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Introduction: Social Studies Education eC21

Social studies is at the center of a good school curriculum because it is where students learn to see and interpret the world—its peoples, places, cultures, systems, and problems; its dreams and calamities—now and long ago. In social studies lessons and units of study, students don't simply experience the world but are helped deliberately to understand it, to care for it, to think deeply and critically about it, and to take their place on the public stage. This, at any rate, is the goal.

It matters, for without social understanding, there can be no wisdom. Good judgment has always relied on the long view—historical understanding. This involves long-term thinking and long-term responsibility alongside an intimate knowledge of particulars. So it is with the other social literacies: without geographic understanding, there can be no cultural or environmental intelligence; without economic understanding, no sane use of resources; without political understanding, no *We The People*, no freedom, and no common good; and without these in combination, no inventive work to build a just and sustainable society, both locally and globally.

One thing is clear: such wisdom cannot be achieved by a handful of courses in a middle or high school curriculum. Social studies needs to be set deeply into the school curriculum from the earliest grades. What results is a snowball effect: knowledge growing each year on its own momentum, empowering students with each passing year. I can remember the teachers at my junior high school in Colorado, thinking that those of us who came from Lowell Elementary School were the smart kids. We were certainly not the smart kids, just ordinary working- and middle-class children who were lucky enough to have been taught social studies daily and with good materials since kindergarten. Consequently, we knew quite a lot about the world and, for this reason, were better able (and therefore more willing) to learn new material.

Educational researchers dub this the Matthew Effect¹ after that section in the biblical Book of Matthew where we read that the rich get richer and the poor poorer. The rich get richer because they can invest their surplus—what they're not spending to live—thereby earning still more, which they reinvest, and so on, becoming more wealthy. The Matthew Effect in education is based on the fact that prior knowledge is a powerful predictor of future learning. The knowledge and skills children *already* possess—the investment in learning that already has been made—enables them to learn still more. Knowledgeable students become more knowledgeable because their prior knowledge serves as a fertile seedbed in which additional knowledge can take root and thrive. Switching metaphors, knowledgeable students are building a house atop a foundation that already has been laid. This is much easier than building the house at the same time they

are struggling to lay its foundation. Here's the point: not having access to social studies learning from the earliest levels of schooling is disabling intellectually and socially.

The Book's Purpose

The purpose of this book is to help teachers, school leaders, curriculum workers, policymakers, and scholars think freshly and critically about social studies education. More than thinking *about* it, however, the book's purpose is to engage readers in thinking *through* some of the most intriguing questions that animate social studies education today, and to do so with the help of some of the field's top scholars. While the book's setting is largely the United States, I believe it can be useful elsewhere, too—as a contrast, a comparison, and a reflective mirror. Some of the most important questions are hardly unique to any one country.

Why, for example, do so few middle and high school history teachers engage their students in actually doing historical work: making, supporting, and evaluating claims about historical events and forces? Is the teacher's own historical knowledge too spotty for that? Is the school's climate stifling? Are students simply not 'ready' for the intellectual challenge of interrogating a thesis or constructing one of their own? Are they able only to listen to adults *tell* them a historical narrative? Furthermore, and connecting school learning to democratic citizenship, aren't there serious consequences for democracy if high school graduates haven't learned to distinguish between a claim that is supported by evidence, on the one hand, and one told to them by an authority figure, whether a teacher, pastor, or politician?

Consider a second question, this one involving the youngest students. Is there really a need to teach about cultural universals in the primary grades? It seems obvious that children already know so much about food, shelter, and clothing simply as a consequence of being alive—eating pizza, living in an apartment, wearing shoes and socks—that taking precious school time for it is redundant. Or, is their knowledge of these powerful concepts frail and loaded with misconceptions (e.g., people eat food because they're hungry; they wear clothes because it's cold), hardly the foundation needed to support later learning?

