The Marginalization of Elementary Social Studies in Teacher Education

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This article examines the literature related to the marginalization of social studies through the lens of elementary social studies teacher education. This study presents the case of two different states wherein one state, Virginia, tests social studies in elementary schools and another state, North Carolina, where social studies is not tested until middle school. The data gathered from both states were originally analyzed to shed light on the question of testing’s effect on teacher preparation and subsequent curriculum enactment. Data collected from the study suggest that factors such as field experiences, programs of study, and methods instruction impact teacher education in elementary social studies in more important ways than student testing.

Key Words: Elementary Social Studies Teacher Education, Social Studies Teacher Education, Elementary Social Studies, Teacher Education, Testing, Social Studies Education

Introduction

The fall 2006 College and University Faculty Assembly of the National Council for the Social Studies’ (CUFA) opening session was aptly titled “Does Social Studies Have a Future?” (2007). At this event, four social studies scholars offered their perspectives on the future of social studies education. The first panelist, Jere Brophy, spoke about being social educators for the purpose of the common good. The second panelist, Carole Hahn, framed her comments around having an issue-centered curriculum. The third panelist, Stephen Thornton, said the future depends on three things: (1) status, (2) content, and (3) what is taught. The final panelist, Linda Levstik, declared that the future of social studies depended on elementary classroom teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. She charged elementary teachers and social studies researchers to give more attention to social studies in the elementary grade levels. This paper examines the phenomenon of the marginalization of elementary social studies education through the lens of elementary teacher education.

Having experienced the marginalization of social studies as classroom teachers, the researchers were well aware of the continued decline of social studies instruction in elementary classrooms. The purpose of this study was to look beyond the elementary school and examine the impact of social studies marginalization on teacher education, specifically elementary social studies methods. This study was grounded by the following research questions:

1. Is the marginalization of elementary social studies impacting elementary social studies methods courses? If so, in what ways?
2. Does mandated social studies testing in elementary schools play a role in social studies methods courses? If so, in what ways?

3. What other factors influence elementary social studies methods?

**Literature Review**

**Elementary Social Studies**

There is a well-documented marginalization of social studies in the elementary classroom (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Rock, Heafner, O'Connor, Passe, Oldendorf, Good, & Bryd, 2007). Neil Houser (1995) aptly declared that social studies is a “back burner” subject in the elementary classroom. Classroom teachers report that their schools place much less importance on social studies than other subjects such as reading and mathematics. Teachers from across the nation reported the disappearance of social studies from their classrooms as their schools institutionally de-emphasized the importance of social studies (Bailey, Shaw, & Hollifield, 2006). Research repeatedly demonstrates the narrowing of the social studies curriculum to the point of exclusion (Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; McGuire, 2007; Rock, et al., 2006; Segall, 2003). In a study of elementary social studies in North Carolina, classroom teachers echoed national reports that social studies receives relatively little instructional time compared to other subjects such as reading, writing, and math (Rock, et al., 2006).

The state of social studies in public elementary school classrooms reflects the current atmosphere of high-stakes testing in the nation’s schools. That is, it is marginalized and narrowed in the classroom. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002) legislation requires standardized testing of all third through eighth grade students in reading, language arts, mathematics, and science. It does not require the testing of social studies in these grades nor does social studies fall under federal guidelines for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as described by NCLB. Schools may test if states choose to do so but, with the punitive nature of NCLB, few states test social studies in primary and elementary school. The only states that currently require testing in social studies are Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin (Byrd, Good, Heafner, O’Conner, Passe & Rock, 2007). Compared to the 38 states requiring social studies testing in 1998, the current 11 states represent a significant decline in a post NCLB school climate. The Center on Education Policy (2008) reported that since the enactment of NCLB, social studies lost an average of 76 minutes of teaching time a year in the elementary classroom. The time taken from social studies instruction was transferred to “tested” subjects (reading/language arts, science, and math).

With the impact of NCLB, the debate has turned to whether testing will help or hinder the status of social studies (Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005; Libresco, 2006). In 2006, Timothy Linter’s study examined social studies education in South Carolina after the implementation of a state-wide test. He found social studies was receiving more attention as a result of a state-wide testing program, however, the attention did not result in better curriculum delivery, in fact curriculum delivery suffered under the testing mandate. The testing program did not seem to spark innovative or exciting social studies instruction, merely compliance (Linter, 2006). Susie Burroughs, Eric Groce, and Mary Lee Webeck (2005) found most social studies educators felt that social studies would be better off not being tested because of the limits it would place on instructional methods. The flip side is without a testing program, time spent on social studies instruction is severely limited (Leming, Ellington & Schug, 2006).
Marilynne Boyle-Baise, Ming-Chu Hsu, Shaun Johnson, Stephanie Cayot Serriere, and Dor-shell Stewart (2008) report that the trends created in the wake of NCLB have presented a “changing landscape” which “solidified social studies’ secondary status” in the elementary classroom.

**Elementary Social Studies Teacher Education**

A review of the literature shows approaches to teacher education in elementary social studies appear to be varied across institutions and programs. The variance often lies in the program’s expectations of social science content mastery (i.e. history, geography, psychology, etc.). Regarding content expectations, some teacher education programs offer students the opportunity to work towards mastery of individual social science subjects while enrolled in social studies methods courses, while other programs offer an interdisciplinary approach to the variety of subjects taught in elementary schools.

