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# Shrink and squeeze: today's teaching pressures and its effect on teaching social studies

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SHRINK AND SQUEEZE: TODAY'S TEACHING  
PRESSURES AND ITS EFFECT ON TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES

A Thesis Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation of  
University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa  
May 2017

This study by: Alyssa McKeone

Entitled: Shrink and Squeeze: Today's Teaching Pressures and Its Effect on Teaching Social Studies

Has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirements for the Designation University Honors

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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Dr. Sarah Montgomery, Honors Thesis Advisor

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Date

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Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

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## Abstract

Social studies education is one of the four core subjects taught to students in elementary schools. Teaching social studies provides students with the content knowledge and ways of thinking to allow them to be participating members in their communities. Although there are many skills students learn from social studies, due to federal legislation starting with No Child Left Behind, social studies has been put on the back burner while math and reading take the forefront. The goal of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers regarding their social studies teaching. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with veteran teachers about their current approach to teaching social studies and changes they have made given the increasing marginalization of this subject area. Major themes related to social studies in fifth grade classes included a lack of emphasis on social studies, reduced instructional time, a changed instructional approach, gaps in student learning, a changed teaching response, and increased teacher advocacy.

## **Introduction**

The initial purpose of this research was to determine how social studies teaching has changed as more high stakes testing has been implemented in PreK-12 classrooms. The goal of social studies is described as, "...content [that] engages students in a comprehensive process of confronting multiple dilemmas, and encourages students to speculate, think critically, and make personal and civic decisions on information from multiple perspectives" (National Council for Social Studies, 2016). It is clear social studies is important for students to learn with so many different components listed in the National Council for Social Studies position statement. Not only is social studies important in the content that is taught, but it also is important for the life skills that are developed such as thinking of topics from multiple perspectives.

Although social studies has many benefits, education policymakers have more recently pushed for increased emphasis on literacy for in the United States large percentages of students are not considered proficient in literacy. In 2000 (before No Child Left Behind began) the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reported 41% of fourth grade students were below proficient in literacy. With a large portion of students not being proficient in literacy, improvement was needed moving forward. In 2015, the NAEP reported a slight improvement for fourth grade literacy with only 31% of students below the literacy proficiency level. Although being able to read is essential in learning the content of the other core subjects, time still needs to be spent on these other core subjects such as social studies so students are developing content knowledge.

## **Purpose**

Given the reduced emphasis of social studies in both national and local contexts, the purpose of the study was to explore the impact of the marginalization of social studies. During

the study fifth and sixth grade veteran elementary teachers were interviewed to understand how teaching social studies has changed over the last couple of decades. Questions were asked pertaining to the time spent on teaching social studies in the past and present, teaching methods used to teach the content, the specific content that is covered, and whether there were professional development opportunities for teachers to attend pertaining to social studies. These questions provided insight on teachers' past and current social studies teaching practices (See Appendix A). In addition, since the interviews were semi-structured, teachers also had the opportunity to give any thoughts they had on social studies education that were not directly asked about throughout the interview.

## **Literature Review**

### **No Child Left Behind**

With federal legislation starting with No Child Left Behind, school districts have been developing standards for math, science and reading (US Department of Education, 2005). With so many standards to teach, there is not enough time to teach everything. This creates a dilemma for elementary teachers described as, "...an instructional-decision-making dilemma—what to teach and what not to teach?" (Fitchett, Heafner & Lambert, 2014, p. 41). This push away from some content areas in order to focus on other subjects in more depth creates a schedule where more time is allocated to certain subjects. Time during the day is then distributed unequally among the four subjects.

The time spent on each subject often has a relationship to what subjects are emphasized on the standardized tests. If a subject is heavily tested, it makes sense to some teachers that during the school year more time would be spent on those tested subjects. As Fitchett, Heafner & Lambert (2014) write, "...teachers working in low socioeconomic schools and classrooms spend

minimal time on social studies; fearing that their students need greater remediation time in tested subjects like math and ELA (English Language Arts” (p. 45). Clearly this is an imbalance between the instructional time spent on various subjects. A study done by the Center on Educational Policy (2008) found that, “. . .more than half of these (53%) of these districts cut instructional time by at least 75 minutes per week in social studies” (p. 1). This extreme reduction in social studies teaching limits students’ exposure to content. It is even more troublesome to know social studies has decreased greatly in low income schools where students often have limited experiences with their families going to museums, experiencing historical sites, or learning more local and national geography via travel experiences. This creates a situation in the United States where low income schools are not teaching social studies while other schools are providing educational experiences including social studies, resulting in educational disparity. Reduced time for social studies education, especially in low income communities promotes inequity and limited exposure to the world.

### **Teacher Preparation**

The duration of social studies occurring in a classroom is also influenced by the teacher’s own social studies education background. Oftentimes in teacher preparation programs social studies is not taught in depth. Consequently, in the classroom teachers do not have the information to teach students the content they should be taught.

