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# Developing Future Citizens of America: Repositioning Social Studies Education in an Era of Accountability

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**Developing Future Citizens of America:  
Repositioning Social Studies Education in an Era of Accountability**

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**Abstract**

As a discipline, social studies develops critical and historical thinking skills while exposing students to democratic values. Such skills remain essential to preparing future leaders of America. Yet, recent research continues to demonstrate the increased marginalization of social studies, especially in light of educational reform movements and accountability measures. This study interviewed eight 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers from diverse central Massachusetts elementary schools to better understand the voices of teachers. In particular, the teachers described factors impacting their instructional opportunities in social studies. Implications from this study include additional collaborative opportunities with other educators at the same grade level to gain more pedagogical skills and content resources in social studies. Additionally, participating teachers needed improved educational opportunities during teacher preparation and in-service profession development to gain more familiarity with current standards, frameworks, and resources. Such opportunities also support improved pedagogical content knowledge.

**Keywords:** social studies, teacher education, qualitative research, accountability reforms

Imagine a typical school day for a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader in an American public school in 2018. Students stroll into the classroom at 8:40 a.m., greet their teacher, and hoist huge backpacks onto cubby hooks. They promptly sit and begin the daily “Do Now” review of multiplication facts. After reviewing attendance and ordering lunches, the teacher dutifully writes the state frameworks and learning objectives on the white board. Then the onslaught of academics commences with a 90-minute English language arts (ELA) block, followed by snack, enrichment (music, art, or physical education), lunch, recess, a 90-minute math work period, and 45 minutes for standardized test preparation to finish the day at 3 p.m. During the ELA block, students rotate through centers—guided reading, writing workshop, and independent reading. The math block entails computation paired with written expressions to develop rich mathematical understandings. Additionally, students practice multiple strategies for solving equations and

checking their work. Such practices provide meaningful learning opportunities, and yet, this common schedule ignores an essential field – social studies education. While the marginalization of social studies continues to solidify in the United States, diving deeply into teacher’s beliefs about how and why this shift perpetuates provides a research basis for changing our approach to educating the next generation.

### **Relevant Literature**

The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) promotes social studies as a subject where students “do” disciplinary work as historians, geographers, economists, and civic leaders rather than complete textbook-centered methods focused on fact memorization. Scholars have long argued for the essential inclusion of social studies in the elementary curriculum in order for students to gain knowledge and skills in civics, economics, geography, and history (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Collectively, these areas help prepare students to become informed and active citizens. Social studies education provides students with deep knowledge about democratic practices and critical thinking skills demanded for participation in government (Passes 2006). Other content areas rarely emphasize such skills. As future leaders, students must demonstrate knowledge of America’s founding documents including the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. Such exposure enables young people to make “informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an independent world” (McCall 2008, p. 137). So, we return to the question - why has social studies education become marginalized when it has potential to play an imperative role in shaping young citizens of America?

While the National Council for Social Studies continues to promote the benefits of social studies education, a national survey confirmed students fail to receive exposure to a strong social studies education (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014). As a discipline, social studies remains marginalized in the current era of accountability (Bolick, Adams, & Willox, 2010). Reductions in social studies instructional time to just 12 minutes per day in early elementary grades and 24 minutes per day in upper elementary grades persists (Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; Van Fossen, 2005). Such trends push researchers to ask how social studies can regain prominence in the elementary curriculum? This research study stems from this inquiry as it explores the voices of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers regarding social studies instruction.

### **Accountability Shifts under No Child Left Behind**

With the passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001, accountability took hold in American public education. State standards and corresponding high-stakes tests were mandated. While individual states retained autonomy to develop their own standards, the educational landscape in the United States dramatically shifted to increased federal control. In most states the development of standards and assessments resulted in “curriculum sprawl” (Olwell & Raphael, 2006) where content and skill demands expanded in many directions. Olwell and Raphael (2006) argued that NCLB caused a curriculum sprawl that expanded the breadth and depth of the benchmarks that students were expected to reach without expanded instructional time allotted for mastery. Marzano & Kendall (1998) estimated that teachers were expected to cover 200 standards and roughly 3,000 benchmarks in one academic year. These 3,000

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benchmarks demand more than 15,000 school hours, yet only 9,000 hours exist in a school year. As a result, up to 40% of the expected content may go untaught. To ensure that the tested standards are fully covered, 44% of districts in the United States have reduced time for social studies (McMurren, 2007).

