Zeitschrift: Zeitschrift für pädagogische Historiographie
Herausgeber: Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich
Band: 14 (2008)
Heft: 2

Artikel: The expanding communities curriculum : from disciplines to topics
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-901791

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The Expanding Communities Curriculum: From Disciplines to Topics

(Red.) Im Unterricht der *Social Studies* nimmt das Konzept der «expanding communities» (graduelle Ausdehnung der Gemeinschaftsbezüge) einen zentralen Platz ein. Der Ursprung dieses Modells liegt im späten 19. Jahrhundert, als Massen von Immigranten in die USA strömten und soziale Integration zum zentralen Thema machten, gerade auch in der Erziehung. Die ungebrochene Attraktivität dieses Modells ist heute global und findet sich unangefochten in vielen Unterrichtsbüchern wieder. Ungeachtet seiner Popularität wird der Ansatz aber mehr und mehr bemängelt, weil er wissenschaftlich wenig gesichert sei und letztlich die Kinder nur das lehre, was sie ohnehin schon wüssten. Der folgende Beitrag rekonstruiert die Genese dieses Ansatzes und dessen Entwicklung in den letzten 150 Jahren und zeigt, welche Konsequenzen seine globale Anwendung hat.

• Anne-Lise Halvorsen

Introduction

By the 1930s, the sequential «expanding communities curriculum» had become the dominant structure in U.S. social studies elementary education. For over seventy years, U.S. schools have followed this curriculum of organizing elementary social studies by a sequence of ever widening social units (family, school, neighborhood, regional community, state, country, and beyond). This structure has even been called the de facto national curriculum (Naylor/Diem 1987) for elementary social studies education. Moreover, a number of other countries, including Singapore and South Korea, have adopted the approach.

The curriculum is founded on the principle that young children learn best by first studying what is nearest and most familiar before expanding their study beyond themselves and their immediate environment. This is the near-to-far «sequence» approach to learning. For example, kindergarten teachers focus on the child and the child's family, interests, and neighborhood. As children advance through the elementary grades, they learn about other communities such as their city, their state, and their country. In what is often visualized as a concentric series of learning circles, each social domain enlarges on the one before it. The approach is used to teach civics, geography, history, and economics, the «scope» of the curriculum, as child-centered topics rather than as separate disciplines.

Despite its popularity and apparently secure position in U.S. elementary schools, this approach to teaching social studies has always been controversial, with many detractors. In recent decades, the attacks on the expanding communities curriculum have increased in intensity. A commonly voiced objection is that the curriculum, and social studies more generally, abandoned the traditional history, geography, and civics instruction that dominated in the early twentieth century. Diane Ravitch (1987) charges that the curriculum is anti-intellectual, redundant with what children learn outside school, without a foundation in psychological principles, bereft of historical study, and boring. Bruce Frazee and Samuel Ayers (2003) claim the curriculum is responsible for pushing history, civics, and geography out of the elementary schools. Others complain of its narrow focus on local settings that preclude a global dimension.[1]

Many such criticisms are valid. There is a consensus that much of today's elementary social studies, that once was more academically grounded and less socially prescriptive, is now somewhat discipline-free and provincial. In defense of the fundamental principles of the curriculum, this article examines two issues its critics seldom address. First, there is a larger and usually unrecognized historical context for this curriculum that was, in fact, used to teach the traditional disciplines long before the 1930s. Second, the expanding communities curriculum framework is a format for *organizing* the content, not the *source* of the content (Brophy/Alleman 2006).

In this analysis, my intent is to locate the expanding communities curriculum in its historical context and to show that the earlier curriculum took a discipline-oriented approach that in the 1930s changed to a child-centric, topics approach. I also explain the curriculum's methodology in order to show how it is possible to teach academic matter using this sequential approach. Last, I claim that disciplinary learning in the framework of the expanding com-

munities curriculum can take a global as well as a local outlook.

This article uses archival and other historic materials to trace the development of the expanding communities curriculum from its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century to its maturity in the mid-twentieth century when it became the most widespread curriculum structure in elementary social studies[2]. In the research, I examine national trends in social studies education evidenced by the recommendations of the American Historical Association (AHA), the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), and the National Education Association (NEA). I also draw on the archival records of Stanford University Professor of Education, Paul Robert Hanna, (1902–1988) who is generally credited with popularizing the approach in U.S. elementary schools (Stallones 2002).

