

“Why do we learn this stuff”? Students’ views on the purpose of social studies

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Introduction

I’ve been teaching pre-service elementary social studies teachers for over 20 years and one thing that always astonishes me is how *fuzzy* they are about why we teach social studies as a subject in schools. When I ask this question in my undergraduate social studies methods classes, I usually get specific content-focused responses such as: to learn about history and geography, Canada and the world, other people and cultures, government and politics, or current events. Learning to be a good citizen is rarely mentioned even though social studies programs across Canada have a long history of citizenship education as their primary goal (Clark & Case, 2008; Gibson, 2009; Osborne, 2008; Richardson, 2002). When I explain that social studies is the school subject that aims to develop our children’s understanding about what it means to be a good citizen, my students are genuinely surprised. Few acknowledge being aware that they were learning about citizenship when they were taking social studies in elementary and secondary school. Is this true of most children and youths’ experiences in school?

A Review of the Literature

A scan of the literature on teachers’ and students’ perceptions of social studies as a school subject from the last three decades would seem to suggest that this lack of overt attention to citizenship education is typical. A number of research studies consistently found that social studies is often the least liked course that children and youth take in school and the one that they feel most lacks relevance to their lives (Chapin, 2006; Chiodo, & Byford, 2004; Egan, 1980; Heafner, 2004; Schug, Todd & Beery, 1984; Steffay & Hood, 1994; Thornton, 2005; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). For example, in Zhao and Hoge’s (2005) study, they interviewed 300 children from kindergarten to Grade 5 and discovered that, “Most children who do not like social studies say ‘it is boring and useless,’ ‘it’s reading the textbook’ and ‘it doesn’t apply’” (p. 3). More positive student reactions to social studies have been found in classrooms where the teacher has clearly articulated goals and a strong sense of purpose as well a personal enthusiasm for the subject (McCall, 2006).

Sears (1996) attributes the problem with social studies to a mismatch between what is reflected in the official curriculum and the way in which it is being represented in the classroom. Aoki (2005) sees this mismatch occurring because the teacher is caught in the “zone of between” (p. 163) in which she or he is “indwelling in two curriculum worlds” (p. 165). One world is the curriculum as planned; the other is the curriculum as lived in the classroom. Curriculum as lived is described by Rogers (1989) as “those

things that a student chooses to emphasize, elaborate on, ignore or omit as he or she recounts learnings from a class or a field trip – the learner’s personal meanings. [These] make up the experienced curriculum” (Rogers, 1989, p. 715). This gap between taught and experienced curriculum occurs because “prior to and during its enactment, teachers have great leeway to interpret prescribed curriculum” (Thornton, 2005, p. 11). Cuban (1992) adds that, “the gap between what is taught and what is learned—both intended and unintended—is large” (p. 223).

Most teachers tend to be content driven with the larger intended curricular goals often getting lost. Brophy and Alleman (1993) claim that, “teachers appear to proceed [with curriculum implementation in the classroom] by asking what knowledge, skills and values are emphasized in the state and district guidelines for the grade level and then make sure that these are covered, especially the ones that are likely to be tested” (p. 28). Often, “knowledge content gets fragmented into disconnected bits that can be memorized but not easily learned with understanding of their meanings or appreciation of their potential significance” (Brophy & Alleman, 1993, p. 28). As a result, Dewey (as cited in Boydston, 2008) warned, “the supposed end for which they [the social studies] were introduced--the development of more intelligent citizenship ...will be missed” (p. 185).

An important step that teachers need to take to address this problem, according to Thornton (2005), is to begin to see themselves as “curricular-instructional gatekeepers.” Such a view of the teacher’s role requires that they concern themselves with the bigger picture and not just with transmitting the officially sanctioned knowledge in the curriculum” (p. 6). Being a curricular-instructional gatekeeper “requires consideration of educational purposes” (p. 6), which according to Thornton is “a task some practitioners prefer to avoid. They may judge aims talks as unnecessary and they may resist it--their job, they might say, is to deliver instruction. Such a view, however, is untenable” (p. 6). Osborne (1991) concurs that, “Good teachers possess a clear vision of education and of what it will do for their students. They are not simply technicians who take a prescribed curriculum or textbook and work their students through it” (p. 119). Does grade-specific social studies content continue to dominate teachers’ focus? If so, does this focus override students’ understanding of the bigger purpose for learning social studies? Does it matter?

