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From Boring to the Sublime: Elementary Teacher Candidates' Memories and Perspectives of Social Studies Education

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Abstract

Through the lens of elementary teaching candidates in Brantford, Ontario, Canada, this study investigates memories and perspectives of elementary Social Studies education. Primary source data include 149 journal entries and academic discourse from in-class journal sharing and discussion. Hence, this study is theoretically rooted in reflective practice (phenomenology) and traditional qualitative inquiry by using a richly descriptive end product. Results are consistent with literature in the field and can be categorized into two principal segments: (a) the majority of teacher candidates who exhibited negative memories of Social Studies, or no memories at all, both suggesting mundane and uneventful experiences; and (b) the minority of teacher candidates who had positive Social Studies experiences rooted in student-centered and collaborative group learning. Lastly, this article ends with a philosophical discussion that aims to elaborate on the overall results of the study, as well as comments on the current and future status of Social Studies education.

Introduction and Objectives

As a teacher educator, I have been very intrigued with the numerous journal reflections that my students have written as part of their Social Studies course in elementary preservice teacher training. As a researcher, I was prompted to further investigate these reflections, specifically the entries that pertain to memories and perspectives of Social Studies education. From an organizational standpoint, this investigation will be categorized into four principal segments. The first segment will provide a contextual framework by connecting memories and perspectives of Social Studies education to existing literature in the field. The second segment provides a theoretical framework for this study including a description of participants and the methodology. In the third segment, journal reflection excerpts will be explored allowing the reader to discover and experience the overall character of the participants' reflections. Moreover, this third segment will also highlight and develop the journal sharing discussions that transpired in my Social Studies classes. The fourth and final segment will be a philosophical discussion elaborating

on the results of this study. In addition, this last segment will also provide a commentary on the current and future status of Social Studies education.

Literature Review

Scholarly consensus has generally corroborated that memories and perspectives of Social Studies education are generally considered to be tedious and dry. Chiodo and Byford (2004), for example, have stated: "An attitude still persists among many students that social studies classes are dull, boring, and irrelevant to their lives" (p. 1). This view is also supported by Erikson (2009), Heafner (2004), Fredericks (1991), Shaughnessy and Haladyana (1985), Ballou (1985), and Schug, Todd, and Berry (1984). One of the principal reasons for the inherent boredom students experience in Social Studies classes has been the reliance on the textbook as not only a primary teaching tool, but in many cases, the only teaching tool (Hawkins, 2005; Marker, 2006; Paxton, 2002; Stevens, 1988). This overreliance on the textbook in the Social Studies class has been addressed by Villano (2005) in her article: *Should Social Studies textbooks become history?* Villano argues that relying solely on the textbook in Social Studies is pedagogically unsound: "We need to remind ourselves that one textbook does not necessarily fit all of our curricular goals or all of the students' academic needs" (p. 128).

Marker (2006) further elucidates on the inherent disconnect between textbooks and Social Studies students: "Textbooks are steeped in a fact-based, chronological presentation of history that is disconnected from and irrelevant to the lives of the students who use them" (p. 87). Similarly, Clark (2009); Levstik (2000) contend that students are interested in aspects of Social Studies education, but took umbrage with how it was taught (e.g., the reliance on the textbook), which ultimately created feelings of boredom and isolation. Likewise, van Hover and Yeager (2007) argue that teachers are the captains of their own ship, which they steer with a map, based on personal life experiences (including what and how they were taught) even though they may have been trained otherwise in teacher training programs. In sum, teachers who have learning experiences rooted in rote and transmission-based learning with a reliance on the textbook tend to produce similar experiences in their own classrooms, ultimately creating negative memories of Social Studies. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the number of challenges beginning novice teachers face, particularly in an age of accountability and standardized testing (van Hover & Yeager, 2004). Grant (2003) further supports this notion: "Policymakers may assume that standards-based reforms support the efforts of ambitious teachers, but until we better understand how these teachers, and the students in their classes, think and act, that assumption is hollow at best" (p. 198).