Current preservice teachers are also the first set of teachers to have experienced the reduced social studies time because they grew up with the onset of the high stakes testing. With less social studies knowledge, it is more challenging to teach social studies content when the teacher has not learned about it as a student themselves. This idea is demonstrated by Lortie (1975) who founded the idea of the “apprenticeship of observation.” This is explained to mean,



“Students spend thousands of hours developing perceptions of teaching and teachers and thus harbor deep-seated notions on the nature of academic content, the structure of pedagogy, and what constitutes teaching practice” (Boyd, Gorham, Justice & Anderson, 2013, p. 2). If a teacher candidate has gone to college with the perception social studies is not very important, this thought of unimportance may transfer to this person’s own future students. As Lortie (1975) explained, by college graduates having grown up watching their own teachers teach, perceptions on what teaching is comprised of as well as their teachers’ attitudes toward social studies will influence their own perceptions. If these perceptions of social studies are negative, it may be difficult to transform the teacher candidate’s opinion solely through a college teacher preparation program. This then begins a cycle of students not seeing social studies in a positive view when in fact it is important part of daily life.

### **Increased Time Teaching Literacy and Math**

Starting in 2001 with the No Child Left Behind federal legislation, schools began to spend more time administering standardized tests to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), resulting in less time to teach the content areas of science and social studies (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008, p. 234). Within the four content areas (literacy, math, science and social studies) literacy has been a main focus of teaching because of the emphasis of literacy-related skills on standardized tests. To accommodate for the increased time needed for literacy, a report from the Center on Educational Policy stated, “About 62% of districts reported that they have increased time for English language arts (ELA) and/or math in elementary schools since school year 2001-02” (McMurrer, 2007, p. 1). This increase in instructional time for literacy becomes problematic when so much time is taken away from science and social studies. The report by Center on Educational Policy also noted, “the decreases

reported by these districts were relatively large, adding up to a total of 145 minutes per week across all of these subjects” (McMurrer, 2007, p. 1). The finding illustrates the idea students are spending more time on literacy than any other subject. In the same study, a school considered in need of improvement by federal measures reported weekly 568 minutes were spent on literacy while only 167 minutes on social studies (McMurrer, 2007, p. 1). This equates to literacy being taught three times more than the time allocated to social studies.

### **Interdisciplinary Curriculum**

While some schools reduce time for social studies or even eliminate it from their curriculum, other schools or teachers are using an interdisciplinary approach allowing them to continue teaching social studies. With this instructional strategy teachers combine aspects from multiple subject areas during one activity. The National Council for Social Studies described the importance of interdisciplinary teaching and said, “With a strong interdisciplinary curriculum, teachers find ways to promote children’s competence in social sciences, literacy, mathematics, and other subjects” (Berson, Bennett, & Dobson, 2009, para. 14). Not only can social studies be combined with literacy, but it can be incorporated into all subject areas creating an interdisciplinary approach. One benefit of having such a long literacy time is multiple subjects can be taught at once allowing social studies to continue to be taught.

One example of a teacher who used an interdisciplinary approach was an Iowa elementary teacher named Jessica Staudt. As described in Montgomery, Christie & Staudt (2014) Staudt created a research unit she taught during reading workshop where students learned about both past and present day women who made change. Throughout the unit some of the main focuses were students did research on various women, created presentations using technology and made connections among the women studied. With literacy being combined with social

studies during this unit, Staudt mentioned students learned many valuable lessons and explained, “They knew from the little I had told them that these were incredible ladies who were doing great things. So why couldn’t they find anything about them? Even the local newspaper didn’t have much to say about any of the women. My kids got mad” (Montgomery, Christie & Staudt, 2014, p. 12). With such a research emphasis, students were able to examine the available resources and form their own opinions on ladies in history as well as examine available sources. This unit raised emotions and made students think critically. The logical connection made between teaching students literacy skills through a social studies topic is easily created at many grade levels as Staudt did.

### **Literacy-Integrated Approach**

Literacy-integrated social studies is another approach being used in schools to combat the marginalization of social studies. In a literacy-integrated approach to social studies the books and inquiry projects are related to social studies. These books may be books students are reading individually or the book may be read by multiple students.

One way teachers can integrate literacy is by using a read aloud approach. Agarwal-Rangnath (2013) explained a benefit of the method and said, “teachers do not use a read-aloud simply to build comprehension in their students, but alternatively use the read-aloud to build a continuous development of issues related to power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships” (p. 6). By teachers thinking carefully about the takeaways they want students to have with a specific book, class discussion questions can be structured allowing students to learn about topics in social studies in depth. This helps students to develop critical thinking skills allowing them to look deep into what is happening in a book.