The time period that followed the passing of the NCLB Act (2001) became known as the “Era of Accountability” due to the importance placed on quantitative test scores and value-added measurements. These accountability measures reduced the focus of state mandates to quantifiable metrics (Betebenner & Lin, 2010). States were required to hold students accountable for content learning by requiring students to take standardized, subject-specific, high-stakes exams. Schools gained labels as low-performing or high-performing based on student performances on high-stakes exams (Winstead, 2011). For example, students receiving lower scores impacted the school’s overall rating. If enough students performed poorly, the school may be labeled as “failing” and eventually be taken over by the state. Additionally, school performance designations affected funding. Thus, under-performance became a cycle. Low-performing schools were less likely to succeed because, “the schools, their teachers, and their students receive fewer funds for learning support and, thus, have fewer resources to commit towards improving or attaining higher scores” (Winstead, 2011, p. 222). Low-performing schools have attempted to improve student performance on standardized exams, and in turn, their school’s ratings, by emphasizing tested content and test-taking skills.

During the era of accountability, many states like Massachusetts developed curriculum frameworks and a corresponding evaluation tool like the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). MCAS has been administered in grades 3-8 and grade 10, in English language arts, mathematics, and, in some grades, science/technology. Although social science/history MCAS exams were administered in Massachusetts as pilot exams, mandated exams have not been adopted. The lack of accountability measures has significantly marginalized the subject of social studies in Massachusetts for more than a decade. Similar trends exist in other states. The Center on Education Policy found 44% of all districts have reduced time for social studies and 51% percent of districts with failing schools have limited social studies instruction (McMurren, 2007). Comparably, Winstead (2011) and Vogler (2003) confirmed that subjects with standardized exams receive more instructional time in elementary classrooms than those subjects without mandated, state-wide testing. Such evidence-based research illuminates an alarming pattern - social studies continues to receive limited instructional time because school districts are dedicating more of their instructional time to subjects that are tested (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; Rock et al., 2006).

### **Limited Content Knowledge**

Moreover, teacher’s lack of social studies content knowledge further reduced instructional time for social studies in elementary classrooms (Ritter, 2012). Preservice teachers often experience methods courses in literacy and mathematics, but fewer have a methods course in social studies instruction (Ritter, 2012). Furthermore, teachers who dislike social studies or do not feel confident teaching social studies content, use the tight schedule to squeeze out social studies (Van Driel & Berry, 2012). When elementary educators find time to teach social studies, they often utilize fact-recall, teacher-centered, textbook instruction (Winstead, 2011). Such pedagogies fail to engage students in meaningful experiences as developing historians. Although many states have social studies standards, teachers spend little time teaching social studies due to

limited instructional time, greater emphasis on tested subjects, and limited formal preparation to teach the complexities of social studies education. Consequently, we are creating a public education crisis by ignoring a subject that is essential for developing active citizens in a representative democracy.

### Research Methods

Two research questions guide this study - 1. How do 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers, in central Massachusetts, describe their experiences teaching social studies? 2. What factors do teachers say impact social studies instruction?

### Grade-level Selection

Three factors influenced the selection of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers in Massachusetts: organization of the MA curriculum frameworks, organizational structures of elementary schools, and the onset of standardized testing. The Massachusetts' Curriculum Frameworks for History and Social Science (2003) utilize the expanding communities organizational approach – a common model in the United States for over 80 years (Halvorsen, 2009). In this approach, earlier grades focus on content directly connected to students' lives, moving to local history, followed by state and national history and culminating with world geography. Figure 1 displays the social studies content emphasized at each grade level in MA.

**Figure 1. Massachusetts Social Studies Curriculum Organization**

Pre-K and Kindergarten	• Family and Community
1st Grade	• US and World Folktales
2nd Grade	• Citizenship and Family History
3rd Grade	• Massachusetts and Local History
4th Grade	• Geography
5th Grade	• Columbian North America
6th Grade	• Geography and Europe

In addition, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teaching teams are less likely to use a departmentalized approach where one teacher instructs multiple sections of a discipline like social studies, as is the case in many middle and high school settings. Departmentalized teams often have blocked times in the day's schedule for each core subject. The goal of this project was to better understand how classroom teachers who taught all subjects utilized their time. And notably, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade was chosen because it

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is the first exposure students have to high-stakes tests in Massachusetts. As a result, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers are often required to teach both content and test-taking strategies.

