Chapter 1

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 (they always do anyway, in school and out), but are helped systematically to understand it, to care for it, to think deeply and critically about it, and to take their place on the public stage, standing on equal footing with others. 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—involved long-term thinking and long-term responsibility alongside 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”; and without these in combination, no inventive, collaborative work on building 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 Englewood, 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 systematically and with good materials since kindergarten. Consequently, we knew quite a lot and, for this reason, were better able (and therefore more willing) to learn new material.

Educational researchers dub this the Matthew Effect\(^1\) after that section in the biblical Book of Matthew where one reads 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 still. 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 it 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 perhaps too weak for that? Is the school’s climate stifling? Are students simply not able to do it—not “ready” to construct or interrogate a thesis, able only to listen to others tell history to them? 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 and argument, on the one hand, and one told to them by an authority figure, whether a teacher or a president?

Consider a second question, this one involving the youngest students. Is there seriously 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, for example, 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 meager and loaded with misconceptions (e.g., people eat foods they like; they eat because they are hungry), hardly the sort of foundation needed to support later learning?
Each one of the book’s 23 central 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 and was an astute observer of culture and language, wrote Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. In this book, he grappled with over 100 terms that are central to our thinking but fundamentally ambiguous, 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 tried to get to the bottom of them and placed 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 dimensions. 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 buffeted by all manner of social forces, and it reflects the anxieties, power dynamics, and “culture wars” of the day.

Contentious Curricula

Of course, 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 elementary curriculum: “science” (biology + geology + physics, etc.) and “math” (arithmetic + algebra + geometry, etc.) The first four of the social science disciplines (history, geography, government, economics) are dominant in eC21, which is a consequence of habit, interest groups (historians are bigger and more organized than the others), and to some extent the standards and accountability movement that began late in the 20th century. The latter narrowed the curriculum in some communities to the point where social studies was edged to the sidelines in favor of still greater attention to reading and math instruction and, because of current anxiety about economic and military competitiveness, science and technology.
Defenders of the federation approach have sought 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 construct, by their own intellectual efforts, the central concepts and generalizations of a discipline. 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, especially those who would scramble the disciplines into an interdisciplinary omelet. Here, the integrity of an individual scholarly discipline, often history (or in math, algebra, and in science, physics), is held to be superior to competitors (e.g., sociology) but especially against the jumble the subject is believed to become amid the exigencies of curriculum enactment in schools: not history, algebra, and physics but “social studies,” “math,” and “science.” Neo-conservative federationists in the 1980s invented the hyphenated terms “history-social studies” and “history-social science” to draw a line between the historical egg and the omelet. One can imagine the result were this strange practice extended to the other federations: “algebra-math,” “physics-science,” etc.

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.” It defines social studies as “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence.” Not the study of the social sciences for their own sakes, note, but for a civic purpose. Its aim, we could say, is enlightened political engagement. 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 communitarian or republican political thought, from Aristotle to Rousseau and 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. Idiots are idiotic precisely because they are ignorant of or indifferent to the conditions and contexts of their own freedom. For this reason, they are a threat not only to themselves but to the community.

The two models, social science and social education, overlap, but it appears that the first predominates in the secondary school in eC21 while the second has somewhat more influence in the primary school. In the latter, however, social studies of any sort has been pushed in some locales to the margins of the curriculum due to the testing-and-accountability frenzy that has gripped the school system since the 1990s. This squeezing of social studies, it
must be noted, has had a “disproportionate impact on the most disadvantaged students.”

Do these alternatives matter? On at least one level they do 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 the substance, strength, and style of building leadership. Despite these, teachers do have agency: what they do matters as does what they know. But no matter which of the two models is enacted, social studies is likely to be boring to many students, especially in secondary schools; to be superficial rather than penetrating, and to feel irrelevant to many of them. Whatever the approach, coverage of an incomprehensibly broad mass of subject matter alongside classroom control of more-or-less bored and potentially misbehaving students are two tacit purposes that continue to haunt the field to its bones.

Who Decides the Curriculum?

Public schools are technologies for creating persons of particular kinds. Nations everywhere have used 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.” 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. Educators, political leaders, and parents, however, are concerned to intervene in history and to intentionally shape society’s future; 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. They don’t only 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.

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,
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 creationism, and the multiple ways of telling America’s story, from Columbus’s expedition to the war in Iraq.12 Richard Rothstein explains that, because our political economy is a free-market democracy, “schools are, by far, the largest public activity in which we engage…. At the local level, schools are virtually the only institution about which we can fight in the public arena.”13

At the core of many controversies in social studies education is disagreement about the fundamental relationship between education and society: should schools cater to 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 at this point 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 taught to succeed in and serve the current social order. On the left, students are to be taught to 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 Dewey put it, “intelligent study of historical and existing forces and conditions,”14 but also taught to use their minds well—to think critically and 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 are not to be indoctrinated but 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 scads of more 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 dictates that very little of it can be taught. Indeed, every school has three social studies curricula: the explicit, the null, and the implicit.15 Consequently, many decisions are needed. Only a tiny sample of the vast 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 the huge bin marked “null curriculum.” This is a giant absence, a foreclosure consisting of all the subject matter that is
not included in the taught curriculum. Here are whole topics (e.g., the agricultural revolution), whole peoples (e.g., gays and lesbians in history), and whole courses (e.g., anthropology) but also the intellectual processes and values not cultivated. Whole subjects such as art, music, social studies, and even science were sometimes tossed into the null bin as the standards-and-accountability hysteria bore down on schools.

