

Rhetoric v. Reality: Social Studies and History Education in Interwar America

La retórica frente a la realidad: las materias de conocimientos sociales y la enseñanza de la Historia en la América de entreguerras

<https://doi.org/10.4438/1988-592X-RE-2025-408-670>

Daniel Berman

Universidad de Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract

Contemporary analysis of American history and social studies education reveals a complex picture. On the one hand, the media depicts battles between liberals and conservatives over the inclusion of racism, slavery, and diversity in standards and textbooks. On the other, research indicates that innovative pedagogy and new content struggle to uproot the textbook-centric pedagogies and rote-memorization exercises that commonly appear in classrooms. While history and social studies education is no doubt amplified by news coverage and social media, these debates, challenges, and controversies are not new, instead, they are part of a long historical lineage. This article traces that lineage by centering history and social studies education and reforms during interwar America (1919-1939). The interwar years were crucial for US history and social studies education because school enrollments significantly expanded and academics, teachers, and administrators created many reforms. However, most studies of the interwar years only consider reforms and fail to explore if those reforms appeared in schools. Highlighting how teachers taught and what they taught, combined with the historical context of the era, illuminates the possibilities, challenges, and limitations of history and social studies education reform.

Key words: social studies, history education, education reform, interwar era, curriculum, curricular history, and social history

Resumen

El análisis contemporáneo de la enseñanza de la Historia y de las ciencias sociales en los USA estadounidense revela un panorama complejo. Por un lado, los medios de comunicación tratan de las batallas entre liberales y conservadores por la inclusión del racismo, la esclavitud y la diversidad en los currícula y libros de texto. Por otro, la investigación indica que la pedagogía innovadora y los nuevos contenidos siguen luchando por desarraigar la didáctica centrada en los libros de texto y los ejercicios de memorización comunes en las aulas. Indubitablemente, la cobertura informativa y las redes sociales amplifican los problemas de la enseñanza de la Historia y las ciencias sociales, pero estos debates, desafíos y controversias no son nuevos, sino que forman parte de una larga trayectoria histórica. Este artículo traza esa línea centrándose en la enseñanza de la Historia y las ciencias sociales y las reformas durante el periodo de entreguerras en Estados Unidos de Norteamérica (1919-1939). Los años de entreguerras fueron cruciales para la enseñanza de la Historia y las ciencias sociales en los USA, pues el número de alumnos matriculados en las escuelas aumentó considerablemente y los académicos, profesores y administradores propusieron numerosas reformas. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los estudios sobre los años de entreguerras sólo consideran las propuestas de reforma y no exploran si estas se pusieron en práctica. Estudiar cómo y qué enseñaban los profesores, junto con el contexto histórico de la época, ilumina las posibilidades, retos y limitaciones de la reforma de la enseñanza de la Historia y las ciencias sociales.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza de Ciencias Sociales, enseñanza de la Historia, reforma educativa, época de entreguerras, currículo, Historia del curriculum; Historia social.

Introduction

History and social studies education reform in the United States presents ongoing challenges. For over a century, scholars, administrators, teachers, and even politicians have tried to alter the historical content that students learn and the pedagogical practices that teachers use. Historians have documented the myriads of reform movements in different epochs, particularly how they aimed to unseat rote pedagogies and textbook-centric learning that dominated social studies and history instruction. Despite the numerous and innovative attempts at altering instruction, many reforms never made their way into schools. Social studies and history education reforms are often unsuccessful in the US because they reflect the conservative nature of public schools, no-

tably their resistance to change. Moreover, reforms are stifled by social, cultural, and political issues, commonly referred to as the “culture wars,” that manifest in different eras.

To highlight the complexities encountered in attempts to reform American history and social studies education, this article specifically explores the interwar era (1919-1939). The interwar era is significant within the history of curriculum reform, particularly social studies education, for two key reasons. First, school enrollment expanded from 74% to 84% of school-aged children throughout the interwar era and high school enrollment expanded from 5.1% to 26% (Snyder, 1993). Second, many crucial social studies and history reforms emerged during the interwar era and were often directly related to the debates over historical methodology, the emergence of the field of “social studies,” and the broader social and political landscape of the Great Depression and New Deal.

Social studies researchers recognized the importance of the interwar years and produced two lines of study that explored this era. First, scholars investigated prominent social studies and history education reports and reforms from organizations such as the American Historical Association (AHA) and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The central questions and debates that shaped this work addressed how reports of these organizations impacted schools, how social science coursework replaced history coursework, and how committee members reached a consensus despite internal disagreements. (Hertzberg, 1981; Saxe, 1992; Whelan, 1991; Keels, 1980; Ravitch, 1987; Jenness, 1990). Starting in the early 2000s, social studies histories from Fallace (2008; 2009), Halvorsen (2013), and Evans (2004), significantly expanded the scholarship of the late 20th century. They studied the intellectual impetus behind social studies reports and reforms, the changes and challenges within elementary social studies, and the impact of the culture wars on social studies. In addition to these subjects, they incorporated additional sources, new questions, and considered the changing social, intellectual, and political landscape of 20th-century America. Most of this research tended to center what *should* have been taught, rather than explore what *was* taught and how it was taught. This article attempts to address the latter and often overlooked question by providing a granular analysis of pedagogy, content,

course offerings, and other sources from the school and classroom level that all help illuminate what students were taught in the interwar period. National reports and examples from schooling in the state of Wisconsin highlighted both general trends and explicit examples of social studies education. While it is impossible to definitively claim what teachers taught, how they taught it, and what students learned, this combination of qualitative and quantitative data, from both national and local sources, provides a comprehensive foundation to address those questions.

