). As the “study of how people choose to use resources” (Chapin, 2013, p. 233), economics helps citizens make informed and rational decisions for themselves, their families, and the larger society. Although economics education is important because individuals and society are more likely to make better choices when costs and benefits of those choices can be identified and compared, it is clear that U.S. students are not acquiring sufficient economic literacy through K-12 schooling. This paper defines “economic literacy” as being able to use a set of agreed upon concepts consistently to answer practical questions in daily life, whereas “economic knowledge” is simply the ability to recall economic concepts (Hansen, Salemi, & Siegfied, 2002).

Our goal should be that all students exit school with a proficient level of economics literacy (Marri, 2011; Stigler, 1983). However, this goal should not fall solely on the shoulders of high school teachers. Often, when we think of economics education we think of a high school senior level economics course offered opposite the senior level government class, but most state social studies frameworks include economics concepts at all grade levels.

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Teachers as gatekeepers

Just because curriculum frameworks or standards include economics competencies and objectives does not mean that they are being taught. Thornton (2005) discussed the concept of teachers as gatekeepers in relationship to curricular innovation in the social studies. Teachers serve as gatekeepers and “curriculum change fails to occur when it is out of step with teachers’ gatekeeping” (p. 16). His discussion focused on teacher gatekeeping as related to their values and beliefs about curriculum and teaching, but other things can prevent teachers from opening the gate to teaching certain competencies or objectives in a curriculum including efficacy and ability. Thornton supported this idea when he explained that curricular reform depends on “whether teachers willingly open the gate, partially open the gate, are unable to open the gate...” (p. 17). Our concern is whether preservice teachers are able to open the gate and teach economics in the elementary social studies classroom.

Curricular transposition

McGowan (2009) further extended the idea of teacher gatekeeping in his curricular transposition theory. This theory accounts for how ideas become reality in the classroom. There are four stages to the theory. The first stage is a concept or idea that is valued and deemed a necessary educational end. The second stage is the curricular program, the ideal mean or way to teach the concept or idea. The third stage is the actual implementation of the ideal curriculum and the fourth stage is the effects on students. McGowan posits that to move from each stage to the next there is a leap and during the leap there is a chance for *disjuncture* or a break between the ideal and the way a curricular program is implemented.

According to McGowan (2009) there are multiple ways that disjuncture between the “ideal educational program” (p. 91) and the implemented program can occur in any curriculum. One significant way is that often when policy makers or societies decide that an educational program is necessary to meet an important societal need the policy makers “assume that it is enough to have a political aim and create an educational policy to achieve it, while ignoring the significant complexities of the educational undertaking” (McGowan, 2009, p. 103). The curricular transposition model accounts for these complexities. The move from the concept or idea in the first stage to the curricular program can be undermined by many factors, most notably political differences among policy makers and between policy makers and curriculum writers about what should or should not be included in the educational program. An example of this in social studies would be the struggle over discipline standards in the 1990s. It is such a significant concern that when the National Council for the Social Studies wrote the *College, Career, and Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards* they deliberately wrote standards that focused on skills over content to “avoid historically divisive prescriptions of curricular content (e.g. names, dates, place, historical eras)” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. xiii). NCSS choose to leave questions of content to the states (Swan & Griffin, 2013). Other examples include the curricular wars over science and history content that have dominated much of the 20th and 21st centuries in the United States.

The leap from the curricular program in stage 2 to the implemented program in stage 3 is the focus of this study. There are myriad of means that cause disjuncture from stage 2 to 3. McGowan (2009) identifies three factors that influence curriculum implementation: (a) teachers’ distinctive practices and beliefs, (b) the resources available in schools, and (c) the wider political environment.

Of interest to this study were teacher factors. An example of teacher practices as it relates to knowledge of content comes from McCutchen et al. (2002). In a study with elementary reading teachers, McCutchen et al. reported “that changes in teacher knowledge can lead to observable and sustainable changes in their practice” (p. 81). They concluded that when elementary teachers’ knowledge of phonological awareness “deepened”, the teachers’ classroom practices changed ultimately resulting in improved student learning. A change in teacher knowledge resulted in a change in teacher practice and ultimately improvements in student outcomes.

Other factors besides knowledge, such as teacher beliefs, can affect teacher practice. An example of this from science education is evolution where beliefs about science and religion may cause disjuncture between the curriculum and the implemented curriculum in the classroom. Nehm and Schonfeld (2007) investigated the effects of adding a 14-week evolution course to a graduate teacher education program for preservice science teachers on their knowledge, beliefs, and preference for teaching evolution. They found that even though there was a statistically significant increase in preservice teachers’ knowledge of evolution, it did not change their beliefs about or result in a change in teacher practice. Teachers still preferred not to teach evolution.

The political environment can also influence implementation of the curriculum. An example of this is the impact of NCLB on social studies instruction particularly in the elementary grades (Anderson, 2009; Au, 2009; Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005; Mertler, 2011; Zamosky, 2008). The pressure to increase scores in math and reading encouraged district and school administrators to make curricular decisions that resulted in less social studies instruction in many schools and districts. The political decision to increase the level of accountability and the nature of accountability severely cut into the one resource that districts and schools could not get more of through tax increases and bond issuances. Their response was to change the curriculum as implemented in the classroom.

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