No doubt most people would regard educating young people to be good citizens as a worthy goal. But such attempts often fall under the umbrella of "social studies," which is where the problem begins. Unfortunately, students often regard the subject as boring and a waste of time. Politically engaged parents and other adults may be suspicious that it consists of either right-wing or left-wing indoctrination. College and university professors disparage social studies as a catch-all field without real substance or definition. Social studies teachers, even if they strongly believe in what they are doing, frequently express frustration at both the lack of student interest and the efforts of outsiders to force specific content and methodological agendas on their classes.

These negative reactions are unfortunate reminders that, although individual teachers may achieve success, social studies itself has yet to achieve general public and academic respect and understanding.

Purposes and Goals

Despite these challenges, spokespeople for social studies consistently and confidently assert lofty goals for their field. Nearly everyone agrees that schools at all levels should prepare children and young people to become informed and effectively engaged citizens. Ronald W. Evans, professor of education at San Diego State University, speaks of "the need to prepare thoughtful, knowledgeable, clear-thinking citizens." The Michigan State Board of Education in 1987 described the central purpose of social studies education as "the development of citizenship." In its statement on standards, written in response to the standards debate of the 1990s, the National Council for the Social Studies stated that a major purpose of social studies programs is "the promotion of civic competence—which is the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of students to be able to assume 'the office of citizen' (as Thomas Jefferson called it) in our democratic republic."2

According to this view, social studies has a unique role to play in a democracy, for it helps citizens gain an understanding of the foundational values of the society and how to act effectively on those values. From this perspective, it is not enough for students to simply understand and accept such "ideals as equality, equity, freedom and justice," they must also learn "how to respect others who are different, how to cooperate with one another, and to work together for the common good."3 Reflecting John Dewey's view that schools were to be laboratories of democracy, the field of social studies seeks to prepare students for participation in the political process of decision making. Thus, the goal of social studies is not simply to convey academic
knowledge, but to transform students into active and responsible citizens.4

A Brief History of Social Studies

Despite general agreement regarding its purposes and goals, the field of social studies has experienced continual debate over how best to implement them in the classroom, as well as whether the curriculum should support existing societal structures or create activists who will seek social change. The foundation of the U.S. social studies curriculum was developed through a series of reports by committees of the National Education Association (1894 and 1916) and the American Historical Association (1899). Through this process, history emerged as the core subject of social studies, partly because historians formed a professional organization before the social scientists and also, particularly within the context of World War I, because teaching history was seen as an effective means of encouraging patriotism. Influenced by the recommendations of the 1916 committee and the subsequent formation of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in 1921, the social studies curriculum that continues to dominate American education took form.

But even as this curriculum developed, critics argued that it encouraged social conformity and placed excessive emphasis on the past. Led by Harold Rugg of Teachers College, Columbia University, reformers in the 1920s began calling for the establishment of a problems-centered, rather than historical, approach to social studies and the establishment of a Problems of Democracy course to be required of all high school students. In his history of social studies, Ronald W. Evans, a strong advocate of a problems- or issues-oriented approach, points out the influence of the Protestant social gospel movement on these reformers, who “made a partial transfer of redemptive power from religious to secular institutions, developing a view of social evolution that held that people could control and improve their world by conscious means.”5

The problems-centered approach reached its high point in the 1930s as Rugg developed a series of textbooks, and the Great Depression forced Americans to recognize the need for social and political changes. At the same time, however, the various social science disciplines were becoming influential within the field. Their leaders urged that such subjects as sociology, government, and economics be taught separately. This change was furthered by the advent of the Cold War, when those calling for reform were regarded as subverting American values; as well as the general decline of the progressive education movement, which had birthed the problems-centered approach. Thus, by the late 1950s, the NCSS was recommending that social studies be organized around the separate disciplines.

The social and political turmoil of the 1960s produced yet another effort to change social studies education. An issues-centered approach, endorsed by the NCSS in 1971, once again took center stage, most significantly in the federally funded “Man: A Course of Study” (frequently referred to as “MA-
and reasoned decisions for the public.

draw on a variety of elements and approaches as they "help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public.

Reconsidering Social Studies

In the U.S., boards of education at various levels determine whether the social studies curriculum will be organized around disciplines or social issues, but individual teachers control the day-to-day implementation of that curriculum. By keeping the goal of citizenship education foremost, teachers can avoid taking sides in the ongoing controversy, drawing on a variety of elements and approaches as they "help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public.

The American Social Studies Curriculum

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riences of both men and women, various ethnic groups and social-economic classes, and diverse cultures. By introducing multiple perspectives, the teacher can help students learn how to compare and evaluate. Elizabeth Noll, a 6th-grade teacher, describes how she moved away from “textbook-dominated teaching and teacher-dominated learning to a more learner-centered approach” that incorporates a variety of perspectives. Focusing on the country to which many members of her community trace their ancestry, she and her students developed a list of possible sources of information as varied as interviews, newspaper and magazine articles, and cookbooks. As the students searched for information, the teacher raised questions such as “Were there any contradictions in the information your sources provided?” and “How did the perspectives you found differ?”

As she developed this approach throughout the year, later applying it to the study of other countries, Noll found that her students gained a “broader and richer” understanding than could be provided by a textbook. “Through their varied reading experiences, discussions, learning logs, interviews, and final sharing,” she concludes in her account of this experience, “my students constructed knowledge that had personal meaning for them. This knowledge was about more than a country. It was also about themselves as capable learners.” The abilities that these students developed as they compared and evaluated information not only increased their understanding of the world but also introduced them to critical thinking skills. If reinforced in other classes (and this is very important), these habits of mind will enable them to better respond to the myriad views that citizens must sort through when making decisions about public issues.

The goal of social studies is not simply to convey academic knowledge, but to transform students into active and responsible citizens.

Social Studies in the Adventist School

Within the Adventist school, social studies offers the opportunity to consider what it means to be a Christian citizen. At the lower elementary levels, the teacher must help students understand, for instance, what it means to be a resident of a neighborhood and the responsibilities that this entails. As the child moves into higher grade levels, local and state history become important, in part because they offer a sense of place that is often lacking in mobile societies. Through these educational experiences, students have the opportunity to reflect on how their Christian commitment might affect the way they relate to non-Adventist or non-Christian neighbors. They should come to understand that the local church is part of a web of institutions that hold the community together. Although Americans tend to emphasize the isolated individual, the Christian classroom in particular, through emphasis on the fact that all people are God’s creatures and made in His image, can help students appreciate the ways their lives are intimately connected with those around them.

Secondary-level social studies courses, whether organized around the disciplines or focused on social issues, offer the opportunity to examine issues of significance to Christians, such as how to relate to military service and war, social responsibility for the poor, environmental concerns, and ethnic relations. Although Seventh-day Adventists have long been concerned with

Emmanuel Missionary College Medical Cadet Corps present flags, 1943.
The Christian social studies classroom can help students appreciate the fact that all people are created in God's image and are connected as neighbors in the community.

Fundamentally, social studies aims to help children and young people understand that human beings flourish within a caring community. Being a good citizen means giving unselfishly of oneself. By understanding the various institutions that make up a community—from the neighborhood level to the international scene—and the historical developments that have produced the world we live in today, students will be prepared to become effective citizens. Society and God's kingdom depend on it.

Conclusion

1. The term “social studies” is commonly used as both singular and plural. In this article, I will use the singular form.
6. Ibid., p. 177. The fore-going history of social studies has been largely drawn from Evans.
16. See, for example, Perry Bush, Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

REFERENCES

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