There are three crucial elements of interwar social studies education that the national and local sources reveal. First, most of the alternations that education reformers clamored for never reached the classrooms. Second, claims from interwar educators and scholars that social studies content, teaching practices, and course offerings significantly differed were incorrect, as there was striking commonality across all three areas. Third, textbook learning, rote memorization, and stale teaching practices continued to dominate the methodology of social studies education in classrooms.

Interwar Era Social Studies Reforms

Many social studies reforms emerged during the interwar era, as educators and scholars grappled with challenges posed by the Great Depression, New Deal, and burgeoning school enrollments (Evans, 2004). Three of the most prominent reforms of this period were social problems courses, the “new” history, and social reconstructionism. Each reform encouraged students to draw explicit connections from the past to the present, to understand the social and economic problems affecting local communities and the nation, and to generate solutions to these problems. There was no consensus amongst school reformers about what content, resources, and pedagogies teachers should incorporate. However, reformers shared a mutual goal: to weaken or eliminate textbook-central learning and rote assessment.

Education reformers, notably historians, were dissatisfied with the state of history in secondary schools during the early 20th century, so some sought to reform it. These individuals and groups particularly loathed high school history because of the overreliance on factual material and the study of

politicians, dynasties, and battles. For these reformers, the “new” history offered a viable solution. Championed by Columbia University historians James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard, the “new history” was a methodological approach to studying history. Advocates challenged the dominant conception of history: a scientific, i.e. objective telling of the past, and they believed history was a subjective assessment of how the present developed from the past. New historians also called for including social histories and accounts and experiences of ordinary people, not just the political and economic elite who traditionally dominated history education. New history also differed because its proponents sought to incorporate other social science disciplines such as sociology, political science, and economics to help interpret the past and link history to the present. In sum, new history offered fresh topics and approaches for students to replace the “dead and irrelevant” histories that dominated high schools. (Robinson, 1912; Whelan, 1991; Committee on Social Studies of the Commission to Reorganize Secondary Education, 1916).

Another notable social studies reform movement was the creation and adoption of the “problems” course, such as “Social Problems,” “Modern Problems” or “Problems of American Democracy.” These courses were almost exclusively offered in the final year of secondary school. The purpose was to integrate history, sociology, economics, civics, and other social sciences to address contemporary social problems. In theory, course topics would reflect student and teacher interests and interdisciplinary studies would guide studies of particular problems. Reformers who advocated for these courses did not specify a specific curriculum or textbooks, since political climates and societal needs should shape the course. So, in theory, the course would change annually. (Committee on Social Studies of the Commission to Reorganize Secondary Education, 1916; Whelan, 1991). Leading social studies reform group, provided a sample lesson with immigration as the topic and three disciplines to frame discussions: (1) Civics: laws and politics that govern and drive immigration regulation and restriction, (2) Economics: standards of living for immigrant populations and the effects of immigration on the labor market, and (3) Sociology: the assimilation of immigrant communities into new spaces and how their cultural contributions shape society (Committee on Social Studies of the Commission to Reorganize Secondary Education,

1916).

The final noteworthy social studies reform movement was social reconstructionism, a progressive education movement that sought to mobilize American public schools and teachers to enact social reforms (Riley, 2006). Arguably the most prominent social reconstructionist was George Counts, a professor of education at Columbia University. Counts envisioned replacing individualism with collectivism and applying interdisciplinary knowledge and studies to combat social issues, notably economic problems during the Great Depression. Moreover, Counts, like other school reformers, believed that students could act as agents of change to help address contemporary social ills. By emphasizing collective action through student application of technological knowledge, schools, students, and governments would “engage in the social planning and social engineering needed to create the cooperative commonwealth, the collective democracy” (Guttek, 2008, p.14). Counts’ ideas resonated with reformers, who incorporated his ideas into influential reports on history and social studies such as the American Historical Association *Conclusions of the Commission* (1934), and Charles Beard’s *Charter for the Social Sciences* (1932). Overall, many social studies reformers utilized Counts’ idea that students needed technological understanding, knowledge, and the ability to analyze and address contemporary social problems.

Differences and Similarities in Social Studies: A National Study

Scholars have thoroughly documented the various reform efforts, but there is considerably less scholarship that explores if and how these reforms materialized in classrooms. Rather than focusing on the reformer’s ideas and recommendations, I center assessments, courses of study, and other sources that depict classrooms to illuminate how successful these reforms were and what actually transpired in schools. This granular analysis reveals some key findings. First, despite concerns amongst education researchers that social studies and history education drastically differed, there was considerable overlap. Second, fears from reformers and researchers that stale teaching practices, rote memorization, and textbook-centric learning dominated classroom instruction were correct. Third, despite those concerns, attempts to improve

social studies and history education did not produce noticeable impacts in schools.

