
What Social Education Content Is Most Important?

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Preparation for democratic citizenship should include analysis of social problems and should have a global and future orientation.



What social studies content should all children learn? This is a complex question about which there is little consensus among social educators (Barr and others, 1977). Numerous answers or rationales are possible and each implies a significantly different approach to content selection.

Yet there is mounting evidence to suggest that our schools function as if the issue were resolved; that is, a de facto national curriculum has emerged in social education (Superka and others, 1980; and Morrisett and others, 1980). Consequently, most social education is based on a single rationale without sufficient concern for its limitations. This results in a great deal of mindless and narrow instruction.

Given this state of confusion, social educators should try to create a better relationship between theory and practice. This article suggests some guidelines and steps for constructing more rational social education programs in the future. We should, however, keep two points in mind as we proceed.

First, a large body of literature exists that deals directly with this issue (Barr and others, 1977; Shaver, 1976). Unfortunately, we have a tendency to ignore the history of social education. Many earlier reform movements were discredited without being tested or adopted on a wide scale. Many of these reforms contained valuable insights and content that we should examine as we begin to construct programs for the future (Hertzberg, 1971, 1973).

A second point concerns the conflicting approaches for choosing social education content. While we should strive for more consensus and a better connection between theory and practice, it is probably unrealistic to assume that we will quickly agree on what social knowledge is of most value. Social issues are complex and our means for resolving them too limited to establish definitive answers at present. Thus some debate is healthy because it tends to increase and improve our ability to select content.

Nevertheless, the current situation (many conflicting rationales yet only one dominant social education curriculum) is not rational and should be changed. Two approaches to this seem reasonable: first we should try to publicize the issues involved and obtain a greater theoretical consensus; second, we must establish a wider variety of social education programs to reflect the plurality of existing rationales. These two approaches may appear to conflict, but both are necessary given present conditions. We may never eliminate all theoretical conflict, but it is the purpose of education to help resolve or reduce such disputes. Meanwhile, it makes no sense to function as if we agree on a single approach to content selection.

What We Should Not Do In Social Education

Creating new programs for social education is as much a question of eliminating current practices as creating new ones. There are many "roadblocks" to change in contemporary social education programs, and the following are among the most significant:

1. We overemphasize learning social knowledge for "its own sake." Despite rhetoric supporting the value of critical thinking, most social education involves memorizing large quantities of trivial or unrelated social science content. Although we act as if we have identified a core of facts that all students should know, a great deal of what we teach bears little relationship to student interests or needs. Actually, most social studies content has been selected because it is traditional or various interest groups have lobbied successfully for its inclusion.

2. Another problem is the dominant position of history in the social education curriculum. This situation is so widespread that it is taken for granted by most administrators, teachers, and

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students. The practice is reinforced by teacher education programs that mainly require history courses and neglect the social sciences. Little consideration is given to a synthesis of the social sciences as they relate to the concerns of social education.

3. Current programs in social education tend to be very narrow and nationalistic. Most of the content is about our states, nation, or Western Europe. Insufficient attention is given to other cultures or even significant American subcultures. Our contemporary social, political, and economic systems are presented without serious criticism or analysis of alternative systems (Nelson, 1972; Stanley, 1981). Consequently, students are seldom taught to function as social critics nor are they likely to want to. Given the present content of social education, it is rational for students to conclude that the status quo is what ought to be.

4. Almost all our attention is devoted to studying the past or the present. Students are rarely asked to speculate about what the future ought to be like and how such a vision might be implemented.

5. Finally, the present social education curriculum teaches students to value an egocentric form of individualism that encourages competitive behavior in one's self-interest. This extreme conception of individualism assumes that competition and selfishness are basic human characteristics that should be encouraged because they serve to improve our standard of living. To a certain extent this is true, but it ignores the numerous situations where cooperative behavior would be more effective. Indeed, the general good is often best served by individual sacrifice, altruism, and collective responsibility. The present curriculum limits a student's ability to develop these values.

What Social Education Should Be In The Future

Some of the following guidelines have been suggested before, but none have been implemented on a wide scale.

Each seems relevant to our present and future needs:

1. Democratic citizenship is a central concern of social educators, and all students should be taught the principles and practices of a democratic culture. This includes a history and description of our democratic ideas and institutions, but it should also emphasize essential skills such as critical thinking, reflective inquiry, decision making, and interpersonal relations. Democratic cultures also require certain attitudes and values, including a respect for individual human dignity and rights, tolerance, rational consent, and a sense of community.

In addition, students should be made aware of the tentative nature of most knowledge, the possibility of rapid and unexpected change, and the need to make decisions without complete information.

