

Defining Social Studies

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In a recent issue of *New Zealand Education Review* (August 30 1996), Mr. Reg Lockstone made some familiar comments about social studies. He argued that social studies is not a real subject, its aims are grandiose and ill defined, the content is superficial, anyone can teach it because you don't actually have to know anything, and of course social studies teachers are generally dangerous subversives whose real aim is to manipulate the minds of young New Zealanders. Rodney Hide uses the same arguments in Richard Prebble's *'I've been Thinking'* when he says "social studies is nothing but a list of politically correct topics without any knowledge base or understanding of how the real world works". In this paper I suggest why comments like Lockstone's are so common and argue that social studies is not some kind of composite formed from other, purer, subjects, but a distinctive discipline with unique, identifiable goals, structure and pedagogy.

Introduction

Why does social studies appear to be so confusing? Part of the problem is the curriculum. The official primary school social studies curriculum is now over thirty years old; it is true that some tinkering occurred in the 1970's when the Faces documents were issued, but this had little effect on what happened in classrooms - probably because distribution of these documents was not followed up with teacher development programmes. The Faces booklets in many instances sat on storeroom shelves unopened. Perhaps equally important was the nature of these documents. They certainly contained good ideas, but the designers refused to be prescriptive. Faces suggested but never told, implied but never stated. As a result, teachers retained the idea that it didn't really matter what you taught in social studies or how you taught it. Shortly before the contract for the new social studies curriculum was announced in 1994 teachers in Northland and Auckland were asked to list the features they wanted to see in a new curriculum. Most declared that they were looking for structure, focus, clear guidelines, and direction (Barr 1994 p.12).

Publishers and the Ministry have not helped. There are enormous differences in the social studies advocated by the three main distributors of social studies curriculum material to primary schools. Developmental Publications places a major emphasis on cultural sensitivity and awareness, Berkley Publishing emphasises inquiry learning, while Curriculum Concepts' material focuses on learning facts. Similarly, while most teacher development facilitators I have had contact with have been excellent classroom

practitioners, many have only vague notions about the nature and purpose of social studies as a discipline. For these and other reasons primary teachers often teach integrated units called social studies. These might be good language units but seldom have realistic social studies objectives. While specialisation makes secondary social studies a little better in this respect, most secondary social studies teachers are graduates in history or geography. Since their training and real interest lies in these disciplines, their teaching reflects this.

Defining Social Studies

Social studies is not, as Lockstone and Hide claim, some kind of hybrid non-subject. Social studies was initiated over fifty years ago as a distinctive and independent course of study. While it draws on content matter from some other disciplines, it has its own identifiable structure. Lockstone (1996) argues that, "there is no agreed definition as social studies," but this is patently incorrect. While social studies curricula obviously vary from country to country, most are very similar in terms of aims, pedagogy and structure. For example, all are based on strands, all express their goals in similar terms, and all advocate similar methods of teaching and learning. There is international agreement on the nature of social studies and its purpose, even though most New Zealand curriculum writers seem unaware of this. Obviously a New Zealand social studies curriculum should meet the needs of New Zealand teachers and New Zealand students, but if social studies is indeed a discipline, it must conform to internationally accepted standards and definitions.

Overseas curricula with which I am most familiar, including those from Australia, the United States and Canada, all have two common aims. These are:

- understanding the world, and
- participating in society as responsible citizens.

These two main goals are, of course interrelated. Unless one has some understanding of the world, one cannot contribute effectively as a citizen. The relationship between the two goals is illustrated diagrammatically on page 11 of the revised draft curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996). Let us consider each goal in turn.

Social Studies and Conceptual Understanding

The first stated goal of social studies is "understanding the world". Social studies curricula use the term "understanding" consciously because learning in social studies involves more than simply memorising factual information. Factual knowledge is used as the basis for helping students to develop concepts and general understandings. Thinking skills are important in social studies because students use them to process facts in order that specific items of information may be related to each

other in a variety of ways to become ideas or “understandings”. Barry Beyer (1979) describes this process as follows.

Understanding does not result merely from recording and storing. Understanding - in the sense of possessing new meaning - is not something that can be given intact to anyone. Learners themselves must bring about understanding. People may be familiar with the fruits of another’s learning as information, but unless they go through the mental processes of establishing that same knowledge, they will not really understand it in all its depth, complexities and various implications. (p.54)

Not all social studies educators will agree on exact terminology but all will agree that understanding in social studies is expressed as ideas, concepts or generalisations. In social studies terminology, a concept may be regarded as an abstraction which pulls together a number of facts. Concepts can be used to group facts together, organise them and try to make sense of them by revealing patterns of similarity and difference. Beyer (1979) sees the next level of conceptualisation, “understandings” as an intermediate stage between concepts and generalisations. In New Zealand, many teachers would refer to such understandings as main ideas or important ideas.

Understandings developed for one situation can be reapplied in others to develop generalisations. Students working on the Social Organisation and Processes strand in Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education 1996) might develop understandings which relate to the ways in which a Pacific Island community organises itself to deal with a cyclone. These same understandings can be reapplied to demonstrate how a New Zealand community deals with an earthquake, or an Asian community with a flood. Learning about cyclones, floods and earthquakes is incidental to the main objective of learning about the ways in which the people concerned reshape their social organisation to deal with emergencies, and developing a generalisation which explains this.

Generalisations can be regarded as the final stage of social studies learning. Generalisations can help us explain or predict; they summarise what is thought to be true about similar cases and they provide a way of synthesising information. Generalisations are, of course, not absolute truths. They should be regarded as tentative statements which can be modified, expanded or qualified. Generalisations are different from understanding in that understandings refer to specific places, times, people or items. Generalisations are broader and applicable in a variety of situations.