I organize the article by discussions of the disciplines, geography, civics, and history that evolved into social studies in the early twentieth century. In each section, taking a historical perspective, I describe how educators presented and teachers taught these subjects using the expanding communities approach. I also present the justifications for (and criticisms of) the curriculum as an organizing sequence. Before my concluding remarks, I also comment on the adoption of the approach outside the United States.

Geography

Of all the social science disciplines, geography instruction is most adaptable to the structure of the expanding communities curriculum. Teachers can use geography to teach children about their own communities and the world using maps of all kinds, narratives of people/environment interactions, and descriptions of customs/practices, such as religion, politics, dress, and work. Geography as a subject also has an appealing, tangible quality: children can often see, touch, and experience what they learn by exploring their surroundings.

Nineteenth century educators and teachers understood the adaptability of geography instruction as a way to expand and concretize the child's small world. Johann Pestalozzi, the nineteenth century Swiss educator, was particularly influential because of his promotion of «object lessons» that emphasized the importance of direct experience with physical objects. The geography curricula of the nineteenth century, in national recommendations and in textbooks, reflected this interest in the tangible aspects of geography study.

In 1893, the NEA released its Committee of Ten Report, which was the nation's first set of national curriculum recommendations. Focused on ten subject areas (called «conferences), one of which was geography. Although the NEA Report mainly concentrated on high school curricula, some of its recommendations were relevant to grades below high school. The geography conference essentially endorsed the expanding communities framework (National Education Association 1894), advising that «the exercise of the imagination of remote objects should always be preceded, if possible, by the exercise of the observation of similar facts near at home» (ibid., p. 222) and that geography study needed to begin with students' direct experiences with the natural world (ibid., p. 219). Specifically, the NEA Report recommended map-making in geography study so that children could learn their schoolroom, their community, their state, and their country. Children could acquire observational skills from local and direct study that would be useful in the study of distant places (ibid., pp. 211–221). This is the same reasoning used by later supporters of the expanding communities approach.

Nineteenth century geography textbooks also used the expanding communities approach in topography lessons that taught children how to locate objects and places on maps (McManis 1911, p. 36). One textbook recommended study that required «taking the child about his home locality first, then on journeys farther and farther from home» (Arnold Henry Guyot, quoted in: Jenness 1990, p. 222). With this approach, often referred to as «local geography,» lessons in geography took children from their own neighborhoods to far away places.

The NEA's Geography Conference Report and contemporary geography textbooks of the nineteenth century conceived of geography study as an immediate exploration of the physical environment in ever widening dimensions. These conceptions, near-to-far and direct experience, are the cardinal principles of the expanding communities approach. Geography study is especially well-suited to the expanding communities approach because of its natural focus on spatial dimensions – geography is about the communities themselves.

Civics (Citizenship Studies)

At the secondary level, civics today is sometimes taught as a separate course, but at the elementary level, like the other social science disciplines, it is generally folded into the hodgepodge of the social studies curriculum. At either level, there are various ways to teach civics, some more traditionally academic than others. For example, in the United States, one perspective is to teach the Constitution and government structure; another is to teach citizenship using instruction in proper moral behavior at school, with peers, and in society generally.

In nineteenth century civics, or citizenship studies, U.S. teachers adopted the latter perspective. They often focused on the citizen's role in society, civic conduct, democratic principles, and, above all, character development, both personal and civic

(Reese 2005, p. 34). They focused less often on government, elected officials, or judicial processes. A tangential issue, not unrelated to the argument of this article, is that this focus on citizenship instruction may have foreshadowed the gradual decline in subject content instruction that is a major complaint by critics of the modern social studies movement.

In an analysis of early nineteenth century New England textbooks (readers and history and geography textbooks), Sherry Schwartz (2001, 2002) found traces of the expanding communities approach in citizenship instruction. Her research revealed that nineteenth century educators thought learning about the self and the local community was better citizenship training than studying foreign lands and past eras. According to Schwartz, «Arguing that a local understanding was far more necessary for the development of democratic citizenship than a knowledge of Europe, educators wrote textbooks that emphasized the development of self, community, and country» (Schwartz 2002, p. 58). As a result, nineteenth century textbooks often blurred the lines between the past and the present, preferring to emphasize communication skills, self-government, and local history. Schwartz posits that these nineteenth century educators' motives may have been to help students locate themselves in history and to become more patriotic in the process.

