

Social Studies Curriculum Change and Students' Knowledge of Government and Civics

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the impact of curriculum change with apparent changes in student knowledge of government and civics throughout the twentieth century. First, political scientist Richard Niemi's studies of students' responses on measures of government and civics knowledge are described. These measures spanned the time period from 1933 through 1998. Next, Niemi's results are correlated to changes in the social studies curriculum as documented by Evans (2002), Stallones (2002) and others. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the impact of curriculum change on student knowledge.

A great deal of attention has been paid recently to the seeming decline in Americans' civic competence and engagement (Putnam, 2000). Some have offered as an explanation a general decline in knowledge of civics and government among schoolchildren (Ravitch and Finn, 1987). In a series of studies, political scientist Richard Niemi tracked student responses to standardized test questions on government and civics. At the First International Conference on Civic Education Research in 2003, Niemi presented his most recent analysis, spanning sixty-five years of testing. Niemi compared twelfth grade students' responses on standardized tests from the 1933 through 1998, and compared fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students using National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP) trend studies for the period 1975-1998. He concluded that contemporary students are not demonstrably less informed about politics and government than were students in the past (Niemi et al 2003, 21). However, he did find some disturbing comparisons among students at different grade levels and in different decades in some areas of civic knowledge. Niemi pointed to social developments and political events to explain some of these differences, but he did not investigate changes in the school curriculum for history and social studies¹ as an explanatory factor.

This paper will attempt to correlate Niemi's findings with changes in the social studies curriculum at grades four, eight, and twelve over the decades in question. While this paper represents only a first look at the relationship between social studies curriculum and NAEP items designed to measure civics knowledge, it should deepen understanding of the influences social studies instruction has on students' civics knowledge over time.

Test Results 1933-1998

Horace Mann described preparation for democratic citizenship as one of the key factors that compelled the State to establish schools (Cremin 1980). Some modern critics would say that that

mission of the schools has failed, as declining numbers of students (Ravitch and Finn 1987) and adults (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1986) seem to have grasped the most fundamental lessons civics and government classes should impart. Assuming that knowledge of the structure and functions of our government is an important topic for American schools to address, it is worthwhile to investigate how such knowledge has changed over time and how curriculum changes have impacted it.

Political scientist Richard Niemi has for years studied this seeming decline in civic competence among students as reflected in responses to items on the NAEP and similar measures. His most recent study compares items and student responses across six decades, from 1933 to 1998. While much care must be taken with interpreting the results of standardized tests as measures of actual knowledge, particularly over such an expanse of time, Niemi reached some provocative conclusions about changes in student knowledge of civic concepts.

For his study, Niemi identified identically worded and similarly worded NAEP items dealing with government and civics in four administrations from 1975-1998. He then compared twelfth graders, eighth graders, and fourth graders² in their responses over time. He reached three general conclusions,

- There was a decline in civic knowledge among 8th and 12th graders.
- There was, if anything, a small increase in civic knowledge in the 1990s among 4th graders.
- The decline among twelfth graders was small—perhaps several percentage points fewer answers (Niemi et al 2003, 20-21).

In addition, Niemi reviewed test items dating back to 1933 and identified similarly worded questions across ten administrations between 1933 and 1998. He compared the responses of twelfth graders, the most consistently tested group, for those years. He concluded that “contemporary high school seniors are not demonstrably less informed about politics and government than were students in the 1930s through the 1960s” (ibid., 21).

What part, if any, might change in the curriculum of history and the social sciences have played in the student responses that led to Niemi's conclusions? The era surrounding the first test items in Niemi's study was one of great creativity in curriculum development for history and the social sciences. In 1916, the Committee on Social Studies of the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education proposed

a radical departure from the established pattern of teaching history, geography and civics. The Committee proposed a greater focus on current issues, social problems, and student needs and interests embodied in two courses, Community Civics and Problems of Democracy, which would integrate history and the social sciences in a synthesized approach called 'social studies'. The controversial proposal sparked debate in the academic community between those who favored traditional discipline-based instruction for the schools and those who advocated various social studies approaches. By 1920, many of the discipline-based organizations granted social studies a grudging acceptance. In that year, the American Historical Association's (AHA) teachers' journal *Historical Outlook* provided space for a "Department of Social Studies" and social studies advocates Edgar Dawson and Lucy M. Salmon were added to the journal's editorial board (Evans 2002, 2). By 1929, the AHA had aligned itself with the social studies movement by forming a Commission on Social Studies (Saxe 1991, xiv).

