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Book review

Inspiring Case Studies of Elementary Social Studies Teachers, Book Review of *Exemplary Elementary Social Studies: Case Studies in Practice*

Educators can easily descend into doom and gloom at the contemporary state of elementary social studies in the United States. As high-stakes testing ignores social studies and/or seems to devalue social studies, *Exemplary Elementary Social Studies: Case Studies in Practice* (Libresco, Alleman, Field, & Passe, 2014) suggests that there is hope for social studies yet. Some of the teachers featured in this thin volume inspire a “Wow,” because their practice is so rich and meaningful. Voices of the students in the teachers' classrooms are the kind you wish you heard and read more often. *Exemplary Elementary Social Studies: Case Studies in Practice* suggests that the future of social studies could be bright, especially if more learn from the teachers' experiences described in the book. The portrayals provided of inspiring classrooms and the teachers' motivations makes the models seem accessible enough to emulate. Many of the teachers actually embrace their state standards as a springboard for improved social studies instruction. This is a welcome change from the frequent laments offered about state standards (Boyle-Basie, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008; Leming, Ellington, & Porter, 2003; Rock, Heafner, Oldendorf, Good, & O'Connor, 2004; VanFossen, 2005).

The first chapter of the book provides plenty of context for the challenging times social studies face. Passe, Good, and Libresco (2014) provide helpful history in explaining that since the 1970s social studies instruction has been declining in the time devoted to it and its effectiveness. No Child Left Behind is just one of the most recent legislative assaults on social studies, among many others. The political landscape is changing so rapidly for social studies that Common Core (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) is barely mentioned in this book. And the C3 framework, which is beginning to show promise for gaining traction, was published just as this book was finished (NCSS, 2013). So, the C3 Framework is also not explicitly discussed. But, readers who are fluent in C3 and Common Core language will be able to make obvious connections to the teachers' practices in the case studies. This is a book that lifts up stories of K-6 teachers who are thriving in their social studies commitment despite and sometimes because of the high-stakes testing environment. The first chapter suggests several conceptual frameworks for analyzing the teachers' practice. It was also helpful that the authors of the first chapter reminded readers to note what the teachers do not do: overly rely on a textbook, try to cover too much curriculum thinly, or drill their students in test preparation.

The heart of the book is six chapters, each describing one excellent social studies teacher's practice, starting with sixth grade and descending to kindergarten. At the end of each case study, the featured teacher (or team of teachers in one case or author of the chapter in another case) offer advice to the reader. Many pre-service and inservice teachers may enjoy this feature of the book.

Chapter 2 includes some great ideas for teaching rich geography and economics. The sixth grade teacher (who is not in a traditional middle school or junior high school) is unusual in her commitment to listening to her students. The chapter features transcripts of her conversations with students and describes how she listens to audiotape of students' conversations as a regular practice. Her curriculum is focused on the Eastern Hemisphere, but many of her practices apply to any type of upper elementary instruction.

The teacher featured in chapter 3 built on ideas from a Project Citizen (Center for Civic Education, 2014) summer workshop she attended to develop a social-issues based project in which her fifth graders created magazines to educate others about community problems. The fifth grade case study is unusual because of the teacher's strong commitment to inquiry and social justice. Readers with an interest in civic education may find this chapter most interesting, particularly because the teacher is so committed to fostering democratic skills and authentic writing. Those who find the work of Beane (1997) to be instructional will love this contemporary example of integrated curriculum and instruction.

The New York fourth grade teachers featured in chapter 4 are unusual in their appreciation of a new high-stakes history test in their state. They view the document-based test as an opportunity for them to improve the quality of their social studies curriculum and to engage in greater social studies professional development. This chapter describes the teachers' practices as they re-wrote their curriculum to focus on essential questions from civics and

geography. Staff development is addressed explicitly in this chapter, with an emphasis on the importance of lead teachers.

Chapter 5 introduces a third grade teacher who is passionate about multiple intelligence theory and teaching to various learning styles. Illustrations and descriptions in this chapter make it easy to see how teachers could develop social studies centers that allow for student choice and meaningful integration of the curriculum.

Those interested in service learning may find chapter 6, centered on a second grade class taught by a first year teacher, to be most fascinating. It is nice to see the case studies feature successful teachers of various experience levels. Like many of the teachers featured in this book, the second grade teacher uses interdisciplinary connections to foster civic understanding while meeting a variety of academic standards. A service-learning project that emerged out a unit on habitats to focus on homelessness appears to nurture children's empathy. Examples of student work and comments during the project enhance this chapter.

Fans of Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy already know of Barbara Knighton, a first-grade teacher who is frequently featured in their writings. Chapter 7 does a fabulous job describing how establishing a learning community in first grade is related to civic education. While most of the teachers included in this book model strong tendencies toward constructivism, Barbara Knighton is noteworthy for explicitly blending direct instruction with constructivism. She explains how she uses stories, narratives, and artifacts to build children's background knowledge. Some readers will especially appreciate the many suggestions for assessment that are bulleted in this chapter.

The final case study of a kindergarten teacher is a little different than the rest of the book because it does not have advice at the end directly from the teacher(s). It is also more focused on connecting state social studies standards very explicitly to instructional practices such as learning centers and class meetings. Readers from North Carolina will probably find this most helpful. It was useful that this chapter specifically addressed the challenges and strategies used by the teacher to become an advocate for social studies and a teacher leader.

The concluding chapter in the book provides a review of 15 "common practices" or themes found across the seven case studies (p. 142). Readers will probably have already identified these, but it is a good reminder. Here are the most intriguing practices for their direct application to the majority of elementary classrooms: means of establishing a learning community, a range of assessment tools, holistically approaching standards, modeling intellectual curiosity, promoting intellectual responsibility, integration across the curriculum, reflection on student learning, and professional development. The book ends with a great call to action:

These are challenging times for elementary social studies, and you have a choice to make. You can succumb to test-prep and contribute to the shrinking time devoted to social studies. Or, like these classroom teachers, you can plan engaging lessons around big ideas that nurture students to be citizens of their local and global worlds (p. 162).

Those interested in improving social studies curriculum and instruction will find rich fodder in this text. This is the kind of book which instructors of elementary social studies methods classes might assign to their students with the instruction to read the first chapter as well as just a couple others of their own choice. After reading several chapters, preservice or inservice teachers may enjoy presenting what they learned from one of the case studies and listening to colleagues analyze the other chapters in the book. Preservice and inservice teachers might benefit from writing reflections on how they could adopt some of these teachers' practices or why they are uncomfortable with some of the practices described in the case studies.

Some could quibble with just a few individual practices by the teachers—e.g. an economics lesson on wants and needs or essential questions that can be answered with one word. But, that is part of what makes reading this book fun: the teachers are inspiring professionals, not necessarily perfect. The book would benefit from a topical index. References are used appropriately, with good citations for further reading, without overwhelming the general reader. Those who care about the future of social studies will find this text an uplifting and useful addition to their professional libraries.

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