

The Slow Death of Social Studies in the Elementary School and a Systemic Design for its Demise in College

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The Culture of Accountability

In 1983 a national commission on excellence in education established by President Ronald Reagan alarmed the country with startling statistics on the apparent drastic decline in academic achievement in the U.S. The report cited standardized achievement scores from a variety of sources and at a variety of measurement points in comparison with international benchmarks in similar content areas. On almost all indicators the United States fared poorly in comparison with other industrialized nations. Putting aside for a moment the numerous inferential errors in the report which have been highly noted in the last 20 years, there were five major areas of recommendations forwarded as a result of the report. Three of these areas, increasing the number of school days, improving teacher salaries to a professionally competitive rate, and providing federal leadership for key groups of students have been largely ignored. The remaining two areas, increasing content and establishing standards and expectations have been addressed in both the curricular and pedagogical structures of the schools, though arguably without their intended effect. As to why all of these recommendations have been either stalled or altered to ineffectiveness, it is certainly a product of lack of centralized control over the nation's educational system. It is difficult if not impossible under the constitutional authority granted to the federal government to enforce alterations on educational systems which have traditionally been designed and directed by state and local governance systems. The NCLB act would attempt to assume a portion of this local control to better enforce a federalized education agenda.

Problems with the analysis and ultimately the recommendations of the Nation at Risk report were not immediately discerned by the academic community, but within a decade of the report many alternative interpretations had been forwarded. Primary indicators of the initial data reported were declining test scores in mathematics and science in comparison with other countries and a steady decline in SAT Scores in the last 30 years. Close examination of comparative test scores for high school students among industrialized nations has shown that not all groups of students were equally represented in reported scores for other nations. In countries like Japan and Germany, where science and math scores were shown to be superior to the U.S. test scores only students who were tracked in higher academic achievement ranges (college bound) were reported, whereas American data reported on all students. It's not difficult to see that such a comparison would lack any validity in determining our relative achievement standing. In 1990 Sandia Laboratories in New Mexico was commissioned by the then secretary of Energy, James Watkins to more closely examine the SAT data collected and they found that the data when disaggregated showed an actual increase in SAT scores within certain sub-groups. A casual observation of the numbers and types of students taking the SAT in 1983 in comparison with the test takers in 1960 would have yielded the same interpretation. A greater percentage of students considering college and thus taking the SAT would most certainly mean that many more low achieving students would be taking the test and thus lowering the mean scores reported. Thus even if more students scored higher on subject areas of the exam their scores would be washed out of a large mean score

analysis. There exists a possibility that at the time our nation developed a national agenda to fix our broken schools, they weren't broken at all.

Regardless of whether the data and interpretation presented in the Nation At Risk report were valid, some of the recommendations forwarded have been adopted in theory if not fully in practice under the umbrella of school accountability. Making schools and this means students, administrators and teachers accountable for some measure of performance has been divorced from the validity or reliability of the performance measurements. We are left chasing an illusory standard of performance without questioning how or why the bar is set, and with little or no national discourse on what our ultimate goal is. In this environment we adopted the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 without a clear definition of what our national priorities in education were, and without a clear measure of how we would know if we had achieved those priorities. We nonetheless pushed forward with the most comprehensive and intrusive federal program in education in our history. The stated intent of the NCLB act is that setting national high standards in education and establishing measureable goals can improve individual outcomes in education. The mechanism by which NCLB attempts to meet these goals is through increased accountability; making schools, and in a larger sense educational communities accountable for student success. There are three major tenants of the program which address accountability. The first of these seems obvious; increase the standards of accountability for student success. This is primarily measured by graduate qualifying exams administered in each state. The second is increased accountability on teacher preparation. The third is offering school choice for parents with students in failing schools or districts.

