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BOOK REVIEW

Taking stock of the field: Complicated conversations in social studies curriculum

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With the fifth edition of *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities* (TSSC), editor E. Wayne Ross and the book's contributors deliver a vital, timely addition to the influential TSSC series. Across 17 chapters—14 of which are new to this edition—the boundaries of the social studies curriculum are relentlessly complicated and contested, and the book's authors offer critical, compelling visions for how social studies teaching and learning can attend to a range of contemporary issues and topics.

Contextualizing the book

The fifth edition of TSSC arrives at a time when efforts to “capture,” or tame, social studies curriculum are ubiquitous and well-funded. To put it another way, if TSSC offers visions of the social studies curriculum as inherently *wild* terrain—even *feral* in its disorderly commitments to real-world action, to understanding that “social studies curriculum and teaching is by its very nature a political undertaking” (p. 381), to its critical attention to the complicated contexts in which education actually occurs—then the capture of social studies begins with its reduction. Phenomena like uncertainty, ambivalence, unpredictability, and spontaneity, while embedded in human experience (and presumably entangled with the project of education as well), are viewed by policy makers, administrators, ideologues, and politicians as problems to eradicate, let alone the more explicit socio-political potentialities that are part and parcel of any meaningful social studies education. To be sure, attempts to capture social studies curriculum, or to reduce its radical potential to foment sociopolitical change, are not new; what Evans (2004) called the social studies wars have been waged since the advent of the field in the early twentieth century. My point, here, is that the fifth edition of TSSC provides an updated glimpse of current contestations around numerous issues, and one of the book's most valuable, and unique, contributions is how Ross and other chapter authors manage to frame a wide range of socio-political issues as readily available for social studies teachers and students to explore and attend to in meaningful ways.

Significantly, the publication of the fifth edition of TSSC coincides with the conclusion of Ross's career as leading writer, teacher, and researcher in social studies education and beyond. Ross has published more than 200 articles, book chapters, essays, and reviews on social studies education, teacher education, and curriculum studies, and he has also written and edited more than 25 books on social studies education, social justice education, critical pedagogy, neoliberalism in education, and global education. Ross served as the editor of this journal from 1996 to 2001, and through groups like The Rouge Forum, which he co-founded, he has worked in solidarity with educators, parents, students, and other community members to make schools more democratic. Across his large body of work,

Ross (2017) has called for critical approaches to social studies education that pursue a “dangerous citizenship”—a style of citizenship that threatens the status quo through critical analysis and collective action—and, in many ways, Ross’s commitment to “dangerous citizenship” as one of the primary purposes of social studies education unifies all five editions of *TSSC*.

The curricular pasts and present-futures of TSSC

Oftentimes, books on curriculum, or a school subject like the social studies, are primarily descriptive in nature, providing a lay of the land—an overview of the state of the field and how things *are*. Indeed, past editions of *TSSC*, particularly editions 1–3 (Ross, 1997, 2001, 2006), are, in my view, unified by their shared attentiveness to a field that, at least in hindsight, seems more sanguine about the solidity of its own boundaries, more confident in what issues, topics, and areas of concern *count* as social studies and which do not. However, since the publication of *TSSC*’s fourth edition in 2014 (Ross, 2014), the field of social studies curriculum has continued to expand, and both the fourth edition and the new fifth edition reflect a field that is increasingly far-flung, not only in a disciplinary, or topical, sense, but also with regard to the curricular and pedagogical possibilities being imagined by social studies researchers, curriculum theorists, teacher educators, and practicing teachers and students.

Taking stock of the past-present is a crucial step in determining how, and where, we, as a social studies field, move next, and early chapters in the fifth edition, along with Ross’s Introduction, provide the reader with a grasp of where we are *now*. Au’s chapter, “It Is All Indoctrination,” shows how attacks on social studies are the newest iteration of the culture wars and are, in fact, part of a larger, ongoing political struggle over texts and learning standards. As Au puts it, “We are always educating toward a set of politics . . . The question is really: Toward what politics are we educating?” (p. 43). Similarly, the chapters by King, Pitts, and Tulino, “The Politics of Black History in the United States,” and Busey and Dowie-Chin, “Beyond the Nation-State,” situate contemporary state legislature battles over anti-Critical Race Theory laws, Black educational curriculum, and the teaching of Black history in historical and international, or diasporic, contexts, respectively. Schmidt’s “A Queer Agenda for Gender<>Sexuality and Social Education” explores how gender<>sexuality is theorized in social studies education, and while the chapter is anchored by an empirical study, it is also the only chapter in the fifth edition that *directly* engages with prior editions of *TSSC*, an approach that enriches Schmidt’s contextualization of her study’s data and broader arguments.