### School Selection

Due to the potential impact of school context, the participants included teachers across the Massachusetts “leveling” system. The leveling system, developed in response to Massachusetts passing of the *Act Relative to the Achievement Gap* in January 2010, was formalized by the MA Board of Elementary and Secondary Education as a means of labeling schools based on “absolute achievement, student growth, and improvement trends as measured by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)” (Stein, Therriault, Kister, Auchstetter, & Melchior, 2016). The lowest performing schools, level 5, need the most support, while level 1 schools receive the least support. The participants were selected from levels 1-3 schools due to both accessibility and general curricular focus. Teachers in level 4 schools - designated turnaround school- and level 5 schools – under state take over- were not the target populations due to the multitude of factors confounding those schools’ curricular decisions including significant lack of teacher autonomy.

### Participant Selection

The study utilized a convenience sample of eight participants in one central Massachusetts county. The sample was gathered using personal and email inquiries. The initial respondents suggested additional potential participants through a snowball sampling technique.

**Table 1. Participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Urban/Suburban</b>	<b>Level of School</b>
Marisa	Suburban	1
Alice	Suburban	1
Ted	Suburban	1
Jessica	Suburban	1
Caitlin	Urban	2
Deirdre	Urban	2
Karen	Urban	3
Rachel	Urban	3

## Data Collection

Interview data provided insights into the teachers' lived experiences with social studies instruction (Creswell, 2014). The researchers used a semi-structured interview technique where the researcher assumed that the interviewee had unique and important knowledge of social studies instruction (Rabionet, 2011). The semi-structured design supported use of the same series of initial questions yet provided flexibility to explore additional topics. Semi-structured interviews enabled stronger comparison and standardization for improved generalizations. A sampling of interview questions is included in Figure 1. Each participant was interviewed one time for 30-60 minutes.

### Figure 1. Sample Interview Questions

- How much time do you spend teaching each subject per week?
- Does MCAS testing impact how or what you teach?
- Describe your typical social studies lesson?
- Do you have a block of time designated for social studies, or do you integrate social studies lessons into other subjects?
- How much freedom do you have to decide how you teach social studies?
- If you could change one thing about your social studies instruction, what would it be?
- Do you believe you have gaps in your own social studies knowledge? If so, in what areas?
- What do you think are the student benefits to learning social studies?
- Are you familiar with content integration? If so, how would you define it?
- Do you use content integration in your teaching? If so, how do you integrate?

## Data Analysis

Initial analysis began when one of the researchers transcribed the interviews. The interview data was then read several ways by both researchers independently to ensure openness to new perceptions (Creswell, 2014). Completing multiple reviews of the data helped to ensure all possibilities were identified (Patton, 2015). As explained by Creswell (2014), this process of analyzing open-ended, semi-structured interviews ensured more grounded findings.

After independent analysis, the researchers worked collaboratively to analyze key themes, patterns, ideas, and concepts from the interviews. During this stage in the research process, key topics were coded, sorted, and organized. Then codes were compared and contrasted to look for patterns. From the eight transcriptions, 31 codes were developed, and subsequently, collapsed into four analytical categories: accountability and high-stakes testing, instructional time, common core state standards, content knowledge and availability of resources. As Patton (2015) explained, category development enables confirmation of relationships found in data. Further, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) supported the notion of searching for consistencies and inconsistencies when reviewing qualitative data. Consequently, the two researchers conducted a process of testing various data sources, both confirming and disconfirming, and revising the associated categories (Maxwell, 2013). This process provided the necessary framework for analyzing teaching beliefs and decisions using a close examination of category

formation to identify meaningful explanations related to social studies instruction (Clark & Creswell, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## Findings

Recent education research recognizes the decreased presence of social studies in elementary classrooms (Duplass, 2007; Groen, 2012; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; O'Connor, Heafner, & Groce, 2007; Olwell & Raphael, 2006; Tanner, 2008; Winstead, 2011). After conducting interviews with eight 3<sup>rd</sup> grade elementary school teachers in central Massachusetts and completing qualitative analysis of the interview data, four obstacles (data analysis categories) were identified as impediments to effective social studies instruction – accountability and high-stakes testing, lack of instructional time, impact of the Common Core State Standards, and lack of content knowledge/available resources. While noteworthy, these obstacles are not new dilemmas in the field of social studies. However, deeper analysis into the voices of the participating teachers uncovered how the teacher's relationship with time permeated their stories and provided a platform to uncover how their beliefs supported their actions. The findings below share teachers' experiences with time and the effect on their social studies practice.