## **Time Set Aside**

With so many strategies to teach social studies, it is important to have social studies as part of the curriculum. The National Council for Social Studies advocates for, “A specific daily block of time should be allocated for elementary social studies equivalent to that provided for other core content” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2009; 2016, para. 24). This means a time should be set for each subject and the social studies time should be the *same* amount of time as the other subject areas. By spending the same amount of time on each subject, students are exposed to each subject equally allowing students to learn a variety of content. In addition, during this learning time the teacher should, “design learning events that challenge students to make meaningful connections and expand their knowledge and viewpoints” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2009; 2016, para. 10). Students should learn new ways of looking at events while also learning more information.

## **C3 Framework**

One way of structuring social studies lessons is by following the National Council for Social Studies recommendation of using the C3 Framework. It originated keeping in mind the short amount of time teachers have to teach social studies as well as the need for students to learn content knowledge in multiple ways (National Council for Social Studies, 2013). It was heavily supported through states as well as national organizations and was developed by people known to be leaders in the area of social studies education (National Council for Social Studies, 2013). The large amount of people who supported this project helps to show states how important and useful such an addition to a curriculum can be.

The three C’s stand for “college, career and civic life” (National Council for Social Studies, 2013, p. 5). Not only should students be prepared with social studies skills for college,

but they should be prepared for all of life after high school. With the C3 Framework, students are learning how to think about what is happening in the world around them by analyzing crucial factors such as asking particular questions to understand the validity of information they are told, hear, or read to make a claim about ideas they learn.

Another component of the C3 Framework is the Inquiry Arc. The Inquiry Arc further strengthens students' thought processes and is described by, "...focusing on inquiry, the framework emphasizes the disciplinary concepts and practices that support students as they develop the capacity to know, analyze, explain, and argue about interdisciplinary challenges in our social world" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. 6). This C3 framework is easy to utilize in any classroom because of its universality. The framework is not saying what content to teach but rather it describes the accompanying thought provoking ideas students should be going through while learning content.

This framework serves as an example of a way to improve each state's social studies curriculum (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Within this framework students decide what they are going to study, apply the topic, find information related to the topic's questions deciding which sources are reliable and finally present the information to others (National Council for Social Studies, 2013). By allowing students to lead their own project on what they learn in a unit, students feel motivated to work on the project because they have made choices on what they want to learn. An added benefit is literacy is heavily integrated into these projects. When looking at the Inquiry Arc people can see literacy standards are paired with inquiry ideas.

## **Lack of Professional Development**

Although the lack of time to teach social studies is a serious concern, there is little being done. Teachers are given few to no social studies professional development opportunities and do not collaborate with other social studies teachers. A recent state-wide report done by the Iowa Department of Education about the status of social studies in Iowa (2015) stated, “ongoing professional development is integral to support teachers in implementing the Iowa Core and continually improving teacher instruction in order to improve student learning” (p.19). When a teacher is using the same teaching strategies year after year there are no new ideas being used and this is halting student improvement. The same study reported, “...less than one in five elementary teachers (12.9%) reported they had access to social studies professional development” (p.19). With the majority of elementary teachers not having professional development in this subject, teachers may feel the subject has little value and may begin to focus on spending time on subjects they have received professional development in. In addition, with little professional development teachers are not able to learn new teaching strategies to help students learn content.

This lack of social studies learning among teachers is not just problematic once someone has been teaching, but even *before* a teacher becomes a certified teacher. In one study done with preservice teachers, 14 out of 21 preservice educators did not have enough knowledge about social justice to be prepared to promote or teach the idea in a classroom (Fry & O’Brien, 2015, p. 405). Social justice is a large part of social studies and to have such misunderstandings as a teacher is problematic because the teacher will not understand how to teach an essential part of social studies.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of doing this research study was to learn how teachers have adapted to teaching social studies in the classroom due to many different pressures they are faced with including high stakes testing and the emphasis on increasing reading and math scores. With an emphasis on reading and math, teachers are spending less time on social studies. The changes in teaching as well as effects on student social studies knowledge were researched. The main research questions for the study were:

1. How has social studies teaching changed since the focus on testing and standards has increased? How much time is spent teaching social studies?
2. How are teachers teaching social studies today? What approaches are they using?
3. How is technology being used to teach social studies?
4. What resources and support (i.e. professional development) are teachers given?
5. What might be the perceived impact of reduced time for social studies instruction upon students?

The research methods are described in detail in the following sections: Setting and Participants, Research Design, Data Collection, and Data Analysis.

### **Settings and Participants**

The participants were selected by sending the Institutional Review Board approved email letter to teachers in the local area, starting by contacting educators via professional and personal networks. The email was sent to teachers that were thought to teach social studies for part of the day. Eight teachers were sent emails. Three teachers replied they would participate in an

interview, two said they did not actually teach social studies, one replied he did not want to participate and two did not respond at all.

