

Research, Theory and the K-12 Classroom Teacher

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Social studies is at the center of a good school curriculum because it is where students learn to see the world—its peoples, places, cultures, systems, and problems; its dream and calamities—now and long ago. Social studies needs to be set deeply within the school curriculum from the earliest grades.

—Walter Parker¹

As president of the National Council for the Social Studies during the 2008-09 school year, I had the privilege of attending many state conferences and meeting hundreds of social studies teachers. As a middle school teacher, I learned and brought many new ideas from social studies teachers and scholars back into my classroom. Unfortunately, a theme that I heard too often in these travels dealt with the reduction of social studies in today's climate of standardization and testing. At times I had to wonder if there were administrators who understood the importance of social studies in a well-rounded curriculum. Thus the quotation above leaped out at me as I began reading Professor Walter Parker's introductory chapter in his newest edited book, *Social Studies Today: Research and Practice*.

I have been an avid reader of Professor Parker's Research and Practice column in *Social Education*, which has been bringing together some of the best scholarly thinking on history, civics, geography, and global education since it was launched in 2001.

His new book is a collection of these columns. In the book, Parker asks those of us involved in social education to think deeply about social studies and the important pedagogical and curricular issues facing us. The Research and Practice column has over the years featured the work of some of the most prominent scholars of social education. Many of these articles have been rewritten for the book. While *Social Studies Today* certainly speaks to the scholar, I believe that it also speaks to district curriculum leaders and to classroom teachers.

I teach world history to approximately 130 12- and 13-year-old students a day at the Hudson Middle School in Wisconsin. As a classroom social studies teacher, I found *Social Studies Today* very valuable for exploring such vital questions as: How can we best prepare our students to be functioning citizens in our pluralistic democracy, as well as in an increasingly global society? How can we help our students analyze, interpret, and think critically? How can we engage our students in meaningful intellectual work?

As classroom teachers, research and theory can and should be part of our personal journeys. My understanding of the importance of such scholarship to my teaching developed early in my career. Within my first few years of teaching, I learned of and devoured the work of people like Bruce Joyce, the late Jere Brophy (to whom I had the honor of presenting an NCSS Exemplary Research Award), Roger and David Johnson, and Elizabeth Cohen. I have continued my learning through the works of such scholars as Fred Newman and Marzano. These researchers work with models of instruction, and their ideas and concepts have been instrumental in my teaching. Although much scholarship does deal with instruction, some of the most important scholarly works that have influenced my teaching explore not only instruction, but the “whys” of our approaches and goals in instruction.

As a social studies teacher, I have taught history to seventh graders for over a decade. For this reason, more recently, I have spent time with the writings of those scholars who concentrate on history education: Keith

Barton, Linda Levstik, Sam Wineburg, and Bruce Vansledright (whose works are included in the Parker volume). Their work does not bear on teaching strategies. Rather, the writings are more in the realm of ideas—ideas to which we can aspire and with which we can examine and measure our teaching.

As a classroom teacher who often has preservice teachers in my classroom, I find it interesting when a college student tells me that a previous teacher had told them not to worry about the educational work going on in the universities. Not practical, they have been told. Not practical? There are innumerable teachers throughout the country who are regular consumers of the type of research and scholarship that Walter Parker and the writers of this incredible volume have made their life's work. Personally, I have benefited and grown in my teaching as I work to implement what I learn from scholars. It is not easy work, but it is good work, and the ultimate beneficiaries are my students. 📖

Note

1. *Social Studies Today: Research and Practice*, ed. Walter C. Parker (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.

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Social Studies Today: Research and Practice (Routledge, 2009), edited by Walter C. Parker, is a compilation of Research and Practice columns published in *Social Education*. All Research and Practice columns are also available free of charge to NCSS members through the *Social Education* archives at www.socialstudies.org/publications.