Programs of studies (required coursework) also differ across teacher education programs. In some teacher education programs students are required to take content area courses related to the social sciences, whereas other programs do not specify such requirements, so the amount of coursework varies. In some programs, students must claim content area “concentrations” which can vary and depend on the individual interests of the student. In other words, they may or may not choose to specify social science as a concentration area. And, in many instances, students’ only exposure to social science content comes from their social studies methods course or courses where content areas are combined (Owens, 1997). Overall, the requirements for social studies content appear minimal, regardless of program offerings, with required courses offering students more breadth than depth with regards to social studies content (Rock, et al., 2006).

Other differences lie in the methods of instruction advocated by individual social studies methods instructors and whether field experiences coincide with pre-service teachers’ personal theories and philosophies of how social studies should be taught (Lanahan & Yeager, 2008; Owens, 1997). Once positioned in a field placement or practicum, pre-service teachers’ experiences with social studies vary greatly. Many pre-service elementary school teachers report having little exposure to social studies instruction in their field placement, which seems to support research exploring the frequency and depth that elementary school teachers are teaching the subject (Lanahan & Yeager, 2008; Owens, 1997). The field experiences often are further complicated when theories espoused in methods courses run counter to those modeled in the field. For instance, William Owens (1997) found that many pre-service teachers described their cooperating teachers as having a “traditional style” which she describes as being more passive than active and one that is “highly teacher directed” (p. 118). His study found that these methods differed from the prevailing theories of the students’ instructors and often confused the students, leaving them with more questions than answers.

What does seem to be consistent amid elementary teacher education programs is that social studies methods courses often are taught by instructors and professors with a wide range of professional and educational experience, not directly related to social studies (Lanahan & Yeager, 2007; Passe, 2006; Owen 1997). Citing a survey conducted for CUFA that exploring why methods instructors were not joining the organization, Jeff Passe (2006) found that a large number of faculty teaching social studies methods did not identify themselves as content area specialists. Many of the respondents considered themselves “generalists” and had more formal training in the
language arts. Many faculty members were unfamiliar with CUFA and had little involvement with NCSS. From these findings, one could ascertain that many elementary social studies methods instructors may not be fluent in the current discourse within the field, discourses that may impact how methods courses are taught.

Passe (2006) also notes that in rare instances where social studies specialists are employed to teach social studies, many lack the pedagogical understanding and teaching experience necessary in elementary grades. Because of their background in a particular social science, they may not be aware of the full scope of the subject matter taught in elementary social studies.

In sum, the state of social studies in the elementary classroom depends largely on the level of marginalization it receives on federal, state, institutional, and individual levels. This study sought to broaden the understanding of social studies teacher education in two states with different policies related to the testing of social studies in the elementary grades.

Methods

The methodology for this research was a multiple case study used for comparative purposes. By using a case study approach, this research used multiple sources of information to add depth to analysis and provide a wider variety of data for the purposes of triangulation. The strength of this type of approach lies in the ability to gather an assortment of information, which will add to the overall validity of the research proposed. Data collection procedures for this project included document collection and analysis, interviews, focus groups, and a survey.

Data Sources

Data were collected from six universities chosen because of the number of elementary education completers in 2006. The three top producing colleges from North Carolina and Virginia took part in this study. Virginia and North Carolina were chosen because of testing considerations: North Carolina does not test elementary social studies while Virginia does.

Four data sources were used in this study, documents, surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Documents including syllabi and programs of study were gathered by the researchers for all elementary social studies methods courses offered at each university. A survey was sent to all social studies instructors at each university. The survey (see appendix A) asked for additional information regarding social studies methods. Interviews (see appendix B) were conducted with elementary social studies coordinators from each university. “Social studies coordinator” is the term we have chosen to designate a lead social studies faculty member. This individual was chosen based on two criteria, teaching social studies methods, and social studies leadership. Students enrolled in a social studies methods course were invited to participate in a focus group (see Appendix C).

As a point of differentiation by state, we also collected and analyzed standard course of study documents from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Virginia Department of Education (DOE). In addition, we collected documents from each state pertaining to elementary teacher license.

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Data Analysis

The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data. As written documentation, the syllabi from each university were compared and contrasted. The interview transcripts were analyzed, looking for common themes or categories among participants. The interviews, focus group transcripts, and documents also were analyzed and triangulated to provide the richest understanding. Through this process, a method of coding the research to organize themes and categories was developed.

Barney Glaser's (1978) six steps for analyzing the data in the constant comparative method guided the data analysis: 1) collect preliminary data, 2) identify categories of focus, 3) continue data collection, 4) begin writing about the emerging themes, while continually searching for new themes, 5) work with the data and the preliminary analysis to reveal basic social processes and relationships, and (6) code and write, while focusing on the core categories. Margaret Goetz and Judith LeCompte (1984) refer to this method as one that “combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed” (p.58). Data undergo repeated review throughout the data collection and analysis process, leading to the refinement of categories. "As events are constantly compared with previous events, new topological dimensions, as well as new relationships, may be discovered" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984 p. 58). After collection, individual researchers categorized the data. Next, each research team member read through sets of data to identify themes. As the research evolved, a running list of emerging themes was maintained; new patterns were added to the list and revisions made. From this iterative process, themes gradually developed.