At the chapter’s start, Schmidt writes, “Each of the previous editions of this book contains a chapter on gender and/or sexuality . . . [and] this writing continues from the important work in the third edition of *TSSC*, where Margaret Crocco (2006) asked ‘what’s the problem?’ with gender in social education (p. 171)” (p. 207). Instructively, Schmidt’s chapter is clear about *how* it extends prior scholarship on gender<>sexuality, what is ultimately a straightforward but crucial move that strengthens the chapter by explicitly situating it within a field that has been grappling with critical issues like gender<>sexuality for decades, albeit through “critical and neoliberal frames” (p. 207) that have been effective to varying degrees. Finally, and in a similar vein, Salinas’s and Blevins’s chapter, “Critical Historical Inquiry: Disrupting the Dominant Narrative,” is a summative extension of their research on critical historical inquiry (CHI) since 1999, and they highlight four characteristics of CHI their scholarship has disclosed: (1) CHI critiques official curriculum, (2) CHI centers race, class, gender, sexuality, and power to trouble dominant narratives, (3) CHI uses, and constructs, culturally and linguistically relevant narratives, and (4) CHI narratives portray “the civicness of people of color, women, and members of the LGBTQAI+ community” (p. 267). The chapter expands these four areas of

discussion by drawing connections to teaching practice and offering visions for the work to come.

My point, here, is that one of the most illuminating realizations that accompanies a holistic examination of *TSSC*'s five editions is that many of the social studies curricular issues have remained the same, what Ross labels “the obstacles of classism, racism, sexism, and other inequalities often encouraged by schools, the state, and oppressive ideologies” (p. xi), and while particular terms might have shifted or different conceptual tools have been employed to explore social phenomena, there is immense value in revisiting, and earnestly considering, the through lines that can be traced across *TSSC*'s five editions. The same goes for this journal's 50-plus volumes and other collective, ever-emergent projects that shape the field. It follows, then, that the fifth edition's strongest chapters demonstrate a style of intellectual self-awareness, what functions as an invitation to the reader to enter into the ongoing “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2012, p. xiii) that is social studies curriculum.

Many of the chapters in *TSSC*'s fifth edition use the status quo as a jumping off point; the authors thoroughly diagnose and discuss problems of the present, and the book is unified by its generative focus on the present-future. For example, our relations with one another—human and more than human—can be rearranged in ways that are more humanizing and just, but any potential rearrangements carry significant political, economic, and social implications. The social studies classroom is *one* location in which young people can engage in this style of relational rearrangement, and *TSSC*'s fifth edition is anchored by Ross et al.'s strong commitments to visions of social studies that “create conditions in which students can develop personally meaningful understandings of the world and recognize that they have agency to act in the world, to make change” (p. 384). In the third part, *The Social Studies Curriculum in Practice*, chapters like “An Eco-Anarchic Social Studies: Teaching for Children's Rights and Earth Democracy” by Edwards-Schuth and Lupinacci and “Teaching for Critically Engaged Denizenship: Lessons from Morocco on Teaching for an Empowered Other Civic Status” by McCafferty-Wright exemplify such commitments, and they hearken back to Ross's unequivocal opening statement in the book's Preface: “I believe social studies has the potential to contribute in significant ways to creating a society where individuals have the power and resources to realize their own potential and free themselves from the obstacles of classism, racism, sexism, and other inequalities often encouraged by schools, the state, and oppressive ideologies” (p. xi).

One key strength of the book is that Ross et al. understand such visions run counter to the conditions many teachers face on a daily basis; notwithstanding, the book's authors are committed to the notion that teachers have the capacity to *create* conditions in which social studies is made meaningful to students—a school subject that can bring students to life by placing them into dialogue with the world and learning to act, “to make change” (p. 384). Such commitments provide a strong teacher-activist tone to the book as a whole, a vision of teaching that positions the teacher as someone who can model how it might look to “transcend passivity” (Greene, 1978, p. 2). In my reading of the fifth edition, I was continually reminded of Greene's (1978) (re) theorizations of the philosopher Alfred Schutz's (1967) concept of “wide-awakeness,” what Schütz described as “a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of *full attention to life and its requirements*” (p. 213, emphasis added). Throughout the fifth edition, chapter authors both encourage and also model an attention to life that is critical, active, and “fully interested in life, and hence, wide-awake” (p. 213).