During the interwar war era, there was a common belief amongst education researchers and reformers that social studies and history education vastly differed throughout the nation. Most of these assumptions stemmed from reports and studies that documented the broad range of class offerings and course sequences. For instance, some elementary and middle schools preferred general social science courses such as social studies, social sciences, or community civics. Other schools preferred established discipline-specific courses like American history and world geography. Most high schools required specific courses such as civics, some iteration of European or world history, and American history, yet many schools offered numerous electives like problems of democracy, economics, sociology, and others (Tryron, 1935; Lessen, and Herlihy, 1938; Dahl, 1928; Dawson, 1924). These variations in course titles, course sequence, and electives highlighted why scholars, educators, and administrators believed social studies and history education were in “a condition of utter confusion,” “a state of disorganization,” and “chaotic.” (Dahl, 1924, p. 185-88; Dawson, 1924, p. 18; Beard, 1932, p. VII).

The statistics of the varying course offerings signified great diversity among social studies and history education, however, studies that probed beyond course titles and investigated class content, assessment, and pedagogies reveal a different picture. For example, Kimmel’s (1933) *Instruction in the Social Studies* was a crucial social studies report because it accentuated the differences and similarities in the curricular content. Kimmel collected over eighty courses of study from junior and senior high schools throughout the US and carefully analyzed class offerings, sequences, course content, and textbooks. This work is unique because instead of simply cataloging the course offerings and sequence of courses, he investigated the content of the courses and the pedagogical methods in classrooms. There was considerable variation across content and course offerings, “but the variations in practice are more apparent than real,” as similarities, not differences, overall permeated social studies” (Kimmel, 1933, pp. 1-4 and 26). Kimmel (1933) analyzed eight courses of study that included a required “advanced civics” course, In

some schools this meant advanced civics, American government, social civics, or problems of citizenship. The course names differed, which gave the illusion of diversity, in actuality, the courses were similar. All the content and units were arranged by topic, with a particular focus on the structures, functions, and organization of the American government.

These overlapping elements in structure and content led Kimmel to conclude that “the name of a course, however, does not serve to differentiate the types and plan of organization of content, which are likely to follow the plans of organization of the textbooks adopted for use in civics (Kimmel, 1933, pg. 53-56)”. The study of “social problems” and “sociology” courses were also revealing. Nine courses of study contained either a social problems course (five) or a sociology course (four). According to Kimmel, “it is difficult to distinguish between courses” and the only discernible difference was the inclusion of the word “problems” preceding topics and social issues, hence, “no attempt is made here to consider them separately.” Both social problems and sociology classes emphasized the idea of “progress” as a fundamental theme, and topics included moral progress, the road to progress, and social progress (Kimmel, 1933, pg. 53-56). Despite the multitude of course offerings and distinct titles, the organization and course topics were similar. Much of the course content was almost identical. Courses of study for early or modern European, world history classes exhibited “few differences in content” (Kimmel, 1933, pg. 42). Eleven of the twelve courses of study included an introduction to prehistoric peoples based on anthropological and archaeological evidence. This segued into surveys of prominent ancient civilizations such as Greece, Rome, and Egypt, which focused on basic geography, political history, and “encyclopedic content,” i.e., broad historical narratives. Second-semester topics varied but typically highlighted the Crusades, Renaissance, European colonialism, and the growth of economic globalization and trade (Kimmel, 1933). A similar organization existed in junior high school American history. Most schools designed their course around major political periods or wars such as the Revolutionary Era and other prominent historical events. Pre-Reconstruction era topics dominated the curriculum, and there was minimal study of the past fifty years (1880-1930). The courses of study and curriculums “seem to lack cross-sectional views of the life of the people

at different periods in American history.” This indicated to Kimmel (1933) that textbooks “influenced the development of outlines of content in courses of study,” as teachers relied on broader sweeps of notable events and epochs instead of social histories (pp. 47-52.).

Courses of study indicated what teachers and schools planned to teach, but do not definitively determine what occurred in classrooms. Another source that helps illuminate what students learned was the test questions used to evaluate them. Worth Osburn, an employee of the State Department of Public Instruction in Wisconsin, researched history testing throughout the US. His study drew upon 2250 papers and tests from elementary and secondary American, ancient, medieval European, and modern European history classes (Osburn, 1926). His study corroborates Kimmel’s (1933) claims that many social studies classes emphasized similar content, but it also demonstrated that teachers mostly expected students to memorize and recall information.

Elementary and secondary American history tests had several common characteristics. Osburn (1926) identified fifty overarching topics from the test questions. He noticed that forty-six common topics appeared in both the elementary and secondary levels. Of the fifty topics in elementary American history, five topics – the names of prominent individuals, the development of the colonies, early exploration, the Revolutionary War, and the Civil War – accounted for half of the test questions. Four topics – the development of the colonies, exploration, and presidents and administrations – also accounted for almost half of the questions in the secondary grades. Even the types of questions that teachers asked were similar. Osburn (1926) found nineteen types of questions in elementary schools, but “identify, give, what, name, and define” questions accounted for 60%. A few examples were “give the reason for Europe colonizing America,” “define the Emancipation Proclamation,” and “name the territories acquired from 1789 to the present” (pp. 13-24 & 71-92). Secondary questions deviated slightly but focused on the recall of facts, which comprised almost 60% of all questions. The content in elementary and secondary American history courses was also similar.