The first teacher interviewed named Ms. Baker has been teaching sixth grade for 32 years, including social studies every year along with other content. In the past Ms. Baker taught social studies in a self-contained setting, but in more recent years she has had multiple classes of students rotate to her during the day. She teaches at a mid-sized, suburban school district with 85.27% of students being Caucasian and 4.28% of students being African American during the 2015-2016 school year (Iowa Department of Education). Her school has the School in Need of Assistance (SINA) designation for the 16-17 school year (Iowa Department of Education, 2015).

The second teacher named Ms. Cook has been teaching fifth grade for seven years and has taught for a total of 18 years. While teaching fifth grade Ms. Cook has taught social studies every year. In previous years she rotated classes teaching social studies to multiple classes, but now she only teaches her own class. Her school district is a mid-sized, urban district with 32.95% of students being Caucasian and 31.53% of students being African American during the 2015-2016 school year (Iowa Department of Education). Her school has the School in Need of Assistance (SINA) designation for the 16-17 year as well as received Title I funding for the 12-13 year (Iowa Department of Education, 2013).

The third teacher, Mr. Williams has been teaching for 17 years. During his teaching career he has taught second, fourth, and fifth grades. When teaching second grade he took part in a special program where it was single gender classes. The program was discontinued after only a couple years. Currently, Mr. Williams teaches just his own class. The mid-sized, urban school district where Mr. Williams teaches has 56.58% Caucasian students and 20.53% African American students during the 2015-2016 school year (Iowa Department of Education). His



school has the School in Need of Assistance (SINA) designation for the 16-17 academic year (Iowa Department of Education, 2015). The school also receives Title I funding as of the 2012-2013 year (Iowa Department of Education, 2013).

### **Research Design**

The research design consisted of semi-structured interviews (Myers & Newman, 2007). Questions asked during the interview came from the interview protocol in Appendix A. By using this protocol, all research questions were answered and could be analyzed after the interviews. In addition to the questions asked, interviewees were also able to add any comments they wanted at the end of the interview. The researcher at times asked clarifying questions to be sure each teacher's' perspective was captured. The initial purpose of this research was to determine how social studies teaching has changed as more high stakes testing has been implemented in PreK-12 classrooms. By learning what current social studies education practices are like, suggestions can be offered to help teachers in continuing to teaching social studies.

### **Data Collection**

The study received IRB Human Subjects Approval allowing interviews to be used as data collection. The interviews took place with the researcher and the teacher at the place of choosing by each teacher. All teachers chose to do their interview in their own classroom. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and a half with the questions being asked in the Interview Protocol in Appendix A. The participants signed a paper giving written consent to be part of this study. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then deleted after the transcription was complete. Once the thesis began to be written, pseudonyms were then used for each teacher to allow privacy for each participant.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis began once all three interviews were done. The transcripts were carefully read and analyzed with different colored pens representing different emerging themes. The constant comparative method was used to identify these thematic categories (Glesne, 2006). After doing the first transcription, these emerging themes were then used as a lens to analyze the other two transcribed interviews. In doing so, the overall themes were challenged and redefined. The overall themes that emerged among all transcriptions were the teacher's enthusiasm for social studies, a lack of the curriculum's emphasis on social studies, reduced time for social studies, a changed instructional approach, gaps in student learning, a response to the reduced time for social studies and teacher advocacy to keep teaching social studies. These themes are explained in the Findings section below.

## **Findings**

### **Teacher's Enthusiasm**

To begin with, the three teachers interviewed showed their excitement for social studies education by agreeing to be interviewed. With one out of eight of the teachers initially emailing simply stating that "no" he did not want to participate and another two not responding, a signal was raised teachers may be too overburdened with other teaching tasks or simply did not want to discuss social studies education. With the responses from the three teachers who did respond agreeing to do the interview, their passion for social studies was shown along with their elaborate answers to the interview questions.

Once the interviews began all three teachers made it evident again they loved social studies. They stated their love for the subject with Ms. Cook saying, "I love social studies" (Interview, 2/13/17). Ms. Baker also displayed her enthusiasm for the subject also saying, "I do

love social studies...I've learned so much about it and I think I would prefer to teach it over science or writing" (Interview, 2/9/17). She became visibly excited when discussing a simulation game she used to teach about the Egyptian culture. She said, "It was really awesome. I had four, or five I guess, big board games" (Interview, 2/9/17). Not only did Ms. Baker like to explain her activities, but Ms. Cook did too. It was clear not only did their students enjoy being taught social studies, but Ms. Baker and Ms. Cook enjoy teaching it. While the first two teachers conveyed their love of social studies through how they teach it or stating their love, Mr. Williams was different in he showed his love of social studies through his own education background. He explicitly highlighted early in this interview his degree included an "emphasis in social studies." With the focus of social studies in college, Mr. Williams was able to learn more about social studies content which he could use in teaching his students.