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 by the social interaction patterns of the school and its reward systems. Students quickly learn that, for example, they need to share the teacher’s attention with many other students, that compliance and attendance are crucial to success in school, that geography means knowing the names of places, that sexual harassment of female students and faculty is or isn’t sanctioned, that the school is racially tracked, and so forth.

Who has the legitimate democratic authority to select the tiny sample of potential material that will get taught? We arrive at 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 altruistic 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 could be and have been imagined to “belong” to the gods, the state, or the village, for example. The propensity of at least some families to teach racist, ethnocentric, sexist, and other values that contradict the democratic ideal, particularly the bedrock values of civic equality, popular sovereignty, tolerance, and freedom, 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 obviously 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 contention as part of her democratic theory of education. She concludes that collective moral argument and decision making (deliberation) among the various educational roles 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, listening and arguing.
The Book’s Plan

Each of the 23 central chapters 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 then published at the rate of one every few issues between 2001 and 2009. These authors not only knew a great deal about the literature on the topic (hence, the sometimes lengthy reference list at the end of a chapter), but also how to compose an essay that was rich but brief and accessible.

Glancing at the Table of Contents, you will see that there are five sections between the Introduction you are now reading and my concluding chapter at the end. These five parts correspond to the themes I now introduce.

1. **Purpose Matters**: Social studies has always 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, 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 hypothesis is that many teachers hold to a different purpose: coverage and control.

2. **Perspective Matters**: Social perspectives are not trivial in teaching and learning. African American students may interpret U.S. history lessons differently than do suburban White students. The popular “nation of immigrants” narrative is swallowed easily by some students while catching in the throats of others; 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 locales they were thrown into at birth, are pivotal in teaching and learning.

3. **Subject Matters**: School subjects, like social studies, math, science, and language arts are constructs; they were built up at various points and places in time and are hotly debated and periodically remodeled.
eC21 we find the school subject called “social studies” and the various courses and themes within it again in a period of heightened activity, scrutiny, 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 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, is taught from one school and community to another.

4. **Global Matters.** Something called “global education” (and “international education”) is all the rage in eC21, making more difficult the task of separating the wheat from the chaff. Nations everywhere create schools to serve **national** purposes, and they are doing so even more intensely today as they struggle to strengthen their economic competitiveness amid globalization. As Kenneth Tye found, “throughout the world, schooling is still seen as a major force in the building of national loyalties.” 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 and know the world differently, but to do this social studies educators must steer clear of the hype.

5. **Puzzles.** Four singular problems are presented. A clueless history teacher is conducting a recitation while students snooze, doodle, or pass notes. Nearly every time it portrays high schools, Hollywood seizes upon this image and the surprising absence of discussion in social studies classrooms. Students say they love discussions, and discussions can be profoundly educative; so, why the scarcity? Second, instruction is situated in highly variable school environments: “chilling climates,” for example, where teachers engage in self-censorship out of fear of community interest groups; and “drought-stricken” climates where pupils are said to be burdened by home and personal pathologies. Third, how should we think about the boundary between content and pedagogy; the borderland between curriculum and instruction? Are the two separate and separable or is their relationship more intimate? At issue are key subject matter questions like this one: Can students be educated for democracy in a non-democratic classroom? Fourth, tolerance. Defined as the willingness to extend civil liberties to those whose views you find objectionable, it follows that you cannot demonstrate tolerance toward groups whose ideas you support or about which you don’t care. Can it be taught in schools? Or is it part of life-long learning, maturation, or, simply, good fortune?
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 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 rhetorically, knowing that this is what he was being asked, “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.\(^\text{18}\)

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 tries to educate 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.”\(^\text{19}\)

Re-reading the *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* myself, and listening to classrooms of middle and high school students discuss it in seminars and literature circles, I am reminded of another 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.”\(^\text{20}\) In other words, democratic citizens don’t grow on trees or appear out of the blue; “the people” must be *educated* from idiocy to puberty and citizenship. King was trying to accomplish a piece of this work 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


4 For example, Arthur E. Bestor, Educational wastelands: The retreat from learning in our public schools (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1953); also Diane Ravitch, “Tot sociology, or what happened to history in the grade schools,” American Scholar, 56, no. 3 (1987): 343-354.


7 I develop the concepts “enlightened political engagement,” “idiocy,” “puberty,” and “citizenship” in the final chapter of this book and, in greater detail, in Walter C. Parker, Teaching democracy: Unity and diversity in public life (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).


Gutmann, op. cit.


Ibid: 77