Whatever the motives, civics instruction in the nineteenth century began with the immediate – the individual as citizen in the present moment and in the present space. Such lessons in civic development and responsibility could readily be applied to life outside the school classroom. Teachers could educate their youngest charges to be good classroom citizens who would, as they grew older, use those citizenship skills in their local communities. The direct experience theory, as promoted in the geography curriculum, also applied in citizenship training where it was possible to see and experience the objects of study. Just as children could explore their local environment in their geography classes, they could «see» their local government in practice – in the courthouses, city councils, and elections. While the expanding communities framework was not so fully developed as in the geography curricula, civics instruction let children see they were citizens of expanding jurisdictions: one community, one county, one state, and one country.

History

History, as a subject in social studies, has a more complex relationship to the expanding communities curriculum than geography or civics. A student cannot directly experience the past, despite field trips and examination of historical artifacts. In the elementary school years, history instruction emphasizes historic facts, lives, and ideas, not tangible objects or contemporary people. Furthermore, since history is generally studied chronologically, the primary driving structure of its study is time, not space. Time is linear, not concentric. Yet history, certainly as much as geography, allows the student to look beyond the local community to other countries and civilizations. The outward perspective of history allows students to understand human experiences and societies outside their own communities.

The nineteenth century curriculum placed less emphasis on history than the «3 R's» or even geography. However, education historians agree that the U.S. common schools did teach *American* history, particularly in the upper elementary grades. Some nineteenth century educators experimented with different organizing structures for the history curriculum, supported by a few textbook reviewers who called for new approaches. Such innovations challenged mainstream educators who saw history, and the proper teaching of history, as a record of events arranged chronologically. There were even some radical dissenters who argued, with vehemence, that the chronological approach, beginning with the Creation and moving forward was «evil» (McManis 1912, p. 323). Hints of the expanding communities approach crept into the conversation as well. As one education critic exhorted, «the study of history must be made to begin at the residence of the pupil, and the sphere of historical knowledge be gradually widened, as formerly mentioned» (ibid., p. 323). This point of view, however, was far from unanimous.

One of the staunchest nineteenth century supporters of the chronological approach to history instruction in the elementary grades was Lucy Salmon (1853–1927), Professor of History at Vassar.[3] In the Committee of Seven Report, written by the AHA to study the condition of elementary and high school history instruction in the United States, Salmon authored a chapter on history in «the grades» (those below high school) that was highly critical of elementary history instruction in U.S. schools, noting that it left «much to be desired» (Committee of Seven 1899, p. 511). Among the faults of history instruction, she named the exclusive focus on state and U.S. history, the inappropriate use of history to indoctrinate unthinking patriotism, the over dependence on textbooks, and the lack of innovative teaching techniques (ibid., pp. 513–515). She proposed that children should expand their insular outlook by studying world myths, fables, and legends. However, she also recommended that children study the past chronologically. In her view, «the demand that a study should proceed ‹from the known to the unknown› may involve a fallacy, that what lies nearest may sometimes be most obscure, and what is remote in time or place be most easily understood» (ibid., p. 514).

History study encourages learning about other peoples, other societies, other lands – taking an expansive view of the world, consistent with the idea of expanding the community. However, educators

have had less success adopting the core of the expanding communities approach with history than with other social science disciplines. It seems it is quite challenging to adapt the framework of studying family, school, and community, in that order, to a chronological structure. Like Salmon, many other educators have disapproved of forcing the expanding communities approach onto history instruction. Yet the educators backing the expanding communities framework had an indirect solution to this problem: if history instruction would not adapt to a child-centered focus, then history instruction would be buried in social studies, which is what happened in the twentieth century.

Social Studies

The expanding communities approach, originating in rudimentary form in the nineteenth century in the various disciplines, grew in scale and popularity as a sequential organizing structure in twentieth century education. Social studies, a pan discipline of history, geography, and other social sciences, has been most influenced by the approach. By the early 1920s, U.S. elementary schools began adopting social studies programs that combined history, geography, and civics as one area of study. In social studies, children studied the family, school, neighborhood, community, and the larger world from the unified perspective of the multiple disciplines.