The overall boring reputation that Social Studies education has endured over the years is comically brought to life in the title of Steffey and Hood's (1994) book: *If this is Social Studies, why isn't it boring?* This publication ultimately shares the success stories of 23 educators whose students found Social Studies interesting and vibrant. Moreover, the notion that Social Studies are boring has even made its way into the world of popular culture. In the novel *The Tiny One* (2000), author Eliza Minot describes in detail a school day in the life of an 8-year-old girl, Via Mahoney Revere, which includes a description of Via's Social Studies period. In the novel, Via

states: "I like Social Studies but I pretend I don't because everyone else doesn't" (p. 159).

On the flip side, there is a dearth of research that connects positive memories and perspectives to Social Studies education. What abounds in great numbers are numerous books and articles that discuss pedagogical strategies to improve Social Studies teaching and learning, which would facilitate the creation of positive memories and perspectives of Social Studies education. Maynes and Straub (2011), Zevin (2007), Brophy and Alleman (2005), Wright (2001), Hughes (2004), Kirman (2002), and the previously mentioned book by Steffey and Hood (1994) are just a minute sample of the many that abound. With reference to specific pedagogical strategies, Willis (2008) contends that out-of-classroom activities generate the best memories of Social Studies:

The most powerful memories of social studies come from multisensory experiences, such as taking tours of a city hall or courthouse; attending local government meetings; visiting local historical sites, museums, and monuments, [and] taking trips to places of historical prominence. (p. 225)

Similarly, Pumpian, Fisher, and Wachowiak (2006) maintain that students generate positive memories of Social Studies when they participate in a variety of differentiated instruction involving hands-on activities, collaborative group works, and student-centered activities:

Students are the first to tell us that learning social studies is fun and exciting when they get to go places, imagine travels, dress up in costumes, taste foods, dig up artifacts, play games, and figure things out with their friends. (p. 144)

The results from a study conducted by Alkis and Gulec (2006) also support a student-centered curriculum: "It might be more beneficial to involve students actively in the lesson and provide student centered education in Social Studies courses" (p. 19).

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Scholarly consensus corroborates that reflection can help professionals develop their practice (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998; Loughran, 1996; Reiman, 1999; Schön, 1991). Hillier (2005), for example, has stated that "teaching will remain at best uninformed, and at worst ineffective, prejudiced and constraining" (p. xi) without critical reflection. One of the most effective ways to engage in meaningful reflective practice is through journal writing. Specifically, journals allow the writer to break routine ways of thinking, develop reflective judgment, facilitate self-exploration and personal growth, and acquire solutions (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1997; Mitchell & Coltrinari, 2001; Moon, 1999). Williamson (1997) best summarizes the impact that journal writing has on learning: "The journal holds experiences as a puzzle frame holds its pieces. The writer begins to recognize the pieces that fit together and, like the detective, sees the picture evolve" (p. 98). Hence, journal reflections are a very useful tool for all professionals, particularly for emerging teachers. It is no surprise, therefore, that I use them on a weekly basis in all of my preservice courses as a principal teaching and learning strategy.

This study is attempting to understand and make sense of phenomena from the participants' perspective via written journal reflections and spoken classroom dialogue. Since these data are

richly descriptive, this study is qualitative in nature (Cresswell, 2009; Merriam, 2002). Specifically, however, this study is rooted in phenomenology, as I am interested in the subjective life experiences of preservice elementary teacher candidates with regards to Social Studies education (Moustakas, 1994; Trochim, 2006). Moreover, reflective practice is the primary process of any phenomenological inquiry (Mostert, 2002).

This study consisted of 149 participants who were in the last year of a 5-year concurrent teacher education program in Brantford, Ontario, Canada – a small university town located 1 hour west of Toronto. As veterans of the program, these preservice teacher candidates were seeking certification in the province of Ontario for either the primary/junior divisions (grades 1 through 6) or the junior/intermediate divisions (grades 4 through 10). Moreover, these participants already had 4 years of practicum teaching experience behind them.

