

Challenges and Prospects for Canadian Social Studies

Sears, A., & Wright, I. (Eds.). (2004). *Challenges and Prospects for Canadian Social Studies*. Vancouver, Canada: Pacific Educational Press. 312pp. ISBN 987-1895766721

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In this edited collection, Alan Sears and Ian Wright bring together Canadian social studies education scholars in an effort to critically examine contextual, content and process challenges and prospects pertaining to social studies education. While the book is intended for a Canadian audience, pre-service and in-service teachers as well as teacher educators, I would argue that it transcends the Canadian context in its efforts to think through and discuss some important issues facing social studies educators regardless of where they might be located. In particular, chapters that focus on teaching historical thinking, citizenship education, gender and sexuality in the social studies curriculum, and multiculturalism, speak to concerns that exist beyond the boundaries of nation-state. More than a methods textbook, this collection attempts to challenge pre-service and in-service teachers' understandings of what it means to teach social studies to diverse students living in complex times. While practical pedagogical strategies are found throughout the book, they are most often included alongside theoretical considerations intended to interrogate more traditional and narrow approaches to social studies education.

Part I of the collection, *Contextual Challenges and Prospects*, begins with a very helpful overview of the historical context of social studies in English Canada. In this chapter, Penney Clark traces the American influences on the emergence of Canadian Social Studies; the various approaches to teaching social studies including the structure of the disciplines, and; the renewed emphasis on citizenship education from the 1970s to the present. This is an important first chapter because it encourages pre-service and in-service teachers to consider the history of their chosen discipline and how this history continues to influence contemporary theory and practice in social studies education. Clark's chapter is followed by Shields' and Ramsay's examination of current social studies curricula across English Canada. The authors argue that social studies suffers from an identity crisis particularly because "it has been, and remains, a contentious subject area, perhaps more so than any other subject in the school curriculum" (p. 39). This statement provides an opportunity for social studies educators to consider why their subject is so contentious and what corresponding challenges this poses for their

own teaching. Next, Stéphane Lévesque's chapter provides readers with an historical perspective of history and social studies in Québec, and Ken Osborne's piece explores the partnership and rivalry of social studies and history.

Part I ends with Alan Sears' writing about citizenship education and social studies in Canada. Sears discusses citizenship as a contested concept despite its centering of the social studies curriculum in Canada. He asks and attempts to answer what we mean by citizenship and citizenship education, what the best ways are to educate citizens, and how we might strengthen citizenship education in Canada and elsewhere. I use this chapter with my social studies pre-service teachers to grapple with the complexities of citizenship and to critique the privileging of liberal democratic understandings of citizenship underlying the chapter. What is largely missing from Sears' discussion is consideration of how the narrative through which citizenship education is imagined involves the transformation of students into an engaged citizenry despite differences of race, class, culture, gender, et cetera. These differences which constitute students' social locations, mediate the ways in which they are able to imagine themselves engaging as citizens in a country such as Canada (Tupper & Cappello, 2010). Sears draws attention to the need for students to not just know about democracy, but to believe in democracy. He argues for reform in the field of citizenship

education through a sustained and deep analysis of both what is wrong with citizenship education and "how it can be fixed" (p. 104). This argument could be expanded to include a consideration of how the promises of democracy have not been realized for all citizens in Canada. Certainly it is important to encourage students to believe in democracy, but this belief should be formed with a clear sense of both the possibilities and failures of the democratic system in which students live (Tupper, 2009).

In Part II of the collection, *Content Challenges and Prospects*, a variety of authors explore what content should be included in social studies curriculum. At the outset, readers are invited by Sears and Wright to consider several questions as they encounter each chapter. These questions provide a means of engaging more intentionally and deeply with each of the chapters, and are particularly useful with pre-service teachers as they begin to form their own perspectives regarding the challenges and prospects of teaching social studies. In their chapter, *Teaching Historical Thinking*, Peter Seixas and Carla Peck advance an approach to history education that provides students with "the ability to approach historical narratives critically" with a stronger focus on specific skill development and rational thinking. Recently, however, their approach to teaching historical thinking has been deemed inadequate by some scholars for providing

little opportunity to “discuss inequities in the past or present by leaving no place to think about history outside of classification and rational thinking” and for running the risk of “reproducing the privilege of the Western philosophical tradition for making rules about who and what counts in the study of the past” (Cutrara, 2009, p.97). Other chapters in this section include: discussions of geography as spaces of possibility for teaching and learning (Hurren); law education in social studies (Cassidy); global education and the challenge of globalization (Richardson); understanding multiculturalism in the social studies curriculum (Varma-Joshi); understanding First Nations Issues (Orr); gender and sexuality in the social studies curriculum (Loutzenheiser); education for peace-building citizenship (Bickmore), and; visual literacy (Werner).

Perhaps the most challenging chapter in this section is Loutzenheiser’s *Gender and Sexuality in the Social Studies Curriculum: Bound and Un-determined*. My students often approach this chapter with scepticism, imagining that sexuality has nothing to do with becoming a social studies teacher. As they engage with the chapter, however, they come to a better understanding of just how much sexuality and gender have to do with social studies. Loutzenheiser does a superb job of blending theory and practice as she calls students to uncover and question the “normal” within classroom spaces, to consider the power of social studies

narratives that privilege heteronormativity and how these narratives perpetuate binaries that “leave little room to make visible complicated renderings that can invite more complex understandings” (p. 185). After reading this chapter, I invite my students to revisit the social studies curriculum they are mandated to teach given what they have learned from Loutzenheiser. I also encourage them to consider the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, culture, and (dis)ability in light of official curriculum - the knowledge, skills and attitudes they are obligated to teach. They almost always come away with new curricular insights that I am hopeful will inform the pedagogical choices they make in their own classrooms and the ways in which they understand and work alongside their own students.

Part III, *Process Challenges and Prospect*, is the final section of the edited collection. Again, Sears & Wright begin with a series of questions for the reader’s consideration that have the potential to provide more meaningful engagements with the ideas and approaches advanced in each chapter. Within these chapters readers will find more practical approaches to teaching social studies. Chapters focus on instructional approaches (Evans & Hundey), concept learning (Hughes), critical thinking (Farr Darling & Wright), situated learning (Hughes & Sears), democratic experiences for early-years students (Shreman), computer technologies (Gibson), and assessment and evaluation strategies

(Myers). It is appropriate that these chapters come at the end of the collection as their reading may be informed by earlier engagement with the chapters in Parts I and II focussing on contextual and content challenges and prospects.

Largely missing from this edited collection are the theoretical considerations of social studies education from Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Standpoints. While certain chapters attempt to challenge dominant (white) discourses of social studies, employing CRT and Whiteness Studies as lenses through which to read and

interpret social studies curricula and pedagogy would be powerful both within and beyond the Canadian context. These absences are suggestive of the ongoing challenges to transformative social studies in pre-service and in-service educational contexts. Despite these shortcomings, the edited collection offers many opportunities for educators to reflect upon their pedagogical approaches and theoretical understandings of what it means to teach social studies to diverse and complex learners in the 21st century. It is a valuable book for any social studies educator to own.

References

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