

AARE PAPER  
THE TEACHING OF HUMAN SOCIETY AND ITS  
ENVIRONMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE  
HUNTER REGION OF NSW

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AARE ABSTRACT  
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THE TEACHING OF HUMAN SOCIETY AND ITS ENVIRONMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN  
THE  
HUNTER REGION OF NSW.

53 teachers from 27 different schools in the Hunter Region responded to  
a survey examining primary  
school teachers' philosophy of teaching Human Society and Its  
Environment as well as gaining  
information about how this Key Learning Area is taught in our Primary  
schools. The survey consisted  
of multiple choice and open ended questions. Follow up interviews were  
held with volunteers.

Although the 'social studies' area is seen in the USA as the  
'citizenship' area, Hunter teachers were  
not cognisant of this as an aim but rather saw it as an area of  
research skill building. US research  
also points to the overwhelming influence of the textbook in US Primary  
schools whereas in the  
Hunter most teachers used no single textbook and 50% used personally

devised units of work for their lessons. These, and other cultural differences are discussed in the light of almost no research available in the Australian context, most of our information arriving from US sources, to guide implementation of the Studies of Society and Its Environment profiles in primary schools.

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#### INTRODUCTION

In N.S.W. the social studies area of study in primary schools is called Human Society and its Environment (HSIE). In 1989 in N.S.W. Excellence and Equity created six Key Learning Areas in the primary schools to lead to eight Key Learning Areas in Secondary schools with much being made of the fact that a child's schooling should be on a K-12 continuum. The primary HSIE curriculum is intended to provide the basic groundwork for the myriad of secondary KLA4 subjects offered. The syllabus currently in use in NSW primary schools (Investigating : Social Studies K-6) was developed in 1982 and provides a curriculum policy document with broad aims and objectives and five support documents. This syllabus was intended to be a guide for school - based units. There has been almost no research at all done into HSIE in these primary grades in NSW. Very little information is available concerning topics taught, teaching practice, resource materials used or the philosophy of the teacher teaching it. This study is an attempt to gather some basic facts about what is actually happening in primary HSIE classrooms and also to investigate teachers' philosophies and attitudes to HSIE. This information can be used along with research into secondary schools as a basis upon which to assess the effectiveness of this KLA in establishing a K-12 continuity as envisioned in Excellence and Equity (1989,18) ;

'The new Board of Studies and the Department of School Education will give high priority to

achieving well planned, appropriate continuity from primary to secondary schooling.'

#### TEACHERS' VISIONS FOR TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES

There has been almost no research done on primary school teachers' philosophy for teaching social studies. There is almost no information available as to what happens in primary HSIE classrooms in NSW and a similar lack of interest in elementary classrooms overseas.

Brophy (1990,396) points out, worldwide;

'there has not been systematic descriptive, let alone comparative research on the implementation and effects of elementary social studies instruction considered holistically (ie with attention to purposes, goals, content selection and organisation, instructional methods activities and assignments and evaluation methods).'

He does, however, make the assertion that elementary teachers are oriented more toward students than subject matter and that they typically favour a citizenship training emphasis, teaching a broad range of facts and inculcation of traditional and locally favoured values. If he is correct in that elementary teachers basically favour citizenship training and values inculcation, is this significantly different from secondary teachers? Anderson (1993,60) argues that there is a gulf between primary and secondary teachers in the social studies area claiming that primary teachers lack the background in the disciplines that would give them expertise.

Although citizenship is the most often cited rationale for social studies there are many differing interpretations of what this means (Sears, 1994). Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977) proposed that social studies be seen as having three traditions of citizenship education. These were social studies as Citizenship Transmission, social studies as Social Science and social studies as Reflective Inquiry. Citizenship Transmission is described as having its main purpose as inculcating right values as a framework for making decisions. The purpose of Social Science is seen as decision making based on mastery of Social Science concepts, processes and problems.

