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THE MARGINALIZATION OF SOCIAL STUDIES INSTRUCTION IN U.S. ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

At a Glance

This Information Capsule addresses the marginalization of social studies instruction in the nation's elementary schools. The marginalization of elementary level social studies has been attributed primarily to its exclusion from high-stakes testing programs. Studies have found that schools are much more likely to teach tested subjects, such as language arts and mathematics, than untested subjects like social studies. The marginalization of social studies instruction has been especially apparent in low-performing schools with high proportions of low-income and minority students that are under intense pressure to raise test scores. Negative student outcomes linked to the reduction or elimination of social studies instruction from the elementary level curriculum are summarized in this report, including lower levels of literacy skills, less access to a variety of reading materials, and inability to catch up on social studies knowledge in the secondary grades.

Most educators agree that instruction in social studies is an essential part of the elementary curriculum. According to the National Council for the Social Studies (2009), "The purpose of elementary school social studies is to enable students to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world." Mastery of social studies content helps young students develop problem-solving and decision-making skills, enabling them to become knowledgeable, active, and responsible citizens (Fitchett, Heafner, & VanFossen, 2014; Babini, 2013; Kalaidis, 2013; Bogan et al., 2012; Ogle et al., 2007; Pace, 2007).

The Marginalization of Elementary Social Studies Instruction

Social studies instruction has been marginalized in most elementary schools and replaced by large blocks of reading and mathematics instruction throughout the school day (Curriculum Leadership Institute, 2015; Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014; Walker, 2014; Babini, 2013; Weaver, 2013; Bogan et al., 2012; Mack, 2010; National Council for the Social Studies, 2009).

Over 2,000 elementary school teachers in 44 states responded to the online *Survey on the Status of Social Studies*. Teachers reported that, on average, 14% of their core subject area instructional time was spent on social studies content. In comparison, English language arts and mathematics instruction received, on average, 44% and 28% of the core instructional time, respectively (Fitchett, Heafner, & VanFossen, 2014).

A survey of over 1,000 grades 3-12 public school teachers across the U.S. conducted by the Farkas Duffet Research (FDR) Group on behalf of Common Core (2011) found that among elementary teachers, 81% of those surveyed said that other academic subjects “get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts.” About half (51%) of elementary teachers said that struggling students receive extra help in language arts or mathematics by getting pulled out during instruction in other subjects, with the most likely subject for pullout being social studies.

Studies indicate that some educators do not view social studies as an important content area (Bogan et al., 2012; Passe, 2006). Elementary school teachers who responded to the *Survey on the Status of Social Studies* prioritized social studies as fourth of six in subject area importance - English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, art, and physical education (Fitchett, Heafner, & Van Fossen, 2014).

The exclusion of social studies content from most elementary level high-stakes tests has intensified its devaluation in elementary schools. Studies have found that schools are much more likely to teach tested subjects, such as language arts and mathematics, than untested subjects like social studies (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014; Walker, 2014; Weaver, 2013; Bogan et al., 2012; Brasof, 2012; Pace, 2012; Hinde et al., 2007). Babini (2013) stated, “A hierarchy of content subjects has been created due to mandated testing. On the top of this hierarchy sits the tested subject areas, and at the bottom, those not tested, including social studies.”

Studies have found that elementary schools in states that include social studies content on their high-stakes tests spend more time teaching social studies than schools in states that do not include social studies content on their tests (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014; Bogan et al., 2012). Data collected from elementary teachers who responded to the *Survey of the Status of Social Studies* found that teachers who lived in states that tested social studies devoted almost four percent more time to teaching social studies than teachers who lived in states without mandated social studies tests. Teachers in states with mandatory social studies tests spent, on average, seven minutes more per week on social studies instruction, the equivalent of over four extra hours of social studies instruction per school year (Fitchett, Heafner, & VanFossen, 2014).

Interestingly, results from the National Center for Education Statistics’ *Schools and Staffing Survey* of over 1,500 grades 3-5 teachers indicated that the type of social studies items included on standardized tests was not related to the amount of social studies instructional time students received. In other words, teachers reported that the inclusion of open-ended questions on state-mandated tests did not have a significant effect on the amount of time they spent teaching social studies content (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014).

