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More social studies?: Examining instructional policies of time and testing in elementary school

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ABSTRACT

Adding instructional time and holding teachers accountable for teaching social studies are touted as practical, logical steps toward reforming the age-old tradition of marginalization. This qualitative case study of an urban elementary school, examines how nine teachers and one administrator enacted district reforms that added 45 min to the instructional day and implemented a series of formative and summative assessments. Through classroom observations, interviews, time journals, and official school documents, this article describes underlying perceptions and priorities that were barriers to any positive impact time or testing might have afforded social studies. Two recommendations emerge from results: 1) time structures need to provide space for the teaching of and planning for social studies; and 2) testing can have positive outcomes, but these are limited when assessments structures are hierarchical, misaligned, and poorly communicated.

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Introduction

Social studies has historically suffered marginalization in terms of both instructional time and emphasis in public elementary schools. Many scholars cite high stakes testing and curriculum standardization as the primary reasons for perpetually situating social studies on the sidelines (Au, 2007, 2009, 2013; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; Pace, 2007, 2011; Wills, 2007). Researchers interested in re-prioritizing social studies in elementary schools conclude that additional time in the school day, as well as assessment practices that hold teachers accountable for teaching expected and appropriate content, are practical and logical steps toward remedying the problem (Author, 2006; Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014b; Author, 2012b; Pittman & Romberg, 2000; VanSledright, 2011; Wills, 2007). To examine the influence of these recommendations and the subsequent impact on the teaching of social studies in elementary school, this study describes results from a case study of one school that enacted district policies which mandated both time and testing reform.

The initiatives were driven by both federal incentives (e.g. competition for *Race to the Top* funding, *pay for performance* plans, and *value added* data reporting), and economic disincentives (e.g. constricting budgets, a declining economy, and the need to cut educational expenditures) that shifted the focus from student performance outcomes to teacher effectiveness. This emphasis on individual teachers' impact on student achievement produced a culture of pressure and angst, where teachers believed they were held accountable without support needed to enact change in their classrooms. In the case of the focus school, 45 min of additional time was added to the school day to streamline buses for budgetary reasons. Additionally,

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in the year prior to this study, the district implemented formative and summative testing in all core classes, including social studies, primarily as a means to measure teacher effectiveness. And finally, to provide sufficient time for all content areas of instruction, the school administration initiated an integrated model in which social studies instruction was delivered in conjunction with the language arts curriculum.

Given a strong national trend toward individual teacher performance and accountability (Author, 2014), I sought to understand how classroom teachers responded to and enacted these new policies in their classrooms. Specifically, I explored time allocated for social studies and how social studies was taught in light of the addition of 45 min added to the school day and mandated formative and summative testing in social studies. I situate the findings of this elementary school case study within the literature based on two outcomes: marginalization and testing, and an extended school day resulting in additional instructional time.

Marginalization and testing

Tested subjects receive greater instructional time (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Center on Educational Policy, 2007, 2008) and testing pressures resulting from the subsequent use of student scores for evaluating teacher performance inevitably influences teacher decision-making (Au, 2007; Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014a, 2014b; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Hargreaves, 1994). Reprioritization in elementary classrooms results in constricted time allocations for social studies as well as other non-core subjects (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010, Author, 2012b; Center on Educational Policy, 2007, 2008). Yet, social studies is touted as essential for promoting humanistic goals necessary for democracy and elementary social studies is foundational in achieving these goals (Alleman & Brophy, 2001; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brophy & Alleman, 2008; VanSledright, 2011; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Despite rhetoric, the elementary social studies landscape is desolate and marked by marginalization trends, (2010; 2012a, 2012b, Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014b Fitchett & Heafner).

Marginalization research suggests that teachers who work in states where social studies is tested are more likely to teach it (Au, 2009; Author, 2006; Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014a, 2014b; Gradwell, 2006; Grant, 2003, 2007; Lintner, 2006). State testing policies are linked with significant time differences for elementary social studies nationally (2010, 2012b, 2012c, Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014b Fitchett & Heafner). However, testing is not always associated with effective instruction, especially when teacher accountability is juxtaposed with reductions in pedagogical and curricular autonomy (Au, 2007, 2009; Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014b; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Gerwin & Visone, 2006; Pace, 2011; Rock, et al., 2006; Wills, 2007; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009).

Indeed, there are dire consequences to the neglect of social studies in the wake of the accountability reforms; however, social studies educators must ask if they would really be better to have social studies included in the nationally-driven "testmania" (Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005, p.14) or if such inclusion will be "killing the social studies in the process" (Au, 2013, p. 10). Identification of state-level testing differences and associated outcomes affirm these concerns (Author, 2006; Lintner, 2006). Teachers' are influenced by the tests they administer, but this influence is most often implicit. The influence of tests on teaching practices is often exaggerated and policy makers should be cautious to not to overly rely on standardized assessments as a "lever of change" (Grant, 2001, p. 422).

Extended school days

With the support of the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, as well as ample federal funding, Extended Learning Time (ELT) has quickly become a go-to solution for improving schools that consistently fail to perform according to established standards (Silva, 2012). The overall academic benefits of adding instructional time to the school day are debatable. Schools across the country have encountered complications with ELT programs, such as: the loss of teachers to schools maintaining a traditional schedule, the need to increase staff and pay teachers more, an upheaval of teachers' schedules, and have produced far fewer cases of success than anticipated. In summary, "less time may be a cause of poor performance, but that does not mean that more time is necessarily the cure" (Silva, 2012, p. 1).

Moreover, stakeholders in states where ELT has been implemented hold concerns regarding the ramifications of increased learning time in the absence of other reforms to ensure quality instruction. Rose and Stein (2011), in examining the data from schools with mandatory extended time versus those with the voluntary addition of instructional time (i.e. tutoring and after school programs), concluded that students gain more from voluntary programs and these gains were particularly higher when additional instructional time occurred during the summer months rather than during the traditional school year. Conversely, in some cases, academic gains have been associated with lengthening the school day. Frabman and Kaplan (2005) documented positive learning outcomes of increased time on task, more comprehensive coverage of the curriculum, additional opportunities for experiential learning, greater ability to differentiate for diverse abilities, and a closer connection between students and the adults serving them. Extended time provided for longer classes in the core content areas, extra classes for English and math, more time for professional development, and opportunities for enrichment (Frabman & Kaplan, 2005). However, these outcomes were not without utilization of community resources, teaching assistants to ensure that teachers in these schools taught a comparable number of hours to those teaching in schools with traditional schedules, and additional time for lesson preparation and collaborative planning.

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