### **Lack of Emphasis**

With the majority of standardized tests focusing primarily on literacy and math, this translates to the emphasis in classroom instruction centering on literacy and math (Center on Education Policy, 2008, p. 1). One approach school administrators are using is to alternate science and social studies. In Mr. William's and Ms. Cook's school district science is taught for nine weeks and then social studies is taught for nine weeks. The subjects alternate throughout the entire school year. Although this does allow a teacher to focus more in depth on just one of these two subjects, it still shows the push administrators are facing with spending so much of the day on math and literacy. In Ms. Baker's school district administrators have allowed more time to be devoted to social studies although that could change in the future. Currently, social studies is taught every day for about 45 minutes in her school district.

In addition to the lack of emphasis shown for social studies through the small pockets of time given to the subject, there is no professional development known to the three teachers interviewed. When Ms. Baker was asked about any available social studies professional development she stated, “nope, I have not seen anything come out about that kind of thing” (Interview, 2/9/17). With no social study professional development time available for decades, teachers are not able to learn new teaching strategies to adapt to the changing literacy and math push while maintaining a strong social studies curriculum. With all three teachers focusing on United States’ history, the job of creating professional development opportunities would be more feasible for fifth and sixth grade if solely United States’ history is taught. Ms. Baker explained her district has no social studies meetings saying, “Our district has not told us to put it off to the side, but I do think that they have de-emphasized it a little bit because of science, math and reading. They’ve been having more committee meeting with the other ones than they have been having with social studies. I haven’t seen a social studies committee meeting in years” (Interview, 2/9/17).

At the state-level there has been talk of publishing new social standards but none of the teachers interviewed knew much in depth information about this. Ms. Cook discussed that the state may not put out the new standards saying, “...who needs social studies, anyways, right? If you don’t teach kids their social studies think how ignorant they could be. They would be so much easier to handle” (Interview, 2/13/17). Ms. Cook sums up exactly what would happen if social studies was not taught anymore. Students would be losing thinking skills that are developed in social studies such as thinking critically and looking at ideas from multiple perspectives.

## **Reduced Time**

With such little time for social studies, it makes it difficult to teach much content or do extended inquiry projects. During this school year Ms. Baker stated, “we usually schedule it for 45 minutes four times a week” (Interview, 2/9/17). Next year, though, Ms. Baker explained social studies will only be for about 30 minutes four times a week. As previously stated Mr. William’s and Ms. Cook’s school district does a rotation of nine weeks with social studies and then science for the same amount of time. Even with that rotation students are only doing social studies 45 minutes four or five days a week then every nine weeks.

With the reduced time comes changed instructional approaches. Teachers must face the decision whether to teach meaningful activities and take more time or to take out the activities and teach solely the content. Although there is a middle ground with a balance of activities and content, many activities done in the past just do not fit into the rigid schedules schools have today based on the interview data from this study as will be shared in the following section.

## **Changed Instructional Approach**

From the interviews it became apparent how teachers are teaching social studies is different than before high stakes testing became important. With each of the teachers interviewed having taught for two or three decades they were able to give a good picture of how their teaching practices have changed with limited time devoted to social studies. In addition, with such a rigid schedule, there was very little time to extend the social studies time.

Previous to the high stakes testing two of the teachers mentioned simulations they did to give students an idea of what life was like in the past. Ms. Cook explained what teaching was in the past saying, “well over the years we were able to do things, there was a lot more freedom” (Interview, 2/13/17). With more freedom, teachers have a chance to do hands on activities with

students. One day Ms. Cook described a day where students learned how to get goods saying, “We made butter. Sometimes stew. They were busy. But really that gives them an idea of what, you know today you walk to the store and get a loaf of bread” (Interview, 2/13/17). While students cannot physically be taken back in time, this allows for a simulation for students to understand what everyday life was like for someone. Another example of a simulation was done by Ms. Baker when she taught westward movement. She described this simulation as, “...kids were moving West and had to buy property. As they bought property, they had to sell it, name it. Some people could sell it and other people could buy it” (Interview, 2/9/17). A simulation Ms. Baker shared occurred during a chuck wagon unit. She explained, “we would bring in and always cook cow tongue so that the kids all got a chance to taste cow tongue...someone would always bring in rice pudding and raisins because that was something they could always take on the trail with them that would keep and wouldn’t spoil” (Interview, 2/9/17). With these simulations, it is clear that the activities are hands on and engaging but also take much more time than simply reading out of a textbook.

Although social studies was described as being hands-on in the past, it is shifting away from that. All three teachers mentioned their textbook is a valuable resource they use with students. Mr. Williams explained, “...we use the book and go through it and take chapter by chapter, lesson by lesson. We try to do a lesson a day” (Interview, 3/9/17). This approach to learning social studies is much different than the hands-on approach that the teachers described doing in the past. In addition, as Mr. Williams explained there is a rigid schedule with trying to do a lesson a day.