The purpose of Reflective

Inquiry is to promote a process of inquiry in which knowledge is derived from what students need to know to make decisions and solve problems. Barth and Mizoue (1991), however, found in their application of the Barth/Shermis Social Studies Preference Scale to university students in four countries over a sixteen year period that many college students preparing to teach social studies are confused about its purpose, content and method. They tended to accept and try to use all three interpretations. White (1982) found similar results with teachers choosing from all three traditions. He also found that the Reflective Inquiry and the Social Science traditions were fairly closely aligned in the minds of respondents with the result that he found two traditions rather than three. Lybarger (1991) also questions the assumption of three traditions while also pointing out that there are possibly different interpretations of these traditions today. Is modern day teaching for citizenship the same as 'citizenship transmission'?

Carter (1989,1990), identified the three traditions in his observations

of forty secondary social studies teachers and when interviewing typical teachers in the three traditions found that the teachers recognised their preferred approach and purposefully organised their teaching approaches to correspond with it. Out of his forty classrooms he found 15 were of the Knowledge Transmitter persuasion, 22 were of the Social Science persuasion and only 3 were Reflective Thinkers. Martorella (1985) identified 5 major approaches to social studies teaching - transmission of the cultural heritage, social science, reflective inquiry, informed social criticism and personal development. Brophy (1990) sees elementary teachers using all these approaches but providing less emphasis on social criticism and on teaching the social science disciplines.

Related to this, and of much interest to us as teacher educators, is the gulf between the so-called intelligentsia of the social studies profession and the teachers within the profession. Leming(1989, 1992) points to there being two cultures of social studies education. The theorists tend to see the need for major change in society whereas teachers are less alarmist and

work to preserve traditional values and practices. Nelson and Drake (1994) interviewed 29 veteran secondary social studies teachers and noted the forceful manner in which these teachers separated themselves from education courses and their undergraduate and graduate training.

Thus there appears to be a gulf between primary and secondary teachers and also between teachers generally and teacher educators as to their basic rationale for teaching social studies. Carter (1990) and Onosko (1992) refer to the importance of teacher goals on the methods of instruction in the

classroom. The apparent confusion about the goals of social studies education is likely to be reflected in confusion at the classroom level in the area of teaching practices.

As an attempt to provide some leadership as to the nature of citizenship education (which it sees as the primary purpose of social studies), the National Council for the Social Studies (1993) prepared a position paper that gives a vision for powerful teaching and learning in the social studies. Prepared by a task force of teachers and teacher educators it proposes that powerful social studies teaching helps students develop social understanding (integrated knowledge of social aspects of the human condition) and civic efficacy (social studies knowledge and skills, along with related values and dispositions). To what extent Primary and secondary teachers would concur with these goals has yet to be determined.

#### CLASSROOM PRACTICES IN SOCIAL STUDIES

The NCSS Statement on powerful teaching and learning in the Social Studies (1993) claims to cover all courses in Social Studies, Social Science, Anthropology, Civics, Economics, Geography, Government, History, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology and topics such as ethnic studies, global education and law related education, claiming that different discipline areas will claim specific emphases. This statement advocates lecture and discussion, cooperative learning, panel discussions, debates, games, simulations, community participation experiences, computerised data bases and preparing students to manage their own learning , as practices that

should be encouraged in the social studies area. Research into classroom practices in primary schools is very scanty (Marker and Mehlinger 1992). In many cases it is necessary to generalise from secondary classrooms. However as Sears(1994) comments in his recent review of citizenship education in Canada, most research to date has been quantitative research and suffers from poor definition of concepts, insufficient attention to reliability and validity of data, poor understanding and use of statistics and scant replication of studies.

Classrooms generally, were well documented in John Goodlad and colleagues' in depth study of 1016 primary and secondary classrooms described in A Place Called School. He commented that in general;

'Classroom contingencies encourage and support minimal movement, minimal student to student or student to teacher interaction and, low non-intimate affect'Goodlad (1983,467).

In regard to social studies, it was seen as of relatively low interest among the subject fields and bottom of the list in upper primary schools. It also seemed to

emphasise recall of information. Sirotnik (1988) quantified the time spent in these classrooms and found 75% teacher-initiated instruction while only 1% of time was spent on 'higher' cognitive and affective learning.

Cuban (1991) comments on the lack of research into what actually goes on in classrooms but suggests that both secondary and elementary social classrooms have extensive teacher talk, homework from a textbook, and lots of recitation and seatwork. Elementary teachers are more likely to use small group and independent work more frequently than do secondary teachers and they use a wider range of teaching aids. They also integrate social studies into daily activities more frequently.

