

The History and Influence of the High School Geography Project

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Abstract

The 1960s witnessed a significant pedagogical reform movement in social studies education known as the New Social Studies (NSS) movement. The purpose of this article is to briefly examine the rationale for the High School Geography Project and its influence during the NSS movement and geography education moving forward. Reevaluating foundational ideas in geography education can potentially inform the present.

Background

Nineteen sixties era NSS approaches were built upon previous advances within social studies education. In 1911, the National Education Association (NEA) undertook a five-year review of curriculum in the United States. The 1916 report noted the lack of citizenship education and the absence of problem-based learning in American schools. Furthermore, the NEA report advanced social studies with the introduction of history, civics, geography, economics, and a new senior-level course titled “Problems of Democracy” (National Education Association Committee, 1916), directly resulting in the formation of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in 1921 as an advocate for civic education. With NCSS, social studies as a bounded curriculum promoted national support for professors and schoolteachers along with significant support among progressive educators

during the 1920s and 1930s. A notable progressive era contribution to social studies was that of Columbia University professor Harold Rugg. As a disciple of John Dewey's early progressive schooling ideology and an early leader within NCSS, Harold Rugg believed social studies curriculum offered opportunity towards a better American society. Affirming NEA recommendations, Rugg placed societal problems at the foundation of his conception of social studies within the curriculum (Evans, 2007). Rugg's social studies curriculum accompanied with the ideals of William Kilpatrick, and George Counts found moderate success in the 1930s throughout the United States until the progressive-based curriculum and ideas came under attack from numerous conservative special interest groups due to allegations with liberal and communist influences (Evans, 2007). Through the NEA and NCSS, they are accompanied by Progressive era conceptions of social studies, the subject articulated as a bounded subject of multiple disciplines with an emphasis on addressing societal challenges. While postwar social studies reflected varied and ill-defined approaches, and a contested rejection of progressive education, the NSS movement of the 1960s offered social studies content areas such as geography unprecedented levels of curriculum development.

The context for the High School Geography Project emerged out of a larger curricular movement known as the New Social Studies (NSS) dating from 1958-1970. The NSS movement was prompted by curricular challenges

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within social studies and a highly charged Cold War political environment. Evans (2010) categorized the postwar years (1947-1958) as contrary to progressive social studies approaches. Noted political scientist Pendleton Herring stated a common criticism of the era when he indicated that school social studies lacked “a single ordered body of fact and theory, operating through an internally consistent generally accepted methodology” (as cited in James 1969, 480). Echoing similar concerns, Lewis Paul Todd (1957) decried social studies education by stating, “But the confusion over the meaning of the term ‘social studies’ is not confined to the matter of definition. Thru the years we have added ingredient after ingredient to the ‘social studies’ brew until it now includes everything from driver education to personal grooming, and we are still tossing ingredients into the boiling kettle at an alarming rate” (245). Noted concerns in existing approaches to high school social studies combined with political events stimulated substantive change within social studies curriculum development. Politically the Cold War era witnessed the founding of the National Science Foundation in 1950 as well as the 1957 Soviet launch of the first satellite, Sputnik. Sputnik and political competition with the Soviet Union sounded the alarm for increased educational funding at all levels prompting authorization of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 (Gutek 1986).

The New Social Studies (NSS) illustrated a push for curriculum change within the field of social studies and the introduction of pioneering and at times controversial teaching practices. The convergence of political and educational shifts was foundational in the emerging NSS movement. Derived from the perceived failures of social studies approaches and political events of the 1950s, NSS reflected a collective re-examination

of the importance and effectiveness of social studies curriculum in the nation’s public schools. The result of such re-examination resulted in several curricular meetings where prominent and recognized scholars convened to investigate how to construct a new social studies curriculum to enhance education (Evans 2010). Among the most influential meetings of content scholars, teachers and curriculum specialists were the Woods Hole Conference, which gathered to answer the challenge of a collective reexamination and implementation of educational curriculum under the directive of the National Defense Educational Act. Prominent educational psychologist Jerome Bruner’s (1960) *Process of Education* was conceived through conference proceedings. Within Bruner’s influential book, he placed primacy on the teaching of the “structure” of an academic discipline rather than “facts.” This book would go on to catalyze numerous NSS projects.