Tentative acceptance by professional organizations opened the door to academically acceptable experimentation in social studies curriculum development. One of the most influential experiments was Harold Rugg's social studies textbooks for secondary classrooms. Rugg's books began as a series of pamphlets for junior high school classes that addressed history and social science topics from an integrated, social studies approach. Rugg once claimed that the segregation of knowledge into disciplinary categories was "the chronic and besetting sin of academic life" (1952, 225). The pamphlets evolved into textbooks that encouraged students to make critically analyze of American history and civic practices. By the 1930s, the Rugg textbooks were widely used (Winters 1968, 91).

Students who participated in the 1933 assessment of civics knowledge had likely been exposed to the integrated social studies approach to instruction and likely the social problems methodology of Rugg and others. In Niemi's longitudinal analysis, the only items common to the 1933 assessment and more recent ones had to do with the Electoral College. Students scored 64% correct answers to those questions in 1933, and 62% and 63% correct in 1988 and 1998, respectively (Niemi et al 2003, 32). The fairly static rate of correct responses over time may seem to yield little valuable information until the changing patterns of high school attendance and the curriculum changes over six decades are considered. In light of those considerations, the small change in percentage of correct responses is remarkable and encourages the conclusion that instruction in civics and government has been very effective in maintaining ground as the high school population swelled from approximately five million students to over thirteen million, and high

school attendance expanded from half of the teenage population in 1930 to 95% by 1994 (in Angus and Mirel 1999, 203).

Social studies instruction, and particularly any approach that encouraged critical analysis of past or present government policy, continued to arouse controversy throughout the 1930s. Others who opposed social studies instruction because of the social reconstructionist goals held by many of its proponents joined the advocates of discipline-based instruction. By the 1940s, social studies was on the defensive and advocates for more traditional instructional approaches gained ground (Evans 2002, 10). Regardless of the arguments over content and methodology that were carried on in the academy and the popular press, teachers in the classroom seem to respond to current events in their decisions of what to emphasize in their courses. Test results from 1939 showed that only 28% of respondents correctly answered questions about the treaty approval process, possibly reflecting the general isolationist mood of the era. Such luminaries as Charles Lindbergh publicly denounced United States involvement with foreign powers. The treaty process was not a topic of public discourse. By the 1976, 1988, and 1998 administrations, 37%, 43%, and 39% of students, respectively, answered similar questions correctly (Niemi et al 2003, 32). The substantial increase in student knowledge may reflect the addition to American History and Government courses of content covering the wartime and postwar development of the United Nations, especially as it is commonly taught in contrast to President Wilson's failure to win Senate approval for U.S. entry into the League of Nations. Other additions to course content such as the international security arrangements emerging from the Cold War and the United States' increasing international obligations may have influenced students' growth in understanding of the foreign policy apparatus of government.

In the 1940 assessment studied by Niemi, 76% of students responded correctly to questions about checks and balances in the national government, possibly responding to the currency of President Roosevelt's battles with Congress and the courts over New Deal policies. By 1964, 75% of students responded correctly to similar questions, following two decades of the most dramatic expansion of executive power in American history (ibid.). By 1998, only 66% of students answered similar measures correctly. The intervening years were a time of consolidation of power in the executive branch, which is described in textbooks and may be reflected in the decline in apparent student understanding of the limitations on power inherent in the Constitution. This result seems to support Niemi's conclusion that there has been a real decline in student knowledge since the 1960s.

The 1940 assessment saw 86% of students correctly answer questions about the Bill of Rights. By 1988 and 1998, 92% and 94% of students correctly answered similar questions (ibid.). This increase may be due to the dramatic increase in course content in American History and Government regarding the expansion of civil rights in the 1950s and beyond as the Bill of Rights was increasingly applied to the states through the Fourteenth Amendment. It may also stem from the increased focus among textbook publishers, curriculum developers, and teachers on state content standards as the basis for course content, including content on the Bill of Rights. It may also reflect the tendency of curriculum development and textbook adoption committees to emphasize points of agreement, such as the fundamental principles of American government, instead of more controversial issues.