Cutler-Sweeney and Garrett (1990) state that perhaps no other object better symbolises American education than the textbook, which can be found in virtually every classroom in the nation. They also point to the predominance of whole group instruction in social studies'

classrooms. Wilen and White (1991) comment that the typical discourse in classrooms is teacher initiation - student response - teacher feedback and that discussion is used infrequently. Ebman and Glenn (1991) found that few social studies teachers understood or used computers and Clegg(1991) found little information upon which to base any conclusions about the use of games and simulations in social studies' classrooms.

Nelson and Drake (1994) interviewed veteran secondary social studies teachers. They felt compelled to demonstrate their knowledge through lecturing and by teacher lead discussion. These teachers

felt that teachers who used inquiry methods were suspected of not knowing their subject. Finkelstein , Nielsen and Switzer (1993) surveyed 1200 primary elementary teachers. Their results showed that respondents had almost no relationship to professional organisations associated with social studies, social studies instruction at the primary level does not command a high priority, social studies is primarily taught as a separate subject, the textbook dominates social studies instruction, and in daily practice passive participation in learning is dominant over active participation. Brophy (1990) comments that discontent is evident in primary social studies classrooms with complaints about not enough content and the wrong content being taught. The new History-Social Science Framework for Californian Schools K-12 arose out of debates about current content in primary schools and emphasises a History-Civics-Geography basis with a K-12 continuity, Evans(1989); Finn & Ravitch(1988); Honig(1989).

The few Australian studies, mostly coming from Western Australia indicate that conditions here are not necessarily similar and it would be unwise to generalise too much from the American experience. Social Studies is not always taught as an integrated subject in Australia. In N.S.W. the Human Society and its Environment Key Learning Area includes many different disciplines taught with their own particular disciplinary emphases. Thus comparison with American studies is difficult and comparison with the integrated primary courses is also difficult.

Carter (1989) offers some data that would indicate that in secondary social studies classrooms in Western Australia similar classroom practices as in U.S.A. take place. In primary schools Marsh, Willis, Deschamp and Davis (1981) found that 35% of teachers used their own collection of resources in social studies and library books and encyclopaedias were their main source of materials which is notably different from those American studies which emphasise the dominance of the textbook. However Marsh's (1987) study of the implementation of a new curriculum package into primary social studies classrooms found that teachers were so inundated by day - to - day pressures that they looked for only basic implementation of materials and depended more heavily on teacher handbooks.

The Bicentennial movement in Australia led to some studies as to the Australian content of primary classrooms. Four schools researched in N.S.W. felt that their social studies was the main source of Australian studies. Concerns were felt that multicultural and contemporary Aboriginal resources were not available and that there was a lack of dynamic materials generally in the area. Moroz (1993) found however that attitudes of primary students towards social studies was quite positive as

opposed to the American situation.

Before any assessment of the effectiveness of our KLA 4 courses in N.S.W. can be undertaken it is essential that we gather some basic information about teacher philosophy and practice in our primary HSIE classrooms. This preliminary study is only a guide to future research on K-12 continuity.

#### METHODOLOGY

A 10 item open-ended questionnaire, related to teachers' philosophy of HSIE teaching, along with a 7 item structured questionnaire, related to HSIE classroom practices in schools, was sent to 344 teachers in 37 government primary and infants schools. These schools were randomly chosen from the total number of Hunter Region government primary and infants schools. 53 replies were received

from 27 schools. the open -ended questions were designed to offer some comparison with the NCSS Statement on powerful teaching and learning in the Social Studies (1993) while the structured questions offered some comparisons with the study done by Finkelstein, Nielsen and Switzer(1993) again done in the USA.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Characteristics

All respondents were classroom teachers, teaching in schools ranging in size from less than 50 pupils to more than 500 pupils. The majority of respondents (32.8%) taught in schools of size 200-300 pupils. The majority of respondents were female (37) compared to 15 males.

Years of teaching experience ranged from 6 years to more than 25 years with the majority teaching for over 16 years (86%).

The actual classes that these teachers taught covered the entire range from Kindergarten to Year 6 with 19 teaching composite classes (some with 4-way composites). The spread was even between infants and primary. The majority of these teachers were initially trained at teachers' colleges (78%) and 26 of them had nor further formal training since then. In their initial training HSIE content and method studies was usually restricted to less than 12 months. Only 5 respondents reported any subsequent professional development in the HSIE area. One respondent seemed to sum up the interest when she asked:

are there any professional associations?