Osburn (1926) included an appendix with all the questions that appeared five or more times on examinations and grouped them by type, i.e.,

those that began with the words how, give, explain, why, etc. Rote questions focused on notable wars, important policy documents, or key political events. For instance, students were asked “what were the results of the War of 1812,” “give the reasons for the Monroe Doctrine,” and “define the Missouri Compromise.” Even the higher-level thought questions focused on the same topics. For instance, the elementary and secondary “why” questions asked pupils why the Articles of Confederation failed and why the United States entered World War I. “Explain” questions considered the causes of the American Revolution and the differences between the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution. (Osburn, 1926, pp. 71-115). Osburn’s (1926) study also demonstrated that the content in European and ancient history was far more standardized than in American history. A few topics of study included mostly English and French history, the names of prominent individuals, and “miscellaneous” subjects (“definition and comparison questions covering the whole field”) – comprised approximately 50% of the questions in secondary European history courses. Three other topics – the church, Germany, and the First World War – comprised another 15% of the questions. The remaining 35% was scattered among 26 other topics. Ancient history was even more standardized. Of the 25 topics, Greece, Rome, and the memorization of names accounted for over 66%, two-thirds, of *all* the test questions. (Osburn, 1926)

Combine with above to American history, the most common questions for European and ancient history required pupils to memorize the subject matter. About 50% of the European and ancient history test questions began with define, identify, give, or name. Moreover, only 20% of the questions in European history courses and 17% in ancient history began with the words explain, why, how, and discuss, which might tap into higher-level thought (Osburn, 1926). The evidence indicated that European and ancient history content was more consistent and recall and identification questions were more pervasive compared to American history. This is unsurprising because ancient and European history courses were large surveys that covered vast amounts of material in a single course.

The national data demonstrated the claims that social studies lacked cohesion and organization were wrong. Students typically took a similar course sequence and learned the same content, despite the variation in course titles and textbooks. History and social

and social studies education appeared to remain “in bondage” to the textbooks (Evans, 2004, p.42). Most of the data suggested that teachers followed the course textbook and used recall and memorization-based assessment, with limited opportunity for students to explain, apply, or justify their understanding of the past. Finally, it appeared that the progressive reforms that stressed critical thinking and social history failed to gain traction in classrooms.

Case Study of Wisconsin

The national data, courses of study, and examinations provided a sense of the daily classroom practices. However, a case study of a specific state provides additional depth concerning the similarities and differences in course content, pedagogical practices, and the impact of reforms. The state of Wisconsin provides a strong example because Wisconsin schools were statistically average compared with other states in terms of budget, per-pupil spending, average attendance, teacher-to-pupil ratio, and many other categories (Callahan, 1945). Overall, social studies and history instruction in interwar Wisconsin neatly corresponded with the national trends: more similarities than differences in course content, reliance on textbook learning and rote assessments, and a lack of progressive reforms. The case study also demonstrates that state and district officials sought new pedagogies and ideas, however, contradictory teaching suggestions and nebulous strategies for incorporating those reforms made it difficult to discern how they materialized in classrooms.

Studies from Holzman (1937) and Kreunen (1931) demonstrated that Wisconsin schools offered a variety of social studies courses: American history, world history, ancient history, medieval history, modern history, economic problems, social problems, geography, commercial geography, US problems, citizenship, and others. There was a wide diversity of elective course offerings, but mainstays like civics and American history were required. For example, civics was required in anywhere from 75 to 88% of all ninth-grade offerings. There was no consensus for tenth grade, as some schools required citizenship, ancient history, or ancient and medieval history, but these percentages were relatively low. Eleventh and twelfth grades were similar to ninth and tenth grades. Modern history was typically taught in eleventh grade,

appearing as a requirement in about half and as an elective in a quarter of the schools, while a small minority required American history. Twelfth grade was the most standardized across the state, with 80% of schools requiring American history (Kreunen, 1931; Holzman, 1937).

Social studies examinations revealed that political, military, and dynastic history were commonly taught and that students were expected to memorize and regurgitate that information on tests. Roscoe Baker, a graduate student at UW-Madison, submitted a master's thesis that evaluated civics and world history tests. These exams were administered in a high school with over 2000 students in a city with 350,000 people, which meant the school was in the city of Milwaukee (Baker, 1928).

The American government and problems tests revealed that memorizing key topics and events was the main aspect of the test, but there were application and higher-level thinking elements. Exams were largely fill-in-the-blank, matching, and multiple-choice. The fill-in-the-blanks were one-page essays where students identified missing terms to complete the correct passage. Many fill-in-the-blank items concerned identifying key laws, documents, or other facts relating to the American government. Some matching questions provided an opportunity for students to apply that information to historical and contemporary problems, despite their dependence on rote information. For instance, one of the questions had the term "isolation" paired with "the rejection of the League of Nations." Multiple-choice questions relied mostly on memorization, offered some opportunities to apply the information to historical or contemporary events, and focused on important initiatives, policies, laws, events, or documents. (Baker, 1928).

World history tests used the same format: fill-in-the-blanks, matching, and multiple choice. The fill-in-the-blank tests exclusively concerned military conflicts, political events, or ruling dynasties:

The three tasks that Peter the Great had to perform were __, __, and __. The ambition of Russia to seize Constantinople during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was thwarted by __. De Gama is important because of __. Magellan's voyage is important because of __ and __. Two causes of the Hundred Years' War were __ and __. At the close of this war, England was expelled from France, retaining only __. The Magna Carta provided for __

and ___. The Model Parliament was called for the purpose of ___. The temporary eclipse of the English Parliament during the Tutor period was due to ___ and ___. The purpose of the Hanseatic League was ___. Modern Prussia had its origins in ___ and ___. The Renaissance has its beginning in Italy because of ___ and ___. (Baker, 1928, p. 100)

Unlike civics, the world history matching and multiple-choice questions were mostly memorization-based. One section had ten questions with leaders and their respective corresponding countries. The same test had another ten-question section that included dates and a notable event. Matches included 1066 with the Battle of Hastings, 1215 with the Magna Carta, 1688 with the Bloodless Revolution, and 1776 with the Declaration of Independence. The multiple-choice questions also featured dynastic, military, and political history, with a significant focus on Western Europe (Baker, 1928).