Continuity and change across five editions of *TSSC*

In reviewing the fifth edition of *TSSC*, it is instructive to look at preceding editions, particularly as *TSSC* has, for nearly three decades now, served as at least one summative assessment of the

field: What is the state of social studies? What, exactly, are scholars in our field thinking about, writing about, and exploring through research? What social and cultural theories are being brought to bear in the field's theorizations of social studies curriculum? What do we, as a field, care about? Of course, it goes without saying that the answers to these questions are, like the field itself, contested, messy, and far from clear, and I am not suggesting any edition of *TSSC* provides definitive answers to these questions. Rather, what *TSSC* offers are *some* answers; each edition's chapters were written by scholars who were active at the time of publication, writing a chapter on their area of expertise or current interest, and while some scholars contribute to more than one edition, each edition stands as a sort of time capsule—an incomplete but informative glimpse of the field in 1997 (1st ed.), in 2001 (2nd ed.), in 2006 (3rd ed.), in 2014 (4th ed.), and in 2024 (5th ed.). Prior editions of *TSSC* illuminate the rich, complicated history of social studies curriculum, revealing, both through what issues are present and also absent, some of the commitments and concerns of scholars *at the time*.

Purposes of social studies curriculum

Every edition of *TSSC* is divided into the same four parts: Part One: Purposes of the Social Studies Curriculum; Part Two: Social Issues and the Social Studies Curriculum; Part Three: The Social Studies Curriculum in Practice; Part Four: Afterword. The fifth edition begins with an Introduction by Ross that provides a brief summary of the field since the 1916 report by the Committee on Social Studies of the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (Dunn, 1916) before offering an extended discussion of Martorella's (1996) framework for what Ross calls the "curriculum ideologies for the field" (p. 9) of social studies—what amount to varied purposes for social studies: "(1) citizenship (or cultural) transmission; (2) social science; (3) personal development; (4) reflective inquiry; and (5) informed social criticism" (p. 9). It is worth noting that, in my reading, the majority of the fifth edition of *TSSC* is devoted to the fifth curriculum ideology: informed social criticism. This focus is not a criticism of the book, but it begs the question of what a more ideologically varied collection would provide an audience that is, presumably, exploring *TSSC* from different vantage points and for varying reasons. It is significant, then, that prior editions of *TSSC* offer purposes for social studies that venture beyond informed social criticism, which brings me back to one theme I will return to throughout this essay: when the five editions are viewed as one ongoing, complicated curriculum conversation, every chapter is, in turn, enriched by the ideological diversity represented across the five editions.

Following this holistic approach to *TSSC*, Ross's decision to maintain the same organizational scheme helps to disclose through lines that can be traced by the reader across all five volumes—what amount to complicated curricular conversations that are extended, abandoned, or taken up again down the line, oftentimes in different form, whether under the guise of new terms or different conceptual tools. Read this way, the interplay between the five volumes is quite dynamic, and I want to emphasize this point because there are numerous chapter-gems to be uncovered in the prior editions, especially in the first three (which are also the editions most likely to be overlooked at this point in time).

For example, in the first edition, Whelan (1997) and Saxe (1997) deliberated over the core purposes of social studies curriculum (Part One); they asked, is history "the core of social studies education" (Whelan, 1997, p. 21), or does the civic nature of social studies curriculum provide it with a "unique mission" (Saxe, 1997, p. 39) in elementary and secondary contexts? Debates over the core purposes of social studies curriculum are ongoing, and as a "complicated curriculum conversation" (Pinar, 2012, p. xiii) it will (quite hopefully) continue, but it is fascinating to trace conversations across subsequent editions in which a range of purposes are put forth by different

authors: anti-oppression citizenship education (see Vinson, 2001, 2006 in the 2nd and 3rd editions); future-oriented education (see Marker, 2006 in the 3rd edition); the cultivation of democratic practices (see Jorgensen, 2014; Leahey, 2014 in the 4th edition); anti-capitalist teacher-student activism (see DeLeon, 2014 in the 4th edition), and understanding, and combating, neoliberalism via dangerous citizenship (see Ross & Vinson, 2014; Ross et al., 2014 in the 4th edition). In the fifth edition, den Heyer reprises Marker's (2006) call for a social studies curriculum that is future-oriented, albeit from a different angle, while Marmol rightly identifies critical media literacy as a crucial purpose for social studies education upon a convoluted media landscape where TikTok is viewed as a go-to news source, and trust in traditional media institutions continues to decline.