Leading this NSS charge was the National Council for Social Studies and their publication *Social Education*. Early on in 1962 an October issue of the journal solicited federally funded proposals for social studies research projects and curriculum centers (Announcement 1962; Evans 2010). Throughout the era, *Social Education* called attention to the numerous social studies projects developing at curriculum centers throughout the nation (Fenton & Good 1965) as well as concerns (Becker 1965). The goal of the curriculum centers was to standardize certain aspects found within each particular content area (e.g., anthropology, government, United States history, geography, etc.) within the social studies. Regardless of the content discipline, each newly developed project placed an increased emphasis on innovative teaching methods directed at the academic structure of the particular subject

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area. The result was independent projects which shared three common traits: 1) a focus on inquiry learning; 2) a focus on values, and 3) commitment to the “structure” rather than “facts” of the academic disciplines (Bruner 1960; Evans 2010; Senesh 1981). In all the Social Studies Education Consortium (1971) reported on 100 projects and 135 textbooks emerging from the NSS era.

One of the first leaders in this emerging NSS movement was world historian Edwin Fenton. Beyond first articulating the term New Social Studies in 1965 (Hertzberg 1981), Fenton was instrumental in connecting the ideas within Jerome Bruner’s *Process of Education* into a social studies context. Similar to earlier progressives, Fenton affirmed the importance of addressing societal challenges within social studies; however, he advanced a social science approach to the issues. Fenton (1966) stated, “The type of social studies program proposed here is a tough-minded scientific approach which presented immediate and future conflict situations in the hope of inducing the student to utilize social processes and to make social predictions and decisions that will keep such conflicts within reasonable limits. This approach to social studies objectives garner specific content areas and indicates an explicit relationship between the basic values and assumptions with which we begin and the specific objectives and content with which we end” (113). Fenton’s secondary world history project *Carnegie-Mellon University Social Studies Curriculum Project* utilized archival and primary source documents in the same way historians approach history. Many of the NSS projects, including the High School Geography Project, were inspired by Fenton’s project as well as his 1967 book, *The New Social Studies* (Cude 2010).

As quickly as New Social Studies projects were introduced in our nation’s schools, the

controversy over project successes ensued. Conservative estimates suggested NSS projects were embraced, at best, by a third of the nation’s social studies classroom teachers. Lecture-based, expository learning continued throughout the height of this contemporary movement despite innovative pedagogical strategies and curriculum materials developed. By the late 1970s social studies were largely confined with content relegated to civics/government and United States history as most relevant (Morrissett, Hawke, & Superka 1980). Compounding the dwindling public perception of the social studies was the Project SPAN report funded by the National Science Foundation. The result was six major problems uncovered from SPAN consultants and staff. Issues identified were 1) student learning, 2) school culture, 3) teaching practices, 4) social studies curriculum, 5) the development of social studies teachers, and 6) a lack of public support (Morrissett, Hawle, & Superka 1980). The final report indicated despite efforts of the NSS movement, social studies curriculum and teaching practices remained static over a 60-year period. The report suggested, “... that despite numerous variations that have occurred, the dominant pattern throughout the nation is one that was established more than 60 years ago” (Morrissett 1982).

The High School Geography Project (HSGP)

Geography’s role within the social studies faced a tumultuous history since the 1920s. At times the subject was approached as a study of commercial and economic functioning within and between countries. At other eras, a more scientific physical geography approach was prevalent in the high school classroom (Rosen 1957). By the 1950’s high school geography was often integrated into social studies classes. Numerous authors of

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the era communicated concerns regarding geography's status within the high school social studies curriculum of the era. High (1960), Monier and Campbell (1963), Pattison (1962), and Scarfe, (1959) stated geography most often appeared in citizenship or history within high school social studies enforcing the belief geography lacked recognition as a core subject in high schools. O'Connell (1962) lamented geography's status subsumed within social studies in stating, "Geography has disappeared from the curriculum of so many schools to be replaced by a variety of social studies courses with no identifiable body of knowledge" (p.60). Such concerns would be addressed by geography's contribution to the growing number of New Social Studies projects. In 1958, ideas for High School Geography Project (HSGP) emerged amongst professional geographers at an executive board meeting for National Council for Geographic Educators.

Contemporaneously with calls for changes within school geography, within higher education, geography experienced a "Quantitative Revolution" which pushed many geographers and departments to a more systematic and social science-oriented approach (James 1969). Early debates focused HSGP on systematic geography rooted in the scientific method as opposed to more traditional regional geography (Kohn 1982). High school geography specialists began advocating for social science-oriented geography over prevailing regional geography. Spatial geography dealing with theories and laws related to the spatial organization of human patterns received the most attention. As topical and spatially oriented geography gained popularity within curricular ideas, Augelli (1968), James (1969), and Scarfe (1959) cautioned against complete abandonment of regional geography in schools. Such division among geographers in higher education was

evident in the creation of HSGP. Noted Middle American regional geographer John Augelli (1968) lamented, "Significantly, however, the "Settlement Theme Course" of the High School Geography Project, on which many of our most forward-looking colleagues have spent so much effort and NSF money, has paid scant attention to regional geography" (68).