Social Studies Teaching and Learning: The Alberta Context

In order to examine some of the questions arising from the review of the literature, I will focus specifically on the newly implemented social studies curriculum in the province of Alberta context. The first ten pages of the Alberta Kindergarten to Grade 12 Social Studies Program of Studies, known as the ‘front matter,’ are the same for all grades. Here, the purpose of and vision for social studies in the province are outlined. The purpose of social studies is described as providing “opportunities for students to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge that will enable them to become engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens” who are “aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 1). The overarching

knowledge, skills and attitudes considered essential to the development of Albertan students as citizens are also delineated here. These outcomes are considered to be cumulative, so that each year of schooling builds on the previous one so that Grade 12 graduates have what they need to be citizens who “effect change in their communities, society and world” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 1).

The front matter also addresses pedagogy. Here students are described as learners who “bring their own perspectives, cultures and experiences to the social studies classroom. They construct meaning in the context of their lived experience through active inquiry and engagement with their school and community” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 5). Thus social studies experiences should “provide learning opportunities for students to develop skills of active and responsible citizenship and the capacity to inquire, make reasoned and informed judgments, and arrive at decisions for the public good” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 5). These skills are to be developed through “an issues-focused approach [which] presents opportunities to address learning outcomes by engaging students in active inquiry and application of knowledge and critical thinking skills” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 5). According to these statements then, a focus on citizenship education, identity, perspective taking, inquiry, issues, active engagement of learners, critical thinking and decision-making should be central to all social studies programs in Alberta.

Province-wide implementation of the new social studies curriculum at the elementary level in Alberta’s schools was phased in over five years beginning with kindergarten to grade three in the 2005/2006 school year, grades four and seven in 2006/2007, grades five, eight, and ten in 2007/2008, grades six, nine, and eleven in 2008/2009, and grade twelve in 2009/2010. As of this writing, elementary teachers have had three to six years of experience with this new curriculum in the classroom, depending on which grade they teach.

How much of this new vision for social studies is evident at the classroom level? What are children’s experiences in school with this new social studies curriculum?

The Research Study

During the 2009/2010 school year, which was four years after the initial implementation of the new social studies curriculum in Alberta, I was lead investigator on a research study examining how elementary school teachers in one school district were handling the implementation of the new social studies curriculum. While the main focus of this study was on the effectiveness of the professional development that the teachers received prior to implementing the new curriculum, the data also pointed to some relevant findings regarding the teachers’ and children’s experiences with the new curriculum. As a part of this study, I had the opportunity to speak to the district curriculum coordinator, classroom teachers and students about their thoughts on social studies as well as to observe in classrooms while social studies was being taught.

Procedures.

Elementary classroom teachers in the school district, all of whom had participated in the district-level formal professional development program on the new social studies curriculum, were asked to volunteer to be interviewed about their thoughts on and experiences with the new social studies curriculum. Those who agreed participated in an initial, one-hour interview between September and November of 2009, with a second follow up interview scheduled from April to July, 2010. Researchers also conducted a mid-year classroom observation and facilitated focus groups with students to uncover what the children believed they were being taught in social studies and why. Artifacts including lesson plans and samples of student work were also collected and field notes were kept during the class observations.

Participants.

Ten teachers from four of the possible eight schools with elementary grades in the district agreed to be interviewed. Four were primary teachers (Grades one and two), one taught a split three/four, and the others were upper elementary teachers (Grades four to six). Two of the teachers had taught for less than ten years, while the rest had teaching experience ranging from ten to over thirty years. All but one had taught at different levels in the elementary program and all had previous experience teaching the new social studies curriculum. Of the ten teachers who were interviewed, four agreed to a classroom visit between March and April of 2010. These four teachers taught social studies to grades one, two, five, and a three/four split. Two focus groups of four to five children each were held with students from each of the grades that were observed.

Data analysis.

A content analysis procedure was used to examine the data collected through the interviews, focus groups and observations (Creswell, 2008). Line-by-line coding was used to analyze the first sets of transcripts. These codes were then organized into categories. The categories were combined into themes and patterns, which were used to guide the examination of all subsequent transcripts in order to gain an understanding of the individual participant's views on the new social studies curriculum. Classroom observation field notes and classroom artifacts were also examined for evidence of these same categories and themes.

