

Commonalities for Essential Social Studies Education



by
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*T*he date was July 3, 1977. I was teaching summer school on the heels of my first year as a secondary social studies teacher in Chicago's inner-city. While talking with a student after class, I heard a loud explosion. I raced to the window and looked down from my second story classroom. One student held a gun, and another student lay lifeless in a pool of blood. The alleged murderer had just left my United States history class. The victim was a student in my world history course just four weeks earlier. They were members of rival gangs. Throughout the following holiday, I pondered my professional role in light of this event. I took the time to reconsider myself and my profession, not only as a person responsible for the education of our youth, but also, and more specifically, as a young social studies teacher.

After fifteen years as a high school teacher, three years as a doctoral student, and three years as a professor of social studies teacher education, I continue to ponder the essential nature of our field. When I try to place the importance of social studies into the context of improving the human condition, I relive constantly the events of July 3, 1977. In so doing, I find myself addressing the core commonalities of our field and why these commonalities make social studies education an essential need if our students are to think through, rather than react mindlessly to, life's problems and issues. With this need in mind, this article identifies a common element that binds the many definitions of our field, draws from a common philosophical foundation, and seeks an essential aim.

A Common Element

Throughout this century, social studies education has assumed a wide variety of definitions, not all of which have aligned with each other and many of which have been contentious (Ross, 1997). The 1916 National Education Association report titled *The Social Studies in Secondary Education* coined the term "social studies" and defined it as studies "understood to be those whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups" (Nelson, 1994, p.9). The interpretive battle has raged ever since. The fact that there have been many definitions between 1916 and today indicates the futility in gaining consensus. The reality that changing socio-historical circumstances influence the social studies is an indication that there is no apparent reason for us to reach a consensus in defining the field. If as consensus suggests, a unanimity of opinion is sought in defining the social studies, then the discussion would never end.

Dewey (1938) noted this futility and posited that the value of social studies rests in "their social origin and function" (p. 368). They are the starting point of all studies because knowledge is socially constructed. As a result, social studies touch all areas of knowledge. This approach may seem overwhelming because it implies that a social studies teacher must be grounded in all areas of knowledge in order to help students connect the various disciplines. Upon further reflection, though, it is obvious that social studies teachers do deal with all areas of knowledge, whether they

are well grounded in those areas or not. Our varying levels of subject matter expertise strike at the heart of framing a *consensual* definition. I suggest the replacement of a consensual definition with a *common element* that designates social studies as essential to the curriculum.

This commonality should stem from the generally accepted belief that citizenship education is the central mission of the social studies. Public schooling in all societies aims to teach students the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to function as citizens. Schools in a democratic society translate these curricular goals into knowledge of the community, nation, and world; skills required to participate effectively in society while promoting and protecting one's interests; and the democratic dispositions that form the bases for decisions to act on one's own behalf while keeping the common good in mind. Citizenship education is the fundamental premise on which the whole school experience functions. If we agree on citizenship education as a common element of our various definitions, then the essential nature of our task lies in being the indispensable linchpin between the socio-civic mandate of public schooling and the lives of our students.

A Philosophical Foundation

In conjunction with the importance of some common element in our definitions is the need for a philosophical foundation. A foundational philosophy of social studies education grows from the common element and promotes the aim of participation in a society based on essential democratic values.

Denying the need to teach basic democratic values would leave open the door for undemocratic values that bring a sense of finality to the human condition. This sort of ideological closed-mindedness is precisely what motivated Dewey (1939) to write *Freedom and Culture* during the heyday of fascism and Stalinism. While exposing the Marxist "utopia" as a predetermined lifestyle based on one unquestionable world view, Dewey was also explaining the democratic process as a philosophy of life based on warranted, but not necessarily permanent, conclusions.

Democratic citizenship includes the rethinking of societal values through a logically reflective and critical process. This process is a value within itself, and it represents the philosophical founda-

tion that supports the essential nature of social studies education. Democracy is a philosophy that includes an open-ended thinking process, not a fixed utopian vision. It is a living process, a way of human growth, that relies upon certain tested values that are worth conserving until such time as they interfere with the maintenance of an open society. We, as social studies educators, bear the essential responsibility to assist our students in both internalizing these values and reconsidering them in light of the best available evidence.

An Essential Aim

The importance of a common element and foundational philosophy leads to the need for an essential aim for social studies education. Without an aim that envisions the promotion of a democratic society, social studies education would remain an ancillary and confused element of the curriculum. There would be no reason for the social studies to exist because it could not contribute to our students' need to develop a socio-philosophical orientation toward life in a democracy.

The philosophical approach that is most important to fulfilling citizenship development implies the aim of teaching and learning in a democratic atmosphere. Born for the progressive education movement, the democratically-oriented school offers students the opportunity to share in decision making—an essential component of democratic citizenship—with true conviction. Helping students to develop a sense of citizenship would involve the essential practice of democracy in school. This sort of practice would be a prelude to and reinforcement of their responsibilities and rights as citizens.

Studies by Langton and Jennings (1968) and Remy (1972) established long ago that philosophically bankrupt approaches to social studies education fail at the aim of developing the attitudes and knowledge attributed normally to democratic citizenship. Examples of schools that have taken seriously the idea of inclusive democratic practice in school governance can be found in the cases of Brookline High School in Massachusetts and Hanover High School in New Hampshire (Mosher, Kenny, & Garrod, 1994) and Harmony School in Indiana (Goodman, 1992). These cases support the earlier findings of Hepburn's (1983) research in schools and

classrooms based on a democratic philosophy of education. She concluded that "...democratic experiences in the school and the classroom can contribute to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to democratic citizenship" (p.24). The aim of establishing democratic schools and classrooms appears critical to fulfilling the democratic philosophy implied by the common element of citizenship that runs throughout our definitions of social studies education.

Conclusion

The shooting that launched my ongoing reflection on the essential nature of the social studies may have been prevented if these two students had understood that people are members of, not prisoners in, a democratic society. Imprisoned by their gang allegiance and unable to reason through their gang affiliations and ensuing actions in a reflective, personal way brought about the death of one and the incarceration of the other. As social studies teachers, we need to rethink continuously the essential nature of our task. However, we must constantly remind ourselves that free people only on occasion reach consensus, and, in the final analysis, individuals in a liberal democracy decide upon and must take responsibility for their actions. If we agree on a common element with a foundational philosophy and essential aim based on the democratic ideal, then we can say without reservation that social studies education is essential to the life of the child. By proceeding in this light, we can lay claim to the most essential responsibility in all of education: nurturing thoughtful, reflective democratic citizens.

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Biography

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