So in good social studies children are not just concerned with learning facts; factual information is gathered and processed to become concepts, understandings (or important ideas), and generalisations. The levels of understanding are apparent in Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum. Students begin a unit by locating facts, these facts are processed and refined to become more abstract concepts and important ideas, and these lead in turn to the generalisations which are the achievement objectives

of the curriculum.

Each level of understanding is broader and less specific than the preceding one. Teachers plan from level six downwards towards level one. They begin with the broad aims of the curriculum and consider in turn the aims of particular strands and the achievement objectives at particular levels. From these they develop more specific important ideas which become the objectives for their teaching unit. Children in the class begin at level one and, guided by teacher questions and activities, gather and process information in order to enhance their understanding as they move through levels two and three. Understanding the world does not just mean learning facts about it; true understanding involves processing information to develop broad ideas and principles which can be applied to new situations.

Table 1: Facts, Concepts, Understandings, Generalisations

Level One: Facts

Indians hunted buffalo
 Indians collected Medicinal plants
 The shaman blessed the hunters before they left
 Buffalo skins were used for clothing
 Deer antlers were made into tools
 The tribe followed the buffalo herds
 European hunters killed thousands of buffalo

Level Two: Concepts

Conservation, exploitation, interaction, scarcity, nomadic

Level Three: Understandings (Important Ideas)

The Plains Indians relied on the physical environment for sustenance
 The Plains Indians treated the environment with respect
 The Plains Indian's life style had to change when the buffalo were gone

Level Four: Generalisations (Achievement Objectives)

People relate to the environment in different ways (3)
 People's interactions with the environment have changed over time (4)

Level Five: Major Generalisations (Strand Aims)

Patterns of relationship between people, places and the environment change
 People perceive places and environments differently

Level Six: Principle (Curriculum Aim)

People interact with each other and their environment

Social Studies as Education for Citizenship

The second stated goal of the national curriculum is education for effective citizenship. In some respects the citizenship aim of social studies can be seen as the more important. In fact the American National Council for the Social Studies claims that the primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (NCSS 1994 p.3)

Social studies aims at enabling students to ‘participate in a changing society as confident, informed and responsible citizens’ (Ministry of Education p.7). Citizens with these characteristics need to be able to think. Democratic citizenship enfranchises members of the political community, and this franchise embodies rights, duties, responsibilities and entitlements. A society which assumes responsible citizen involvement in decision-making cannot survive if its members cannot, or will not participate in such decision-making. A good citizen, therefore, is not simply one who understands how legislation occurs and how governments are elected. As Shirley Engle and Anna Ochoa (1988) point out, “Participation in a democracy is not a matter of subservience to power or blind loyalty to the state but is a willingness to be responsible for the state and to engage at all levels in the decisions that chart its course”. (p.23)

Social studies is the curriculum area largely responsible for educating young citizens in the knowledge, skills, beliefs and values associated with participatory decision-making. This kind of education requires students to practise such skills as evaluating the accuracy of information, differentiating between fact and opinion, making comparisons, respecting the rights of others to express a point of view, and making decisions based on considered evidence. Such skills can be taught, and they can be assessed. The educational needs of democratic citizens certainly include facts but democracy requires more; a good citizen must be able to think and have a commitment to democracy and democratic ideals. A good citizen must be a responsible decision-maker.

A major concern expressed by critics of social studies is that the subject involves, “tinkering with pupils’ personalities” (Lockstone 1996). If these critics mean that social studies is about teaching children to think then they are right. Social studies is an agent of socialisation to the extent that it is concerned with transmitting factual information and reinforcing acceptable behaviour. Socialisation is concerned with transmitting a reasoned attitude, an understanding of democratic culture and with developing the basic habits necessary to make a democracy work. But social studies has another function, namely ‘counter socialisation’. Counter socialisation is the process of developing independent critical thinking, and with fostering individual responsibility. The focus of counter socialisation is on questioning the validity of alternative claims.

Socialisation is a conserving process which seeks to preserve prevailing practice and social cohesiveness, whereas counter socialisation is the process of expanding the individual's ability to be a rational, thoughtful and independent citizen. In a democracy, socialisation needs to be balanced with counter socialisation.

Planning for Thinking and Understanding

The knowledge objectives teachers set when planning a social studies unit should equate to the kind of conceptual understanding they would like their students to achieve as a result of the unit. These conceptual understandings will normally relate to, and be derived from, the national curriculum and the school social studies plan. The unit's thinking skill objectives will involve some of the skills the students will use in processing factual information to reach the knowledge objectives. A hypothetical unit based on the information shown in Table 1 could be based on the national curriculum achievement levels three and four in the Place and Environment strand (People relate to the environment in different ways; people's interactions with the environment have changed over time). If the teacher chose the American Plains Indians as a setting, he or she could develop the understandings that the Plains Indians relied on the physical environment for sustenance, they treated the environment with respect, and their life style had to change when the buffalo were gone. To reach these understandings the students would process factual information provided in resources by using learning activities which incorporated a variety of thinking skills.

Social studies is about developing concepts, understandings and generalisations about human behaviour and it is about producing thinking, responsible citizens. Social studies helps children to understand the world so that they can understand themselves and participate effectively in their world. A good social studies curriculum will make teachers aware of the centrality of conceptual understanding, provide them with a practical and appropriate model of thinking skills which will help students both "develop understanding of people and their interactions with each other and their environments", and enable students to "participate in a changing society as confident, informed and responsible citizens.

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