Findings and Discussion*i) Teachers' views on the new social studies curriculum.*

As part of the district professional development plan, all of the elementary teachers in the district spent an afternoon looking at the front matter of the Program of Studies where the goals and purposes for social studies are laid out, including

addressing the important role of citizenship education: According to the district curriculum coordinator who facilitated the district's PD plan,

I think the one aspect that worked really well [in the district PD plan] is the fact that we got all the [elementary] teachers in-serviced in that they all looked at and worked a little bit with the front matter. That I really was proud of because sometimes they just never bothered to read it.

Despite this emphasis on understanding the goals and purposes of social studies, the majority of the teachers in the first interview talked about how the most significant changes to the curriculum were changes to the specific grade level content that they were responsible for teaching. A few acknowledged the new emphasis on “big ideas” and concepts such as ‘perspective’ and ‘diversity’, but none of the teachers identified the purpose of social studies as developing “active, responsible citizens” or “global agents of change” that are identified as goals in the Program of Studies front matter. Only one teacher mentioned the key core concepts of ‘citizenship’ and ‘identity,’ which also appear in the front matter (Alberta Education, 2005).

Many of the teachers also expressed concern about these specific grade-related content changes that they saw in the new curriculum. One such concern was in relation to the difficulty of some of the concepts.

I believe that reading, writing and math should take priority over the other subjects. The new social studies program is quite demanding and is difficult to teach to young children. I like the idea about teaching about other cultures and being aware of life in other countries; however, not all children at this age can understand these concepts.

I am disappointed. Why do children in grade three have to study Tunisia, India, Peru and Ukraine. I understand the relation between these countries and our culture in Canada, but most students in grade two don't even know about their own country.

Another concern voiced by the teachers was a perception that there was “content overload” in the curriculum.

In grade four, sometimes it feels a little bit like cramming it down their [the students] throats because there's a lot more to be covered. If there is a way to pare it down a little bit that would be a joy... It's almost like you're skipping a rock across the pond to get to the other side and you don't get time to actually get your feet wet.

These changes in the curriculum content affected the teachers' comfort level with teaching it at times because of their own lack of knowledge about some of the topics.

Where's Tunisia? I don't know about Tunisia! It bothers me that they [the curriculum developers] picked a country that there's not a lot of information on.

The biggest change as noted by teachers, however, was in the pedagogical underpinnings of the curriculum. The teachers talked about the new curriculum being more "student centred" and "connected to the children's lives". There was also a recognition that the emphasis in the curriculum had shifted from learning content knowledge to skill development and an inquiry focus.

... the pedagogy is quite a bit different. It really does lend itself to inquiry, in fact it demands it. So for me that's the major change. It's not the content; it's how it's delivered.

The shift to an inquiry approach was also flagged as a concern for some teachers.

Teachers know how kids learn and are really nervous about inquiry without structure and are struggling with that too.

I think there are teachers who are maybe a bit more apprehensive to just let kids go at it [inquiry].

I'm positive there are teachers out there who aren't teaching with the new pedagogy. I know there are because social studies isn't their only subject. As an elementary generalist there is a focus on math and language arts, and social and science are sort of those thematic add-ons if they've got time to plan something super fantastic.

One concern with the move to an inquiry approach was the lack of support in the prescribed resources.

[The curriculum is] really relying on inquiry and all the things that go with it but there is not a lot in the textbook to drive what you are doing and that's really tough.

While the teachers generally didn't acknowledge a heavy reliance on the textbooks, all of the children in the focus groups talked about using them frequently in social studies alongside other resources such as children's story books, artifact kits, and the Internet.

