

THE LAST CENTURY: A LOOK BACK AT SOCIAL STUDIES

By
Carol Brown
Executive Secretary
Iowa Council for the Social Studies



*M*y mother was born in the first decade of this century and my granddaughter in the last. Sometime in the middle decade, I began teaching in a high school in a suburb north of Detroit. The differences from decade to decade are incredible.

My mother rode her pony to a one-room schoolhouse about three miles from the farmhouse in which she was born. Numbers were computed on slates, older children helped the younger and everyone brought their lunch in a metal pail with a lid. High school was 20 miles away so it was necessary to “board” during the week and only go home for weekends. The tools for learning consisted of slates and chalk, composition books and scratchy pens dipped in inkwells, textbooks and library books, a globe and a blackboard.

When I walked into my social studies classroom in 1955 to teach American History and Government, I was given a piece of chalk, a blackboard, a textbook and a United States wall map. There was a purple "ditto" machine in the teacher's room and I could request a movie projector which I threaded myself to help my students visualize some of the events they were reading about - about as innovative as one could get at that point in time.

A hot lunch was available in the cafeteria for \$1.50 and was served on yellow plastic trays. Attendance slips were posted on a hook outside the classroom door and collected by students "from the office". My grade book was my most treasured and protected possession, hidden from the eyes of all students and carried to all fire drills.

Before I left the classroom for administration in 1979, my room was further equipped with an overhead projector, "gang maps" were added to the wall and I could request a TV for special events in addition to the old "thread-your-own" movie projector.

In 1999, my grand-daughter walked into a carpeted classroom equipped with student computers, a TV, a VCR, a "white board" written on with magic markers, learning centers, and "big book" textbooks. Her teacher used an LCD and power point to present information and sent her attendance and grades to the office via computer, which she also used to track student progress.

The social studies curriculum in my mother's school included American history, European history, civics and geography. As a social studies supervisor, towards the end of the century, I "coached" teachers of American history, world history, government, economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology,

Comparative Government and Economics, International Relations, Street Law, Current Issues, Law and Issues, African-American Studies and Geography. Third graders learned about the city in which they live, fourth graders the geography of the state and nation in which they live and 5th graders the history of their state and country. Teaching methodology included cooperative learning groups, higher-order thinking skills, project learning, identifying and teaching to preferred learning styles, post-

holing, jig-sawing, integrated learning, inter-disciplinary experiences and service learning to mention only a few. Many of these teaching strategies and techniques had been used by master teachers throughout the century but it was in the latter half that such methodology was analyzed, labeled and perhaps perfected.

For most of 20th Century and the century before, social studies were considered a core area carrying equal weight and importance with Language Arts, Reading, Science and Math. The State Department of Education (DE) had a full-time Social Studies Supervisor with an adequate budget; AEA's had social studies consultants, as did many local school districts. Although not large, each of these individuals or departments had budgets, which supported curriculum development, student evaluation, teacher workshops and student activities.

But alas, something happened to social studies on the way to the 21st Century. No longer are there full-time supervisors of social studies at the state, AEA or local level. Additional responsibilities have reduced the supervisor or consultant's time, resources and commitment to social studies to as little as 15% in some cases. Money for new text adoptions, teacher training and workshops have been delayed or omitted altogether. Social studies has been labeled a "discretionary" subject area by the AEA Accreditation legislation robbing it of its core area status and much needed consultant and financial support.

There was a time when it was thought that civics, history, geography and economics were essential learnings for a well-educated citizenry and a stable, productive, participatory democracy. Is this no longer true? Are they no longer important?

What will my granddaughter's social studies curriculum be like? Will she be taught the history and culture of her own country? Will she know the history and geography of the world's peoples? Will she be taught to respect and appreciate diversity? Will she be encouraged to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills and attitudes necessary to become a well-educated human being involved in the affairs of her neighborhood, her nation and the global community?

Under the current status of social studies, I am afraid not. Unless we

as social studies educators take it upon ourselves to call for the reinstatement of social studies as a core area with all of the support and funding necessary to provide a challenging, effective social studies learning experience at all grade levels I am afraid my granddaughter and her peers will live and work in the 21st Century with a distinct handicap. They may be able to read, write and compute but they will not know and appreciate who they are and where they came from as Americans. They will not have the vision and commitment to function effectively in a pluralistic democracy "with liberty and justice for all".

In many respects, "we've come a long way, baby," especially in the areas of technology and teaching methodology. But we have a long way to go if we are to move forward with the substance and status we once had. My granddaughter and her peers must become well-educated human beings. They must develop a sense of civility and the mental tools and social understandings that are necessary for all people to live happily and successfully in the 21st Century. The future of our state, our nation and the world is dependent on them. Will they be prepared to meet the challenge?

Biography

Carol Brown has taught Social Studies at the elementary, middle and high school levels and recently retired as Social Science Supervisor for the Des Moines Public Schools. She has worked extensively in the areas of conflict resolution, international education, cross-cultural communication, Holocaust Studies and Civic Education. Carol currently serves as the Executive Secretary for ICSS.