In this transition from the separate study of the disciplines to a single area of study, a startling change in curricular focus occurred. Topics, such as machines, transportation, health, communications, recreation, and housing, replaced the separate disciplines. Almost from its inception, while admitting that the consequences were likely unintended, critics argue that the elementary curriculum suffered as a result. As many critics charge, the disciplinary content diminished as the relevance-for-life instruction strengthened. Thus, it is the «scope» of the social studies curriculum, rather than its «sequence» that is responsible for the current state of social studies education, often described as inchoate and watered down. Yet, as suggested by this overview of the nineteenth century curricula, it is possible at some level, especially with certain disciplines, to teach rich, disciplinary skills and content using the expanding communities approach.

Paul Robert Hanna's idea of replacing the disciplines with topics derived from his work on a curriculum project for the State of Virginia that he undertook with his colleague, Hollis Caswell. For Hanna, the topics were the basic human activities that represented: «the widest scope of problems of men living together – from the life and ways of these people remotely removed from us to the culture of our immediate community. Human relations are those unitary life experiences that the specialists have broken up and classified into subject-matter fields as history, geography, civics, economics, sociology, political science, ethics, esthetics, anthropology, individual and social psychology» (quoted in Gill 1974, p. 53; Hanna 1934, p. 132).

Many of Hanna's colleagues and peers, who supported his ideas, were enormously influential. Probably the best sources for identifying leading educators' beliefs about social studies education are the reported discussions from the NCSS annual meetings and the articles in the NCSS yearbooks. Of particular interest is the 1939 yearbook, *The Future of the Social Studies* (Michener 1939). For this volume, James A. Michener, future novelist and Pulitzer Prize winner, assembled a group of prominent social studies scholars as authors. They agreed upon, and endorsed, the expanding communities curriculum for the elementary grades. Next, at the 1940 NCSS annual meeting, Ray Osgood Hughes, a leading social studies educator and author of several civics books, reiterated his support for an approach resembling the expanding communities framework: «The pupil can best learn to understand his immediate environment, the people whom he meets every day, the ones who help to make his life pleasant in the community in which he lives» (Hughes 1940). Hughes emphasized the importance of teaching political events, but he also defended lessons on social and economic issues that especially appealed to children, as well as lessons on the value of thrift, neatness, and good citizenship. The particular program he endorsed used the expanding communities approach that included the study of the family, school, and community, as well as the study of human activities, such as shelter or transportation (Michener 1939).

Similarly, Hanna's textbooks emphasized the relevancy of the familiar topics of everyday life and downplayed the disciplinary content of history and geography. Yet it is in this change of focus that Hanna's work is most innovative as well as most controversial. Largely because of his efforts, evidenced in his textbooks, the «scope» of the elementary social studies curriculum changed (disciplines to topics), but the «sequence» (organizing structure) did not. Children continued to study the topics by applying them to their lives at home, school, neighborhood, and beyond. However, with its roots in the theory and practice of nineteenth century education, the expanding communities curriculum was not Hanna's creation. His contribution was turning a loosely defined social studies curriculum that had developed in the 1920s into a well-organized and highly influential program of study.

The Expanding Communities Curriculum in the World

Because the approach is not specific to any location, it is easily exportable. Unlike history or geography courses, which are generally time and space constrained, the expanding communities curriculum allows children to study their family, school, and local communi ty in any setting – the sequence applies to any «community» that has a series of expanding social networks.

Hanna realized the universality of his sequencing approach and promoted it widely in Germany, the Philippines, Central and South America, the Middle East, and Japan (Stallones 2002). He always favored curricula that were locally produced and reflective of local concerns. Japan and the Philippines are among the countries that have adapted his expanding communities curriculum to a problems-based approach to social studies that focuses on the home and family, school, the town, and the province (ibid.).

South Korea uses the expanding communities sequence in two of its elementary social studies programs: Elementary Moral Education (EME) and Elementary Social Studies (ESS) (Kim/Cheong/Hoge/VanSickle/Kim 2001). The EME focuses on self life, family-neighborhood-school life, social life, and national life. The ESS integrates the study of history, geography, and society in a topics-based approach that follows the expanding communities approach. For example, in third grade, South Korean students study community life; in fourth grade they study regional life; in fifth grade they study national life; and in sixth grade, they study life in other countries.