The participants were students in a 24-hour Social Studies course and had a distribution of 69% females (103 participants) to 31% males (46 participants) – a typical gender ratio for elementary teacher training in Ontario faculties of education. All participants were either 21 or 22 years of age and represented a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds indicative of the Southern Ontario population base, where more than one third of all Canadians reside. Moreover, Southern Ontario's population also represents more than half of English speaking Canada. These participants, therefore, offer a uniquely English Canadian perspective into the nature of elementary Social Studies education.

The assigned topic for journal reflection in the first week of classes explored memories and perspectives of Social Studies education, which all participants were required to write as part of their course requirements. These 149 journal entries are approximately one/two pages in length and represent the core of the primary source data for this study. These journal entries were an appropriate starting point for my course as it allowed teacher candidates the opportunity to critically think about and reflect on their own Social Studies experiences. Ultimately, these reflections were intended to help teacher candidates contemplate their own future teaching of Social Studies in a new and revised manner.

The writing of the journal entry, however, was not the end of the reflective process for the participants of this study, as the first half of each class was also dedicated to the assigned weekly journal. In this part of the class, many reflections were read aloud and followed by classroom discussion, which included 149 participants over five different classes. The very rich and detailed discussions that ensued over the first journal topic (memories and perspectives of Social Studies) represent the second source of primary data for this study. This was an important process in the reflective process, as teacher candidates had their own thoughts legitimized or refuted by the experiences of fellow classmates. Moreover, the feeling of overall collective reflection during these discussions authenticated and validated the journal assignment.

Findings

Journal Reflections

The first principal theme that emerged across the majority of the 149 reflections is one of boredom, as supported by the multiple studies cited in the literature review section of this article. Specifically, participants recall many boring and mundane tasks, such as coloring maps, memorizing dates, cities, countries, etc. These negative experiences are rooted in antiquated pedagogy where transmissive and uni-directional teaching (Miller, 1993; Thomas & McRobbie, 2010) dominated learning experiences. For example, Joanna's journal entry reads:

Social Studies often involved reading from a very boring and dated textbook or a duotang of notes made by the teacher. We would read the notes as a class, answer questions for homework and then take them up during the next period. At the end of the unit there would be a test, usually based on the questions discussed throughout the unit. It was simply memorization. While the actual information could sometimes be interesting, the method of learning certainly was not stimulating.

Mario further elucidates on the transmissive and uni-directional learning that imbued his Social Studies experiences.

What I remember most vividly about Social Studies is being given a large, dry textbook and being told to complete a list of pre-prepared questions. My teachers used a very transmission based approach to education that did not leave room for exploration or creativity. The result of this was a loss of the knowledge soon after it was covered. Consequently, this experience with Social Studies led me to associate the subject with dullness.

In addition, Janine wrote:

I admit that Social Studies was definitely not a favorite subject of mine. Among my worst experiences was memorizing mountains of details in order to get a satisfactory mark. Often it seemed like information overload, and with a test, the teacher only wanted to test me on short-term memory. I wasn't happy in this class and found it boring and meaningless.

The sentiments of Joanna, Mario, and Janine were replicated numerous times throughout the 149 journal entries. Social Studies was simply a subject that generated many tedious and monotonous memories.

The second dominant theme that emerged from these journal entries was the complete lack of any Social Studies memories at the elementary level. This theme is very much tied in with the first theme of boredom. Perhaps the Social Studies experiences were so boring that they did not resonate or register any memories. Christina's remarks adeptly summarize this notion:

To be entirely honest I really do not remember much about Social Studies

throughout elementary school. I cannot remember specific lessons that were conducted or any major projects that were completed. It's all a complete blank to me. I guess we didn't do anything that special.