[In social studies] we read it from the textbooks. (Grade three student)

Sometimes [in social studies] you get a [text]book and just look at different things in the books. (Grade two student)

Sometimes it gets boring cause we read the textbook a lot. (Grade four student)

We try and find answers to the questions in the textbook cause you're searching for this page and no it's not in this page. So you're kind of spending most of your period and trying to find out the first question and where you would get it from. (Grade four student)

We write it in our booklets for social studies. Our teacher, Mrs. C. makes up a booklet for us and we have to answer the questions when we learn. Like we have a different booklet for each chapter [in the textbook]. So you have to answer the questions after you've read the pages that you need to read to answer the questions. (Grade three student)

[Social studies is] copying off the board and working in the social textbook and studying for all the tests. (Grade three student)

We did something called an inquiry question for the whole entire unit. So we would read textbooks and do all our research and then we answer the question. (Grade five student)

Mr. B likes to use the [social studies] textbook a lot. (Grade five student)

Classroom observations also revealed teachers using worksheets provided in the teacher materials that came with the recommended textbooks. Students mainly relied on textbooks to answer teacher-generated questions in each of the classes observed. Our observations indicated that there was little engagement of students in "active inquiry and application of knowledge and critical thinking skills" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 5) as described in the Program of Studies.

ii) Children's views on social studies.

Students in each focus group were asked, what do you learn about in social studies, and, why do you take social studies in school? Their responses to the first question are provided by grade, while the responses to the second question are presented by theme.

a) What the children are learning in social studies. Focus group discussions focused on what sorts of things they were learning about in social studies. The children were generally quite articulate about the topics and content they were currently studying. According to the grade five students, in social studies they were learning:

... about the different cities and countries and about different people and what they do and how they live in their culture.

... about the history, what people did way back then and how it's changed in the future from the past.

... about the Native Canadians and the European fur trade and just learning about Canada and it's history.

... about continents and sometimes it just history.

...about where you're from and what it used to be like where you're living now.

... stuff about the world.

An examination of the learning outcomes for grade five social studies in the provincial program of study shows that at least the first few students were quite accurate regarding the content they were studying, but not necessarily about the purpose for studying it.

Grade 5 students will examine how the ways of life of peoples in Canada are integral to Canadian culture and identity. They will explore the geographic vastness of Canada and the relationships between the land, places and people. As they reflect upon the stories of diverse Aboriginal, French, British and immigrant experiences in Canada over time, students will develop a sense of place and an awareness of how these multiple stories contribute to students' sense of citizenship and identity. (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 1)

Some of the responses from grade four students included:

... you learn about the history of Alberta, aboriginal, Francophone, Métis, Canadians, and other people that were in Alberta and Canada.

...you learn about how things have changed over time, like what happened in Alberta long ago and about the fur trade and about Francophone, Métis, and British.

...you learn about people from the past and what did they do and what their language was.

...you learn more like culture and more about other people and the history, like the Sundance of the aboriginal people or the catholic missionaries and the Métis and the Francophones.

... it [social studies] teaches about our history and about culture and how life was in Alberta.

It's all about geography and the past of many different countries and who the first people were there.

All but the last student response reflect the grade specific focus outlined in the Program of Study.

Grade 4 students will explore the geographic, cultural, linguistic, economic and historical characteristics that define quality of life in Alberta. They will appreciate how these characteristics reflect people's interaction with the land and how physical geography and natural resources affect quality of life. Through this exploration, students will also examine how major events and people shaped the evolution of Alberta. (Alberta Education, 2005)

Grade three students understood social studies as a subject where they learn about "other kids and other different places," "the world," "services are in other places like Peru, Tunisia, and India," "other countries and the people that are living in those countries," and, different countries' food and their clothing." Here too, the students' comments reflect the grade focus for the most part, however, no mention was made of Canada's involvement with these countries or of learning to be a global citizen.

Grade 3 students will investigate life in four diverse communities around the world. The contemporary communities examined will be drawn from India, Tunisia, Ukraine and Peru. Students will inquire into how geographic, social, cultural and linguistic factors affect quality of life in communities in the world. Students will enrich their awareness and appreciation of how people live in other places. Their understanding of global citizenship will be further developed and they will recognize Canada's involvement in other parts of the world. (Alberta Education, 2005)

Grade two students talked about social studies being about "back in the olden days," learning about different communities like "Nova Scotia, Acadian, Iqaluit and Saskatoon", and "how some of the communities are different from ours". These responses also demonstrate awareness of some aspects of the grade two overview in the Program of Study.