Courses of study complement the information from the state reports and reveal the similarities in content and textbook-centric pedagogy. Courses of study for high school classes were less available and lacked detailed descriptions of the content and topics. Elementary and middle school courses of study, however, contained elaborate units and topics, daily lessons, textbook readings, exam questions, worksheets, and student activities and projects. For geographic and population representation within Wisconsin, the courses of study come from Madison, Shorewood, La Crosse, Bayfield County (a rural district), and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to form a representative sample.

The social studies course of study developed by the DPI's Office for K-8 schooling was somewhat contradictory. A report in 1929 called for including child psychology, fostering a sense of social responsibility, deviating from the memorization of facts and dates, and other progressive reforms. Teachers should, however, emphasize established knowledge and content and rely on textbooks, which contradicted progressive reforms (Callahan, 1929). Even the objectives had discrepancies. The general aims of all social studies were to develop the child's ability to participate in society, emphasize their membership in the global society, and instill a sense of responsibility towards their communities. Yet almost all the objectives for grades one through four and about half for grades five through eight focused on learning specific

knowledge. The DPI stated, “it must always be borne in mind that the chief aim of Social Science work is twofold: To impart information and to establish ideals and attitudes” (Callahan, 1929, p. 156). So, if students understood and learned the course content – mostly political, military, and biographical information – it nurtured the necessary attitudes and moral responsibilities to transform them into good citizens.

The recommended social studies content that appeared was standard in the US. Grades one through four were general social studies that focused on the home, the farm, and the city, with mentions of Native American and pioneer life and foreign countries and transportation. Grades five through eight stressed histories with American biography in fifth grade, American beginnings in Europe (ancient and medieval European history) in sixth, American history in seventh, and a split between civics and the history of Wisconsin for eighth. Grades one through four incorporated a combination of social studies disciplines, notably geography and history, while grades five through eight emphasized historical content. The sixth and seventh-grade history courses seemed to follow the pattern documented in the national surveys. Much of the content was major political moments, key people and founding fathers, military conflicts, and the development and expansion of the nation. (Callahan, 1929).

The impact of the DPI’s recommendations varied by district, but Bayfield County schools, a rural district in the far north of the state, implemented their sequence and course of study. Whether intentional or not, it appeared Bayfield directly copied the course of study from the DPI report in creating their social studies classes. Bayfield likely designed its sixth-grade course around its textbook, *Dawn of American History* by William Nida, and used sections of the textbook to match the topics from the DPI’s course of study. For instance, the section in Bayfield’s course of study about the Crusades corresponded to pages 278-320 from Nida (Herbster State Graded School, 1923-1960; Callahan, 1929). Similarly, Bayfield’s fourth-grade social studies recommendation was transportation and communication, the second half of the fourth-grade course from the DPI. Again, Bayfield designed its course around their two textbooks, *Building our Country* and *Adventuring in Young America* by Anderson McGuire and Edna Phillips, directly copied the content, topics,

and units from the DPI course of study, then corresponded the content with specific chapters from the two texts (Herbster State Graded School, 1923-1960; Callahan, 1929). Apart from the content and matching textbook sections, this was the extent of Bayfield's course of study; students probably read the assigned textbook passages and recited that information or knowledge for their social studies instruction (Herbster State Graded School, 1923-1960).

A Course of study from a small city, La Crosse, demonstrated similarities in content and teaching methods but ignored the DPI. Geography instruction from La Crosse's course of studies highlighted similarities between the districts. Fourth through sixth-grade geography in La Crosse (1926) covered the physical geography of the US, Australia, Latin America, and Europe. Each section and topic corresponded to passages from a textbook, typically fifty to two hundred pages of recommended reading, which appeared to function as the main source of information and guide for classroom instruction. Examination questions asked students to match physical locations such as cities, mountains, and rivers to their respective countries or states. Limited opportunities for students to apply information to different historical or social questions appeared, but some included "New York is the largest city in the United States why isn't Saint Louis?" and "why does South America export all supplies or surplus raw products and import manufactured goods?" (La Crosse Board of Education, 1926, Geography Section). It is unclear if the answers were part of textbook readings or if students had to apply the information to answer the questions.

Other courses of study from Madison and Shorewood schools demonstrated a more progressive approach to social studies. Like Bayfield, La Crosse, and Wausau, Shorewood, and Madison emphasized geography in the elementary grades, specifically the memorization of different geographic regions and peoples. However, both districts favored fusion coursework and required students to mobilize their knowledge and skills "to increase the child's understanding of the World about him" and "develop understanding and appreciation of the relations of people to each other and to the world in which they live" (Madison Public Schools Supervisor of Curriculum, 1932-1937, Box 1; Shorewood Schools Board of Education, 1933, p. 331). The curriculums featured more explicit critical thinking questions that called for pupils to

understand how and why the physical environment shaped cultures, economics, and society. There were also more examples of projects, activities, and test questions that encouraged students to apply the information they learned to a question or problem. Madison's course of study even included books from history reformers, such as Beard (1932) and the American Historical Association (1934) in their bibliography of recommended readings. However, it was unclear how those works explicitly appeared in the document, since most reformers ignored elementary social studies. While Madison and Shorewood incorporated memorization questions and textbook exercises, there was more emphasis on critical thinking questions, projects, activities, and calls for students to apply the knowledge they learned (Madison Public Schools Supervisor of Curriculum, 1932-1937; Shorewood Schools Board of Education, 1933).