Context

It is essential to understand the complexity of social studies education within the frame of the two states we used for our research study. This information serves to contextualize the role of social studies within North Carolina schools and Virginia schools.

Social Studies in North Carolina

North Carolina has maintained a Standard Course of Study since 1898. The standards are revised every five to seven years. The North Carolina Social Studies Standard Course of Study last was revised in 2001. In response to the accountability push, in the mid-1990s, North Carolina established the ABCs of Public Education. The ABCs program is based on schools meeting growth expectation goals established by the State Board of Education. To assess performance on accountability measures students are tested in reading, mathematics, and science in grades three through eight. Currently, there are no plans to test social studies content in these grades (Rock, et al., 2006). North Carolina has an active council for the teaching of social studies.

Social Studies in Virginia

Virginia tests social studies as a part of the elementary accountability program. It is interesting to note that Virginia does not label its elementary program ‘social studies’ instead, it is labeled ‘history and social science’ (Virginia Department of Education, 2001). The History and Social Science Standards of Learning (SOLs) were first established in 1995 and revised in 2001 (VDOE, 2001). The SOLs are tested in third, fourth, and fifth grade. The third grade test is considered cumulative and standards from K-3 are included. In fourth grade the test covers Virginia studies. In fifth grade, the test assesses United States history to 1877 (VDOE, 2003).
Currently, scores in mathematics, science, and reading are factored into federal ratings. The history and social sciences scores, however, are used in calculating school accreditation. In order to be fully accredited, fifty percent of the students must pass the science and history tests. Seventy percent have to pass in reading and mathematics (Duke & Reck, 2003). Virginia also has an active council for the social studies.

**Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study needs to be acknowledged. Multi-layered data were gathered from each institution. Data were purposefully collected from different sets of individuals: social studies coordinators, social studies instructors, and students. It should be noted that participation often was limited across the different populations. Each social studies coordinator completed a survey and participated in an interview. Each social studies instructor was invited to complete a survey, however, not all instructors completed the survey, we had a 26% return rate. All students were invited to participate in focus group discussions. Due to scheduling issues, focus group sizes varied from three to 17 students at each institution.

“Teacher educators need to be aware of the current status of social studies in order to advocate and prepare students. Advocacy is imperative in the plight for elementary social studies. Advocacy needs to occur not only at the university level, but also all the way to the legislatures, teachers, students, and general public.”

**Findings**

Our research questions were: 1) Is the marginalization of elementary social studies impacting elementary social studies methods courses? If so, in what ways? 2) Does mandated social studies testing in elementary schools play a role in social studies methods courses? If so, in what ways? and 3) What other factors influence elementary social studies methods?

**Marginalization in Social Studies Methods**

The marginalization of social studies in elementary schools is not new or surprising. Our data pointed to a high level of marginalization within social studies methods in both states. Two of the research questions focused on the differences between tested and non-tested states’ teacher preparation programs for elementary social studies. What emerged was the marginalization of social studies at both the university and local elementary school level, regardless of state-wide testing.

**Content**

During focus group interviews, students were asked to describe their experiences with social studies in their program of studies. In many cases, students indicated that the social studies methods course in which they were currently enrolled was their first social studies related course. This information was confirmed after analyzing program documents outlining the required program of studies for elementary education majors. During focus groups, students often shared more about other courses taken in their concentration areas, or required subject matter courses that were geared more towards content. We differentiate between methods and content. Methods are strategies for teaching in the elementary classroom, while content is the familiarity with the information that elementary students are
expected to learn. Courses included geography, history, anthropology, and psychology. Responses from students who had chosen social sciences, humanities, or liberal studies as it is referred to in one program, indicated a lack of understanding when it came to the content covered in the course, as well as a lack of comfort when it came to teaching the content. One problem, it seems, is that courses in their areas of concentration cover a broad range of topics and are open to non-education students. When referring to a history class she had taken in her concentration area, one student from a Virginia university indicated frustration stating,

It’s a very broad history class, like upper level 300 or 400 level which is really hard because I feel like it would be more beneficial to take like a science class or other concentration classes that are geared towards elementary. Usually with the Math/Science concentration they teach it for education. They revamped it (the program of studies) because people weren’t taking the classes. People were thrown into upper level bio classes and we said we couldn’t do that. It doesn’t make sense so, they changed it and geared it all towards teaching, but they didn’t change it for the humanities.

Focus group interviews conducted in other schools provided similar data. Students from four of the remaining six schools in our study indicated that content areas courses within the social sciences concentration, as well as required social science courses available to them, suffered from the same symptom of being broad and not geared towards content specific to elementary school curricula. As a result, these students expressed concern over their own knowledge and their ability to teach social studies successfully. When asked about their preparedness to teach social studies one student from North Carolina stated,

Honestly, I’m a little nervous about it. Some of the content, in general, I feel uncomfortable with. Not necessarily how to teach it though. I feel like this class (methods) gave me methods and places to go, resources to use to teach it. I’m just nervous about the content of it.