Similarly, Melanie writes: "When I first started to write this journal entry I had a hard time thinking of an answer to what I remember about Social Studies. I just could not seem to recall anything about what I had learned."

I was also very intrigued by Marilyn's entry:

I have no trouble recalling French and Spanish classes, and classes in the Arts. I cannot, for the life of me, recall a Social Studies class. When I first looked at this journal topic, I considered cheating. By cheating, I mean flipping through the curriculum documents until I found something that sounded familiar. I was stumped and that seemed the only way to complete this entry.

Tara also had an interesting journal entry:

When I read our journal topic for this week I felt like I was having a panic attack. To be honest, I do not remember a lot from my Social Studies class in elementary school, which means that it did not have much of an impact on my education. The fact that I had to really think about what I learned expressed the concern that I took nothing away from my elementary Social Studies experience.

Once again, there are many other journal entries that parallel the thoughts of Christina, Melanie, Marylyn, and Tara. The bottom line is that Social Studies was simply a subject that failed to resonate and register any meaningful learning experiences. These findings are consistent with Cordeiro (1995) who states:

In a methods class devoted to social studies. I ask students to talk about their memories of Social Studies from their elementary school days. If I am lucky, two or three out of twenty will report positive memories. Many have no memories at all. (p. 132)

Journal Discussion

Since I had exceedingly positive memories of my own Social Studies experiences in elementary school, I found these journal entries very intriguing, particularly Marilyn's entry. Are these negative experiences (or lack of any memory of experiences) a function of the Social Studies curriculum or the pedagogy of the teacher? This is one of the questions that would be addressed in our journal discussion period. It appears as though I had a support for both sides of the equation on this matter. Martin, for example, argued that the best teacher could not make Social Studies an interesting subject.

Learning about people and dates from the past is deadly boring. These things are really not that relevant to my life now, and certainly not relevant to the life of a kid in school. Teaching a kid in grade 4 about something that happened hundreds of years ago is just

not that enjoyable. It's almost impossible to turn something boring into something exciting. Even the best teachers have a hard time with Social Studies lessons.

Likewise, Andrea had similar thoughts, although she was a tad crasser in her approach:

Social Studies was not just boring, it totally sucked! I was constantly daydreaming or falling asleep. Learning about capital cities, provinces, countries, blah, blah, blah, boring, boring, boring. I would rather have learned Math and I hate Math. That says a lot about Social Studies.

On the side of bad pedagogy is Katherine who states:

Sadly, I think my lack of memories [in Social Studies] isn't because I have a terrible memory, but because my teachers didn't find engaging ways to teach Social Studies. No subject is exciting from a textbook. None of my teachers brought Social Studies to life and I think a good teacher can bring a textbook to life, or maybe even scrap the textbook all together.

Joey echoed similar thoughts to Katherine:

Most of my teachers found comfort in the textbook. Perhaps too much comfort because that's all we did. Read a few pages, answer a few questions, take up the questions, and eventually have some kind of test. My teachers could have done so much more in Social Studies, like drama, music, games, and arts and crafts. In a weird and twisted way, these dry and dull teachers have taught me well. They have taught me what not to do as a teacher. Go figure?

It was nice to see that Joey found a silver lining in his uneventful Social Studies experiences.

Scholarly consensus has revealed generation's worth of data supporting the claim that Social Studies is boring and uneventful for many students. This study has produced similar results, as approximately 78% of the participants (116 out of 149) had either negative experiences in elementary Social Studies or no recollection of any Social Studies experiences at all. Despite these data, general attitudes towards Social Studies have not changed. This phenomenon is even more puzzling when we consider the numerous technological innovations available for the Social Studies teacher to differentiate pedagogy such as geocaching (Matherson, Wright, Inman, & Wilson, 2008; O'Hara, 2008; Rosenberg, 2004) and Google Earth (Pantazes, 2011), as well as other forms of readily available technology (Ross, 2006). Moreover, there is an abundance of pedagogical literature available to improve instruction through constructivist and holistic philosophies (Larochelle, Bednarz, & Garrison, 1998; Miller, 1993; Ross, 2000). The bottom line is that Social Studies experiences continue to be sub-par for many students.