Despite such concerns, social science specialists turned attention to spatial geography and innovative pedagogy, which would come to dominate the era's crowning curricular achievement, High School Geography Project. A systematically focused curriculum closer aligned HSGP with emerging social science trends and positioned the project well for future National Science Foundation (NSF) funding.

Early in the planning process Gilbert White and Clyde Kohn formed a joint committee supported through both major professional geography organizations, the Association of American Geographers and the National Council of Geographic Educators, with the purpose of improving geography education (Stoltman 2010). By 1961, through the work of the Joint Committee on Education, HSGP formed under the direction of William Pattison with private funding from The Ford Foundation (Helburn 1966; Kohn 1964; Stoltman 2010). The High School Geography Project received a substantial boost in 1964 when Congress revised the 1958 National Defense Education Act. The revisions added geography, civics, and history to funded fields of study in critical need of improvement; consequently, the NSF funded the project (James 1969).

Similar to numerous NSS project of the era, High School Geography Project found pedagogical inspiration in the work of noted education psychologist Jerome Bruner and his 1960 publication, *The Process of Education*. As did

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progressive educators of the early twentieth century, Jerome Bruner emphasized inquiry within the classroom. Bruner's inquiry approach distinguished itself from previous progressive educators by emphasizing the structure of the academic discipline. Known as discovery learning, Bruner's approach promoted student explorations of content theories and principles in the same manner as behavioral and social science professionals (Takaya 2008). Moreover, discovery learning engendered deep levels of study within the discipline of a subject in an age-appropriate manner. Within HSGP, discovery learning involved observation, spatial analysis of maps, prediction, theoretic models such as central place theory, aerial photograph study, and analysis of social data (Helburn 1965; Stoltman 2010).

New Social Studies advances, increased professional geographer support, Jerome Bruner's influence, National Defense Education Act funding, and private funding converged in the development of the High School Geography Project (HSGP). In the years from 1961-1963, William Pattison served as director of the project in its formative stages. William Pattison and the joint committee's foundational work on HSGP fully developed under the leadership of Nicholas Helburn from 1964 to 1970 (Stoltman 2010). From 1964-1969, the American Association of Geographers steering committee oversaw the project, with 1966 considered a landmark year due to project leaders agreeing on settlement as an underlying theme for all units (Stoltman 2010). Over the next three years, academic scholars and teachers developed and published classroom materials incorporating student inquiry and spatial geography approaches for grades 9-12. After eight years of research and development, extensive field-testing, the involvement of nearly 100 teachers and thousands

of students (Patton 1970), Macmillan published *Geography in an Urban Age* (HSGP 1970).

Pedagogically original materials became an enduring legacy. Each unit included a detailed teacher's guide, student resources, student manual, and opaque transparencies. Additional hands-on and data-rich materials were numerous including maps, simulation games, role-playing scenarios, aerial photographs, and case study vignettes (Stoltman 2010). Additionally, HSGP changed the traditional roles of students and teachers. Unlike traditional attempts to dictate instruction, lessons were student-centered with teachers commonly acting as coordinators and sequencers of the curriculum (Helburn 1998). To facilitate characteristics of Bruner's (1960) *Process of Education*, students engaged in inductive methods, through the study of data, testing hypothesis, and drawing conclusions based on self-discovery (Helburn 1968; Kohn 1970). As Nicholas Helburn (1968) was leading the project to fruition, he summarized, "The students' ability to formulate questions ..., to collect information and to select the relevant from the mass, to hypothesize answers, to recognize the tentativeness of those answers this is the primary objective of the High School Geography Project" (281).

A noteworthy unit of study, which demonstrated such inquiry approaches, was the "Geography of Cities" unit (HSGP 1970). Within the unit were six lesson activities, each included content readings, and inquiry-oriented activities. The lesson "City Shape and Structure" engaged students in applying theories of city growth to predict growth patterns within the city of Chicago. Sources such as age distribution, physical features, population maps, graphs, income, and other demographic data were included to support skills of prediction, abstraction, and verification. In "New Orleans," students analyzed

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aerial and topographic maps to evaluate land use as well as hypothesized about relationships between urban features and social and economic facets of the city. Perhaps the most popular lesson within the unit was “Portsville: Building a Hypothetical City” based on the city of Seattle (Helburn 1998). The activity involved a simulation, which consisted of students utilizing historical data and building blocks to construct a map model of Portsville at three different periods. Portsville included considerable data sheets and narrative information for students to make logical decisions based on a geographic knowledge base. Despite the financial expense of keeping Portsville, Helburn (1998) recalled, “We seriously considered throwing it out entirely. What finally secured the decision to keep it was an affective gain, the sense on the part of the student that she or he had the power to change the city, to reach across and add a shopping center or some other building to that corner of the city. Most of our lives we have to adapt to the urban landscape. Here was student empowerment, a sense of being able to change the city” (p. 214).