Wisconsin schools mirrored the national trends in social studies and history education and highlighted the interest and challenges with progressive reforms. Similar to schools throughout the nation, progressive reforms did not commonly materialize in Wisconsin classrooms and schools, as teachers incorporated textbook-centric pedagogies and recitation-style assessments. Wisconsin schools offered many social studies classes and electives, but civics, an iteration of European history, and US history were the dominant subjects. Moreover, much of the content stressed memorizing the structures and functions of the American government and dynastic, military, and political histories, with limited opportunities for social history or higher-level thinking. The DPI and districts like Madison and Shorewood attempted to incorporate progressive reforms such as child-centric psychology and the application of history to contemporary problems. However, the lack of specificity about how to incorporate these practices, coupled with the emphasis on textbook pedagogies highlighted the difficulties and contradictions of reform.

Looking Beyond the Classroom: Social and Economic Challenges to Social Studies Reform

Qualitative and quantitative evidence from the national and local level demon-

strated that most reforms failed to appear in schools and that teaching practices and content were consistent. Yet, it does not explain why reforms were stifled and why instruction was similar. The broader context of the interwar era, notably the growth in secondary enrollments, the Great Depression, the differences in teacher education programs, and the politicization of history helps illuminate why these phenomena occurred.

Student enrollments rapidly expanded during the first half of the twentieth century because of wage increases, child labor and truancy laws, the Great Depression, and the expansion of public schooling (Reese, 2011; Tyack, 1974). From 1920 to 1940, school enrollments increased by over 20% from approximately twenty-three million to twenty-eight million students. High schools experienced a 225% increase from two and a half million to seven million students. The teacher force kept pace with the enrollment increases and experienced a growth of 20%, 700,000 to 900,000 teachers, which helped shrink average classroom sizes from thirty-two to twenty-nine pupils, still considerably high. (Snyder, 1993). Historians of education David Angus, Jeffery Mirel, and Karen Graves maintained that the increased enrollments triggered an important shift in the secondary curriculum. During the Progressive Era (1880s - 1910s) high schools in largely urban areas typically offered a vocational, liberal arts, or college preparatory course track. These scholars argued that the ballooning enrollments popularized a general curriculum track, which affected the opportunity for progressive reforms. Instead of integrating fresh content or new teaching techniques, teachers and administrators designed courses and instruction to reach the broader and expanding student body perceived to have differing intellectual abilities, which led to more elective classes. (Angus and Mirel, 1999; Graves, 1998).

The Great Depression prompted a sharp increase in high school enrollments because teenagers could not find steady employment (Tyack et.al, 1984). High school enrollments soared 33%, from four and a half to six million students from 1929 to 1934. School financing was also severely impacted. School expenditures declined from approximately 2.3 to 1.7 billion dollars, the first and only decrease throughout the 20th century. The teaching force experienced a decline of six thousand teachers and a 15% reduction in salary. The diminished teaching force and rising enrollments generated larger

classrooms, with a modest bump from 30 to 31 pupils on average (Snyder, 1993). Expenditures, the teaching staff, and classroom sizes rebounded to pre-depression levels by the end of the decade but did not produce an atmosphere conducive for progressive education reforms. Teacher education programs were also not accommodating to progressive social studies reforms. Social Studies researcher Edgar Dawson noted that most teaching training candidates completed studies in discipline-specific departments such as history or political science instead of training in multiple subjects. Students supplemented those requirements with teaching methods or education classes, which became secondary to their program (Dawson, 1922). It is impossible to determine how these teaching programs shaped classroom practices, but it does offer insights. It helps to explain why teachers relied on textbooks. Teacher candidates received a narrow content focus and likely lacked the breadth to teach the immense amount of required content. Instead of trying to learn new content and potentially another discipline, new teachers used the established materials and textbook supplements. Moreover, because the required coursework was mostly in disciplinary content, not in teaching methods, this likely impacted teacher candidates' ability to incorporate the pedagogical changes that social studies reformers desired.

History reforms also faced significant political hurdles during the Interwar era, notably strong nativist sentiment and the Rugg textbook scandal. Zimmerman (2022) notes that European immigrant groups and African Americans wanted representation in U.S. history textbooks throughout the interwar era. These groups did not seek to negate the dominant historical narratives of American progress and exceptionalism, rather they wanted representation within those accounts. Their attempts encountered resistance from nativists, particularly Southern white supremacist groups who contended these stories disputed the "pure" and "national" history of the US (Zimmerman, 2022, p.33). Similarly, this same nativist alliance sought to ban history textbooks that offered sympathetic or positive views of British history. They contend textbooks with pro-British sentiment ignored the uniqueness and exceptionalism of the United States, focused more on British superiority, and downplayed the importance and significance of the American Revolution (Zimmerman, 2022). The anti-British sentiment picked up significant press,

so much so, that Wisconsin politicians attempted to pass legislation banning pro-British textbooks in their schools (Heckel, 1923).