Researchers caution that while mandated testing of elementary social studies may result in more instructional time for the subject, it does not necessarily produce more effective teaching and learning. In fact, several studies suggest that when states include social studies in high-stakes testing programs, instruction often consists primarily of repetitive exercises and rote instruction that are designed to prepare students for the test (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014; Weaver, 2013; Pace, 2012).

The National Council for the Social Studies (2009) noted, “As a result of educational practices steeped in the ‘teach to test’ phenomenon, teaching and learning are reduced to that which is necessary for students to do well on state tests rather than providing a well-rounded program to ready students for life as active citizens in the twenty-first century.”

Although the marginalization of elementary level social studies has been attributed primarily to its exclusion from high-stakes testing programs, other factors contributing to the reduction or elimination of social studies instruction have been identified, including:

- State and district mandates for the provision of special services and new curricula around issues such as bullying make it difficult to fit everything into the school day schedule (Babini, 2013).
- Deep budget cuts to instructional programs and personnel have contributed to a strong emphasis on reading and mathematics and a significant reduction in the time spent teaching other subject areas (Walker, 2014).
- Some studies have found that teacher preparation programs do not adequately address social studies content and skills. The result is that graduates feel uncomfortable teaching a social studies curriculum, especially when they are new to teaching (Babini, 2013; Bogan et al., 2012; Passe, 2006).

The marginalization of social studies instruction has been especially apparent in low-performing schools with high proportions of low-income and minority students that are under intense pressure to raise test scores. According to a survey of nationally representative school districts conducted by the Center on Education Policy, 36% of districts reported that they reduced time for elementary social studies instruction between 2001-2002 and 2006-2007. That percentage rose to 51% in districts with at least one school identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Similarly, school districts reported that they reduced the time spent on elementary social studies instruction by an average of 76 minutes per week from 2001-2002 to 2006-2007, compared to an average reduction of 90 minutes per week in districts with at least one school identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under NCLB (McMurren, 2007).

Researchers have concluded that the negative consequences of reducing or eliminating social studies instruction are even greater for low-income elementary students, and can lead to a widening of the achievement gap. This is because higher-income students have alternative ways of gaining world knowledge, such as vacations and visits to museums and other cultural settings. In contrast, low-income students rely on their schools to provide them with knowledge about the world outside of their neighborhoods (Walker, 2014; Kalaidis, 2013; Pace, 2012; Jerald, 2006).

Consequences of Reducing or Eliminating Social Studies Instruction

Researchers have identified serious negative consequences related to the reduction or elimination of social studies instruction from the elementary level curriculum:

- Some researchers blame students' low scores on middle grades social studies exams on their lack of exposure to social studies in the elementary grades (Brown, 2015; Babini, 2013; Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2013; Sparks, 2011). For example, fewer than one-third of the nation's eighth grade students scored at the proficient or higher level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress' U.S. history, geography, or

civics tests in 2014 and only three percent or fewer scored at the advanced level in any of the three subjects (Brown, 2015).

- Researchers have found that the exploration of social studies content strongly supports the development of reading skills and that its exclusion from the elementary curriculum can have detrimental effects on students' literacy levels (Fitchett, Heafner, & VanFossen, 2014; Weaver, 2013; National Council for the Social Studies, 2009; Hinde et al., 2007; Jerald, 2006). Pace (2012) stated that "content knowledge is essential for reading comprehension; thus, narrowing the curriculum may actually defeat the purpose of emphasizing literacy."
- Lack of access to social studies texts may lead to decreases in students' literacy levels.
 - Social studies texts provide students with additional background information. Researchers agree that background knowledge is essential for high levels of reading comprehension and that students who have a wide range of background knowledge in a variety of subject areas score better on reading tests (Babini, 2013; Weaver, 2013; Ogle et al., 2007; Jerald, 2006). Duffy and colleagues (2003) stated, "If the goal is to improve students' reading achievement, not teaching these subjects [social studies, science, and the arts] will limit students' background knowledge of many topics about which they may read. Because having adequate background knowledge is necessary if one is to comprehend or understand what one is reading, lack of instruction in these subjects may ultimately affect students' reading achievement negatively."
 - Social studies instruction exposes students to a greater variety of reading materials, such as newspapers, journals, magazines, textbooks, and fiction and nonfiction books. Studies show that the more types of reading students engage in, the better they become as readers, and the greater the likelihood that their reading test scores will increase (Weaver, 2013).
 - Social studies texts provide students with the opportunity to engage in nonfictional reading. Teachers in English language arts classes tend to assign fictional text. One study reported that over 90% of assigned texts in English language arts classes are fiction. Social studies teachers, on the other hand, are more likely to assign students nonfiction reading (Weaver, 2013).
 - Social studies reading materials often include a great deal of visual information, such as maps, diagrams, timelines, graphs, and charts, that can help boost literacy skills (Weaver, 2013; Ogle et al., 2007). An analysis of science and social studies textbooks, leveled readers, and trade books appropriate for second and third graders found that 60% of the graphics in these texts provided additional information not included in the written text (Fingeret, cited in Roberts et al., 2013). Roberts and colleagues (2013) concluded, "Numbers like these leave little room for doubt that