Each one of the book's chapters opens a unique window on the social studies education scene early in the 21st century—eC21. "eC21" draws on Raymond Williams' system for historical dating where *e*, *m*, and *l* designate the early, middle, and late thirds of a century. Williams, who had an original analytic mind, wrote *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*.² In that book, he grappled with over 100 terms that are central to our thinking but fundamentally ambiguous. They are always in flux and, because they are important, subject to argument; for example, *history*, *culture*, *educated*, *science*, *ideology*, and *democracy*. Williams didn't take these concepts at face value. He didn't try simply to define them; he tried to get to the bottom of them and to place them in historical context.

His work inspired the book you have in your hands in a basic way: I wanted to present an array of contemporary thinking about social studies education so that readers could deepen their understanding of this field but also so they could look critically at how contemporary scholars are thinking and writing about social studies today in its various aspects. It is a book about social studies education, but it is also a book about how we construct social studies education, again and again, by enacting it, describing it, and debating its means and ends. *Social studies* is the keyword of this book. It is a concept—a social construct. It is human-made like a pyramid, not natural like a tree; therefore, its meanings change with time, place, and political context. Social studies education is contingent, buffeted by social forces, and it reflects the anxieties, power dynamics, and “culture wars” of the day.

Contentious Curricula

The term “social studies” means different things to different people. Generally, in the United States today it connotes a loose federation of social science courses: history (world, national, and state), geography, government, economics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. “Social Studies,” as such, is the name of a *department* in middle and high schools—the department that houses courses with names like these—and of a *subject* in primary schools. In the latter, “social studies” is an amalgamation of these social science disciplines and is thereby distinct from two other amalgamations found in the primary school curriculum: “science” (biology + geology + physics, etc.) and “math” (arithmetic + algebra + geometry, etc.) Reading, writing, speaking, and listening—together “language arts”—are another amalgamation. The first four of the social science disciplines (history, geography, government, economics) are dominant in eC21, which is a consequence of tradition, interest group politics (historians are better organized and bigger than the others), and to some extent the standards and accountability movement that began in IC20. That movement narrowed the curriculum in some communities to the point where social studies was edged to the sidelines in favor of still greater attention to literacy and math instruction and, because of current anxieties about economic and military competitiveness, science and technology.

Defenders of the loose federation approach have sought foremost to maintain the disciplinary integrity of each of the social sciences. At its best, this approach gave birth to the “inquiry” teaching movement in social studies (still much revered if scarcely practiced). That movement aimed to help students reconstruct, by their own intellectual efforts, the central concepts and generalizations of a discipline.³ At its worst, however, the approach made more than a few scholars into rigid disciplinarians guarding the disciplinary gates and defending what they think is disciplinary purity from polluters who would scramble the disciplines into an interdisciplinary omelet. Here, the integrity of an individual scholarly discipline, often history (or in math, algebra, or in science, physics), is held to be superior to competitors (e.g., geography) and to the jumble the subject is believed to become amid the pressures of curriculum enactment in schools: not history, algebra, and physics but “social studies,” “math,” and “science.”⁴ Neo-conservative federationists in the 1980s invented the hyphenated terms “history-social studies” and

“history-social science” to draw a line between the egg and the omelet. One can imagine the result were this practice extended to the other federations, resulting in the names “algebra-math” and “physics-science.”

In contrast to social studies as a federation of the several social sciences, there stands another meaning that is less attached to disciplinary purity than to the development of students as enlightened and engaged democratic citizens. This approach is sometimes called “social education.”⁵ It defines social studies as “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence”⁶—not the study of the social sciences for their own sakes, note, but for a civic purpose. Its aim is enlightened political engagement, we could say, or informed civic action. Its strategy is to combat *idiocy*, by which the ancient Greeks meant selfishness and inattention to public issues, and to nurture civic intelligence. This is a goal rooted in republican political thought, from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt. Its thesis is that neither humans nor their communities mature properly until individuals meet the challenge of *puberty*, which to the Greeks meant becoming public persons. These are people who see freedom and community not as opposites but as interdependent. They fight for others’ rights as well as their own. As Aristotle wrote, “individuals are so many parts all equally depending on the whole which alone can bring self-sufficiency.”⁷ *Idiots* are *idiotic* because they are ignorant of this insight and indifferent to the conditions and contexts of their own freedom. Idiots do not take part in public life—they do not *have* a public life. In this sense, idiots are immature in the most fundamental way. Their lives are out of balance, disoriented, untethered, and unrealized. For this reason, they are a threat not only to themselves but to the community.⁸