The 1950s marked a further retrenchment in secondary social studies instruction as it suffered from attacks by opponents of progressive education on one hand and red-baiters on the other. Respected academics such as Robert Hutchins and Arthur Bestor criticized progressive education, and in Bestor's case, social studies in particular, as "soft, anti-intellectual, and weak when compared to schools in Europe and the USSR" (Evans 2002, 15). Critics of the political philosophies underlying some social studies materials and methodologies pointed to the role of social reconstructionists in much of its production, and to the progressives' flirtations with radical political ideas during the Great Depression. Even the advocates of social studies turned a critical eye toward the integrated curriculum approach. An editor of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) publication *Social Education* wrote "One of the pressing issues that concerns all of us is the place of history and other 'content' courses in a social studies program that has become as broad as life itself" (Todd 1950, 195).

Fifty-nine percent of students who participated in the 1954 assessment correctly answered questions on the Declaration of Independence. In 1988, the same percentage of respondents answered correctly on similar items. Once again, this consistency in the face of a dramatically different high school population is remarkable and seems to reflect positive strides in teaching government and civics to diverse students. On the other hand, ten years later only 50% of students correctly answered a similar measure (Niemi et al 2003, 32). The 1980s saw a resurgence in heritage-oriented approaches to American history and government courses sparked by the revival of political conservatism and alarmist publications such as *A Nation at Risk*, which described a broad-based crisis in American education. The decade also saw a re-emphasis on 'basics' in social studies classrooms, as embodied in publications such as E.D. Hirsch's

Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (1987). This publication and many like it found its way into classrooms and influenced the content and the focus of teachers. Perhaps these influences buoyed the teaching of the fundamental documents of American democracy in a way that was not present in the following decade⁷.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a rebirth of progressive approaches in education, including a return to integrated instruction in history and social science in the form of the "New Social Studies." Innovative curricula such as *Man: A Course of Study* (MACOS) incorporated modern social science research into topical, often multi-year, studies. Idealistic teachers, more attuned to education as a force for social change, took their places in the classrooms of America. NCSS meetings increasingly dealt with resolutions calling the organization to make pronouncements on political and social issues (Wraga 1995, 432). The 1964 assessment measured 72% of respondents correctly identifying the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education*. By the 1988 and 1998 administrations, only 68% and 66% of students, respectively, correctly identified *Brown* (Niemi et al 2003, 32).

Perhaps the immediacy of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s accounts for the difference. By the late 1980s and 1990s, freedom riders, the Voting Rights Act, and the national debate over school desegregation were topics for the history books, not current events. The concept of judicial review, itself, however, had a different outcome. In 1964, only 37% of test-takers correctly answered items regarding the principle of judicial review. By 1988 and 1998, 54% and 52%, respectively, gave correct answers (ibid.). It may be that the more global, integrated approaches that gained popularity in the 1960s were less suited to instruction in abstract legal concepts than were the more traditional, standards-driven curricula of the 1980s and 1990s. Concerns among social studies educators led to attempts to redefine the 'essentials' of the field (Wraga 1995, 436). It also may reflect teachers' exposure to scholarly debates over increasing judicial activism. In addition, the era saw a variety of content standards promulgated by national discipline-based organizations, usually organized along traditional disciplinary lines. As states began to develop content standards for their schools, politics often dictated that controversy be avoided, leaving the emphasis on areas of little controversy, such as the basic principles of American constitutional government.

The final item in Niemi's 60-year analysis concerns the compromise reached at the Constitutional Convention that led to our bi-cameral national Congress. The Connecticut Compromise was featured in the 1969 and 1998 NAEPs. In 1969, 44% of respondents correctly answered the measure. In 1998, 55% correctly answered the item (Niemi et al 2003,

32). Once again, this seems to indicate that the trend in American history and government course curricula toward traditional, standards-based content facilitated students' retention of key elements in the development of the American governmental structure.

NAEP Results 1976-1998

Niemi also analyzed NAEP Civics Test results from the 1976, 1982, 1988, and 1998 administrations to fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders, from which he drew three general conclusions. Niemi claimed that, while fourth graders appear to show an increase in civic knowledge during this time period, there was a decline in civic knowledge among eighth and twelfth graders (2003, 20-21). He also pointed out that the decline among twelfth graders is small. Niemi's conclusions for these years may be more reliable than his conclusions for the broad period from 1933 to 1998 because the demographics of schoolchildren in recent decades is more consistent than for the longer time frame. In addition, there are more identical and similar questions on the four recent tests than in previous decades.