Grade 2 students will investigate life in three diverse communities within Canada. Based on their understanding of their own communities, students will explore characteristics of selected rural and urban communities in Canada: an Inuit community, a prairie community and an Acadian community. They will apply their understanding of various aspects that define communities, such as geography, culture, language, heritage, economics and resources, in their investigation of how communities are connected. Students will discover how people live in each of these communities and will reflect upon the vastness of Canada and the diversity of Canadian communities. Students will also be given the opportunity to study the past of their own or one of the other communities

studied. Throughout the study, emphasis will be on the contribution of individuals and groups to a community. (Alberta Education, 2005, iii)

The grade one students had more difficulty than did their older counterparts in identifying what they were learning about in social studies, which is made obvious in the following excerpt from one focus group conversation:

SG (Interviewer) – Patty, what do you learn in social studies?

Patty – I really like to play the games that Mrs. M. [the Grade 1 teacher] lets us play, like cards.

SG – Like you were playing today when I was in your class. Why?

Patty – Because like Go Fish you have to say a number and you have to try to guess if they have that.

SG – So what does that teach you about when you're playing cards?

Patty – It teaches you how to play it.

SG – Why are you learning how to play cards in social studies?

Patty – I don't know.

SG – Do any of you know why you're learning to play cards today in social studies?

Fanny do you have an idea?

Fanny – No.

SG –Gwen do you know why she was teaching you to play cards today?

Gwen – Because [long pause] I don't know.

SG –Patty do you have an idea why now?

Patty – Maybe because my Dad teaches me to play cards and then Mrs. M. teaches us how to play cards.

SG – So it's something you do at home then with your family?

Patty – Uh-huh.

SG – So you're learning about things that your family likes to do together. Is that what you're doing?

Patty - Uh-huh

The grade one teacher later described her purpose for playing cards with the children in this way, "I wanted them to find out these family rituals that we have and to see that traditions are still really important in this day and age." This focus on the concept of tradition is reflected in the following statement from the grade one Program of Study:

Through inquiry into their social, physical, cultural and linguistic environments, Grade 1 students will see themselves as part of the larger world. They will have opportunities to share their personal stories and explore traditions and symbols that are reflected in their groups or communities. (Alberta Education, 2005)

The teacher also noted that this was her third lesson in which she had been addressing the concepts of time and past, present and future. The children seemed to have a solid understanding of these concepts. Here is a conversation with the same student:

SG (Interviewer) - You were also learning about pirates and making pirate maps in social studies. Do know why you learned about pirates?

Patty – Cause it was in the past.

SG – So the pirates lived in the past. Is learning about the past part of social studies then?

Patty - And the present and the future.

SG– And pirates are the past?

Patty – Uh huh and the present is like we are doing right now. And then the future is what we're gonna do tomorrow.

b) Children's thoughts on why they take social studies in school. Most of the student responses to the question of why they take social studies in school represented a view of “schooling as preparation for the future”:

You need social [sic] cause if you wanted to be a teacher you would need to know that stuff. (Grade five student)

...because when you grow up you could be like a tour guide for the museum and when people ask questions about the history of Canada or other places, then you could actually answer them. (Grade five student)

It's important for when you grow up. (Grade four student)

In social studies you learn about new places and when you grow up you might want to move to that place. (Grade five student)

It's important to know about because when you grow up and you're in university then you might need to know that stuff in the test or something. (Grade four student)

Included under this theme is the view of social studies as preparing the children to be world travelers:

So if you, wanna ever go to one of these countries you're gonna know what their language is and like you're gonna know what did they do and what kind of stuff they used. (Grade four student)

It's useful because then if you go to one of those countries then you know what their history is and all that type of stuff. (Grade three student)

If you go to those places you know if stuff is bad or dangerous so you wouldn't go near it. (Grade three student)

A second theme in the children's responses was the importance of social studies for “success in school”:

Well because we can learn more and we wouldn't know anything if we go to a higher grade. (Grade two student)

If you have social [sic] you would get a better education and know more about your country. (Grade five student)

So you can get good on your tests. (Grade three student)

The third theme in their responses addressed the development of historical and geographical understanding.