### Reduced Instructional Time

As expected, participating teachers noted pressures imposed from high-stakes testing related to increased accountability. Five of the eight teachers, across school performance levels one to three, illustrated how their school's accountability status impacted their teaching; the lower the level of the school, the more negative the impact. All eight teachers shared how testing impacted their teaching schedule and time demands. Savage (2003) outlined how high-stakes testing can negatively affect academics due to a "narrowing of the curriculum, spending great amounts of instructional time on what is to be covered on the test rather than on what is important, implementing tedious drill and skill activities." (p. 202). Data from the study reinforced such findings from the literature. Deirdre described the impact of accountability "we teach test taking strategies, how to write an open response, and how to write a short answer response." Similarly, Jessica noted "3<sup>rd</sup> graders don't come with the necessary skills to take standardized exams like MCAS. They need to learn how to bubble the letter, how to check their work, and options for persevering when they get stuck." Comments like Deirdre's and Jessica's explain how instruction and content were impacted by the time needed to prepare for mandated accountability measures.

As a result of the pressure to support student performance on high-stakes exams, non-tested subjects, like social studies, are either eliminated from the curriculum or instructional time is greatly reduced (Winstead, 2011). Winstead asserts that less than 20% of instructional time is devoted to preparing for and teaching social studies. Data from the eight participants verified this reduction in time. All eight of the teachers reinforced how their English language arts (ELA) and math blocks were equal to or greater than 60 minutes five days a week. In all cases, social studies blocks were, at most, 45 minutes, 2.5 days a week. For example, Alice described her schedule as including ELA and math for an hour, five days a week, and then a special block for science or social studies for 45 minutes twice a week. All eight participants confirmed the research - science and social studies were not taught on the same day. In many respects, science and social studies compete for the same block of instructional time during the week. The teachers explained



how they pick science or social studies based on preference or curricular alignment. Caitlin noted her students have “90 minutes of math, 90 minutes of ELA, and we throw the science and social studies in here and there.” Jessica expounded “I have a designated social studies block that alternates with science for 40 minutes a day.” The participants’ voices solidified how social studies instruction continues to be marginalized across schools due to an emphasis on the tested subjects. When asked what would most benefit students’ social studies learning, four participants wished for “more time.”

### **Textbook Approach to Covering the Standards**

While many of the teachers believed they had flexibility in how they approached teaching social studies, they were expected to address the appropriate standards. The findings across all three accountability levels were similar – teachers at each level utilized the textbook as the main organizational structure. Caitlin explained “I use the standards, but I design how I want to do it.” Deirdre emphasized her reliance on the textbook for organization purposes:

We do it from the social studies book. So, we’ll cover a chapter a week from the *Massachusetts Our Home* textbook. Typically, we work on vocabulary words, review them, and then there’s a listening component. We just went over what an ‘artifact’ was in the last audio recording.

Similarly, Karen highlighted “we have a textbook called *Massachusetts Our Home* and that’s pretty much what we do.” Notably, across all levels, teachers’ approach remained textbook-centered and routine. Rachel explained how her school adopted a science program which identified what material the teachers “needed to cover” whereas in social studies there was more “teacher work” to determine how and what to teach. As a result, she noted her desire for additional materials and training in teaching social studies. This is a key perspective to highlight since teachers who lack strong content knowledge in social studies may be less likely to devote the time needed to develop strong instruction. Often teachers with minimal content knowledge desire curricular materials for structure (D’Souza, 2018).

### **Decreased Autonomy and Limited Creative Practice**

Four of the eight participants explicitly noted their desire to increase the amount of time they spent on social studies instruction. Two of the teachers wanted more time for hands-on, inquiry-based social studies lessons and the other two teachers wanted more time to teach social studies more generally. Marisa explained “I guess it would really be that I had more time to do the creative activities. There’s so many great inquiry, hands-on things that are so fun to do, but there are things on our content standards that are so stretched because of so much we have to cover and how fast we have to do it.” Alice concurred “I’m a very hands-on teacher, so I would love to reconstruct a Wampanoag wetu” but with her limited instructional time she feels unable to implement her ideas. The sheer number of standards to be covered across content areas prevent some teachers from hands-on, inquiry lessons in social studies content due to the limited time in a school day (Marzano & Kendall, 1998). Marisa explained how she found success when she connected student learning to the bigger question of “why is this important to learn?” and then connecting new ideas to the outside world. She believed that this makes learning both interesting and relevant. However, she often found it more challenging to do so when the rush to finish the standards prevailed. Ted and Rachel both expressed grave concerns over the push for

data-driven, evidence-based mandates. Rachel asserted, “we look at data all the time.” Ted expanded:

we used to be child-centered. Now we’re data-driven, and everything is assessment. We spend a lot of time doing assessment, rather than giving out what a child at 9-years of age really needs - to have fun and do a lot of out-of-the-box thinking. We find ourselves just teaching to the perimeters now.