Interestingly, during the comments and questions section offered to students at the end of a focus group interview at a Virginia university, one student returned to the issue of content as her final thought. This was after a larger discussion of methods, standards, and testing. The students were asked if they had any comments or questions about the role of social studies in their professional development. One student laughingly stated, “It’s definitely opened my eyes up to the amount of knowledge I don’t have…”

The “revamping” of certain content area courses versus others also is indicative of further marginalization. Elementary education majors typically choose a concentration area. There usually is a requirement that students take more classes related to their chosen concentration. We found that what is required for a concentration area tends to favor other subjects over social studies. One particular North Carolina university’s program of studies, for instance, allows students to add additional licensure if they choose a reading concentration. In the focus group, all of the students had chosen reading as their concentration for this purpose.

Social studies methods professors from universities in both states reiterated the students’ responses and concerns about social studies content. These concerns touched on issues regarding the amount of courses students were required to take in the area of social studies, the type of content covered in the
courses, and the small amount of time they had to work with students in their methods courses.

The issue of content and testing emerged in interviews in Virginia. Professors from one university discussed their students anxiety about the content covered in the tests their future students would be required to take.

Our pre-service teachers feel they have to be masters of information they need to know about history. They have expressed concern to me that they are not sure they know enough 5th grade history. I know this also has to do with their Praxis scores.

The mention of Praxis scores in her response is in reference to the low scores pre-service teachers from her institution historically had received on the history section of the licensure and certification tests required for teaching in Virginia. It should be noted that these scores were not analyzed in our research, but students and teachers referenced the topic in interviews.

Also of note is that none of the descriptions of the methods courses in either state included social studies content. Their syllabi did not indicate a focus on content other than reference to state standards, which were less of a focus of instruction. In two cases the instructors did reference content knowledge specifically. The syllabus used by one professor from North Carolina stated clearly that her course was “not a history course,” but did recommend an optional assigned text, Social Studies Content and Middle School Teachers, to help make up for content deficits her students may have. Another North Carolina professor in our study requires that students purchase a text, Social Studies Content for Elementary and Middle School Teachers, but spends a very small amount of time utilizing it in his methods course. When asked why he used the book, he indicated that his students lacked content knowledge. When asked specifically if he thought their concentration courses were not adequately preparing them, he stated,

Yeah. That’s why I have to do the Fritzer (Social Studies Content for Elementary and Middle School Teachers) book. I have them take the quiz for people who take the U.S. citizenship test. And so, I’ll ask those questions and they don’t really know it and they want to know who needs to know this kind of stuff. I tell them that it’s the citizenship test and if they were going to take it that most of them wouldn’t pass. And then I say, so now you’re going to teach children about our country and what it stands for. It’s a real eye opener.”

At each institution, survey responses from methods instructors supported their students’ responses concerning content, and indicated their students’ preparedness to teach social studies content was much lower than their preparedness to effectively implement social studies methods. The responses also supported information gathered in interviews with professors.

Integration

Another theme emerging from focus group interviews, surveys, data mining, and coordinator interviews, was the idea of subject integration. To begin with, data gathered from surveys indicated a strong preference, or leaning towards, the integration of social studies content with other academic areas, most notably language arts. When asked to what extent they taught curriculum integration as a method for social studies instruction, the majority of instructors gave answers of four and five on the Likert Scale, indicating “almost always” or “always.” When asked to discuss this further during interviews, professors qualified their responses by acknowledging
that integration was a way to address the marginalization of elementary social studies. Most acknowledged that integration often is a double-edged sword. One professor commented, “On one hand it is a way to ensure social studies is taught, however, social studies content is often poorly integrated and not taught as a cohesive and rich subject.” Another added, “…it is important to teach them to pull it in where we can.” Other instructors discussed how they had to help the students “sneak” social studies into the classroom. On top of this, some were rather pessimistic regarding their students’ ability to follow the standard course of study as written, and that perhaps integrating subjects would help. A professor at a North Carolina university stated,

They’ll never get through with the standard course of study or whatever it is they teach. But you have to find time to stop and integrate other things on there, you know, the other skills that are there are going to be in there. I say that they have to just find a good fit of what they like, what the kids like, and the reality of resources you have and go with it.

Integration, as a social studies method, also was a prominent feature listed in almost all of the syllabi in Virginia and North Carolina. In several cases, the ability to integrate social studies in other areas of the curriculum was a stated goal of the methods course. There was never any specific mention of marginalization in the syllabus. Syllabi giving a rationale indicated social relevance as the impetus for integration. In another course, the syllabus states that students are expected to apply ideas from assigned readings about social studies integration into projects they are working on in various other methods courses. According to the syllabus, “We will make social studies connections to books you will be reading in your literature class.” One syllabus in North Carolina refers to social studies as the “integrating core,” and in several instances literacy integration was mentioned specifically, re-affirming language arts as the subject by which all others would be organized around. When asked about this idea, a North Carolina student stated,

We talked different days about how social studies can be integrated in writing or reading units. Our professor brought in lots of books, children books, and chapter books that deal with the different social studies topics and how you can incorporate and write social studies in your classroom, especially if you’re in a school which doesn’t have a set time for social studies throughout the day.

Another student added, “What I’ve really taken from this class is that I feel comfortable with is integrating social studies so you’re meeting those standards for reading also.”