The two models, *social science* and *social education*, overlap and exist in tension with one another. It is a useful, productive tension, like others in education (depth/breadth, knowing/doing, child/curriculum). Consequently, much better than choosing between the two is to intersect them artfully, maintaining each as a corrective and challenge to the other. The first model seems to predominate in the secondary school in eC21 while the second has more influence in the elementary school. But, does it matter?

Does it matter which model or what manner of hybrid a school decides to enact? On at least one level it does not. What matters more is that on the lived, everyday ground of educational practice what teachers do behind classroom doors largely determines the curriculum students actually receive and the sense they make of it. This is not to say teachers work in a vacuum; they don’t. They are subject to national and local policies, the expectations of the communities in which their schools are embedded, the myriad social forces that bear down on schools and teachers, and the intelligence, strength, and style of building leadership. Despite these, teachers do have agency: their choices matter as does what they know (their reading habits, news sources, past learning, and opportunities for continuing professional development). But no matter which of the two models is enacted, social studies is likely to be boring to many students, especially in secondary schools; it is likely to be superficial rather than penetrating, and to feel irrelevant to many students.

Whatever the model, *coverage* of a broad mass of subject matter alongside classroom *control* of more-or-less disengaged and potentially misbehaving students are two tacit purposes of instruction that continue to haunt the field to its bones.

Who Decides the Social Studies Curriculum?

Public schools are technologies for creating persons of particular kinds. Nations everywhere use schools for this purpose—to form subjects and citizens with particular identities, imaginations, and abilities in relation to the government, ethnic groups, civil society, church, market, family, and strangers. Schools are not asked simply to instill knowledge and skills but to “make up people.”⁹ Political scientists know this people-making process as *political socialization*—the largely unconscious activity of reproducing people who embody the dominant social norms, customs, beliefs, and institutions. But educators, political leaders, and parents, however, are concerned to intervene in history and intentionally to shape society’s future; that is, they are concerned with *conscious* social production. Their currency is not description and explanation, as with political scientists, but planning and prescription—renewal, improvement, transformation, liberation, social justice, cultural restoration, and so forth. They don’t merely observe schooling, they create it. In doing so they specify not only what students will learn but what sorts of people they will become: responsible, knowledgeable, loyal, compliant, critical, religious, secular, competitive, collaborative, law-abiding, caring, and so forth. The list is long. It is often contradictory and always contentious.¹⁰

For this reason, public schools have been ‘ground zero’ in the culture wars. “The struggles for the control of the schools,” Walter Lippmann wrote in 1928,

are among the bitterest political struggles which now divide the nations... Wherever two or more groups within a state differ in religion, or in language and in nationality, the immediate concern of each group is to use the schools to preserve its own faith and tradition. For it is in the school that the child is drawn towards or drawn away from the religion and the patriotism of its parents.¹¹

Witness the epic battles over the desegregation of schools, the teaching of evolution, and the multiple ways of telling America’s story, from Columbus’s expedition to today’s disputes over immigration policy. At the core of many controversies in social studies education is disagreement about the relationship between education and society: should schools serve the status quo or transform it? This is an enormously important question and the subject of the chapter that follows this introduction. Suffice it to say that there are roughly three responses to this question, and they fall on the political left, right, and center. On both the right and left are rather clear visions of society, and schools are “technologies” (in the sense used earlier) for realizing them. On the right, students are to be made into people who serve the current social order and thrive on its terms. On the left, students are to be made into people who change it in order to create a more just and vibrant democracy, one that would include the economy rather than leaving it in the hands of the market. In the center is the Deweyan position: Students should be helped to build knowledge through, as he put it, “intelligent study of historical and existing forces

and conditions.”¹² They should also be taught to use their minds well—to think critically, to engage in higher order reasoning, to value and use scientific inquiry. But they are not to be told to what end they should use these competencies; that is, they should not be indoctrinated. Rather, they should be left free to use their minds as they see fit. It is up to them—well-educated democratic citizens, trained thinkers—to engage in the ongoing work of government of, by, and for the people.

