

Some Strategies in Dealing with High-Stakes Testing and The Death of Social Studies Education

Terrance L. Furin

The Pressure and Dangers of High-Stakes Testing

The pressure of high-stakes testing has virtually eliminated the teaching of history and the other social studies from many urban elementary schools. This is not some wild statement; I have heard it directly from many Philadelphia teachers in numerous classes at Saint Joseph's University where I teach graduate social studies pedagogy courses to graduate student teachers who are pursuing Masters degrees or state certification. Many of these graduate student teachers describe enormous stress on them and their students to meet the established Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), as indicated by standardized test results. They tell of several unusual strategies schools take to achieve AYP, such as motivating students to do their best on standardized exams by giving them t-shirts to wear with slogans such as "PSSA, WE DO OUR BEST EVERY DAY." Graduate student teachers also describe the pressure they face to eliminate altogether the teaching of subjects other than reading/language arts and math. One of my graduate student teachers shared an e-mail that he and twelve other fifth- and sixth-grade teachers received on December 20, 2004, which was sent by an assistant principal of a Philadelphia elementary school and reads as follows:

To all:

Please suspend the teaching of Social Studies until April (after the testing period) [sic] We need to concentrate on PSSA and Terra Nova strategies to help our students do well. A word of caution – our 5th grade math scores on the benchmark tests are dismal – we will double our math time to help our students become proficient in math. Let's continue to focus on the children and make them our #1 priority. (I know you do – just a push to keep it real!!!)

Again, Please accept my sincere thank you for all that you do to make our "kids" successes!!!

peace out!

(Assistant Principal's name)

This is not an isolated situation. Over the past two years more than forty graduate student teachers have related receiving similar directives from their supervisors. Moreover, the situation is not unique to Philadelphia. High-stakes testing pressure has led to sporadic treatment of subjects other than reading/language arts and math in many schools across the United States.

Another example is found in Illinois where the emphasis on reading/language arts and math has eliminated state tests measuring knowledge of United States government and history. As stated in the *Chicago Tribune* on March 11, 2005, "Illinois students no longer

have to take . . . [state] tests measuring their knowledge of fundamental principles of U.S. government and history – the result of some of the most severe state testing cutbacks in the nation” (Rado, 2005, para.1). Al Frascella, a spokesperson for the National Council for the Social Studies, cited additional evidence of national social studies cuts and was quoted recently in the *Kansas City Star* as saying that “the worst thing that has ever happened to social studies has been the No Child Left Behind Law” (Smith, 2005, para. 6). Frascella stated further that “the message being read by the local school districts, state school boards and superintendents is [social studies] is not important because the law didn’t include it. . . What isn’t tested isn’t taught, and we are seeing that all across the country”(Smith, 2005, para. 8). The absence of social studies education can be particularly damaging at the elementary level because as Jesus Garcia, president of the National Council for the Social Studies, indicates, “if students do not get the basic skills in social studies in grades K-6, the result will be students entering high school with very little background information in any of the social studies subjects” (Manzo, 2005, para. 29).

The power inherent in high-stakes testing, especially when imposed upon teachers and students from outside sources, contains grave dangers for schools hoping to prepare citizens for a democratic society. Several prominent American educators have identified this power and associated dangers. Elliot Eisner (1998) writes that “it is difficult to imagine a more potent lever for changing the priorities of schools than the evaluative methods we employ” (p. 109) while Henry Giroux (2002) states that “any struggle to make schools more democratic and socially relevant will have to link the battle for critical citizenship to an ongoing fight against turning schools into testing centers and teachers into technicians”(para. 22). Both of these current educational theorists build on similar thoughts expressed by John Dewey (1916) nearly ninety years ago when he wrote in *Democracy and Education* that “the notion that the ‘essentials’ of elementary education are the three R’s mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for realization of democratic ideals” (p. 192). Dewey writes further as follows:

The vice of externally imposed ends has deep roots. Teachers receive them from superior authorities; these authorities accept them from what is current in the community. The teachers impose them upon children. As a first consequence, the intelligence of the teacher is not free; it is confined to receiving the aims laid down from above. (p. 108)

Dewey’s choice of the word “vice” is neither dramatic nor extreme when considering today’s situation. It is clear that for many urban teachers and students the “aims laid down from above” have pushed social studies out of the elementary curriculum.

When I first heard graduate student teachers express their frustrations regarding the elimination of social studies, I found it hard to believe. I know that there are state social studies standards and regulations requiring this subject matter be taught. Frustrated, I contacted two different Pennsylvania educational supervisors who both told me that even though state standards existed in all curricular areas, it was apparent that only those tied to high-stakes testing received intensive instruction. Furthermore, they indicated that

unless specific complaints were filed from Philadelphia constituents they would not investigate.¹ I am aware that currently the National Council for the Social Studies and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development – two major national education organizations – are promoting the inclusion of social studies within the testing framework of the No Child Left Behind Act.² Nonetheless, the reality is that today elementary students in Philadelphia and many other school districts are not receiving substantive social studies education because of building level directives.