### HSIE Practices in Primary Schools

#### 1.Time devoted to HSIE.

These questions were directly linked to questions asked of American Primary Elementary Social Studies teachers by Finkelstein, Nielsen and Switzer (1993).

Q.1Is there a specific amount of time mandated for Human Society and Its Environment?

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Hunter Region (1994)USA (1993)

YES 39%56.6%  
NO43%32.4%

DON'T KNOW18%11%  
N = 53N = 1262

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The US study used 150 minutes per week or 30 minutes per day as their base mark when examining the next three questions.

Q.2If a specific time is mandated how many minutes is this in Human Society and Its Environment?

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Hunter Region (1994)USA (1993)  
95% of schools required no more88% required more than

than 150 minutes per week.150 minutes per week.

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Q3.On the average how many minutes do you actually spend each week teaching Human Society and Its Environment?

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Hunter Region (1994)USA (1993)  
88% spent no more than91.4% required more than  
150 minutes per week.150 minutes per week.

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Q4.Ideally how many minutes would you like to spend every week teaching Human Society and Its Environment?

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Hunter Region (1994)USA (1993)  
67.9% would prefer no more86.4% would prefer no more  
than 150 minutes per week.than 150 minutes per week.

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Four Hunter respondents felt that the area should be totally integrated with other curriculum areas and had no preferred time.

2.Instructional Strategies Used When Teaching HSIE

In the Hunter only 2 respondents used a textbook (3.7%) while 51 respondents (96.2%) used no textbook. This can be compared with the US study where 70% of the respondents used a textbook for at least 50% of their social studies instruction. In the Hunter the most commonly used sources of instructional material were personal teacher-devised units or school-based units of work (43 respondents-81.1%) In the US when not using a textbook teacher devised units were the next most popular choice of instructional material (73.9%). Comments made by teachers about this included:

the textbooks I have seen for Kinder have such dreary content it would put off the subject permanently. "My Family" is a base. We discuss school and class rules of course, but to make it a unit! They are thirsty for knowledge-why not give them some?

and another also commented:

we re-invent the wheel in primary schools. The management's inability to coordinate and produce good teacher model units is absolutely appalling. Teachers were given a list of teaching resources and activities and asked to note to what extent these resources/activities were used in their classrooms. The same list as was used in the US study was offered in the Hunter to choose from with a few additions. It is noteworthy that the US study didn't give the teachers the opportunity to comment on the use of computers or community participation experiences (suggested as

important in encouraging powerful teaching and learning in the NCSS statement ). The US study found:

resources such as books, worksheets, maps, globes, films and filmstrips were cited as regularly or frequently used. Materials with high potential for firsthand student participation such as games, field trips, guest speakers and learning centres were frequently cited as seldom or never used for instruction. p.67

Hunter teachers cited resource books, maps, worksheets, excursions and videotapes as the most common activities these being used up to half the time. Least

commonly used activities

were mock trials, filmstrips, computer databases and simulations and investigation community issues, with many teachers noting that they never used these activities at all.

Teachers' Philosophy of Teaching HSIE

Teachers were asked 10 open-ended questions designed to explore their philosophy of teaching HSIE.

The literature review from both US and Australian sources tended to support the view that citizenship was the major goal of Social Studies/HSIE teaching but that there were three main traditions that Social Studies teachers espoused- citizenship as knowledge transmission, citizenship as a social science discipline study and citizenship as reflective inquiry. Using NUD\*IST software key words related to these traditions were searched for in the replies. Very little evidence of these traditions was found. Only one teacher mentioned citizenship as being related to the HSIE area although there were 12 comments in the text that were related to citizenship. Of the 1708 lines of text analysed only 1.3% were related to citizenship as such. Of this 1.3%, 0.47% referred to an active style of citizenship while 0.94% referred to a passive style of citizenship. In comparison 7.8% of text units mentioned "skills" and 7.6% of text units mentioned "knowledge". Particular discipline areas were rarely mentioned with History being the traditional discipline area most commonly named. The most commonly mentioned area of knowledge was "environment". To the researcher's mind this indicates that Primary teachers of HSIE in the Hunter have a more pragmatic approach to the area than other studies (which were mostly done in secondary schools) would indicate. The Department of School Education has encouraged teachers to program in blocks of knowledge, skills and values/attitudes and it is obvious that teachers perceive this subject as a combination of some areas of knowledge and some skills without examining a deeper philosophy for it. To further explore what specific knowledge and skills were associated with HSIE these categories were further explored. Of all the different skills mentioned 27.6 % of

