PACE

COMMENTARY

Finding the Time

The Influence of Testing and Teacher Autonomy on Social Studies Marginalization

AUTHORS

Paul G. Fitchett | Auburn University

Tina L. Heafner | University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Richard G. Lambert | University of North Carolina at Charlotte

PUBLISHED: November 13, 2012

"I just don't have enough time." This is a common complaint by elementary teachers across the United States. Many practitioners perceive accountability and high-stakes testing as constraints to the quality and quantity of their instruction. Overwhelmed by curricular intensification, teachers react to these pressures by narrowing their instruction exclusively to tested subject matter. Further compounding the situation, educational policies have mandated accountability assessments in key subject areas; thereby increasing the profile of some subjects while diminishing the prominence of others. Among the core subjects of elementary education, math, science, and English/language arts have most directly benefited from the current accountability movement due to statewide and federal testing requirements. Yet, social studies remains left behind. In 2012, only eleven states required a state social studies assessment in elementary grades (California is not one of them). Across the country, teachers are shifting time away from social studies in order to spend a greater portion of the instructional day on tested subjects.

In this study published by *Education Policy,* we attempted to explain the confluence of accountability pressures, testing policy, and social studies marginalization. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics Schools and Staffing Survey, we examined the influence of assessment policy in elementary grades and teachers' perceptions of professional control on reported time spent on social studies instruction. Our research reported several key findings. First, teachers in states that require social studies teaching, spend more time teaching social studies. On average, teachers with state tests spend approximately 30 minutes per week more (or 18 hours per the traditional academic year) on social studies than teachers without tests. Second, teachers who believe that they have control over their instructional environment report up to 6 hours more of social studies teaching than less autonomous teachers. Finally, teacher credentials (such as licensure and content area) and school characteristics (socioeconomic status) were not associated with time spend on social studies.

From these findings, we suggest social studies professionals advocate for a place among tested subjects in the elementary grades. However, testing should not be the singular focus. We also recommend that teacher educators and school leaders promote greater professional autonomy. Elementary teachers who perceive greater curricular control are more likely to teach social studies. Lastly, we infer from our findings that test-related marginalization and autonomy were such effective predictors of social studies instructional time that other factors such as teacher credentials and school context were not substantial. Working complimentary and not contradictory, we argue that educational leaders in teacher education and policymaking re-focus efforts to encourage practitioner autonomy while simultaneously finding a place for social studies in the current accountability environment.

The full study can be found here (gated): Fitchett, Paul G., Tina L. Heafner and Richard G. Lambert, "Examining Elementary Social Studies Marginalization: A Multilevel Model," Educational Policy, forthcoming.

Suggested citation

Fitchett, P. G., Heafner, T. L., & Lambert, R. G. (2012, November). *Finding the time: The influence of testing autonomy on social studies marginalization* [Commentary]. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/finding-time

PACE
Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org