In every focus group interview conducted for this study, students mentioned having been taught methods for integrating social studies with other subject areas, re-affirming what we learned from survey data, syllabi, and interviews with instructors. When pressed further on the question during focus group interviews, students’ responses indicated their own awareness of the marginalization of social studies and agreed that, perhaps, this was the most appropriate method given the situation. For example, when asked what method they thought was most appropriate for teaching social studies one student responded,

Well, I think you should integrate it. In my practicum we just did a whole month on Native Americans and we blocked out a little time in the day to do it, and you forget about it the rest of the day. Teaching it like that, it’s just like it’s a subject to be learned at
school and doesn’t apply to the rest of your life. Integrating it in other places like reading and math just gives you more time to do it and makes the learning more natural. It kind of solves two problems.

The student’s reference to the realities of how much attention was given to social studies in their field experiences was echoed in nearly all of our focus group interviews. It is discussed elsewhere in this paper, but the field experiences of students re-affirmed what they felt was a “need to integrate.” In many cases it was hard to tell if students felt that integration was truly the best approach, or merely the answer to a larger issue of marginalization in the curriculum. What was obvious, though, was that it was happening, and happening in nearly every social studies methods course analyzed for this study. Given that it was taught as a “preferred” method, and taught so frequently, it is easy to understand how students may be confused. Similar to the previous response, another student added:

It’s like the students have to get tested in math and language arts so if you’re gonna be an effective teacher and really teach a kid social studies you have to teach it somewhere else. You can say we’re learning language arts while we’re doing this other. It’s almost like you just can’t separate the two.

The students’ responses indicate their awareness of how little time is given to social studies, but each backs up their response by alluding to integration as a more effective method in general.

While it may not be clear that integration leads to the marginalization of social studies, it was clear that subject marginalization has created few opportunities for social studies to be taught in elementary classrooms and integration is the best way to combat the problem. As a result, students are observing social studies integration in their field experiences and being taught integration in their methods courses. Student responses and instructor interviews seem to indicate that integrating social studies meets programmatic needs (i.e. standard course of study objectives), but questions remain as to whether the lack of academic rigor may ultimately limit elementary students’ ability to actually “do” social studies. If so, subject integration may need to be re-thought as the answer to the pre-existing condition of subject marginalization. Questions that need to be explored further are those addressing whether or not subject integration further marginalizes social studies both in the classroom and in teacher education programs.

**Testing**

We choose research universities in North Carolina and Virginia because we were curious if social studies methods would be different in a tested versus a non-tested state. What we found was that testing had no significant impact on social studies methods courses in the universities we studied. Entering into this research, we speculated that Virginia universities would focus more on content because the elementary social studies test is content based. Instead we found that none of the methods courses had a strong content focus; the majority of time was spent on methods. Social studies marginalization did not seem to be related to testing. We found regardless of mandated testing, social studies concerns and issues were expressed equally among all six universities.

**Other Factors Influencing Social Studies Methods**

Through our research, several additional factors influenced social studies methods at the universities we studied. In speaking with the social studies coordinators, we found their
personal leadership greatly influenced not only the methods courses at their university, but also shaped social studies education in their communities and beyond. Another consistent influence on social studies methods was student field experiences. All six of the universities had students in the field with some expectation for either social studies observation or teaching. A final influence on social studies methods, though minimal, was state policy.

**Faculty Leadership**

There was an identified “coordinator” of elementary social studies education at each participating institution. These coordinators played a significant role in advocating for social studies education. These individuals were all aware of the marginalization of elementary social studies across the nation and within their education community. The faculty members served as advocates for elementary social studies within the teacher education program, and as advocates for elementary social studies within the methods courses offered in the elementary teacher education program. The professors viewed themselves as advocates for the field and sought to provide vision for the field of elementary social studies at their institution.

Leadership and vision for elementary social studies was documented throughout the data. It was well-documented that the elementary social studies coordinators saw themselves as individuals who provide vision for the role elementary social studies plays in the teacher preparation program at each institution. One faculty member commented that her vision was specifically to, “continue to advocate and build up within our social studies program.” This commitment to the field was evident in different forms. One faculty member demonstrated commitment through her work to redesign the elementary social studies methods experience. She commented that her “passion” and “commitment” to the field has helped the department to evolve and value elementary social studies methods. She cited the example of her leadership to, “develop courses in a meaningful way...so that [the courses] will have cohesiveness and have connections.”

Despite the coordinators’ commitment to elementary social studies methods within the teacher education program, the participants reflected on the transient nature of social studies instructors. All participants discussed the difficult nature of staffing elementary social studies methods courses. Each faculty member commented that at some point in recent history, part-time individuals taught elementary social studies methods courses, most without a “vision” for social studies education. One faculty member commented that this issue led to a weakness in the university’s elementary education program. The weakness was the resulting “uniformity” of the courses taught. She reflected, “When you have so many people teaching [elementary social studies methods], some sections lose some of the quality.” She further explained that having a core faculty committed to the field would provide leadership and consistency for the students in the program.

The elementary social studies methods coordinators also saw themselves as providing leadership and vision for the field within their courses. They noted the importance of educating their students on the marginalization of elementary social studies methods. The faculty members made deliberate attempts to make their students aware of the state of the field, and to probe their students to reflect on how teachers should respond to the marginalization of the field. One faculty member reflected on her vision for social studies within her department,

> I think the work has to start with our teachers out there in the classrooms ... there’s a lot of misunderstandings about what social studies really is and
its purpose ...we make sure our students leave here with a positive experience for [elementary social studies] so that they will stand up when it is being marginalized and stand up then you think it is not best for our children or school.

