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Book Review of, The Status of Social Studies: Views From the Field

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Book Review

Gayle Thieman, is an associate professor in the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University, Oregon. She teaches and advises pre-service teachers, specializing in social studies methods, curriculum and instructional design and technology. Dr. Thieman was a secondary school teacher and administrator for 20 years and is a past president of the National Council for the Social Studies.

Passe, J. & Fitchett, P. G. (eds.) (2013). *The status of social studies: Views from the field*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Until publication of *The Status of Social Studies: Views from the Field*, social studies teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers lacked comprehensive information about how social studies is currently taught in U.S. schools. While numerous articles bemoaned the marginalization of social studies, there was a dearth of quantitative data about the enacted social studies curriculum, teachers' beliefs and instructional practice. Since the 1980s, social studies research has involved small-scale studies, frequently qualitative, that could not clarify the nation-wide status of the field. Responding to this lack of data, a multi-state team of researchers collaborated to administer the Survey on the Status of Social Studies (S4), garnering responses from over 11,000 teachers nation-wide.

The 375-page book, edited by College of New Jersey Dean Jeff Passe and University of North Carolina-Charlotte associate professor Paul Fitchett and authored by fifty researchers, is organized into six sections. Part I describes the development of the national survey and summarizes key findings from each section. It also includes a chapter comparing the results from three states, Oregon, Kansas, and Virginia (Thieman & Carano, 2013). Part II summarizes the status of social studies instruction across developmental levels: early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school. Part III explores varied curricular themes including democratic values, history, geography, religion, race and class. Part IV focuses on teaching strategies: using primary sources, incorporating current events, simulations and role plays, integrating technology, and addressing the needs of English Learners. Part V examines issues of professional development, teacher support and control in the current environment of high-stakes assessment and accountability. Finally Part VI considers the status of social studies from the perspective of the Common Core State Standards and suggests next steps for our profession.

Common themes emerged across the chapters. The survey data confirmed the continued marginalization of social studies for early childhood and elementary students, and when taught, social studies was often integrated into other subject areas. While

secondary teachers reported smaller decreases in instructional time, they also felt constrained by state assessment policies.

Instructional and curricular decisions were remarkably similar across grade levels. Elementary, middle, and high school teachers prioritized preparing good citizens and strongly agreed that the primary goal of social studies is to develop students' critical thinking skills. Elementary and secondary teachers expressed a similar preference for cooperative learning and using primary sources, maps and globes in the classroom. However, middle and high school teachers also emphasized writing assignments and listening to lectures. Teaching civic responsibility, core democratic values and social history and integrating current events were highly ranked by most teachers; however, only middle and high school teachers prioritized political history.

The national survey highlighted a disturbing equity gap. It is especially worrisome that teachers in highly diverse schools reported less authority and control over their teaching than did teachers in predominantly white schools. The researchers speculated that this was the result of "teaching-to-the-test pressures in minority settings" (p. 207). The survey results also confirmed the digital divide between instructional opportunities for students in low and high socioeconomic classrooms. Teachers identified as high-frequency technology users were more likely to teach in high socio-economic schools. Furthermore teachers in schools with more racially diverse students reported lack of funding was a significant barrier to participation in professional development.

The survey also illuminated missing curriculum, specifically teaching about religion, which was ranked 9th out of ten, and teaching about race and class. Elementary teachers were much less likely to report teaching about race and class, while teachers of color and those who taught in more racially diverse classrooms were more likely to report teaching about these subjects. Given the increasing racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity and growing economic inequality within the U.S. population this is a matter of concern.

The chapter on the status of social studies and the Common Core State Standards explores implications of the Common Core for the marginalization of social studies, democratic discourse, disciplinary and inquiry-oriented skills, media and technology literacy and argues that, "the CCSS-ELA elevates social studies as a central part of the curriculum...and validates social studies as a core academic area" (p.324).

This review is a mere snapshot of the rich and varied findings from the largest survey of social studies professionals in over thirty years. However, while the editors assert, "researchers can confidently use the S4 and accompanying data to examine contemporary issues in the field of social studies education" (p. 35), there are some limitations. Five states (Florida, Oregon, Georgia, Arkansas, and North Carolina) represent 47% of the surveys, with the remaining 39 states accounting for 53%. Some of the largest states, such as California, Illinois, and New York, are vastly underrepresented in the survey. Despite these methodological concerns, the survey provides a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data, much of which is awaiting further analysis.

The book presents a complex topic in a highly readable and user-friendly format with well-organized chapters and statistical details noted in appendices. Classroom

teachers may see themselves mirrored in both hopeful and challenging ways with insightful suggestions they can share with their school administrators. District leaders, local and state policy makers will find informative data and policy recommendations for improving the quality of social studies education. Social studies teacher educators and researchers will find provocative questions for further exploration. This book challenges social studies leaders to examine the survey findings and take action.

References

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