Ted used the term “perimeter” to highlight a concern far more reaching than simply time constraints. He argued the heart of teaching has been sacrificed due to accountability-driven instruction. Notably, three teachers in the study did not highlight a loss of autonomy or limitations on creative practice. Without follow-up interviews, it remains difficult to know if these teachers believed they had the necessary autonomy or if they believed it was not a central impediment to their social studies instruction.

### **Discussion**

The broad conclusions of this study articulate similar concerns from the last decade of social studies research - time restrictions, standards coverage, and decreased teacher autonomy (Duplass, 2007; Groen, 2012; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; Heafner, Good, O’Connor, Passe, Rock, Byrd, Odlendorf, & Groce, 2007; Olwell & Raphael, 2006; Tanner, 2008; Winstead, 2011). However, the participants’ suggestions illuminate the concerns in a new light. First, the participants centered solutions on developing relationships with teachers at the same grade level to ease the burden of planning, integrating, and developing instruction. Both level 1 and level 2 teachers pushed for more detailed collaboration. For example, Marisa, a level one teacher, expressed how many of the other 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers supported her in her school, “everybody has their focus area and they help find resources and information so we can be more effective.” Alice, a teacher in another level 1 school continued, “We make sure we share everything so that the kids are not missing out.” Similarly, Jessica, also a teacher in a level 1 school, concurred about the value of collaborative planning “we collaborate as a team and we use all the same resources. Our styles of teaching our different, but a lot of our activities are similar. The kids are getting the same experience in every classroom.” Likewise, Deirdre, a teacher at a level 2 school, noted “we do team and we share. We don’t team teach, but there is collaboration.” However, it is important to highlight what was missing from the interview data – none of the teachers at level 3 schools noted collaborative practices. This does not mean that collaborative practices failed to exist as it is possible that the teachers at level 3 schools did not see the necessity in such collaboration for a variety of reasons.

### **Implications**

In 2006, Passe explained how the social studies crisis is partially a result of teachers overlooking the subject. As such, the National Council for Social Studies argues that teachers need proper preservice education and professional development, along with daily instructional time and access to resources in order to provide meaningful social studies instruction (NCSS). Likewise, Guidry (2010) found teachers overlooked social studies due, in part, to limited content knowledge. Guidry noted how most preservice elementary teacher preparation programs require a single history course for content development. Similarly, Tanner’s (2008) research argued that

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teachers' attitudes regarding the necessity of social studies were affected by the limited emphasis on social studies in their preservice education programs. Tanner articulated how the beliefs of elementary preservice teachers' can shift if field-based experiences include rich and varied opportunities for social studies instruction including drawing connections to students' daily lives and utilizing resources beyond the textbook. By ensuring teacher candidates have such opportunities, they can better connect theories learned in coursework with meaningful, classroom-based practices. Such findings provide guidance for the necessary shifts in our approach to teacher preparation.

Furthermore, limited opportunities to develop strong pedagogical content knowledge - what and how to teach - (Gudmundsdottir & Schulman, 1987) extends beyond teacher education. Professional development opportunities in social studies also remain limited. Participants noted the negative impact of limited professional development on social studies instruction. In particular, Rachel suggested, "I think a lot more professional development could be beneficial. Even a think-pair-share of teachers' ideas." Drawing a larger conclusion, Tanner (2008) outlined how the extent of social studies instruction directly relates to a teacher's understanding and interest in the content area. Tanner's research explained how teachers with solid content knowledge and meaningful instructional techniques increased the prominence of social studies in the classroom (Tanner). This research study, coupled with previous findings in the field, emphasize the necessity for developing stronger pedagogical content knowledge for elementary teachers in social studies.

Another possible area of development for teacher education and professional development, includes gaining familiarity with current standards, frameworks, and resources. Beyond the state standards and curriculum frameworks, teachers also need familiarity with *National Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies* (2010), and the NCSS' *College, Career, and Civil Life (C3) Frameworks* (2013). However, teachers in the field were often unaware of these resources or they found the sheer volume of frameworks, principles, and organizing structures overwhelming. The more aware teachers are of the existence and possible use of resources, standards, and guides, the greater the opportunity for effective integration and inclusion of social studies instruction in the elementary curriculum. However, exposure alone is not enough to change practices. Teachers need guided instructional opportunities to collaboratively explore resources. Here again, professional development opportunities can provide the needed guided instructional opportunities.

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