Regarding the apparent increase in civic knowledge among fourth graders, curriculum change may not be responsible. Although the past few decades have seen a gradual shift away from the 'expanding communities' curriculum model, the move has not been as dramatic as some would claim (Stallones 2002, 293). Additionally, the fourth grade curriculum has been remarkably stable despite curriculum changes. In the 'expanding communities' model, fourth grade was the most common placement for students' introduction to state history and development. Although modern curricula tend to address development from a broader social science basis, the home state is still the most common focus for fourth grade classes. The growth of standards-based curricula during the time period has more narrowly focused students and their teachers on civic functions, or maybe the movement for improved subject matter preparation for elementary teachers has presented students with teachers better versed in political science.

The general decline in civic knowledge among eighth and twelfth graders over the past several decades parallels the shift toward traditional discipline-based approaches to teaching American history and government at both levels. While it is tempting to attribute the apparent decline in knowledge to these approaches and the rise of content standards as the basis for curriculum development, there are other factors at work. The initial wave of standards-based testing focused much more on mathematics and English than on history and the social sciences. In some cases, state tests did not measure achievement in social studies at all. For instance, California was so unconcerned about the social studies knowledge of its schoolchildren that,

until recently, its state tests did not correspond to the content standards or even the course sequence for history and social science in the secondary schools. Consequently, teachers emphasize topics found on the tests at the expense of prescribed course content, or risk their students' poor performance on the state tests. Primary grade students were not tested on social studies at all! Teachers in one school district reported to the author that their superintendent directed them to focus on reading and mathematics and ignore social studies in grades K-3. In addition, as teachers increasingly are held accountable for students' test scores, they become less willing to emphasize topics that are not on the tests.

Among twelfth graders, the largest decline in correct answers during the period 1976-1998 appeared on items dealing with the structure and function of the federal government. The greatest gains appeared on items dealing with state and local governments. Items concerning constitutional rights and their applications saw little or no change (Niemi et al 2003, 26-27). Once again, the past several decades have been marked by a shift toward standards-based curriculum and traditional approaches in history and civics education. As standards have been developed by states, the courses in American government have tended to include more material on state and local government structure and function, possibly accounting for respondents' gains in those areas.

Accounting for the apparent steep decline in students' knowledge of federal government structure and function is more difficult. Two items that saw double digit declines had to do with how the Secretary of Defense gains office and the function of the State Department. When asked about how the Secretary of Defense is chosen, the number of fewer respondents who answered correctly in 1998 fell ten percentage points from 1982. When asked which department deals with foreign affairs, 52% answered correctly in 1976, but only 25% in 1998, a decline of twenty-seven percentage points, the largest single decline in Niemi's entire study (ibid.). Factors beyond the school curriculum may have influenced these results. The dominant figure of Henry Kissinger as Secretary of State still loomed large in 1976, when students took the NAEP. By 1998, a long series of less monolithic figures had held the office. In addition, the gradual shift from presidential reliance on Cabinet secretaries in favor of Executive Office appointees, as recounted in textbooks, may have made the workings of the executive branch more obscure to students. In any case, Niemi's assessment of the decline in civic knowledge overall among twelfth graders from 1976-1998 is that it has been small.

The story was different for eighth graders during the same period. These students' civic knowledge seems to have declined across the board, with many items recording double digit declines (ibid., 28-29). The eighth grade social studies course

has long focused on American History, often from pre-colonial times to Reconstruction. The development of state content standards and the renovation of course sequences have left this largely untouched, but new topics have been added. New emphasis has been placed on Pre-Columbian American cultures and immigration. In the process, some civics content may have been lost. In addition, some states have attempted to avoid duplication in content from grade to grade by making teachers more aware of the broad curriculum frameworks within which they teach. Teachers may feel less compelled to teach civics content when they know it will be taught at other grade levels.

Conclusion

Drawing broad conclusions about curriculum effects from standardized tests is notoriously tricky. Analyses of results that span several decades are even more suspect. In the first place, the characteristics of test takers have changed dramatically over time. For instance, the overwhelming majority of those who took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 1941, a few years after the first assessment included in Niemi's analysis, were white males. A significant percentage attended private schools. By the time of the last assessment in Niemi's study, SAT examinees were mostly female with a significant percentage from ethnic minority groups (Bracey 1995, 75). Respondents measured in Niemi's study reflect similar trends.