students who know how to decode and interpret graphical elements have a distinct advantage over those who do not.”

- The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics (2011) reported that schools that implement high-quality civic learning are more likely to have a positive school climate, which in turn has a positive impact on students’ academic achievement and personal character.
- Studies indicate that school districts are not cutting social studies instruction entirely, but are deferring it until students reach middle or senior high school. The rationale for this strategy is that eliminating social studies at the elementary grade levels provides more time for instruction in English language arts (Bogan et al., 2012; Sparks, 2011; Hinde et al., 2007). However, researchers have found that the lack of social studies instruction in the elementary grades has negative effects on students when they move into the secondary grades. For example:
 - Students are more likely to perform poorly on standardized English language arts tests in middle and senior high school because assessments at the secondary level place more emphasis on reading comprehension and focus less on the decoding skills that are emphasized at the elementary grade levels.
 - Students who lack the background knowledge they would have attained by learning social studies in the elementary grades are more likely to struggle to comprehend their middle and senior high school social studies textbooks.
 - Once students fall behind in acquiring background knowledge, it becomes harder for them to catch up and they continue to fall further behind. By the time they get to high school, many of these students have to be placed in remedial classes (Walker, 2014; Jerald, 2006).
- Researchers have concluded that the marginalization of social studies instruction in the elementary and middle school grades may have long-term negative effects on students’ career readiness. For example, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools in partnership with the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics (2011) reported, “Civic learning has been shown to instill young people with the ‘twenty-first century competencies’ that employers value in the new economy.”

Similarly, Kalaidis (2013) linked skills learned in K-12 social studies to students’ career readiness later in life. She noted that social studies instruction strongly encourages students to develop the skills employers say they value most - critical thinking skills and written and oral communication skills. In a national survey of business hiring decision-makers conducted by Northeastern University (2013), 60% of respondents agreed that it was more important for entry-level workers to possess skills like oral and written communications and problem-solving than training and industry-specific capabilities. In fact, 73% of the business leaders surveyed agreed with the following statement: “Being well-rounded with a range of abilities is more important than having industry expertise

because job-specific skills can be learned at work.”

Summary

Social studies instruction has been marginalized in most elementary schools and replaced by large blocks of reading and mathematics instruction throughout the school day. The marginalization of social studies instruction has been especially apparent in low-performing schools with high proportions of low-income and minority students that are under intense pressure to raise test scores.

The devaluation of elementary level social studies has been attributed primarily to its exclusion from high-stakes testing programs. Studies have found that schools are much more likely to teach tested subjects, such as language arts and mathematics, than untested subjects like social studies. However, researchers caution that inclusion of social studies content on mandated tests does not always produce more effective teaching and learning. Several studies suggest that when states include social studies in high-stakes elementary testing programs, instruction often consists primarily of repetitive exercises and rote instruction that are designed to prepare students for the test.

This Information Capsule summarized some of the negative student outcomes related to the reduction or elimination of social studies instruction from the elementary level curriculum, including lack of knowledge in the areas of history, geography, and civics; lower levels of literacy skills; less access to a variety of reading materials; inability to catch up on social studies knowledge in the secondary grades; and lack of career readiness skills.

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