In addition to this fundamental issue, there are loads of specific subject matter controversies. This is due to the simple fact that the social studies field contains an almost limitless body of potential subject matter, but limited instructional time. This means that very little can actually be taught. Indeed, every school has three social studies curricula: the explicit, the null, and the implicit.¹³ Only a tiny sample of the universe of possible topics and skills is included in the explicit curriculum. This is the officially planned and publicized curriculum found in curriculum standards documents of states, school districts, and national organizations; it is found also in teachers’ lesson and unit plans, on classroom bulletin boards and websites, and in curriculum materials. What is not included in this subject matter is tossed, figuratively speaking, into a huge bin marked “null curriculum.” This is a giant absence. It consists of all the subject matter that is not included in the taught curriculum. Here are whole topics (e.g., inequality), whole peoples (e.g., gays and lesbians in history), and whole disciplines (e.g., anthropology) but also the intellectual processes and values not cultivated. Whole subjects such as art, music, and even social studies and science were sometimes tossed into the null curriculum as the standards-and-accountability hysteria bore down on schools in eC21.

Occupying the third dimension—the implicit or hidden curriculum—are the values, perspectives, and behaviors that are shaped not deliberately by the official curriculum but subtly by the social interaction patterns of the school and its reward systems. Students quickly learn, for example, that they need to share the teacher’s attention with many other students, that compliance and attendance are crucial to success in school, that the computer lab is mainly for testing, that sexual harassment of female students and faculty is or isn’t sanctioned, and so forth.

Who has the legitimate democratic authority to select the tiny sample of potential material that will get taught? We arrive the ‘who decides?’ question. Parents and educators are two of the key players in curricular decision making, of course, but so are citizens. (Because these are roles, not persons, they overlap.) Parents may claim they have a natural right to exclusive educational authority—natural because, first, the children in question are “their” children (the ownership assumption), and second because parents are naturally concerned to maximize the welfare of their children (the evolutionary assumption). Both assumptions are specious, as both educators and citizens are quick to point out. Parents may have given birth to or adopted children, but that does not establish possession. Children have been imagined to “belong” to the gods, to God, to the state or the village, for example. The propensity of at least some families to teach racist, sexist, and other values that contradict the liberal-democratic ideal, particularly the

bedrock values of freedom, equality, popular sovereignty, tolerance, and justice, undermines the second assumption, as does the frequency of child abuse and neglect.

Neither professional educators nor democratic citizens are inclined, as parents sometimes may be, to claim exclusive educational authority, because that would be blatantly undemocratic. Rather, both groups claim a seat at the deliberative table, alongside parents, where curricular policy is developed in a democratic society. Amy Gutmann has developed a comprehensive portrayal of this democratic role conflict as part of her democratic theory of education.¹⁴ She concludes that collective moral argument and decision making (deliberation) among the array of educational actors is the most democratically justifiable approach to the authority question. In brief, who should decide the curriculum by which the next generation of democrats shall be educated? All of us together, weighing the alternatives, arguing, and listening.

The Book's Plan

Each of the 31 chapters that follows was written at my invitation as editor of "Research and Practice," a regular feature in the journal *Social Education*. In this role, I had the luxury of wondering about the social studies field, developing questions based on that curiosity, and then asking leading scholars to respond to those questions. Their responses were published at the rate of one every few issues between 2001 and 2015. These authors not only knew a great deal about the literature on the topic (hence, the sometimes lengthy reference section at the end of a chapter), but also how to compose an essay that was rich but brief and accessible to non-specialists.

