

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE: SOCIAL STUDIES LEFT BEHIND

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Social studies gave her something to read about, something to think about, something to capture her imagination. That is worth celebrating.

“**W**e don’t have time for social studies. The emphasis needs to be math. Math is what is important here.” This is a quote a fellow teacher of mine said during a meeting shortly after our school year ended. And although it sounds horrific to the ears of any social studies teacher, it isn’t entirely her fault. She was simply doing what she was “supposed” to do; teach to the TAKS test.

When you teach in Texas you teach to the TAKS test. And in third grade, in Texas, math supersedes social studies and the like. It is as if the TAKS committee says “sorry social studies, go sit in the corner. You wait your turn.” To me this doesn’t make a lot of sense. Should tests define the curriculum? Are teachers supposed to emphasize certain subjects over others based on a test? If a chef was making dinner for a party of fifteen would she bring out the “main dish” and serve the rest of the food later in the evening or not serve it at all? It’s doubtful. Rather, the chef would serve the meal all at once or in a logical order with every menu item included. First the salad would be served, then the main course followed by dessert.

Teaching should work in much the same way. Students should be “served” a wide variety of foods including all the food groups. Not just one or two of them. And although students might prefer one over another, a balanced diet is important to human growth and development. When applied to education, each subject is equally important for the growth of the “whole student.”

I must admit, this teacher’s comment at our meeting made me think. I wondered, when was social studies placed on the back burner? When did writing become more important than reading a map? Further why was this teacher telling me math was more important than social studies while she was wearing a shirt displaying a map of the world? That seemed a bit hypocritical. However, it also illustrated an important point. Social studies is still “on the plate” even when we don’t recognize it. Without even realizing it, this

teacher was teaching social studies. Just because she put more conscious focus on math, social studies was still being taught. Social studies, whether it appears on the menu, is rendered invisible by curricular integration, or is ignored completely, is always present in the classroom. So it's time we consciously provide a balanced curricular diet.

Because social studies includes, economics, geography, history, government, psychology, sociology, culture, and the like, it can't be avoided even when curriculum directors and those writing the accountability tests look past it. For example, every time teachers work on classroom community whether they are conscious of it or not, they are teaching social studies. It is in social studies that students learn good citizenship, critical thinking skills, problem solving, conservation, and the ability to learn from the past. Without social studies there is very little left for students to read or write about. Every functioning school works to reinforce social relationships and citizenship skills. If social studies is so omnipresent, why don't policy makers and curriculum leaders compel teachers to invite social studies back to the table consciously and intentionally?

I recently interviewed a second grade girl asking her whether or not social studies was important to her. She said, "Yes, most definitely. I love social studies! Without social studies we wouldn't have history. And without history we wouldn't know anything about Egyptians. And Egyptians are cool! I like their jewelry, their pyramids, and learning about how they survived."

While she identified her love for the Egyptian culture, more importantly, she was clearly developing a love for learning. Social studies gave her something to read about, something to think about, something to capture her imagination. That is worth celebrating. Social studies can develop a love of learning that will last a lifetime. Let's put social studies back on the menu.

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