Twenty-two percent of the participants in this study generated positive Social Studies experiences in their journal reflections. These positive experiences can be consolidated into the following four themes: (a) cross-curricular integration, (b) out of class excursions, (c) guest speakers, and (d) role playing. Although these themes are somewhat predictable from a teacher educator perspective, the sharing and discussion of these themes with preservice teaching

candidates is a vital and necessary component of teacher training, and, thus, figure centrally as a principal feature of this study.

Sela, for example, made reference to the positive effect that cross-curricular integration had on her Social Studies memories:

I remember learning about birthday celebrations around the world, and our teacher integrated music by teaching us how to sing happy birthday in a variety of different languages. This was a really fun activity that I still remember like it was yesterday.

Alicia also commented on the cross-curricular integration with Social Studies and physical education:

I remember my grade 5 teacher always had us doing something physical in Social Studies. He would take us on monthly walks around the neighborhood claiming that walking was healthy for us. We would always have to fill out some sort of Social Studies worksheet on our walk, answering questions like: How many houses we had seen for sale? Did we see any animals, specific trees, plants, etc?

Curriculum integration was also something that Jeff found very interesting in his memories of Social Studies:

I remember one teacher who was really into native culture and education, which seemed to dominate our Social Studies learning. He would always have us make miniature models of things, such as canoes and tepees, which crossed-over into Math and Science with things like scale, measurement, and building material and even into Art because they were very creative projects.

Out of the classroom educational experiences are also very effective. Alicia's comments (noted above) would easily fit into this category. In addition, Ashley remembers a positive excursion to a maple syrup farm when studying pioneer life:

I remember our teacher taking us to a local maple syrup farm that still used traditional ways of making maple syrup. Visiting all of the stations and seeing the entire process was totally awesome! Till this day I think about that trip whenever I use maple syrup. I really liked it when they let us taste some of the syrup, it was so much fun!

Cindy clearly remembers a trip to a local museum where students had the opportunity to explore ancient artifacts:

I remember going to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto when we were studying ancient Egypt. The museum had all kinds of real Egyptian artifacts that I would otherwise only see in a book. It was very interesting to see things that were thousands of years old right in front of my eyes.

The positive memories of these out of classroom experiences are consistent with the sentiments of Willis (2008) as previously noted.

Lisa's memory of her school principal coming in as a guest speaker was also a very favorable learning experience:

In grade 5 I also recall our Ancient Egypt unit. To introduce us to the unit, our principal, who had travelled to Egypt numerous times, visited our class to share with us pictures of the pyramid, stories of his adventures, and even brought the class souvenirs. It was great to have someone who had actually been there talk to us and create a personal connection.

Similarly, Jenna has fond memories of the Mayor coming to her classroom to discuss local politics:

In grade 5, the Mayor of Kincardine came to our classroom and talked to the class. I remember that both the principal and vice-principal were also in the class that day, and they never came to our class, so I figured that it must have been a special day. We had an opportunity to ask him about his job and what he did on a daily basis. He even gave us a lot of fun stuff such as key chains, posters, and pens. It was a very fun class.

Joanne remembers role-playing during a unit on medieval life. In our class discussion, she shared an excerpt from her journal.

During this unit [medieval times] we had a feast at the school. Parents sent food with their children and they dressed up to match what a person during medieval times would wear. Also during our feast we were able to eat with our hands and we threw our leftovers into the middle of the circle. Because of this, I was able to picture the eating habits of a person during medieval times. This unit was one of the best I have experienced because it was hands on. The way to succeed as a Social Studies teacher is to make the experience memorable and let the students discover by themselves.

Fatima also remembers recreating the contact between early French explorers and Native Canadians.