Glancing at the Table of Contents, you will see that there are five sections after the Introduction you are now reading. These five parts and their chapters correspond to the themes I now introduce.

1. *Purpose Matters*: Social studies always has been a battleground where curriculum controversies reflect the cultural and academic conflicts at play in society. Should the social studies curriculum aim to transmit the existing social order, preparing students to succeed within its norms and values, or should it aim to transform the status quo, helping students create a better society? If the latter, what sort of "better" is it? Should history, geography, economics, or something else be the driving force in the social studies curriculum? Diverse purposes also insinuate themselves into daily instruction even more intimately: Why, for example, do so few history teachers engage students in historical inquiry? One possibility is that many teachers are bound to a different purpose: not authentic intellectual challenge, but coverage and control.

2. *Perspective Matters*: Social perspectives are not trivial in teaching and learning. African American and immigrant students may interpret U.S. history lessons differently than do suburban white students. The enduring "nation of immigrants" narrative is swallowed easily by some students while catching in the throats of others; those Latino students in the southwest, for example, whose

ancestors never migrated but experienced a change in government. Girls and boys may perceive social studies differently as have Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Native American students. A student's location in the hierarchy of social status and power can serve as a strong filter of the teacher's lessons and the contents of curriculum materials. Indeed, students' social perspectives, stemming from the groups and locations of their birth, are pivotal in teaching and learning.

3. *Subject Matters*: School subjects, like social studies, math, science, and language arts, are constructs: they were assembled at various points in time and space, and they are hotly debated and periodically remodeled. In eC21 we find the school subject called "social studies" and the various courses and themes within it again in a period of heightened debate and renewal. Three examples: We are learning a great deal about how young people think about the past and how teachers can provide more powerful history instruction; we are learning that there is a new consensus as to what are best practices in civics education but that students have strikingly unequal access to them; and we are learning more deeply about the variation with which a single topic, such as the Holocaust, or course of study, such as World History, is taught from one school and community to another.

4. *Global Matters*. Something called "global education" is all the rage in eC21, making it difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff—the globalism from the globaloney, the curriculum from the slogan. Nations everywhere create schools to serve *national* purposes, and they are doing so even more intensely today as they struggle for economic competitiveness; consequently, we are prudent to treat claims about "global" or "international" education with skepticism until proven otherwise. Social studies educators are well-positioned to teach a new generation to see the world more clearly and know it more accurately, but to do this we must steer clear of the hype and prattle. The stakes are high. With rapidly-developing Internet resources, geospatial technologies, and social media come all sorts of opportunities to teach students new literacies, and old ones, too. A central challenge remains judging the credibility of information sources, and this might be *the* core literacy objective of social studies teaching and learning in a globalizing world.

5. *Puzzles*. Five puzzles are presented. First, picture this: A monotonous teacher is conducting a recitation (*Ferris Bueller's* "Anyone? Anyone?") while students snooze or goof off. Hollywood likes to seize upon this image when it portrays high school history classes, underscoring the surprising absence of lively discussions and debates, mock trials and moot courts. Students say they love these things, and they can be profoundly educative. So, why the scarcity? Second, social studies instruction is situated in highly variable school environments: "chilling climates," for example, where teachers engage in self-censorship out of fear of community pressure groups; and "drought-stricken"

climates where pupils are assumed to be burdened by family and personal pathologies. Third, tolerance. Defined as the willingness to extend civil liberties to those whose views you find objectionable, it follows that you don't tolerate people you love or groups you support or ideas you believe in. Tolerance is something different. But can it be taught at school? Or is it part of life-long learning, maturation, or, simply, good fortune? Fourth, middle school students are effervescent adolescents with hormones ramped into high gear. Is there any room for intellectual development? Finally, and returning to *Ferris Bueller*, we focus on the use of film in social studies teaching and learning. What are the best practices? Are teachers limited to, as the phrase goes, "showing a movie"; and is a documentary any more credible than a narrative film?