Not only are textbooks heavily used now, but literacy is also heavily incorporated too. Ms. Cook explained literacy put with social studies as, “...it’s kind of like your social studies is

laid out and then you're reading and writing is supposed to be intertwined in there and we have noticed that that seems to work better for the younger grades because they don't have such big times..." (Interview, 2/13/17). Ms. Cook pointed out with her students who are in the upper elementary grades it is difficult to have writing mixed into a time period that is so large as opposed to the smaller time periods in the younger grades. Despite Ms. Cook not being a large proponent of the writing program, she did like the reading skills built into the readings. She explained her enthusiasm for the social studies textbook as a resource that could lead literacy teaching saying, "I finally went to a reading coach one day and I said have you ever taken a look at one of these? Absolutely every skill and strategy that fifth graders need to know is there built right into the lesson" (Interview, 2/13/17). Even though textbook related assignments may not be as engaging as a project-based approach, it is key to note that the teacher believes that the social studies textbook is of high quality and supports literacy standards.

In addition to using the textbook to teach social studies, teachers also mentioned how they use children's literature to explain stories that happened in history. Ms. Baker explained students used to read novels set during World War II and then create newspapers related to their novels. Mr. Williams explained he recently read the book *Pink and Say* by Patricia Polacco to his class to describe a story that took place during World War II. He explained his students showed emotion during the book explaining his students' reactions as, "they were really upset when Mo Mo Bay got killed" (Interview, 3/9/17). Children's literature can support student engagement and empathy, as well as build historical content knowledge, as shown with *Pink and Say*.

Another approach is technology integration. Since technology is such a large part of many students' lives today this raises engagement when students use technology at school while also allowing the content to be presented. One thing that Mr. Williams does is he has students do

a quiz like game that is connected to the textbook students use. He explained students' reactions as, the technology "...peaks their interest" (Interview, 3/9/17). By allowing students to use technology, he is supporting student engagement with the content.

Another way technology is integrated through social studies is through current events. This allows students to learn about present day events in addition to learning about the past from their textbooks. Ms. Baker explained, "We do a lot of current events and we watch CNN Student News which is a current event show" (Interview, 2/9/17). With limited time to teach about present day issues, students are able to see clips of what is happening now in informative videos. Ms. Cook also explained her class did something similar with students watching Channel One News. Although there were not any long projects involving technology described by any of the teachers, news clips or online quizzes were used.

### **Gaps in Knowledge**

Because of the reduced time spent on social studies, students are facing gaps in their social studies knowledge. These are not just small gaps such as the specific dates of when events happened, but are major missing pieces. One of these pieces all teachers shared is geography knowledge. Mr. Williams explained, "...they may not know what a region is or the difference between a state and city, a country" (Interview, 3/13/17). Geography and a knowledge of time are the basis of understanding social studies because that is how students know where and when events were happening so that they can know why something happened. Ms. Baker described her students' geography knowledge as, "...huge, huge holes. I start the year with a geography unit to just kind of give them a base so that they can understand the Civil War and where the mountains are. They don't know where the Rockies and Appalachian Mountains are" (Interview, 2/9/17). Another geography misconception Ms. Baker has heard is, "...I did have a girl tell me that she



was so surprised that we got the Statue of Liberty from another country and that they put it in the New York Harbor. She thought they put it in California...she had absolutely no idea where California was versus New York” (Interview, 2/9/17). As Ms. Baker described it is very important students know some of the physical features of the area near the Civil War to better understand how the land structure impacted war events. These gaps in location knowledge create an issue with students not having sufficient social studies background knowledge for later grades.

Another misconception Mr. Williams has seen is understanding the difference in time of when slavery occurred and when Martin Luther King Jr. was alive. Mr. Williams described the issue saying, “...they can’t make that distinction between Martin Luther King and slavery. He was living during that time period. He was a black man so naturally they just can’t understand the time period” (Interview, 3/9/17). Ms. Cook has had similar encounters with students and she exclaimed, “I cannot believe [the students] got to the fifth grade without these pieces of information...” (Interview, 2/13/17). Although teachers like Ms. Cook are surprised and concerned for students, it is important to recognize the misunderstandings at the beginning of each unit so that misunderstandings are not perpetuated further.

Consequently, teachers are needing to back up and teach crucial information like geography. Mr. Williams described gaps in social studies knowledge and said, “When it’s piecemeal you get a little bit of that, a little bit of that...” (Interview, 3/9/17). Just as Mr. Williams said knowledge is trying to be pieced together in students’ heads, new information may fit with students’ knowledge base, or it may not depending on what students have previously learned during limited social studies instruction time.

## **Changed Response**

By having less time to teach social studies, teachers are realizing they must change their response to teaching. Teachers have dealt with this in various ways. All of the teachers interviewed try their best to incorporate social studies as much as they can, but with less time some projects done in the past are not feasible given current time constraints.