Social studies and history instruction were further politicized during the Rugg textbook scandal throughout the mid-1930s to early 1940s. Harold Rugg, an education professor and social reconstructionist, authored a series of textbooks that explicitly highlighted how the present developed from the past, had students explore social problems rather than simply memorizing information, and promoted social histories. Throughout the early 1930s, Rugg's textbooks enjoyed considerable success and were commonly on bestselling textbook lists. However, his luck soon ran out. Rugg's use of "collectivist" and "socialist" language made his textbooks a target. Conservative and anti-New Deal organizations including the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Legion and notable individuals such as the Forbes family. These individuals and groups launched salvo after salvo against Rugg and his textbooks. The public campaign against Rugg and his books ultimately led to various attempts to bar his textbooks from classrooms, and in some instances, led to mass book burnings. The controversy ended as America entered World War II, but both instances highlighted the political challenges of implementing social studies and history reform. (Laats, 2015; Evans, 2004; Zimmerman, 2022).

Conclusion: Echoes of the Past

During the interwar era, a slew of progressive reforms emerged that sought to adapt history and social studies instruction to contemporary social problems and new historical methodologies. However, these reform movements were stifled, as most teachers relied on memorization, textbooks, and political, military, and dynastic history for classroom pedagogies and content. Despite some variations within social studies, ancient history, European history, civics, and US history dominated the course sequences. The course titles and topics often fluctuated, but the content remained markedly similar, and the examinations routinely asked students to recall notable events or individuals.

The social and economic challenges of the interwar era, specifically the burgeoning school enrollments, the economic impacts of the Great Depression, and the political nature of social studies all hampered schools' ability to incorporate progressive reforms.

Currently, attempts to reform history and social studies curricula in the United States encounter countless and immense obstacles. The US still does not have mandated national history standards, as each state sets its own standards. Moreover, the most recent bill in the mid-1990s to create national standards encountered a bitter bi-partisan divide, which culminated in an infamous 99-1 defeat in the US Senate (Nash et al., 2000). This lack of national standards creates notable differences in history and social studies curricula. For instance, a 2020 *New York Times* article highlighted the differences between California and Texas, a liberal and conservative state with the two largest textbook markets, in their adoption of history content standards and textbook usage, as each offered drastically different depictions of slavery, civil rights, and other topics in American history (Goldstein, 2020). Similarly, several states discussed banning the 1619 project, which highlighted the centrality of racism and slavery in the United States and documented policies and practices of systemic discrimination (Serwer, 2019). This lack of national standards, the legal reality of state and local control, and the political nature of history and social studies make reforms challenging.

Despite the politicization and lack of national standards, social studies instruction in the US shares many commonalities. Levstik (2008) compiled research that considers classroom content, pedagogies, and assessment to document what happens in classrooms. For the most part, secondary students took a similar course sequence: world geography, world history, American history, and Civics. In response to a survey on textbooks, Wade's (1993) and Robert's (2014) research indicated that textbook instruction is the dominant instructional method in history courses. Moreover, new research indicated elementary social studies suffered under increased state-mandated testing and was replaced by additional reading and math instruction (Levstik 2008). Despite the overreliance on textbooks and reduction of social studies in the elementary grades, regional and state reforms provide some schools and educators opportunities for innovative approaches to education. This often included newer

curricular resources like primary sources or advanced pedagogical methods that have students analyze and interpret rather than memorize information (Levstik 2008). In sum, Levstik (2008) carefully reminds readers that “on the surface little appears to have changed in social studies classrooms, patterns of instruction persist with textbooks still predominant.” However, “case studies make it clear that interesting and exciting things can and do happen, but there seems to be little institutional support to ensure more students experience this kind of instruction” (p. 60).

Ultimately, these contemporary debates and challenges over social studies and history education are not new but are rather blips on a century-long continuum of reform. Let me be clear, this is not to say that reforms are futile so educators should abandon them. Rather, this article demonstrates that the debates, challenges, and opportunities for history and social studies reform are perennial. Currently, American students and teachers grapple with questions of discrimination and slavery in the founding of the US, which parallels the challenges with teaching subversive and collectivist ideas from the Rugg era. Just as in the past, history and social studies teachers typically rely on the textbook to help their students memorize information that they reproduce on exams. Hopefully, educators can look to the past to know what reforms are possible and have worked, but also understand the struggles of adaptation and devise strategies to mitigate these challenges.

Bibliographic references

- Angus, D. L., & Mirel, J. (1999). *The failed promise of the American high school, 1890-1995*. Teachers College Press.
- Baker, R. (1928). *Measuring the results of teaching and learning in the social studies of the high school* [Unpublished master’s thesis]. School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999956054402121>
- Beard, C. (1932). *A Charter for the social sciences*. Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Callahan, J. (1929). *Courses of study for the state graded schools and grades*