I remember our class putting on a play for our parents in grade 6 that recreated Jacques Cartier's first contact with the Natives of Canada. We had great costumes and it really felt that history was brought to life. We even had a chance to incorporate some French into the play.

All of these aforementioned positive experiences are consistent with the research of Pumpian et al (2006) and Alkis and Gulec (2006) as previously mentioned.

Sharing these positive Social Studies experiences in class generated a great deal of productive discussion. Participants ultimately agreed that student centered and collaborative group learning was the best formula for success in the Social Studies classroom. Breaking away from teacher-centered learning is consistent with Hobbs and Moroz (2001) who contend that "students find social studies boring because of the teacher-centered activities" (p.1). Moreover, the overwhelming majority of participants asserted that learning experiences need to be more practical and authentic, and also allow students to discover knowledge (Bruner, 1961; DeVries, Zan, Hildebrandt, Edmiaston, & Sales, 2002). William's comment during the journal discussion period, for example, adeptly summarizes this notion: "Social Studies was very interesting when

we did hands-on activities. I loved building castles and making miniature models of things.” Similarly, Paulina stated: “Participating in hands-on activities was the best part of Social Studies.” Danelle’s comments are also worth noting: “I enjoyed Social Studies when it was social – group work, games, and competitions. I remember one teacher who always played a jeopardy-style game to test us on factual knowledge. It was so much fun!” In fact, Danelle’s comments truly resonated with the class on that particular day, and many students showed verbal support for her statement. Remarks such as “yes”, “right on”, and “so true” can be heard right after Danelle’s comments. Moreover, the same level of support was also evident in other classes when I shared Danelle’s comments. One particular student (Mario) ironically made the point that his Social Studies classes should have been called “single studies” because “there was nothing social about them.”

Discussion

The results of my study are consistent with literature in the field: most students have negative memories of Social Studies (or no memories at all), and few students have positive Social Studies experiences. After months of sifting through data, reading through countless articles, and processing the nomenclature of pedagogic philosophies, I struggled to find an explanation for my results. My “Aha” moment, however, occurred when I stumbled across a familiar quote: “Are we doing what is best for our students, or are we doing what is most convenient for us?” Through this quote, I contend that creating positive Social Studies experiences requires an enormous amount of planning, preparation, and development. A student-centered lesson on constructing a tepee, for example (as cited by Jeff), requires an enormous amount of work for the teacher, such as finding resources (building material), step-by-step instructions, determining fair and equitable assessment and evaluation strategies, differentiating content, and accommodating exceptional learners. Clearly, this constructivist approach to learning is best for students, but very challenging and demanding for teachers. Considering teachers’ increased responsibility, stress, and anxiety levels (Dinham, 1993; Griva & Joekes, 2003), it becomes much more attractive for teachers to revert back to the basics of teacher-centered pedagogy. For example, the students read pages 34-41 of the textbook and answer questions 1-9 on page 42. The teacher takes up the questions on the next day, and the same formula is followed, ultimately leading towards a culminating test. Then, the process starts all over again. This mundane formula is very convenient for the teacher, but is clearly not best for the student. Moreover, there is prevailing culture of academic books imbued in the marketing and advertising campaigns of large publishing companies that seem to make the textbook ubiquitous and legitimize their employment (Kizlik, 2011). From free desk copies to brochures advertising the latest and greatest book, Social Studies teachers at all levels are subject to this legitimization of the textbook.