Social issues and the social studies curriculum

Part Two is titled "Social Issues and the Social Studies Curriculum," and Table 1 provides a summary of the social issues addressed across all five editions of *TSSC*. One trend I noticed is that an issue like multiculturalism, for example, will be discussed in an early edition of *TSSC* before being taken up again in later editions; often, the later chapters render the issue with an added element of complexity and criticality—what is usually a reflection of how the issue, or concept, has been critiqued in other social and cultural discourses. Following this pattern, and to denote this complexification across five editions, I have underlined what I view to be the

Table 1. Social issues and the social studies curriculum across five editions of *TSSC*.

| Issue | Author(s) | Edition |
|--|------------------------------------|---------|
| Gender and Feminism | Noddings (1997, 2001) | 1 |
| | Bernard-Powers (1997, 2001) | 2 |
| <i>Gender <>Sexuality and Queer Theory</i> | Crocco (2006) | 3 |
| | Loutzenheiser (2014) | 4 |
| | Schmidt (2024) | 5 |
| Multiculturalism | Hursh (1997, 2001) | 1 |
| | | 2 |
| <i>Critical Multiculturalism</i> | Malott and Pruyn (2006, 2014) | 3 |
| | | 4 |
| Marxism and class | Malott and Pruyn (2006, 2014) | 3 |
| | | 4 |
| Standardized Testing | Mathison et al. (2001, 2006) | 2 |
| | | 3 |
| Progressive School Reform | Gibson and Peterson (2001) | 2 |
| Racism and Prejudice | Nelson and Pang (2001, 2006, 2014) | 2 |
| | Rains (2006) | 3 |
| | | 4 |
| <i>Racial Essentialism</i> | McCarthy (1997) | 1 |
| <i>Anti-Racism and Black History Curriculum</i> | Busey and Dowie-Chin (2024) | 5 |
| | King et al. (2024) | |
| | Hawkman (2024) | |
| Indigenous Perspectives | Rains (2006) | 3 |
| | Four Arrows (2014) | 4 |
| | Leddy (2024) | 5 |
| | Shear and Sabzalian (2024) | |
| <i>Decolonization</i> | Leddy (2024) | 5 |
| | Shear and Sabzalian (2024) | |
| Dangerous Citizenship | Ross and Vinson (2014) | 4 |
| Patriotism | Westheimer (2014) | 4 |
| Ecological Democracy | Houser (2014) | 4 |
| Islamophobia | Sensoy (2024) | 5 |

The issues above are drawn solely from Part 2 of editions 1–5 of *TSSC*.

foundational issue at play, and I have *italicized* subsequent complications of the underlined issue.

For example, in the first and second editions, Noddings (1997, 2001) and Bernard-Powers (1997, 2001) authored chapters on issues of gender in social studies education, and Noddings (1997, 2001) paid close attention to feminist discourses in the field. These two chapters stand as *TSSC*'s initial offerings on the very broad "issue" of gender, and in later editions, chapter authors employ queer theory and other lenses to further complicate the curricular conversation around gender. So, I have italicized these "issues" in the Table 1. The table is an attempt to represent the issues addressed across five editions of *TSSC* in a way that is helpful and clear, but also wary of reducing the complicated issues at hand.

In my interpretation, the clusters of edition numbers signify a continued, complex attention to particular curriculum issues, and we can see how issues like racism or gender have been (re) theorized in ways that, in my view, use conceptual tools from outside the fields of social studies education and curriculum studies to draw ever-closer to lived experiences of the social phenomenon being explored. Social issues like race and racism are good examples; theoretical frameworks like Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992, 1976; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and anti-racism (Kendi, 2019) are used by *TSSC* authors (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2024; Hawkman, 2024; King et al., 2024) to further complexify their analyses of social phenomena. Here, I am not suggesting some sort of linear arc moving inevitably toward a transcendent social truth, but I do think there is something to be said for the ways in which the field of social studies curriculum has worked collectively to build upon prior work—what amounts to a collective project invested in always complicating an ongoing conversation.