The coordinators for each institution commented on the importance of being involved in state and national organizations. The faculty members reflected on the leadership roles they played within different professional organizations and the importance of being engaged in the field. They noted it was important to them for their own professional development, but it also was important to support the field. One faculty member commented,

I had a mentor that was very involved in state and national organizations for social studies. That was a real benefit for ...to make connections and be encouraged and engaged at the national realm of social studies professional organizations ...I have been engaged and involved [in the field]. I feel like I know the concerns of social studies educators, the directions, the policies, the issues, the statements that are out there in terms of what our organizations are trying to accomplish and what we hope to have happen in social studies education because of my involvement.

The social studies coordinators at each participating institution reflected on the importance of providing social studies leadership within their courses and within their teacher education programs. They found support for advocacy through the state and national organizations. Each participant commented on the obstacles of providing the leadership. Some have sorted through issues of staffing and course coordination, while other faculty members continue to struggle with advocating for social studies teacher education in an era of social studies marginalization.

Field Experiences

The types of field experiences students had within their social studies methods courses differed at the various institutions across both states. In some cases, field experiences associated with social studies methods courses took place during the second half of the semester when students no longer met for methods instruction. Another type of field experience was a semester long and tied directly into the methods course. In yet another case, there was no practical field experience at all during the semester social studies methods was taught. Field experiences at some institutions were not directly linked to the students’ social studies methods courses, but designed to run concurrently with other methods courses students were taking during that semester. At one institution in Virginia students are only required to be in schools for four hours per week, totaling at least forty hours for the semester, and this field experience is not tied directly to their social studies methods course. It also runs concurrently with their other methods courses. Regardless of the differences, the experiences, or lack thereof, were considered important in the impact they had on students’ perceptions of social studies.

In instances where field experiences were not directly tied to their social studies methods course or occurred during the second half of the semester, professors expressed concern over the lack of continuity with their instruction. A professor from Virginia stated,

I think that one of the things that happens with the practicum is that some of the students don’t even get into their classrooms until near the end of the semester, so that makes it hard to refer in our classroom discussions or when
we ask them to do things in their classrooms. It is always a little disjointed, like it is not a cohesive experience.

Regardless of whether or not there was continuity with the methods courses, students in our interviews consistently mentioned that they were not getting the opportunity to see social studies being taught regularly in their field experiences, and sometimes not at all. Time and time again we heard stories of social studies being absent and/or marginalized in their field placement classrooms, having trouble finding opportunities to teach social studies lessons they were developing in their methods courses, and completing observations required for those courses. In one of the North Carolina schools where the students’ field experiences were tied into their methods course, a student told us,

The class I’m in now is supposed to do social studies on the day I’m there. They do it on Monday and Tuesday. Pretty much the whole semester I was there to observe social studies they were preparing for the writing test. So, the time was spent in writing conferences, so the students were just reading a social studies newspaper if they were not being conferenced with.

When asked how prepared they thought they were to teach a social studies lesson, one student being interviewed in a Virginia focus group stated, “Not at all. Its just like, my teacher in the practicum never teaches social studies, and I haven’t really ever done a lesson in it.” This student’s response was met with head nodding by others in the focus group along with many saying, “yeah, me too.”

Students discussed having conversations with their cooperating teachers about how little social studies was being taught, and how they had expressed their own concerns to them. The teachers being observed and acting as mentors were not only providing few opportunities for pre-service teachers to observe social studies, they also were verbalizing their own concerns over the marginalization of social studies. A student interviewee from North Carolina shared,

My teacher’s focus area was history and she’s working on her Master’s and doing a lot with social studies for her course work. It’s her favorite subject and she doesn’t teach it because she doesn’t feel like she has the opportunity to do so. And, she’s not a first year teacher. She’s been teaching for like twelve years you know, and she never felt like she was able to teach it.

Professors in our study were well aware that their students were not seeing social studies taught regularly in their field placements and expressed concern. In most cases, these professors admitted that discussions in their methods courses often centered on this very topic. In one interview, a professor from Virginia expressed her concern and discussed her institution’s plans to address the issue in the types of partnerships they were trying to develop with the schools students visited for their field experiences. Discussing the importance of the partnership, she stated,

That is why the partnership schools will be great once they are fully developed because then we can say you need to dedicate five hours to social studies, 10 hours to language arts, and five hours to science. That should be how it happens and that was part of the rationale for developing partnership schools.

Another issue emerging in Virginia was that students were seeing the effects of testing social studies in elementary school. Students whose field placements were in grades that were tested expressed concern over the amount
of content required and the anxiety students and teachers had over the tests. When asked what they thought affected how social studies was taught in elementary schools, a Virginia student doing her observation in a grade that is tested stated,

Well, I see a lot of social studies in my practicum but it’s all about the history of Virginia and that’s what they test. I haven’t seen anything but that. Last week when I was there they had social studies and an assessment of 35 questions and they hadn’t covered any of it, but they have to get a beginning, middle, and end score. They are all geared towards the standards of learning. I looked at it myself and didn’t even know all of it and my teacher said she didn’t even know all of it.

