

Educating Future Social Studies Teachers for Classroom Excellence

The literature concerning citizenship education in America focuses heavily on the possible future crisis the next generation will have on keeping American-style democracy alive and vibrant. At the same time, much of the literature discusses how teachers have placed too much emphasis on content knowledge of civics. These researchers suggest that teachers need to adopt more experiential learning within their classes with service learning programs. While these studies and strategy recommendations for change have solid philosophies behind them, they overlook a basic element of animal psychology. It is very hard to teach old dogs new tricks. Of course, this basic dog training truth applies to humans as well. While some veteran teachers have readily begun to embrace some of these new strategies, many social studies teachers remain firm in their traditional approaches to teaching, even though the results seem to indicate their instruction is inadequate. The solution to this problem is to make sure that new social studies teachers entering the field have the skills and tools necessary to meet the demands of good citizenship education as well as the demands of teaching in the public schools of America. This has to be the focus of the future because you can teach new tricks to young dogs.

In order to meet the needs of citizenship education, Avery (2003) offers six suggestions for preservice teacher preparation at universities and colleges that will allow for better citizenship education in the social studies discipline. These suggestions are:

1. “preservice teachers need to get extensive practice in facilitating class discussions about controversial social and political issues,” (57)
2. “methods instructors should give preservice teachers assignments that help them understand how young people think about social and political concepts and issues,” (59)
3. “methods instructors should help teachers understand that the development of civic identity is a dynamic process that takes place in a social and cultural context,” (60)
4. “methods instructors should help preservice teachers analyze civic textbooks and materials,”(61) and
5. “preservice teachers should become familiar with basic methods and tools that help students see connections between and among concepts,” (61)
6. “we need to consciously integrate international perspectives and issues into our methods courses.” (61)

Before we begin a discussion of these suggestions, it is important to look at the requirements necessary to graduate from the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) with a Bachelor’s degree in Secondary Education with major in Social Studies. In addition to meeting the basic general education requirements and the requisite education philosophy and theory classes, social studies majors at UMSL (2006) must also take a certain number of hours within the various disciplines of the social studies. In order to meet the American History requirements, students must take 12 hours (four courses) in American History. Students must take American History 1001, *American History to 1865*, or American History 1002, *American History since 1865*, in order meet the general education requirements of also students at UMSL. Along with one of these basic American history survey classes, social studies majors must take HIS/SEC ED 4013, *U.S. History for Secondary Classrooms*. The other six hours (two classes) are left to the student’s discretion.

The program of studies for undergraduate social studies majors requires 9 hours (three classes) in European/World History. The only required class is HIS/SEC ED 4014,

World History for Secondary Classrooms. Preservice teachers must also take six hours (two classes) in United States/State Government. The College of Education requires one of the course be POL SCI/SEC ED 3290, *American Government for Secondary Classrooms*, while the general education requirements for all UMSL students requires them to take POL SCI 1100, *Introduction to American Politics*. In addition, social studies majors must take six hours in behavioral sciences, three hours in economics and three hours in geography.

In comparing the requirements of the social studies preservice program at UMSL, the series of classes about applying the core subjects into the classroom offer hope in meeting Avery's suggestions. These three classes, if taught complimentary of each other, offers the preservice student the opportunity to experience each of the suggestions Avery offers in his article. However, there must be concern about the depth at which each of the suggestions can be addressed. While the *United States History for Secondary Classrooms* class can help preservice teachers facilitate discussions about controversial issues with students as well as the other suggestions, will the requirements of history classes allow the preservice teacher enough knowledge to understand the complexity of controversial issues, let alone facilitate a discussion of it? It is possible to graduate with a social studies degree and never take a class about the United States since 1865. A world history teacher who has only taken two classes, probably survey-type classes like the American history classes, may never develop the knowledge necessary to understand the concepts and connection within world history themselves, let alone teach it to students.

In Political Science, the field with the most direct application to citizenship education, preservice social studies teachers takes only *Introduction to American Politics*

and *American Government for Secondary Education*. In these classes, it is very difficult to develop an in-depth understanding of American complex federal system of republican government. It is not possible to understand how “young people think about social and political concepts and issues” without the preservice teacher understanding how they think about political issues within the context of America’s federal structure. Integrating international perspectives into preservice learning is impossible since students take only three world history classes and have no comparative government requirements in their plan of studies. The complex skill set that Avery suggests can only happen if the preservice teachers have the foundation of knowledge necessary to carry out these grand plans.

Of course, it would be impossible to require all social studies preservice teachers to graduate with five majors comprising Secondary Education, American History, Political Science, World History, and International Studies. The time and cost would kill the social studies because there would be no teachers. Therefore, the solution to this difficult situation lies beyond the universities and colleges. The responsibility for developing outstanding social studies teachers belongs to the public schools where these preservice teachers gain employment. However, once employed, many teachers find themselves overwhelmed with other responsibilities that distract them from developing their craft as a social studies teacher.

In their first few years of teaching, many teachers are not fully prepared to teach the social studies as Avery recommends. These new teachers, instead of being the young dogs learning and using the new tricks of teaching social studies, are faced with stressful interactions with parents, other teachers, administrators, and counselors. These new

teachers are also learning how to interact in the classroom with their students. On top of this, new teachers must concern themselves with standardized test scores, increasing levels of accountability, budget restraints and a political climate that often is too critical of schools and teachers. It is no wonder that these young teachers are unable to develop their craft and emerge as outstanding citizenship educators. While teacher burnout is higher than ever (Wood & McCarthy, 2002), with all the demands placed on the beginning teacher, in addition to learning how to teach their subject in an effective manner, it is surprising that teacher burnout is not higher than it already is.

Fortunately, the sky is not completely falling on the social studies teacher. There is one thing that colleges, universities and the public schools can do for teachers. It is a simple concept, but very difficult to apply personally. All teachers must be encouraged, and allowed the time necessary for self-reflection. Banks (2001) describes one of his teacher education classes and his stress on helping students understand who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how they can improve themselves, which would allow them to become better educators of students. As students develop a sense of self-awareness, the trials and tribulations of the first-year teacher become less stressful, which is the first step in avoiding burnout (Wood & McCarthy, 2002). Only when they understand themselves as a person can a teacher begin to understand their students. Once they begin to understand their students, Avery's suggestions become very manageable for the teacher to develop as their career progress. By identifying a content weakness or a classroom management weakness, a teacher can develop higher education plans to address it. This reflection leads to better teaching in all disciplines.

Once colleges and universities sow the seeds for self-reflection and improvement, the public schools that hire these young teachers must nourish this during the first years of teaching. Schools need to pair young teachers, and not just first-year teachers, with experienced teachers who truly understand the educational process. Schools need to encourage teachers to create developmentally appropriate instructional practices. Schools need to reward and make time for young teachers to pursue advanced education within their discipline or other highly relevant to public education field. Schools need to foster professional learning communities that nourish the “young dogs” so that the “old dogs” do not kill the spirit of the new teacher coming out of college.

Combined with a solid preservice education, schools can further develop young teachers by nourishing the young teacher and encouraging them to even greater heights within their classrooms, which could alleviate the problems of teacher burnout. While Avery and Brown discussed the social studies field in particular, their suggestions reach beyond just those classrooms. If colleges, universities and public schools plant the seed, nourish it and help it grow into an excellent teacher, not only will citizenship education improve, education across all disciplines will improve.

References

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