During journal discussion, many participants reported that their host teachers were also engaging in tedious and mundane Social Studies pedagogy. This conscious attempt by host teachers to make life “convenient” is the genesis for another generation of students that are failing to create any positive and vibrant memories in the Social Studies classroom. Hence, the future of Social Studies education in Southern Ontario is looking very much like the past. Ultimately, teachers tend to show more passion for subjects that they are enamored with, and doing what is “best”

for students in these subjects is a labor of love. The problem is that teachers are expected to teach a wide variety of subjects at the elementary level and, chances are, these teachers are not going to be passionate about all of them. This phenomenon is supported by Markle (1978) who argues that elementary teachers ultimately develop a preference for teaching specific subjects, unlike secondary school education where teachers tend to be specialists in their particular subject area. The million-dollar question, however, is: What percentage of elementary teachers identify Social Studies as their favorite subject to teach? Although I cannot answer this question, I do not think the number is very high based on my experience as both a classroom teacher and teacher educator. Thus, if Social Studies falls short in the bid to attract vibrant and passionate in-service teachers at the elementary level -- teachers that will do what is "best" for students -- then where and how do Social Studies advocates intervene to raise the importance and profile of the subject?

On the surface, some of the responsibility lies on the shoulders of Social Studies teacher educators. But what impact can this relatively small group of educators have on an entire discipline? After all, Social Studies only represent about 24 out of 360 hours of class time in the teacher-training program for the institution that I teach for (this does not include practice teaching). That is under 7% of total instructional time. Even if this number were doubled, a Social Studies teacher educator would have to be a miracle worker to turn a large percentage of teaching candidates into stellar Social Studies educators and advocates.

With such little time dedicated to Social Studies in teacher training, then it is safe to assume that students at the elementary level are also being exposed to insufficient Social Studies instructional time. Evidence of this can be found in studies by Pace (2008), Jones and Thomas (2006), Bailey, Hollifield, and Shaw Jr. (2006), Bryant (2005), Manzo (2005), VanFossen (2005), Perkins-Gough (2004), and von Zastrow (2004). Heafner et al. (2007) contend: "Even if a classroom teacher, administrator, and/or an instructor in higher education find value in the Social Studies, the educator must find creative means to squeeze in the Social Studies in little to no allocated time" (p. 504).

Jones and Thomas (2006) play the "if you can't beat them, join them" card. Specifically, they argue that numeracy and literacy curriculum gets the lion share of instructional time, and if Social Studies tailors its curriculum to enhance numeracy and literacy, then Social Studies would reap many benefits. The danger with adopting this philosophy is that Language and Math are considered to be the really important subjects, and Social Studies is a frill subject that is useful in a supporting role. This is a very dangerous card to play. I am a huge supporter of Arts education (especially music), and I am afraid that too many Arts educators have also played the same card (Stewart, 2007). These are band-aid solutions that might work short term, but fail to cultivate any meaningful and self-sustaining long-term growth. Social Studies is an important discipline within elementary education. Who we are, where we live, and how we live are fundamental aspects of everyday life. Social Studies must be politicized and advertised for the sake of the subject. This mindset also promotes authenticity, integrity, and courage, which are critical in creating and sustaining long-term growth.

Conclusion

Scholarly literature has demonstrated that Social Studies continues to get scraps from the education table. Many students find it boring and the subject itself has witnessed reduced instructional time in favor of literacy and numeracy initiatives. But, do we as Social Studies educators really want a seat at the table? For those of us who are enamored with Social Studies education and actually help to perpetuate positive experiences for our students by doing what is “best” for them, there is a certain liberty and emancipation from being the focus of attention and avoiding the lion’s share of instructional time and importance. Not being heavily monitored and micro-managed (as is the case with literacy and numeracy curriculum, particularly in Canada) can be a good thing. Freedom is the best teaching tool. Moreover, I often wonder if a larger stake at the education table would actually improve the overall pedagogy and perception of Social Studies. Maybe what we have is not so bad. This is not to suggest that we ignore the generations of studies that have corroborated dull and uneventful Social Studies experiences (including this one), but rather to focus on meaningful and authentic Social Studies experiences (what is “best” for students) rather than try to convince the rest of the world that what we are doing is important. If we follow our hearts, an authentic grass root movement will follow where students, preservice-teacher candidates, and educators of all types will want a seat at our table, because we are doing what is best for students. In sum, the best form of advertising for Social Studies is honest to goodness hard work that places students at the apex of the educational experience.

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