We probably have it so we learn about history, geography and parts of the world and how they started. (Grade four student)

...cause so we can explore places and know more about the place. (Grade four student)

We make maps...cause you could have maps to travel somewhere if you don't know where to go. Like if you're looking at a campsite. Mommy and Daddy had a map so they know which campsite to look at first. (Grade one student)

I think that we need to know about it is because you don't want to just know about our province, you might want to learn about other provinces in Canada. (Grade two student)

It's important because it helps you to learn about the way things were. (Grade four student)

One particularly astute Grade three student was able to see the importance of studying history to learn from mistakes made in the past:

...because if we didn't have social studies we wouldn't know where our past have been. Like what has changed...cause sometimes our past tells stuff about us like what we have done in the past, like what has been like the good stuff and like the bad stuff.

Lastly, some children saw the importance of social studies as being more socio-cultural in nature.

I think it's really important to learn about other communities in the world because in case you have any relatives from there and you know why they do things like my uncle he's Scottish so I know why he wears a kilt. (Grade three student)

...so you know how other people do things. (Grade three student)

I think that we have social studies in school is that we can learn about different communities in Canada so you know all about like Edmonton and Alberta. (Grade two student)

I think learning about other communities is important because we wouldn't know anything about other communities. (Grade two student)

We learn about communities ...cause it's a place where people live (Grade one student)

You learn about groups...what groups you're in...like soccer (Grade one student)

One student was able to talk about "helping others" as part of the impetus for learning about other people.

I think it's important to learn about different communities beside ours because we could help them. (Grade two student)

While this comment came the closest to the vision of good citizenship articulated in the Alberta Social Studies Program of Studies, no direct reference was made to the concepts of "citizen" or "citizenship" in any of the children's responses.

Summary of Findings

Participating teachers in this school district generally saw significant changes in both the content and the pedagogy of the new Alberta social studies curriculum. In terms of content, the main changes recognized were in the grade specific topics and concepts that they were responsible for teaching. Some teachers reported struggling with the difficulty of the new content and questioned the age appropriateness of certain topics. Others expressed concern over the abstractness of some of the new concepts. Even though the teachers had examined the overarching goals and purposes of social studies in the Program of Study during their professional development sessions on the new curriculum, no mention was made of the important role that citizenship education plays in social studies.

Pedagogically, a renewed emphasis on inquiry and students' thinking and questioning was noted by the teachers as being a significant change in the new social studies curriculum, as was a shift to skill development. A general lack of confidence in implementing inquiry-based learning was expressed by some of the teachers and attributed mainly to the shortage of age and topic appropriate resources. For the most part, however, the teachers relied heavily on the prescribed social studies textbooks and there was little evidence of inquiry, as defined in the Program of Studies, in action in the classes observed.

It is not surprisingly then, that the students did not mention learning to be an active, responsible citizen as a reason why they take social studies in school. Rather, social studies was seen as the school subject that either helped them prepare for their future; taught them about geography, history and society, or was important for success in school. For the most part, the children were conversant about the topics and concepts that they were currently studying in social studies. While their responses about what social studies entails reflect some aspects of the specific grade-focused content, a foundational understanding of the reason why it is important to learn about culture, history and geography is not apparent in their responses to why they study social studies in school. There was scant evidence of active engagement in inquiry in the focus group discussions.

Concluding Remarks

The findings from this study of the implementation of the new social studies curriculum in Alberta point to some continuing challenges in teaching social studies in elementary schools. Big picture thinking about goals and purposes for what we do as teachers appears to be continuing to take a back seat to specific grade level outcomes (Thornton, 2005). It would appear that Dewey's earlier prophecy of missed opportunities to promote "intelligent citizenship" has been fulfilled (Boydston, 2008). Curriculum implementation is a very difficult process and struggling to implement curriculum change without a deep understanding of purpose exacerbates the challenges it poses.

As Brophy and Alleman (1993) assert, "the key to improving social studies is the individual teachers' understanding of social studies education--not just as social studies content to be covered but as a coherent citizen education effort" (p. 31). Listening to our students' voices about how they make sense of their school experiences is an important first step in understanding the impact of what happens in our classrooms (Erickson, et al., 2008; Thiessen & Cook, 2007). If educating for citizenship is truly the *raison d'être* of social studies, then it should be understood as such by both our teachers and our students. We need to start conscientiously sharing this important purpose at every opportunity in order for social studies to be recognized for the critical role that it has to play in schooling.

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