While no single edition has space for every issue, the table also discloses a dearth of attention to some critical areas, particularly issues of class—if there is one social experience the vast majority of people in the United States, Canada, and beyond hold in common, it is the reduction of human existence to a person's coerced participation in a global economic system that is violently dehumanizing. Therefore, critical analyses of class, along with theorizations of social studies curriculum that explore possibilities for class solidarity that is diverse in every which way, are crucial, and past editions of *TSSC* have been attentive to this issue; it is one notable absence in the fifth edition. Finally, the impressive scope of curriculum issues addressed across five editions of *TSSC* is what makes this series so unique and important to the field. At the same time, a far-flung net can also nudge crucial issues out of the picture, whether that's issues of class (Malott & Pruyn, 2006; Malott & Pruyn, 2014), patriotism (Westheimer, 2014), or neoliberal education reform and increased standardizations of curriculum (Mathison et al., 2001, 2006). In many ways, the choice of issues for a new edition is an impossible task, and it is worth noting that Parts One and Three also discuss what could be termed curriculum issues not listed in Table 1 (for example, see Edwards-Schuth & Lupinacci's chapter for their offering of the climate crisis as a social studies curriculum issue.) So, perhaps one take away is to resist against the tendency to view the new edition of any series as the complete one, the one that got it right; rather, I suggest all five editions of *TSSC* can be viewed as one—as an ongoing, complicated conversation. Taken together, *TSSC* provides a remarkable panoply of curriculum issues, across nearly 30 years, that are available for teachers and students to explore.

Social studies curriculum in practice

Part Three of the fifth edition contains some of the book's strongest chapters, blending social and cultural theory with teaching practice. The authors demonstrate how teachers can employ critical historical inquiry (Salinas & Blevins), study "evil" through different frames (van Kessel), practice critical economic analyses that "provide opportunities for students to

actively engage with real-world problems rather than passively accept the economic status quo” (Adams, pp. 309–310), and offer students alternative conceptions of rights and citizenship that are dangerous to the status quo (Edwards-Schuth & Lupinacci; McCafferty-Wright; Ross). Part Three of *TSSC* has always been a go-to resource in my work with teacher candidates, and I have taught particular chapters in the fourth edition for nearly a decade. My students consider Selwyn’s (2014) chapter on facilitating authentic student inquiry in social studies to be exceedingly accessible and useful, and Mathison’s (2014) chapter on assessment has often been my entry text for a unit on assessment methods in social studies. All six chapters in Part Three of the fifth edition are poised to cultivate generative discussions in teacher education contexts, as well as professional development settings. If there is a critique to be made, it is only that chapters in prior editions, particularly the two from the fourth edition I mentioned above, are missed; but again, when the five editions of *TSSC* are viewed as an ongoing, complicated curriculum conversation, every new chapter is a welcome addition to the conversation—what amounts to an embarrassment of riches for social studies curriculum scholars, researchers, teacher educators, teacher candidates, and practicing teachers.

Conclusion

The fourth edition of *TSSC* (Ross, 2014) was one of the first books about social studies curriculum I read as a graduate student, and the experience of reading a book that not only challenged the boundaries of what counts as social studies but also demonstrated how critical social studies curriculum scholarship could engage with social and cultural theory was absolutely thrilling to me, particularly as I was starting graduate school as a former secondary teacher well-versed in standardized curriculum, assessment, and classroom practice. Needless to say, my conceptions of social studies curriculum were limited, and books like *TSSC* challenged my preconceptions, opening up what I imagined to be possible for my teacher education classroom, my empirical research, and what theory and philosophy *outside* education was permissible to theorize in relation to curriculum. In short, this is what high-quality scholarship does—it troubles a reader’s sense of intellectual stability, calling into question the meanings, definitions, and narratives we hold on to. The fifth edition of *TSSC* continues the series’ legacy of disruption, and my hope is that scholarship in social studies curriculum continues to push boundaries, engage with diverse conceptual tools, and remain suspicious of curriculum conversations that are decidedly *uncomplicated*, whether they come from within the field or from outside.

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