Similar to other New Social Studies era projects, High School Geography Project (HSGP) did not experience widespread adoption in the high school geography classroom (Helburn 1998). Before HSGP’s publication, noted geographer Preston James (1969) cautioned against moving forward with professor led scientifically oriented geography stating, “It could be that the “new geography” we so loudly proclaim may be just another swing of the pendulum. Unprepared teachers who have never been exposed to geographical concepts could continue to select facts about places and require young people to commit them to memory” (481). Affirming James’ (1969) concerns, numerous authors attributed HSGP’s lack of sustained success to

teachers unprepared for such a drastic shift and the ever-changing foci within geography. Overall, the newness of the inductive pedagogy and systematic topical study of geography represented too significant of a shift from traditional regional geography for teachers (Kohn 1982; Stoltman 2010; Winston 1986).

The Legacy of the High School Geography Project

Despite High School Geography Project’s (HSGP) short publication cycle and limited usage nationwide, the enduring influence within the academic field of geography education outweighed limited classroom usage. Kohn (1970), indicated HSGP awakened many academic geographers to the importance of high school geography. In the midst of such awakenings, Pattison (1962) stated “But the high school has remained, for most of us, somebody else’s business. Still, there are signs of a change in attitude ...” (280). Consequently, HSGP narrowed the gap between academic geography and high school geography (Natoli 1986). Helburn (1965) indicated that before HSGP, high school geography was behind college geography 20-50 years. Former project director Nicholas Helburn (1998) recounted, “Although not often stated, the primary criterion for the HSGP steering committee was academic respectability--the demonstration that good analytical geography could be taught at the secondary level. Often this goal was stated as closing the 50-year lag between the graduate seminar and secondary school classroom” (p. 217). Natoli (1986) suggested that the High School Geography Project enabled students to “do geography”; a concept deeply embedded in later geography education reforms of the 1980s and 1990s and one entrenched within current *Geography for Life National Geography Standards* (Gallagher & Downs 2012).

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High School Geography Project materials gained popularity primarily at a grassroots level. Geib (1972) found dissemination of the project occurred principally through teachers involved in experimental and developmental stages of HSGP. Geib's study spoke to the appeal of HSGP, as teachers with first-hand knowledge of HSGP spread the word about the curriculum. Similarly, Stoltman (1980) reported that HSGP professional workshop participants were vital in diffusing the curriculum among teachers and leadership in schools. At the tertiary level, Hill (1970) reported adaptation of HSGP material in introductory college geography courses. The project also garnered an impact internationally. In the 1970s, 12 countries modeled their geography curriculum on HSGP (Gunn 1975; Helburn 1998). Angus Gunn (1975) noted "... that HSGP's greatest contribution to curriculum development in other countries is its teaching approaches" (p. 220).

High School Geography Project (HSGP) demonstrated long-term inspiration in the United States. The project connected hundreds of college professors with teachers through professional development opportunities. Consequently, professional geographers took a more significant interest in school education as reflected in the subsequent development of geography education specialties at numerous universities after HSGP (Helburn 1998). Helburn (1998) also indicated that National Geography Standards and the National Assessment (NAEP) test in 1994 demonstrated HSGP inspiration. Russell and Byford (2008) demonstrated effective adaptation of HSGP materials forty years later. In retrospect, High School Geography Project's contributions to geography reform in the areas of systematic inquiry-based learning and a concentration on the structure rather than facts of geography are an

enduring legacy in geography education of the late 20th century and beyond.

Conclusion

High School Geography Project's (HSGP) role in geography education cannot be fully understood without contextualizing academic and political forces at work during the late 1950s and 1960s. The post-Sputnik Cold War era placed substantial political demand and funding towards curriculum reform in the sciences and social sciences serving as an impetus for change. In addition, the New Social Studies curriculum movement renewed previous demands of progressive educators for social studies to directly address societal challenges. The NSS era under the influence of Jerome Bruner and Edwin Fenton expanded upon progressive ideals by advocating for a social science approach to the study of history, geography, economics, political science, anthropology, and sociology. Such approaches facilitated students studying the structure of the subject as a historian or geographer would. Amongst early NSS projects, HSGP emerged at a time of much debate among systematic and regional geographers within academic geography. Aligning more with a systematic approach, *Geography in an Urban Age* (1970) reflected collaboration among geographers of the major professional organizations and eight years of research and development. Inquiry activities within the curriculum facilitated student learning through "doing geography" as a geographer would while addressing societal challenges. Though the curriculum project garnered limited success in high school classrooms, the curriculum influenced similar projects globally while leaving an indelible mark on the entire academic field of geography education as well as later standards-based curriculum reforms.

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