As previously mentioned, one technique school administrators have been pushing lately is literacy integration. With this method, teachers use social studies topics to do writing pieces or skills. Mr Williams mentioned one way he uses the Scholastic News magazine students read saying, “We usually go over vocabulary words. They’re words that bold print in the edition” (Interview, 3/9/17). This is one way of using a literacy skill of knowing what words mean to help students better understand the stories they read instead of becoming confused as they read. A way that Ms. Baker incorporated literacy was through a cause and effect writing that also discussed primary and secondary sources as well as how to know if a source is credible. By making logical connections between literacy and social studies, students can realize the interconnectedness of the world.

Although this can be a good idea to do a two in one approach with social studies and literacy it does have its limitations. By doing so much writing in social studies, students may not enjoy the social studies as much. Ms. Cook described an issue she has been noticing as, “...to keep reading little stories about the Revolutionary War and writing papers about the Revolutionary War for that length of time. Kids get really irritated with it” (Interview 2/13/17). Although it is a good idea in hindsight to integrate literacy into social studies, it can take away the enjoyment of simply learning the social studies content.

Another literacy-integration approach all of the teachers discussed in the interviews centered on their teaching about current events. All three teachers noted how they think it is important to teach about current events and how their students want to discuss current events. Also, this is a way to bring together the latest news by using technology along with paper magazines.

All of the teachers mentioned they use Scholastic News or some type of current event magazine with their students. These are short magazines teachers receive in the mail each week with highlighted new stories. Ms. Cook mentioned that not only are students excited to read these magazines, but parents are too. She says, "...the parents like these, I've had parents ask if there are any more of these that they can take home" (Interview, 2/13/17). With not only students liking current events, but parents too, it is clear social studies is a topic parents enjoy too. Mr. Williams even takes the current week's issue a step further with going to the digital version of the magazine. This allows students to see videos expanding their knowledge from what is in the magazine

### **Teacher Advocacy**

Although it can seem as though there are many barriers to teaching social studies, the teachers interviewed all had ways of advocating for social studies. With Ms. Cook it was clear that not only does she care about social studies, but her students care too. When describing the field trips students go on she explained, "...you must know that we fight very hard at this building to have those things, and we are very fortunate" (Interview, 2/13/17). By having strong advocates like Ms. Cook, students can still learn about the many facets of social studies that are not just important for a knowledge base but are important to knowing how to look at situations in the world today.

One teacher that stood out during the interviews was Ms. Cook. From her interview it was clear she was not backing down from teaching social studies in engaging and dynamic ways. Some of the activities she continues to do are day-long field trips, a King's Court simulation teaching students about unfair taxes and having guest speakers play the role of historical figures. One of the day long field trips is to Fort Atkinson. Ms. Cook described the experience as, "...there are teepees [they] let you go in....they'll let the kids come in and explain different things to them. They can buy different foods, like the fried bread. I was surprised last year, kids bought things like squirrel stew and things I thought they'd never try" (Interview, 2/13/17). It is clear students learn many things and get to have an experience similar to a primary experience of actually being at the fort when it was in use.

Another way Ms. Cook showed strong social studies teaching was through teaching students to question their previous knowledge. One way she teaches students to take into account new knowledge is through the story of Christopher Columbus. Her instructional approach is described as, "...you know you're all excited this day because this is Christopher Columbus and he discovered America and this is this wonderful thing and then you get the side of well this is what happened to the native people" (Interview, 2/13/17). By explaining to students the multiple perspectives of a situation, students build critical thinking skills.

Not only do students learn the skill of critical thinking, but she also teaches students their Constitutional rights. With many of Ms. Cook's students coming from a city with a long history of conflict between law enforcement and local citizens, Ms. Cook wants students to be informed of what they can do if law enforcement approaches them. She explains this to students as, "you do have to give your name but they do not have the right to search pockets and you don't have to

let them into your house” (Interview, 2/13/17). By Ms. Cook teaching such a wide variety of social studies content and skills, it is clear she teaches high quality social studies.

In addition, it is important to recognize the teachers interviewed are advocates in that they still teach social studies. There are schools that no longer teach social studies. Ms. Cook mentioned, “...there are buildings [in our district] that last year had no science or social studies at all” (Interview, 2/9/17). By not having either of these subjects this is incredibly problematic and is a disservice to students not just in their current grade, but then in future grades. Students who get years without social studies may have wider knowledge gaps and will not have covered material other students did learn. By having strong teachers who advocate for social studies, students learn the content and skills necessary for life.

### **Conclusions**

This project revealed the reduction in time given to social studies teaching. With less time, teachers use fewer hands-on projects and have discovered students have missing knowledge and misconceptions. Although, there is less time for social studies as compared to before No Child Left Behind, some social studies teachers have remained strong advocates to continue teaching social studies knowing the knowledge and skills taught during the subject are crucial as students go through life.