2. An attempt should be made to redress the present overemphasis on individualism in current programs. We are not fully human nor can we maximize our individual potential apart from groups and communities. Students need to develop a sense of community and collective identity. Thus we must provide them with frequent opportunities to study the value of collective behavior and to relate to others in caring and helping ways.

3. Social education should include some study of the sociology of knowledge. This is a difficult area, but it would help if students could learn how knowledge can be produced and shaped in ways that tend to limit our ability to understand reality. Thus students might come to see the value of social criticism and the possible need for social change (Nelson and Michaelis, 1980, Chapter 8).

4. The exposure and analysis of social problems should be another central focus of social education. Some debate will ensue regarding which problems should be studied; however, it is not too difficult to identify a number of serious and persistent social problems worthy of

study: war, pollution, racism, poverty, crime. Students should be able to study these problems in depth and from all perspectives, including radical vantage-points. Here is where the content of history and the social sciences is of great value and can be rationally selected and applied. The goal of such study is the construction of proposals to help eliminate or control social problems.

5. Finally, social education should have a global and future orientation. Many social problems are global in nature and we cannot afford to ignore our nation's interdependence. In addition, we can learn much about ourselves from the study of other cultures. It is also necessary that we expose all students to future studies. This seems obvious given education's task of preparing students to live in the future, yet it is generally neglected in practice. Social education is in a unique position to help shape the future in the interest of humankind. By getting students to investigate what the future should and could be like, we can help them determine what it will be like. Thus students should be involved in the construction of models, blueprints, or relevant utopias to orient future social change.

What We Can Do

If we were to implement these recommendations, the content and practice of social education would be altered significantly. How might such changes be implemented? This is obviously a difficult task as our history of failure to significantly reform social education indicates. And some might question the point of attempting reforms when they are not likely to succeed.

However, such negative views ensure that reform will not occur. Educational reform requires a change of attitude and a belief that change is possible. The purpose of this article is to encourage attitude change, but more is necessary. There are some specific steps administrators and supervisors—in concert with teachers—can take to initiate changes in social education. Some could be imple-



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mented immediately with little increase in time or costs. Others involve a long-range commitment.

1. At present there is almost no discussion among administrators, supervisors, and teachers concerning the purpose of social education and how it relates to what we teach. We must start to emphasize these issues because most teachers are too concerned with classroom management and survival to worry about curriculum theory. Until

teachers believe such issues are a real concern of their district, most are not likely to take them seriously.

2. We tend to monitor teachers' lesson plans but their tests often indicate more about what they really emphasize in social education. Teachers are often surprised by what an analysis of their tests reveals, and this creates an excellent opportunity for administrators to help them coordinate theory and practice.

3. Whenever possible, eliminate having students memorize large amounts of unrelated social data, such as lists of presidents, state capitals, counties, and exports. This may seem obvious but the practice is endemic in our schools.

4. Use guidelines like those presented in this article or the National Council for the Social Studies to help select content, materials, and experiences. Focus first on redressing program imbalance, for instance, too much emphasis on history.

5. Ensure that students are exposed to a wide variety of issues and viewpoints. Most of this will occur in the classroom but the school can also invite speakers and hold assemblies with student debates, panel presentation, and so on.

6. Give students the opportunity to take some responsibility for others—younger children, handicapped students, and the elderly. In addition, organize group activities that require cooperation and collective responsibility.

7. Develop a course or at least some units on future studies.

8. Involve parents and other community resources in the process of reform-

ing the social education program.

9. Recruit and hire teachers who will help facilitate change.

10. Revise existing minimum competency programs in social education to reflect the guidelines discussed.

11. Training programs for social educators should emphasize the problems discussed in this article, especially study of the sociology of knowledge and the need to relate theory and practice. The typical three-credit social studies methods course is too short to give much attention to these issues. Programs should be expanded with a follow-up at the graduate level.

12. Join lobbying efforts to help persuade local and state governments to change legislation that unduly restricts social education.

A Final Thought

The failure of the present program is apparent in many respects (Morrisett and others, 1980). Even its supporters lament the inability of students to retain what they have been taught (Barr and others, 1977, Chapter 3). In addition, students apparently dislike and see little value in social education (Welton and

Mallan, 1981, Chapter 1). Thus the need for change is clear.

Such significant change is not likely to come about soon, but that is all the more reason for social educators to do what they can to begin the change process. Theory, models, and materials already exist; we do not have to start from scratch. What is required first is a heightened sense of awareness and effort. We cannot afford to let the failures of past reform movements discourage us. Let us start now to help construct the future of social education. ■

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