Increased accountability for student success is the most visible and influential aspect of NCLB. In each state math and reading test scores are determined for qualifying exams in order to measure the success of the individual students. It is important to note that only reading and math scores are used as a measure of success for federal purposes, though many states also include writing, social studies and science in their state exams. The stated goal of NCLB is that all students achieve state established standards in their qualifying exams. It is worth considering what this means. Every child must demonstrate proficiency as measured by a single often objective form of assessment. The objective form is the most reliable way of measuring discrete skills with easily comparable data, but is it the most valid form of assessment? There are several major drawbacks to exclusive reliance on one instrument for measuring academic success. The first of these is often stated by students who do poorly on the exam yet have demonstrated in course evaluations that they have at least an expectable level of mastery over the subject matter. "I'm not a good test taker" is a not uncommon quote among students who do poorly on standardized exams. If we put aside the easy explanation that these students are rationalizing their failure with excuses, and examine the structure of standardized assessments it is not hard to see why some students would fare poorly. By necessity standardized exams are timed. This factor alone improves the competitive advantage to better or faster readers regardless of the subject matter, and consequently can decrease the scores of students who do not process information as quickly. Speed at visual processing is neither a stated goal nor a supposed objective of standardized tests, though it is certainly a factor in the measurement of all subject area assessments. A clearly stated goal in both the Nation at Risk report and the NCLB legislation is to develop critical thinking abilities in students. One must question how well an objective form of exam such as multiple choice can assess critical thinking abilities. Often information is easily codified for exam reliability; this can work to decrease the ability to measure critical thinking in favor of easily assessed knowledge based questions. The most important consideration, however, is not so much in how we measure student success, but what we measure. Without a national mandate for social studies standards on standards on state exams, it is not only likely but consequential that social studies content will be under represented in our state curriculums.

The second tenant of NCLB is directed at teacher accountability. This is measured in two ways. The first is through state mandated teacher qualifying exams in the subject areas teachers are licensed to teach. It is logical that a history teacher knows history content or that a math teacher knows math content, but the limitations of qualifying exams are as apparent as the student qualifying exams. Easily measured knowledge such as specific history events, or math algorithms do not establish a teacher's ability to relate

that material to a k-12 student. Although some states include pedagogical exams in their teacher qualifying assessments, these are limited by the multiple choice format to a simple recitation of “best practice” without a context for understanding when and how a particular method would best incite student understanding or engagement. This also reinforces the programmed instruction model which is prevalent in many k-12 schools of finding the most successful approach to teaching and universally applying that regardless of the teacher’s abilities or the student’s needs. A universal teaching strategy assumes a universal learning style, and further assumes a universal teaching style. Ideally, under NCLB, objectives for learning (standards) should be aligned perfectly with strategies for teaching (methods), which in turn are comprehensively measured by standardized testing (assessment). A perfect alignment between standards, methods and assessments disregards the student as an active learner and further assumes that the student adds nothing to the learning equation. This is not the system envisioned by Dewey of dynamic democratic and activist student centered education. If we know precisely what each student should demonstrate as a result of their education is it not also inferred that we know exactly what should be taught and what should not be taught. This is a big conceptual problem with the culture of accountability; who decides and by what processes do we determine what should be accounted for.

The third tenant of NCLB might be its most controversial. On the surface providing parents choice over the schools their children attend is merely an extension of school accountability. If a school underperforms as measured by standardized assessments, a parent can remove their child and place them in a school which is performing at satisfactory levels. In this case school A (the underperforming school) loses the reimbursement for the child and school B (the satisfactory school) gains both the child and the subsequent dollars that fund that child’s education. This is a simple capitalist mechanism for improving schools. As failing schools reduce in population successful school increase and the market will eventually eliminate the failing schools and reward and propagate the successful schools. This is the argument put forward in NCLB. The absurdity of this argument almost makes it unworthy of debate. In order for this program to be viable we must first assume that the reason that a school fails is inherent within that school (the facility or the personnel), and not related to the individual children who are failing. If you take the children out of a failing school and put them in a successful school they will succeed? If we look at those schools that are not succeeding under the NCLB regulations it’s not hard to pinpoint the problem. In fact it’s not hard to predict those schools which will fare poorly without any knowledge of the school resources or teacher training and ability. Schools in poorer neighborhoods do not do as well as schools in more affluent neighborhoods. Is this a result of poor teachers in the economically disadvantaged schools? Not always. Students who face poverty at home come to school less prepared and with fewer educational resources than do their middle class and upper class counterparts. Additionally, one of the most telling factors in student success is parent involvement. The more involved a parent is in their child’s education the better they do in school. Let’s return to our school A and school B scenario. If a school is failing to meet standards and must offer parents a choice for relocation to another school, which parents are going to take advantage of this program? It is likely that the involved parent who is concerned about their child’s education will be the one who makes the move, but it is also likely that their child was one who was succeeding at school A to begin with. Inevitably we will be removing all of the most successful children from the least successful schools, leaving these schools with the least successful children and the least involved parents. Is this not a form of defacto economic segregation?