Faced with what I considered an untenable situation, I decided to develop a different approach to our Saint Joseph's University elementary social studies pedagogy course. It is based on the premise that the key in developing strategies in schools where social studies has been eliminated lies in creating a deep passion within classroom teachers for social studies education which is accomplished by focusing on several substantive human relations encounters.

Creating a Passion for Social Studies Through Human Relations Encounters

Human relations encounters are the core of our elementary social studies pedagogy course. These encounters focus on social justice issues and have generated deeper interest and a greater passion than a more traditional cognitive scope and sequence and chronological approach to the teaching of history and the other social studies. One reason for this could be that this focus resonates with the philosophy of our Jesuit university which stresses not only *cura personalis* (concern for the individual), but also emphasizes social justice issues that transcend religious, racial and ethnic, gender, class, and national divides. In essence, we are bringing the cognitive and affective domains together and focusing both of them on serious historical and social issues

The types human relations encounters we weave into our courses involve the studying of topics such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the subsequent Japanese emphasis on peace education; the harmful effects of Western colonization of indigenous Americans; "Jim Crow" racism's virtual perpetuation of slavery; some of the consequences of Nazism as manifested in the Holocaust; and the Zionist quest for a Jewish homeland in the Middle East and the ongoing Middle Eastern crises. Each of these topics is developed on two levels – one that provides cognitive and affective experiences for graduate student teachers and another that demonstrates ways that these experiences can be applied in primary and intermediate classrooms. For example, graduate student teachers are introduced to a study unit on Japan by reading John Hersey's *Hiroshima* – a book that graphically describes the effects of the atomic bombing

¹ I describe these conversations in a commentary published in the March/April 2003 issue of *Social Studies for Young Learners*.

² In March of 2005, a representative of the National Council for Social Studies shared with me some of the organization's policy initiatives to broaden the subjects tested under the No Child Left Behind Act. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) is also trying to widen the curriculum tested under NCLB. A major policy report by Bruce O. Boston entitled "Restoring the Balance between Academics and Civic Engagement in Public Schools" is available on the ASCD website:

<http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/index.jsp/>

of Hiroshima through the eyes of several survivors – and learning about the current peace education movement in Japan. Graduate student teachers then imagine ways to teach their students about this moment in history using Eleanor Coerr's *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, a story of a nine-year-old girl who survived the Hiroshima blast and who struggles with Leukemia while trying to fulfill her dream to become a winning runner.

This pattern continues in a unit on the encounter between Europeans and indigenous Americans in which graduate student teachers view an original “Lone Ranger” TV episode and then read and discuss Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*. In a series of short chapters, Alexie writes vividly about life on a reservation and the many problems that exist for Native Americans today. Graduate student teachers then share lessons they have designed for primary-aged students based on Jane Yolen's book *Encounter* that depicts the lost innocence and virtual annihilation of the Taino natives when they encounter Western European explorers.

When learning about how to teach their students about Jim Crowism and America's racial divide, graduate student teachers view segments from the PBS series *Slavery* and share their views on Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*, a portrayal of 1930-40's racial segregation in Louisiana and the struggles of a young African American male who tries to prove his innocence prior to being put to death for the crime he did not commit. Following these discussions graduate student teachers develop primary or intermediate lessons on Marian Anderson using a video entitled “Marian Anderson” and Pam Munoz Ryan's picture book *When Marian Sang* that captures through powerful illustrations and primary-aged words some of the impact of Marian Anderson's struggles with Jim Crow segregation.

When learning about how to teach the Holocaust, graduate student teachers learn of the effects of Nazism and the holocaust on youth by viewing scenes from Leni Riefenstahl's 1934 *Triumph of the Will*, a vivid documentary portraying Hitler's mesmerizing rise to power, juxtaposed with segments of Steven Spielberg's powerfully emotional movie *Schindler's List*. In addition, graduate student teachers are encouraged to read Elie Wiesel's *The Night Trilogy* in which the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize author shares memories of his life in Auschwitz. A recent presentation by one graduate student teacher for intermediate-aged students presented the Holocaust through the eyes of children and included clips from *Triumph of the Will* a movie that emphasizes the brainwashing of youth and the reinforcement of imposed values through group pressure seen at mass rallies of Hitler youth. This was contrasted with a film produced by Polish Jews after World War II entitled *Ambulance*, in which children on a playground are gathered into a supposed ambulance that is in reality a death-van.