text units mentioned research/thinking type skills while 8.8% mentioned group work skills. In the knowledge area teachers were asked about controversial issues they taught. Only 6 teacher spent more than 25% on controversial issues, most arguing that they preferred to avoid controversy. Areas that they perceived to be controversial were in the main Aboriginal Land Title/First Settlement issues and Environment vs resource exploitation issues such as logging. These were the areas they tended to avoid. Knowledge areas taught and not seen to be controversial were subdivided into the 5 knowledge areas of the National Profiles. The percentage of the total text was calculated as follows:

Time continuity and change 0.59%  
Place and Space 1.6%  
Culture 1.3%  
Resources 0.23%  
Natural and Social Systems 0.82%

2.3% of the entire text referred to values. These values were subdivided again into the same clusters of the National Profiles of Studies of Society and Environment as follows:

Democratic Process 0.70%  
Social Justice 0.82%  
Ecological sustainability 0.47%

## DISCUSSION

Time Devoted to HSIE

The only difference reported by teachers in the US and the Hunter was in the area of ideal HSIE time. 20% more Hunter respondents felt that the benchmark figure of 150 minutes a week was not enough and that more time should be spent in this area. 4 respondents commented that all KLA areas should be totally integrated and they had no idea how many minutes were actually allocated to different Key Learning Areas. These latter comments are very much of a similar philosophy to the

NSSC position on powerful Social Studies teaching which advocates social studies teaching as

integrative across the curriculum.

#### Materials Used in HSIE

There is obviously a very different approach to the use of textbooks between the two cultures with Hunter teachers rarely using a textbook but relying on teacher compiled units of work. It is concerning though that these same teachers have had little very contact in the HSIE area in their initial training and have had little subsequent inservice or professional support. Although Hunter teachers seemed more inclined to use excursions and less inclined to use filmstrips than their American counterparts both groups were disinclined to investigate community issues and Hunter teachers were loathe to use computers in this areas in any form. (It is interesting that filmstrips, which would be seen by Australian teachers as outdated technology, were highly rated by US teachers.) Although US respondents were not asked in Finkelstein et al's study about computer usage other researchers found little evidence of their use (Ebman and Glenn 1991). The lack of computer usage in this area is possibly another indication of the lack of inservice and ignorance on behalf of teachers as to the possibilities in this area. Disinterest in investigating community issues is just another indicator of Infants/Primary teachers' dislike of controversial issues.

#### Philosophy of Teaching

It is interesting that in the US the Social Studies area is seen as the citizenship area whereas Hunter teachers don't really see it that way. The recent ANOP survey of Australian reported in Whereas the People (1994) found that most Australians thought of citizenship as being about obeying rules and caring for others. Knowing about their society didn't really come into it. Thus comparisons between US and Hunter teachers as to philosophy becomes problematical with the very first expression. The Reflective Inquiry tradition was definitely not represented by Hunter teachers. As most Hunter teachers had no Social Science discipline it is not surprising that they didn't see it a discipline study. It is interesting that some groups still argue about the place of History in Studies of Society and Environment yet of all the discipline areas this is the one that Hunter teachers most agree is included in this Key Learning Area. It could be said that there was some evidence of Knowledge Transmission as a tradition but it could equally be said that HSIE as

Skills Development was a philosophy. This latter emphasis is in line with current thinking as to the value of "learning how to learn". It is surprising however that this does translate itself into computer literacy.

#### CONCLUSION

This study was an attempt to come to grips with the situation in Australia where there is virtually no

information available on what is happening in the Social Education area in Primary schools. Most assumptions about this area are based on American studies. Unfortunately this study, although a random sample, has only a small number of respondents and therefore needs to be expanded upon before too many conclusions can be made. However it does indicate some areas for future research

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