Effects on K-12 Social Studies

There are a number of disastrous effects on the social studies curriculum from the culture of accountability. Let us begin with a presumption inherent in *A Nation at Risk*, that which is worth knowing can be reliably measured. As stated earlier, it is often presumed by psychometrists that the most reliable measure of achievement is an objective form of evaluation. In the social studies this presents a difficult tradeoff between instructional content and measurable outcomes. What is most efficiently measured are factual bits of knowledge which don’t always, or maybe never, show a student’s ability to integrate that knowledge into a more critical understanding of social studies concepts. In standardized history exams dates, names and places are common assessment material, but even causality can be

included on multiple choice questions. But is causality the limit of our understanding of historical events, or even the desired outcome of history instruction? Is it desirable that student have, for example, a common understanding of the causes of the American Civil War, its major events and principal personalities? If this is the outcome that we seek from a course on the Civil War, are we diminishing history to a timeline? If so, then we must ask the question as many students do, why is it important that I know American History? The apparent aim of history instruction is to know what happened and why. Historians would probably disagree. Simply knowing that something precipitated an event does not encourage critical thinking about how that event relates to others, or what role it played in a chain of causality. A further overriding assumption is that what is worth knowing can be reliably measured. It is not difficult to challenge this assumption. Even in a college survey course on American History the understanding of historical paradigms and concepts varies among students as their experience in the classroom is as much a product of their own interaction with the material as the teaching methods employed. What ultimately is measured by objective exams is discrete knowledge which is easily codified. Only subjective measures allow for students to demonstrate their own levels of understanding and integration of ideas. In K-12 schools social studies education must by design focus on measurable knowledge.

Another equally disturbing trend in social studies education is directly related to the enforcement of NCLB which calls on states to mandate benchmarks in math and language arts and to assess these standards in a state graduation qualifying exam. By specifically calling on states to assess progress and proficiency in these two subject areas and by attaching consequences to failure to meet these standards NCLB has marginalized content areas such as science and social studies which are not specifically tied to performance measures. A recent report by the Center for Educational policy showed an average decrease in elementary schools in instructional time for all subjects except math and English/language arts of 32%. This translates into an average decrease in social studies instruction of 76 minutes per week. To put this in context English/language arts increased instructional time by 141 minutes per week since NCLB was enacted. In order to meet state standards in social studies content, while decreasing the amount of time given to instruction, it is inevitable that elementary teachers adopt a broad overview approach which covers major events or themes without allowing for deeper examination of critical topics. It is likely that students matriculating into high school history and social studies courses have fewer conceptual frameworks with which to examine topics presented in the secondary courses. Though the core courses may not have altered in topic since the inception of NCLB, the subject matter must by design have to be altered to accommodate the lack of preparation that students receive in the earlier grades.

The third influence of the culture of accountability relates directly to the form of assessment given. In standardized testing objectives methods are preferred for reliability. In states which mandate a graduate qualifying exam in social studies content, it is often the case that multiple choice question formats suffice to measure a students' acquired knowledge in history. There are two problems with this. The first is that having established the content that is going to be tested, you have removed the content that will not be tested from consideration in instruction. In other words, when we establish exactly what it is you need to know, we have also stated what it is you do not need to know. Mark Twain put this more aptly in his critique of higher education when he said "when a man is buying a basket of strawberries it can profit him to know that the bottom half of it is rotten". The second effect of a multiple choice format for history assessment is that it only measures what you do not know. Many of us have experienced this on such exams when much of what we did learn was not assessed and the exam seemed only to focus on what we had not learned or remembered.