According to graduate student teachers' course evaluations, these human relations encounters have been effective in nourishing a passion for social studies in Saint Joseph's graduate student teachers. Passion is not enough, however. Graduate student teachers must also develop strategies to include social studies in schools where it has been eliminated. This is also a part of our Saint Joseph's social studies course.

Strategies for Inclusion of Social Studies in High-Stakes Testing Schools

Over the past four semesters graduate students have suggested ways that social studies can be included in high-stakes schools. Their suggestions generally fall into three categories: finding time within and outside of the traditional school day for social studies activities; infusing the high-stakes curriculum with social studies concepts; and organizing classrooms to develop social studies ideas and skills. In his 1984 comprehensive study of America's schools entitled *A Place Called School*, John Goodlad found that the average school year for elementary students was 180 days of approximately 6 hours in length. Of the 6 hours, approximately one hour was spent for lunch and recess. Only 70% of the remaining 5 hours was used for instruction. The remainder was consumed by routines, behavior control, and social activities. A visit to almost any elementary school today will indicate that not much has changed in the twenty years since this study.³ Goodlad believes that it is possible to include social studies and other subjects in the instructional day without reducing the time spent on reading and math if principals and teachers used time spent on routines more efficiently. Goodlad states:

To those legislators, school board members, and others who often sound as though they would deprive children of access in school to social studies, science, health education, and the arts in order to assure attention to reading, writing, spelling, and mathematics, let me simply say that the sacrifice is unnecessary. If the schools of our sample are representative, it will just be necessary for the principal and teachers of some elementary schools – perhaps most – to become more efficient in the allocation and use of school time. (p.135-36)

If even five minutes per day could be captured from these routines, then fifteen hours per year could be added to the instructional day.

Saint Joseph's graduate student teachers suggested several ways to achieve this.⁴ Some of these include using school time more wisely by reducing daily lunch counts (a daily ritual in most elementary schools wherein students spend several minutes in choosing lunch from a continuously changing menu); eliminating non-emergency PA announcements; and abolishing extraneous school activities, such as fundraisers. They also proposed several social studies activities (i.e. games or map quests or the formation of social studies-focused clubs) that could take place during non-instructional time, such as during recess or after school. In addition to making more efficient use of time, Goodlad also suggests that social studies can be infused into the reading/language arts, and math curriculum. Our graduate student teachers also propose several strategies to accomplish this. These strategies included in the appendix offer a way for teachers to begin implementing social studies curricula outside of social studies classrooms. These strategies are only the beginning of a list of unlimited possibilities teachers can generate

³ As a former superintendent and current university professor, I have visited more than fifty elementary schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas. I have found that the elementary school time pattern described by John Goodlad is remarkably consistent to this day.

⁴ See the Appendix for a more comprehensive listing of student suggestions for inclusion of social studies in a high-stakes testing school environment.

in any school environment. What remains of central importance is that teachers develop a passion for social studies curricula and that they work to imagine ways to fit this subject area content into the school day.

Heeding Sound Advice

Is it possible in the city that gave us Benjamin Franklin and where Thomas Jefferson so nobly penned the words that are the bedrock for our freedoms that we are denying our young students the essential knowledge necessary to become active citizens in our democratic society? In many of Philadelphia's elementary schools today, the answer, sadly, is yes.

Jefferson (1972) wrote of the importance of studying history in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* as follows:

history . . . will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it to defeat its views. (p. 60).

More recently, Henry Giroux (1988) wrote in *Teachers as Intellectuals* that “neither classrooms nor students exist in precious isolation abstracted from the larger society in which we live” and that “if students are to analyze social studies subjects from a critical perspective, such an analysis must be steeped in pedagogical structures that promote productive communication and dialogue” (p. 72-73).

Now is the time for us to heed such sound advice. While it is important to educate policy makers on the importance of including social studies in our elementary schools, the key for their inclusion lies with the classroom teacher. Until history and all of the social studies are perceived to be essential subjects, teachers are the ones who need to have the passion to develop strategies so that they are included as a vital part of each child's basic education.

Terrance L. Furin is an Assistant Professor in the Education Department at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. Prior to this appointment, he served for twenty-two years as a Superintendent in Ohio and Pennsylvania. During this time he received many distinguished awards including the Fulbright Memorial Award for study in Japan. He has authored numerous book chapters as well as articles in publications such as *The School Administrator*; *Social Studies for the Young Learner*; and *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*. Terry is active in Jesuit outreach activities in South America and his research interests include high-stakes testing and social studies in elementary schools as well as the spiritual aspects of transformational leadership. He can be reached at: tfurin@sju.edu.