From the research done with the three teachers it is important that a next step is taken to create social studies professional development opportunities for teachers. As the State Report put out by the Iowa Department of Education (2015) explained, 12.9% of elementary teachers had social studies professional development opportunities to go to in the last three years (p. 19). When looking at the instructional approaches teachers were using, textbooks were heavily relied on while technology integration was limited. A specific area of professional development should

discuss how to connect technology with social studies. If the state and administrators do not invest in social studies, this de-emphasis in social studies will become increasingly problematic.

From the three interviews conducted it was clear teachers are concerned about the future of social studies education. Mr. Williams said, “it’s on the back burner...” (Interview, 3/9/17). With the recognition that social studies as less important, teachers are noticing it is thought of as less important which means teachers are not getting the necessary supports to teach the subject. Ms. Cook explained one solution to give social studies more time is, “I think you need to take some reading and math away” (Interview, 2/13/17). With a balance of time spent among subjects, all are represented equally. In terms of support to teach social studies Ms. Baker said, “...we’re just getting by” (Interview, 2/9/17).

### **Future Research and Implications**

When doing this project veteran teachers shared what teaching social studies was like before No Child Left Behind began. By hearing these stories and documenting them a strong vision of a rich social studies curriculum can be kept alive. This shows all teachers that even when there may be challenges to teaching social studies in an engaging way, it is possible.

It is very important new teachers work with veteran teachers for ideas on teaching social studies. Ms. Cook demonstrated she was a strong advocate for her students to continue activities in class as well as going on field trips related to social studies. By learning from veteran teachers such as Ms. Cook, new teachers can gain valuable knowledge on teaching social studies.

With many current education majors in college having gone to school after No Child Left Behind, they may be missing content knowledge just as students today face the same issue. This is problematic with new teachers now being a product of the marginalization. These teachers will have gaps, misconceptions and will be missing content knowledge that was taught to students in

past decades. Lortie (1975) explained students have preconceived notions of what teaching is like. If they lacked social studies as students, they may teach little of it in their own classrooms under the belief that it is not a high priority.

In the future preservice teachers need to be given more assistance in preparation to teach social studies to students. This means more class time should be spent on teaching content knowledge to preservice teachers because it cannot be assumed they will have the knowledge to teach their students. Next, preservice teachers need to be given strategies to make the content knowledge interesting and engaging to elementary students. With this combination of content knowledge and teaching strategies, preservice teachers will be prepared to teach students the necessary content.

To further prepare elementary preservice teachers, faculty from all social studies related areas including elementary, secondary and professors teaching strictly history or geography content should come together and collaborate on an improved sequence of classes that preservice teachers take to ensure preservice teachers have the combination of content and pedagogy. This may mean entirely new classes that preservice teachers take or changing the current classes' content. An important first step would be determining what students do not know by doing a diagnostic test and then taking additional steps.

Once classes have been revised to better meet the needs of students, it is imperative that students' knowledge be assessed as they are going along in a course. If improvement is not shown, this must be examined so that changes are made in the class(es) to help students learn the content and teaching strategies. Although it may be a challenging task to change what is taught in classes, it is essential so that teachers are able to fully do their job and give students exposure to all content areas.

Overall, if people care about social studies, then changes must be made with a team of people working hard to improve teacher education programs. This is not a job that can just be done with one person because social studies touches on so many sub topics. Without social studies, students will not be informed people in society leading to many negative consequences. When a society is built upon having a voice, taking it away creates suppression.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

**\*Before beginning the interview, share the consent form and answer any questions. Make sure the participant provides written consent before starting the interview.**

1. Please first tell me about your professional work in relation to education and social studies.
2. How do you teach social studies? What resources and methods do you frequently use?
3. What are some social studies units or teaching examples that you are really proud of?
4. How much time do you typically teach social studies in a given week? What are some factors that impact that amount of time? Does this amount of time for social studies differ from previous years or decades of teaching for you?
5. Do you integrate literacy standards into your social studies teaching? How? Can you give some examples of what your approach to integration looks like?
6. Do you integrate technology into your social studies teaching? How do you use it? Can you give some examples?
7. How has your social studies teaching changed in the last decade? Can you describe some approaches and units you did previously compared to what you are doing now? What do you sense has prompted you to make these changes? How do you feel about these changes?
8. How prepared do you think your students are in the social studies subjects when they start the year with you? Do you notice differences in student preparedness in the past decade in the social studies subject areas? If so, how has this impacted your teaching?
9. Have you noticed that students are coming to you with gaps in their knowledge base or misconceptions about social studies content? If so, can you give some examples? How have you responded? Do you have any examples of when your students were surprised to learn something that they previously did not know or had misconceptions about in regards to social studies?
10. In what ways are you supported in teaching social studies? Are there opportunities for professional development or focus in this area? Have you been able to collaborate with other teachers or school librarians to support your social studies teaching?
11. What else would you like to share about this topic or related to this topic?