The Culture of Accountability and the University

The culture of accountability at the university has taken a similar path toward narrowing subject matter and confining content to easily measured outcomes. Utilitarian philosophies of general education have lead to a diminishment of courses not specifically linked to a chosen degree field. Many of the courses eliminated in this contraction are historical foundations courses, which in the view of faculty in other disciplines are not specifically related to the knowledge sets necessary to perform occupational functions within that discipline. Thus arguments such as why does an engineer need to know European history, or

why does business marketing major profit from an American history course guide curriculum decisions in a sometimes narrow fashion. It is not difficult to answer these questions if we define an education beyond the bounds of occupational preparation. If the curriculum arguments are limited to the specific knowledge or skills necessary for adequate performance at a specific task we are accepting a false premise. Take for example the business major. What is critical for the success of that student is not ultimately the quantifiable amount of business information that they have consumed in their course of study, but rather the ability to integrate that knowledge into new paradigms and critically examine ways of doing business. This is a skill that is nurtured not just within a single discipline, but in each content area that challenges a student to think and apply knowledge, to synthesize information and create meaningful analysis of learning. Thus the answer to the question posed is that it profits a business major to think, and that thinking across disciplines expands one's ability to creatively solve problems within their chosen field. This is the essential function of a broad liberal arts curriculum.

A more insidious program of diminishment has sprung recently from the accountability movement at the university level; the unit assessment system. As we have defined the assessment link to accountability there is no reason to elaborate on the "why" here except to say that the American university system has a long history of academic freedom and that a standardized assessment system is not well suited to this tradition. Unit assessment systems are essentially a model for monitoring each student's progress through their programs and insuring that identified markers for performance be measured at set points. The aim is to assure universal coverage of key elements or specific knowledges along with establishing reliable measures of student progress through the program, ultimately to develop a valid template for determining unit (college, school or department) success. There are more things wrong with this than can be detailed here, but just a few examples should provide enough persuasion. The most obvious effect of a strong unit assessment system is the compulsion toward universal teaching styles or coordinated syllabi. It seems obvious for assessment purposes that if two professors teach the same course, the syllabi ought to be similar, but should they? Beyond that should they not also be encouraged to deliver that material in a similar fashion to establish a comparable measure of student success? This would require, for example, a political historian and a social historian teaching the same history course to develop some synthesis of style and content diminishing them both. We have long accepted the variations in content that come with academic freedom. This is acceptable so long as our view of learning is dynamic and not static; which is to say that we are not attempting to deliver a set of facts to students in some vain hope that they will regurgitate them on a final exam, but rather that they will think about the material being presented. Herein lies the problem for the accountability movement. How do you measure thinking? To what degree did a student think about the material of the course and engage in an internal dialectic toward higher levels of learning? With some subjective measures, such as an essay exam, we can move toward an accurate assumption on these questions. With objective measures, such as a multiple choice exam, we cannot. If we are encouraging dynamic thinking which evolves as students interpret and examine the content presented on their own terms, we move away from the ability to universally assess student progress and universally align course delivery. Courses in the social sciences are particularly susceptible to alteration from a unit assessment system. In programs that are more skill based such as nursing or engineering one can almost accept a unit assessment system as valid, but in programs which encourage and require multiple interpretations of content the effects of such a system can be disastrous.

Let's look at the problem from the other side. What if we could establish a perfect alignment within just a single course, (not across courses within a unit). A perfect alignment would mean that what we intend to teach (course objectives), what we actually teach (course instruction), and what we measure (course evaluation), are all aligned, or matching. Within a system of accountability this is an ideal course. So long as the established objectives are those agreed upon by the unit, the outcomes will be both valid and reliable. There is something missing from this neat educational algorithm though; the student. If what we intend to teach is exactly what we do teach, there is no room for student participation in the learning experience. This is not the progressive educational paradigm of Dewey but rather a throw-back to a 19th century model of knowledge delivery. This is happening in both or secondary schools and post secondary schools as we seek easily measured outcomes that validate accountability. If we do not

challenge both the NCLB influences on the elementary and secondary schools, as well as the accountability movements within higher education, we will inevitably move toward static models of learning, utilitarian models of curriculum, and in Cornel West's terms "highly programmable people".

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