Even if the nature of test-takers did not change over time, the test items have. Only a handful of assessment items in Niemi's study were worded in language sufficiently similar to other years to allow comparison. Intentional inclusion of identical and similar test items over many administrations is a fairly recent phenomenon, dating from the development of the NAEP in 1969. Conclusions based on longitudinal studies before that time are suspect.

In addition, with so many information sources vying for attention, it would be naïve to assume that school is the only, or even the primary, source of civics knowledge. In an era of televised Congressional hearings featuring salacious testimony concerning prominent politicians, students may formulate their assumptions about the workings of government apart from school influences. Teachers may compound this effect by their reluctance to tackle controversial issues in the classroom. In the absence of teacher guidance to lend context and perspective, students may form faulty conclusions from what they see in the popular press.

The decentralized nature of American education makes generalizing about curriculum effects difficult. National trends in curriculum making do not necessarily apply locally. Neither do generalizations from aggregate test results. This is especially true for the era before the teacher accountability movement,

which has sought to impose more uniformity on classroom practice. Before the 1980's, teachers had more freedom to use their own judgment in choosing content. The best that can be said for any conclusions drawn here is that they are broad generalizations based on available data.

Finally, standardized tests may not reliably measure student knowledge. Test items are sometimes written in confusing or culturally situated language that skews results. This phenomenon may be compounded in an analysis that employs test data to analyze changes in student knowledge across decades. Small errors may become large as they are carried over time.

With these many caveats in mind, Richard Niemi's longitudinal analysis seems to address two currents of thought in curriculum history. First, many have decried curriculum change as a 'dumbing down' that has hurt children (Angus and Mirel 1999, Ravitch 1983). In light of Niemi's conclusion that there seems to be little difference in the civics knowledge of high school seniors from 1933 to 1998, the curriculum that contributes to civic knowledge cannot be said to have suffered. In fact, since the schools serve a much more diverse population today than in past decades, we may say that civics education has effectively adapted to the changing school clientele. Further, if we assume that the increasingly diverse high school population of today poses more challenges to classroom teachers and curriculum developers than did the students of the 1930s, the relatively stable test results across the past 70 years support the concerns of social studies advocates in the earlier time period that traditional history and social science instruction was insufficient to prepare students for productive citizenship (see Stallones 2002, 46ff.). The curriculum of past eras may have squandered the opportunity afforded by the more selective demographic composition of the high school.

Second, the relatively stable test results of the past seventy years indicate that despite debates over the content and delivery of social science curriculum chronicled by Saxe (1991), Evans (2002), and others, little real effect has been seen on achievement. Perhaps the "wars" over social studies are fought mainly among academics and in the popular press, but have little lasting effect on what and how teachers teach in the classroom. Unfortunately, the same may not be said for the more recent period, 1973-1998, for which more comparable data is available. A real decline in civics knowledge among eighth and twelfth graders is indicated for those years. That time period coincides with a return to traditional history/social science instruction at the secondary level and the institution of teacher accountability measures. Teachers in recent decades have had less freedom to simply 'close the door and teach' than in earlier times. The implementation of high stakes testing to measure both students' and teachers' facility with promulgated

content standards has restricted teachers' ability to resist curriculum innovations mandated by state and national governments. Perhaps the recent decline in civics knowledge indicates that students achieve more when teachers have greater academic freedom.

Testing any of the assertions above will require more thorough investigations. The demographic changes of sites in which tests were administered during the years in question should be studied. In addition, local, even classroom, curriculum histories of test sites over time must be developed to further understanding of the meaning of test results. Textbooks also should be analyzed for correlation with content contained in government and civics test items. In addition, teachers' course taking, their individual intellectual development, and their viewpoints on current issues should be analyzed in light of how these elements impact classroom teaching and learning. Only when sweeping studies of national curriculum movements and debates are augmented by these types of local and individual investigations will data from large-scale standardized tests become useful for understanding curriculum impacts in any but the most general ways.

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¹ For purposes of this paper, I will be somewhat imprecise in my usage of terms. By "social studies," I generally mean an approach to content and teaching in which history and the social sciences are integrated. By "traditional approach," I generally mean content and teaching which are either organized by disciplines, or designed to instill a sense of the American 'heritage', or both.

² Fourth graders were compared in only three administrations; 1976, 1988, and 1998.

³ While I cannot produce a body of empirical evidence to justify this conclusion, my own teaching of 11th grade American History and 12th grade American Government, and that of many of my colleagues, was greatly influenced by the forces described.