- below high schools.*: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
- Callahan, J. (1945). *A Study of the Public School System in Wisconsin: Compared with some national trends*. State Superintendence's Office.
- Charles Beard, *A Charter for the Social Sciences*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), VII.
- Committee on Social Studies of the Commission to Reorganize Secondary Education. (1916). *The social studies in secondary education: Bulletin no. 28*. Government Printing Office.
- Dahl, E. J. (1928). Chaos in the senior high social studies. *The High School Teacher*, 185-188.
- Dahl, E. J. (1928). Overlapping of Content Material in Social Science Textbooks. *Social Studies*, 19(2), 80.
- Dawson, E. (1922). Preparation of Teachers of the Social Studies for the Secondary Schools. Bulletin, 1922, No. 3. *Bureau of Education, Department of the Interior*.
- Dawson, E. (1924). *History inquiry: Report of the director Edgar Dawson*. McKinnley Co.
- Evans, R. W. (2004). *The social studies wars: What should we teach the children?*. Teachers College Press.
- Fallace, T. (2008). Did the social studies really replace history in American secondary schools?'. *Teachers College Record*, 110(10), 2247- 2248.
- Fallace, T. (2009). John Dewey's influence on the origins of the social studies: An analysis of the historiography and new interpretation. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(2), 601-624.
- Goldstein, D. (2020). Two states. Eight textbooks. Two American stories. *The New York Times*, 12.
- Graves, K. (2014). *Girl's schooling during the Progressive Era: From female scholar to domesticated citizen*. Routledge.
- Heckel, A. K. (1925). Pure history and patriotism. *Historical Outlook*, 16(3), 106-110.
- Hertzberg, H. W. (1981). Social Studies Reform 1880-1980. *Social Science Education Consortium*.
- Holzman, J. (1937). *Curricula of the high school of Wisconsin* [Unpub-

- lished master's thesis]. School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999972172202121>
- Jeness, D. (1990). *Making sense of the social studies*. Macmillan.
- Jessen, C. A. (1938). Offerings and Registrations in High-School Subjects, 1933-34. Bulletin, 1938, No. 6. *Office of Education, United States Department of the Interior*.
- Keels Jr, O. M. (1980). The collegiate influence on the early social studies curriculum: A reassessment of the role of historians. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 8(3), 105-128.
- Kimmel, W. G. (1933). *Instruction in the social studies* (No. 17). US Government Print. Office.
- Kreunen, W. (1931). *A survey of the courses of study offered in the smaller Wisconsin high schools* [Unpublished master's thesis]. School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999963636102121>
- La Crosse Board of Education. (1926). *First draft of a course of study in geography*. Wisconsin Board of Education.
- Laats, A. (2015). *The other school reformers: Conservative activism in American education*. Harvard University Press.
- Levstik, L. S. (2008). What happens in social studies classrooms. *Handbook of research in social studies education*, 50-62.
- Madison Public Schools Supervisor of Curriculum, "Social Studies Grade V: Madison Public Schools," In Curricula, 1932-1937. Dane Series 315 Box 1. Accessed at the Wisconsin Historical Society Reading Room. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/9911125856402121>
- Nash, G. B., Crabtree, C. A., & Dunn, R. E. (2000). *History on trial: Culture wars and the teaching of the past*. Vintage.
- Osburn, W. J. (1926). *Are we making good at teaching history?: Prepared under the direction of WJ Osburn, with the assistance of a grant from the Commonwealth Fund*. Public school publishing Company.
- Ravitch, D. (1987). Tot sociology: Or what happened to history in the grade schools. *The American Scholar*, 56(3), 343-354.
- Reese, W. J. (2011). *America's public schools: From the common school to*

- no child left behind*”. John Hopkins University Press.
- Riley, K. L. (Ed.). (2006). *Social reconstruction: People, politics, perspectives*. Information Age Publishing.
- Roberts, S. L. (2014). A review of social studies textbook content analyses since 2002. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 9(3), 51-65.
- Robinson, J.H. (1912). *The new history: Essays illustrating the modern historical outlook*. The Macmillan Company.
- Saxe, D. W. (1992). Framing a theory for social studies foundations. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(3), 259-277.
- School District No. 1, Town of Clover (Bayfield County, Wis.), “Course of Study Transportation and Communication,” In Herbster State Graded School Records, 1923-1960. Bayfield Series 14. Box 1. Accessed at the Wisconsin Historical Society Reading Room. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/9911124911102121>
- Serwer, A. (2019). The fight over the 1619 project is not about the facts. *The Atlantic*, 23.
- Shorewood Schools Board of Education. (1933). *Social science units, including worksheets and illustrations: Shorewood, grade four*. Wisconsin Board of Education.
- Snyder, T. D. (Ed.). (1993). *120 years of American education: A statistical portrait*. US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics.
- The Commission on the Social Studies. (1934). *Report of the Commission on the social studies*. Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- The Commission on the Social Studies Curriculum. (1936). *The social studies curriculum* The Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association of the United States.
- Tryon, R. (1935). *The Social Sciences as School Subjects*. Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Tyack, D. B. (1974). *The one best system*. Harvard University Press.
- Tyack, D. B., Lowe, R., & Hansot, E. (1984). *Public schools in hard times: The Great Depression and recent years*. Harvard University Press.
- Wade, R. C. (1993). Content analysis of social studies textbooks: A review of

ten years of research. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 21(3), 232-256.

Wausau Board of Education. (1926). *Helps and suggestions in teaching geography: a geography program worked out by the Wausau grade teachers, 1925-1926*. Wisconsin Board of Education.

Whelan, M. (1991). James Harvey Robinson, the new history, and the 1916 social studies report. *The History Teacher*, 24(2), 191-202.

Zimmerman, J. (2022). *Whose America?: Culture wars in the public schools*. University of Chicago Press.

Contact address: Dr. Daniel S. Berman. Education Building 1000 Bascom Mall Madison, WI 53706. Main Office Room 235. . E-mail dberman2@wisc.edu.