The Singapore 2005 social studies curriculum manual also requires the expanding communities approach for teaching knowledge, skills, and values of citizenship education. The Singapore curriculum designers emphasize that this «spiral» approach «helps pupils understand how a new application or an idea is connected to one learnt previously. It also introduces and reinforces knowledge and feelings about Singapore in increasing depth and breadth» (Ministry of Education 2005, p. 2).

Yet the approach's greatest strength might also be its greatest weakness – that is, what makes the approach easily exportable might also be what makes it provincial. In its present topics-based form, the approach tends to de-emphasize disciplinary knowledge and over-emphasize the «local». The result may be a social studies curriculum that is not only watered down but also parochial. A narrow focus on the immediate environment means children are likely to learn more about their backyard neighbors than their world neighbors. Some supporters of the approach may argue that learning about one's own community is a necessary step to learning about other, more distant, communities since children need a point of reference for comparison. However, there is an equal possibility that, in such comparisons, prejudice and even racism and xenophobia can be inadvertently instilled when the home community is characterized as «normal» or worse, superior.

That said, the approach can work differently in different settings. With some countries and locales, such an intense focus on the local might escape the threat of parochialism. For example, in highly diverse settings such as large urban areas or ethnically diverse countries like Singapore, children could learn about people quite different from themselves, just by studying what and who is in «their own backyard». However, the danger lies in the incorporation of the approach in homogeneous settings such as many rural or suburban areas, or countries like South Korea, with an ethnically homogeneous population. By only studying one's immediate environment, these students learn mainly about people just like themselves, possibly precluding them from developing a cosmopolitan perspective. Again, the problem lies not with the sequencing structure itself, but with the scope of the subject matter.

Conclusion

Criticism of the expanding communities curriculum is multi-pronged. Many critics, perhaps the most vocal, both past and present, complain of its superficiality and its redundancy. It is also argued that it is practically impossible to study only one community at a time, in isolation, without considering the wider social network. Yet the criticism most often leveled at the approach is its lack of disciplinary rigor. However, I argue that, in general, there is nothing inherently anti-disciplinary about the ever widening, immediate to distant approach of the expanding communities curriculum in the social sciences. As this investigation of the study of geography, civics, and history demonstrates, some nineteenth century teachers supported and advanced the approach as a way to teach these separate disciplines.

That said, the approach clearly works better with some of the social science disciplines than with others. In particular, geography and civics lessons are adaptable to the expanding communities curriculum that relates to the child and the child's world. History lessons are less adaptable to the approach, although even history, if taught from a global perspective, leads the child to a world expanded beyond the neighborhood and community.

Where the expanding communities framework went astray was when it was applied to the study of topics in social studies. At this point, in the 1930s, the disciplines of geography, civics, and history were marginalized in the curriculum as the topics of self, family, and community moved to the forefront of elementary education. With no anchor to the social science disciplines, most of the rich content of historical and geographical study drifted away. The

fault lay not with the structure of social studies education but with the content. A child-centered curriculum, especially in geography and civics, as nineteenth century curricula suggests, need not be anti-intellectual or superficial.

If today's policy makers and educators continue to recommend the expanding communities approach, which many thoughtful people still find sensible and relevant in elementary education, they need to focus much more on the scope than on the sequence. Since the expanding communities curriculum of sequences has been held responsible, wrongly in my opinion, for the declining quality of elementary social studies education, a concern is that reformers will abandon the approach rather than use the approach to increase subject content.

A second concern with the expanding communities approach, in its global application, is its overwhelming emphasis on the immediate, the local, and the national, rather than on other peoples, cultures, events, movements, geography, and political and economic systems. A narrow focus on the local and national community runs the risk of neglecting the interconnected and interdependent world community. This is a concern often overlooked by both supporters and critics of the approach, but perhaps one worthy of more attention as more education systems adopt it.

Footnotes

1 For example, comments to the author by Elizabeth Heilman and Avner Segall, 3 April 2006.
2 Also see Leriche 1987, for a historical analysis of the approach.
3 See Bohan 2004 for a biography of Salmon.

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