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Appendix

Saint Joseph Graduate Student Teacher Suggestions for Inclusion of Social Studies in a High-Stakes Testing Environment

Efficient Use of Time

- Reduction of daily lunch counts (a daily ritual in most elementary schools wherein students spend several minutes choosing lunch from a continuously changing menu) or the elimination of lunch counts altogether through set weekly menus;
- Elimination of non-emergency PA announcements in classrooms for matters that could be handled individually during recess, lunch/breakfast, or times before and after school;
- Abolition of extraneous activities, such as various fundraisers, that encroach on classroom time;
- Pre-assortment of student papers and materials coupled with effective methods of distribution such as the use of student mailboxes;
- Streamlining of “opening” and “closing” activities through standardization and tightening of routines such as bus arrivals and dismissals, removal or putting-on outdoor wraps and boots, and well-established restroom/recess/lunch procedures;

Capturing Time During Non-Instructional Activities

Capturing Time Within the School Day

- Convince the PTA and/or school district personnel to paint a map of the United States, individual states, and or the world on the playground and then developing a game to locate various sites to report back to the class;
- Create activities during recess periods that center on historical events such as the origins of the Olympics, the history and importance of various sports, and the origins as well as the choreography of various dances;
- Turn hallways into a “Parade of Presidents” (or other historical figures), rainforests, or various geographical environments and having students search for clues to teacher-created puzzles while waiting in lunch or restroom lines;
- Convince the principal and other teachers that school assemblies should focus on the social studies;
- Create student-run school stores or post-offices to learn basic economic principles.

Capturing Time Outside of School

- Have students conduct interviews and prepare a period “time capsule” with parents, grandparents, or neighbors regarding various topics such as their lives as elementary students or the most significant events in their lives.
- Capture bus or walking times (for school transportation or field trips) to study various geographical or sociological aspects of neighborhoods;
- Ask students to analyze TV advertising by identifying the amount of time during a thirty-minute block used for advertising as well as the alignment between products, shows, and age groups;
- Produce after-school plays for the public that focus on various historical events or events that depict world cultures such as African myths and story-telling, Japanese theatre, Mayan myths, and others;
- Establish before and after school current events or multi-cultural clubs.

Infusion of Social Studies into High-Stakes Tested Subjects

- Make available in the classroom trade books that center on social studies for students to read during times when they are not engaged in direct instruction or for the teacher to read to the class during “quieting times” (examples used in our pedagogy course include Jane Yolen’s *Encounter*, Pam Munoz Ryan’s *When Marian Sang*, Eleanor Coerr’s *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, James Lincoln Collier’s *My Brother Sam is Dead*, and Jon Scieszka’s *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, and Lois Lowrey’s *Number the Stars*);
- Have students develop travel brochures and write letters or postcards to historical pen pals who may be classmates or students in the same or a different grade-level classroom;
- Organize spelling bees to center on geographic places and historical events and characters;
- Create class newspapers (including stories covering various newspaper sections, pictures, editorial cartoons and comics) that focus on school as well as current local, national, and international news as well as historical events such as the Holocaust and background for the current Middle East crisis and the Iraq War;
- Teach students to count in various languages such as Swahili which can be used as a bridge into a rich multi-cultural lesson on African cultures.
- Use maps to locate various sites’ latitude and longitude while developing math coordinate skills;
- Make historical facts, such as the various ages of Presidents, the subject for developing math graphing skills;
- Examine the relationship between math and architecture while studying historical buildings such as Independence Hall.

Infusing of Social Studies into Art, Music, and Physical Education

- Coordinate with art, music, and physical educational teachers to create school-wide events that focus on multicultural art, music, dance, games, and food that culminate in a school and community festival;

- Development of interdisciplinary activities, such as the creation of diverse greeting cards to demonstrate ways that different cultures commemorate significant days;
- Utilization of major holidays to create a social studies focus such as involvement of the entire school in making peace cranes for a holiday tree that coincides with a study of peace education in Japan arising from the atomic bomb's destruction of Hiroshima;

Classroom Physical Organization

- Social studies learning centers can be designed to include newspapers, magazines, travel brochures, puzzles, books, and – if possible – access to a rich array of social studies Internet sites (such as the National Council for the Social Studies) and other computer resources;
- Providing students book covers made from various maps;
- State, national, and world maps can be displayed and rotated throughout the room;
- Bulletin Boards can be organized to reflect regular current events, feature world leaders, and identify historically significant days;

Classroom Procedures

- Making current events and the presence of a daily newspaper a regular part of opening exercises;
- Democratically organizing the classroom by designing a constitution that will develop class rules and procedures while explaining the basics and history of the democratic process;
- Establishing a classroom judicial system to deal with playground infractions, class disruptions, and other disciplinary matters while explaining the basics of our judicial system;
- Establishing “peace” certificates or “historical medals” to recognize student achievements while describing the accomplishments of Nobel Peace Prize recipients or the formation and structure of the United Nations;
- Naming reading or math groups after various states, nations, or historical figures;