This student’s response also speaks to the quality of social studies instruction when there is a standardized test and the concern over a lack of content knowledge. The ways in which her cooperating teacher reacted to the test and content is significant for the student’s field experience. Overall, our research found that students’ field experiences had a big impact on how they viewed social studies, and also had an effect on their experiences within their methods courses.

State Policy

Policy and legislation was a theme woven throughout the data. The student and faculty participants all commented on the various impacts state policy has on the field of social studies education. There were not significant differences regarding policy between Virginia and North Carolina participants’ social studies experiences. All individuals noted the tension between what was taught in elementary social studies methods courses and in the elementary social studies classroom. As mentioned, pedagogy privileged in the methods course was not always what was evidenced in the pre-service teachers’ field experiences. It is here that the students we interviewed expressed their anxieties over state-mandated testing and the extent of social studies standards.

There was well-documented evidence across the data that faculty purposefully discussed and worked with state social studies standards. In an effort to prepare students for policy that would affect what and how they taught, methods courses included assignments that required students to create curriculum projects based on state standards. At one institution, students created notable people projects based on individuals listed in the state standards. At another institution, students created a multimedia content research project based on the state standards. When asked, the teacher education faculty members reflected that assignments such as these were designed to assist pre-service teachers with knowing and implementing the state curriculum.

Although the state standards have an impact on what is taught in the social studies methods courses, the participating students and faculty note that state policy does not play a large role in what is taught in the elementary social studies methods course. One instructor commented, “I have not had the pressure [to follow state standards] however, when I am in the field I see the pressure coming from the teachers.”
Discussion and Implications

The study conducted by Rock et al (2006) regarding social studies instruction in North Carolina elementary classrooms initially prompted us to begin thinking about how the marginalization of social studies affected elementary teacher education. In examining social studies methods courses, we wanted to know if teacher education in elementary social studies would look different in a state that tested elementary social studies versus a non-tested state. We expected there to be a difference especially in the amount of content taught, however, that was not the case. Sadly, social studies is marginalized equally across North Carolina and Virginia. The marginalization occurred across the spectrum of the program, beginning with general education requirements and ending in public school classrooms. Many students commented that the methods course was their first opportunity to interact with social studies content in a meaningful way. Across North Carolina and Virginia, students were concerned about their lack of content knowledge in regard to social studies. When examining general education requirements, the required courses varied from university to university. The students commented that the history courses that were required were either irrelevant or insipid.

The expectations for field experiences varied across programs yet the message was the same; social studies instruction was difficult to observe in public schools. Most students described social studies instruction as being taught in small amounts of time which often was shared with science instruction. Students who were required to teach social studies lessons did not have the opportunity to observe a lesson before teaching. Several mentioned their lessons were the only social studies students received in the time they were in classrooms.

The methods courses were very similar across both states and all programs. The focus was on active and engaging social studies methods. There was not an emphasis on content in any systematic way, however, many of the instructors mentioned working to infuse as much content as they could while still focusing on methods. A method common across all courses and universities was integration. Several class sessions were spent focusing on integrating literacy with social studies. The students and instructors described the use of integration as a necessary component if social studies had a chance in elementary classrooms. Both Virginia and North Carolina have a standard course of study outlining what is supposed to be taught, but, how this information was used in methods courses varied. It varied not only across universities, but also within universities themselves. All of the students with whom we spoke were aware of the standard courses of study, but the documents were used differently in different methods classes. There are reasons to be hopeful about the future of social studies. Four of the departments we visited recently had made an effort to streamline social studies methods courses in terms of who was teaching and what was being taught. Just as the literature pointed out, social studies methods in the past had been taught by instructors who did not claim a social studies focus (Passe, 2006). In all of the six universities, efforts were being made to have social studies leadership in the elementary education department. The leadership roles instructors maintained varied, but all showed a commitment to the field either on local, state, or national levels. It is our conclusion that it is going to take a great deal of leadership and advocacy to revive the field of social studies, especially elementary social studies.

Recommendations

It is imperative that we continue to nurture and develop social studies leadership in elementary education programs. Teacher
Educators need to be aware of the current status of social studies in order to advocate and prepare students. Advocacy is imperative in the plight for elementary social studies. Advocacy needs to occur not only at the university level, but also all the way to the legislatures, teachers, students, and general public. Social studies leaders need to ask state legislatures to support schools in implementing the mandated curriculum. According to state policy, social studies is supposed to be taught in elementary school in both North Carolina and Virginia, but there are indications in this study that do not support this requirement. University social studies leaders need to create and present professional development programs for elementary educators currently in schools, and teacher education students need to be aware of what social studies is and why it is important.

Partnering with the general arts and sciences colleges or departments to create undergraduate courses specifically for elementary education majors is one model of strengthening social studies methods that should be considered. This collaboration might benefit social studies. More time could be focused on powerful and authentic social studies methods if students had a meaningful understanding of content upon entering the course. If students could take history and other social science courses geared toward elementary educators, teaching and learning potentially might be improved.

The data in this study suggest field experience in social studies needs to be reconsidered. If the purpose of field experiences is to observe powerful social studies in action, then our current system within the universities studied is not working. More thought, care, and collaboration need to be taken in these universities when placing students in classrooms.