These are my themes, but there is no reason they need to be yours. A useful exercise for readers will be to create their own set of themes based on their own interpretations and groupings of the chapters.

Social Studies at the Center

Jailed after leading a nonviolent protest against racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. sat in his cell and drafted a letter that has become a fixture in the American literary and political canon. Probably no one can claim to be well-educated who hasn't read it, not in the United States at least. Its keywords are two of the most difficult and dynamic in any language: *justice* and *injustice*. The tricky part of taking one's place on the public stage, King wrote, is to square law with justice. He asked a key question rhetorically, knowing that this is what he was being asked about his civil disobedience: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" His reply:

The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.¹⁵

It was an open message to the world, but King's immediate audience was a group of white clergymen who had written a few days earlier that his activities in their segregated state were the "unwise and untimely" doings of an "outsider." Sincerely and patiently in this letter, he educates them. It is a respectful adult-to-adult letter, cleric-to-cleric, black-to-white. He tells them he is in Birmingham "because injustice is here" and because "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."¹⁶

Re-reading the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* myself, and listening to classrooms of middle and high school students discuss it in Socratic seminars, I am reminded of another original educator, Thomas Jefferson, who two centuries before had warned that because "the people themselves" are democracy's engine, "their minds must be improved to a certain degree."¹⁷ In other words, democratic citizens don't grow on trees or appear out of thin air; rather, "we the people" must be *educated* from idiocy to puberty and then

to enlightened political engagement. King was trying to accomplish a piece of instruction in his letter. But I wonder why these grown men needed his tutorial—why they hadn't already learned it. This wasn't two centuries ago, after all. I can't presume I would have done any better at that time and place, of course; however, in my judgment, this is why social studies is at the center, not the margins, of a good school curriculum and why it needs to begin early in the primary grades and continue, snowballing, straight through college.

Notes

¹ Herbert J. Walberg and Shiow-Ling Tsai, "Matthew Effects in education," *Educational Research Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1983): 359-73; and Keith E. Stanovich, "Matthew Effects in reading," *Reading Research Quarterly* 21 (1986): 360-407.

² London: Fontana/Croom Helm (1976). And see the revision by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds., *New keywords: a revised vocabulary of culture and society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

³ For example, Edward Fenton, *The new social studies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), and Irving Morrissett, ed., *Concepts and the structure in the new social science curricula* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967).

⁴ Classic criticisms along these lines include Arthur E. Bestor, *Educational wastelands: The retreat from learning in our public schools* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1953); and Diane Ravitch, "Tot sociology, or what happened to history in the grade schools," *American Scholar*, 56, no. 3 (1987): 343-354.

⁵ Stephen J. Thornton, *Teaching social studies that matters* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005); also, Hazel W. Hertzberg, *Social Studies Reform, 1880-1980* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium, 1981).

⁶ This is the definition of the National Council for the Social Studies at www.socialstudies.org.

⁷ Aristotle, *The politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958): 6. Also, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1981): 263.

⁸ I develop the concepts "enlightened political engagement," "idiocy," "puberty," and "citizenship" in my book, *Teaching democracy: Unity and diversity in public life* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

⁹ Ian Hacking, *Historical ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ See Amy Gutmann, *Democratic education*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture wars in the public schools*

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Herbert M. Kliebard, *The struggle for the American curriculum, 1893-1958*, 3rd ed. (New York: Falmer, 2004).

¹¹ *American Inquisitors* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1928/1993): 22-23.

¹² John Dewey, "The crucial role of intelligence," *The Social Frontier* 1, no. 5 (1935): 9.

¹³ Elliot W. Eisner, *The educational imagination*, 3rd ed. (Columbus, OH: Merrill/Prentice Hall, 2002).

¹⁴ Gutmann, op. cit.

¹⁵ "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in King's *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Mentor, 1963): 82.

¹⁶ Ibid: 77

¹⁷ *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1787/1954): 148.