Methods courses can play a role in advocacy efforts. Teacher educators need to be aware of potentials for marginalization. If such is occurring, they can then get their students involved in advocacy projects, such as writing letters to state congressional members and having students attend state social studies conferences. Schools of education also need to reconsider the generalist nature of elementary educators and its’ effects on possible marginalization. All of the universities in our study offered content area specialization but what this actually meant was a few additional arts and sciences courses, not education courses specifically related to elementary school content. Rethinking content specialization could potentially strengthen pre-service teachers’ content knowledge.

In specifically examining methods instruction this study suggests it is imperative to turn a critical eye to integration. While integration has been seen as an opportunity for social studies to resurrect itself in elementary classrooms, it is often done at a very surface level according to this study’s participants. We advocate for powerful integration, which we describe as integration that revolves around social studies content. The content would be relevant to the state standard course of study and to the students’ lives.

Conclusion

At the start of the study we anticipated finding some differences between social studies methods courses in Virginia and North Carolina. We expected content to be emphasized more in Virginia because of mandated elementary social studies testing. What we actually found was that the content/methods dilemma was equally problematic in both states. The marginalization of social studies was a clear and consistent theme throughout elementary teacher education programs in both North Carolina and Virginia. Based on the literature, we knew of the marginalization of social studies on a school but had not considered the implications for teacher education. After conducting this study, the message is clear that social studies was consistently
marginalized from schools to teacher education institutions, regardless of testing policies. The marginalization infiltrated pre-service teachers’ undergraduate preparation in different forms, from preconceived subject bias to limited amounts of content exposure. Within methods courses integration was widely advocated as a way to “sneak” social studies into the curriculum. As one participant stated “We have to get social studies in any way we can…”

If social studies has a future, particularly elementary social studies, large-scale advocacy measures must be undertaken. We advocate that this responsibility should fall on teacher educators, social studies specialists, social studies teachers, and all members of the National Council for the Social Studies. If we continue to leave elementary social studies behind, we may find ourselves without a foundation for our field.

References


Web-Based References


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APPENDIX A -- Survey

| Institution ______________________________________________________________________________________ |
|______________________________________________________________________________________________|

**Elementary Social Studies Education Survey**

For questions 1 - 9, please circle the number that most closely corresponds to your answer.

1. How prepared are your students to teach elementary social studies content? (Circle one)
   - Not Prepared 1 2 3 4 5 Well Prepared

2. How prepared are your students in the use of elementary social studies methods? (Circle one)
   - Not Prepared 1 2 3 4 5 Well Prepared

3. How prepared do you feel to teach elementary social studies methods courses? (Circle one)
   - Not Prepared 1 2 3 4 5 Well Prepared

4. To what extent does your state standard course of study affect how you teach elementary social studies methods courses? (Circle one)
   - Not Prepared 1 2 3 4 5 Well Prepared

5. To what extent do you teach curriculum integration as a method for social studies instruction? (Circle one)
   - Never 1 2 3 4 5 Always

6. Has your approach to teaching elementary social studies methods changed over the past five years? (Circle one)
   - No Change 1 2 3 4 5 Significant Change

7. How satisfied are you with the ways social studies courses are taught in your elementary education program? (Circle one)
   - Not Satisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Very Satisfied

8. How would you rate your understanding of state and national policies regarding elementary social studies? (Circle one)
   - No Understanding 1 2 3 4 5 Clear Understanding

9. How would you rate your students’ understanding of state and national policies regarding elementary social studies? (Circle one)
   - No Understanding 1 2 3 4 5 Clear Understanding

10. Rank-order your program’s commitment to teaching methods in the following subject areas in order from (1) Most Important to (5) Least Important
    - _____ Arts _____ Literacy _____ Mathematics _____ Science _____ Social Studies
Open-Ended Questions

(Please use the back of this paper if you need additional room)

1. Tell us about your students’ social studies experiences in your teacher education program?

2. What do you feel is the most important issue in the field of social studies today?

3. Tell us about your own training in the field of social studies.
APPENDIX B – Interview

Social Studies Coordinator Interview Protocol

- Tell me about your elementary education program of studies?

- How would you describe your teacher education program’s commitment to social studies?

- How are you involved in local, state, and national social studies organizations?

- What is the history of social studies education in your program?

- Who is responsible for teaching social studies courses?

- What types of social studies experiences do your elementary education students have during their program of studies?

- What are the strengths of social studies education in your elementary education program? What areas, if any, need improving?

- In your experience as a teacher educator, have you seen a change in how social studies methods are taught? If so, how?

- What factors influence the way social studies methods are taught?

- What is your vision for social studies education?
APPENDIX C – Focus Group

Focus Group Questions

1. Talk about your social studies experiences in your program of studies.

2. How prepared do you feel to teach elementary social studies?

3. How well do you understand the state’s standards regarding the teaching of social studies?

4. What do you think affects what and how social studies are taught in elementary schools?

5. Describe your social studies methods courses.

6. Talk about any practicum experiences you have had with social studies.

7. What do you feel is the best approach for teaching elementary social studies?

8. What, if any, school subjects should be given preferential status in elementary schools?

9. In your program of studies, how does the importance given to social studies compare to the importance given to other subjects such as math, language arts, and science?