

Exploring Rationale Development as Intellectual Professional Development for Experienced Social Studies Teachers

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Introduction

Writing about the history of the era of the new social studies, Ronald Evans (2012) examined reform efforts designed to improve social studies teaching and the pursuit of educating for democratic citizenship. For Evans, “the central question haunting social studies is whether classroom instruction can be improved in the direction of meaningful learning” (2012, p. 317). According to Evans, efforts to reform social studies teaching have historically faced two constant sources of tension: “curriculum politics and the entrenched dilemma of classroom constancy” (2012, p. 2). Curriculum politics are currently embodied by the influence of the accountability movement and related reforms. Curriculum constancy is “embodied in the failure of classroom practice to live up to its potential for interesting, engaging, teaching worthy of our nation and the questions, social issues, and problems we face as citizens” (2012, p. 2). As a whole, Evans’ analysis painted a grim picture of the possibilities of reforming the constraints facing social studies teachers.

Despite the inability of previous reform efforts to transform social studies teaching, we believe the story contains a silver lining. After walking the reader through a myriad of reasons why reform efforts have continually failed to break free from the grip of curriculum constancy and the grammar of social studies, Evans (2012) optimistically highlighted an often overlooked reality in teaching: teachers still have choices. Given the freedom to make choices, teachers should have thoughtful,

sound rationales for their decision-making. Evans roots his belief in the potential for rationale-based decision making to improve social studies teaching in the ethical dimensions of teaching. As he sees it, “for these choices to matter, teachers have an ethical responsibility to examine the choices and to develop their rationales and classroom practices as thoroughly and deeply as possible” (2012, p. 322). Positioning rationale development as part of the ethical obligations of teachers echoes work by Dinkelman (2009), Newmann (1970), and Shaver and Strong (1982). Connecting purpose with teacher decision-making ties in with Thornton’s (2005) conception of teachers as gatekeepers.

For teachers interested in thinking deeply about the purposes guiding their content and pedagogical decision-making, rationale development has received considerable attention in the literature on social studies teaching and learning. In fact, the idea that purpose matters in teaching social studies has received renewed interest over the past decade (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Conklin, 2010; Dinkelman, 2009; Evans, 2012; Hawley, 2010, 2012; Hawley, Pifel, & Jordan, 2012; Powell & Hawley, 2009; Thornton, 2005, 2006). As Thornton has argued, “teachers’ purposes matter more and in a different way from assembling a standardized product” (2006, p. 148). Going further, Thornton asserted that “teachers’ purposes, then, guide how far they open the curricular-instructional gate; for whom, when, and which gates they open” (2006, p. 418). In other words, a well-developed and articulated sense of purpose improves teachers’ curricular decision making, their teaching and student learning, as well as the overall educational experience of students at all levels.

In this article we begin with a review of the theoretical and research literature focused on the process of rationale development. Drawing on this growing body of literature, we explore the potential of rationale development to provide a form of intellectual professional development for experienced social studies teachers. Following this initial discussion, we present an approach to rationale development that we have used with experienced social studies teachers. Finally, we discuss the potential benefits for teachers interested in articulating their initial rationales and outlining their developing sense of purpose(s) for teaching social studies. Ultimately, this article is seen as a small step in the process of positioning teachers to confront and transform the grammar of social studies—one classroom at a time.

What is a Rationale Anyway?

The idea that social studies teachers should develop comprehensive rationales for their work as citizenship educators can be traced back to

Shaver's (1977) edited bulletin for the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *Building Rationales for Citizenship Education*. As editor and author, Shaver stated that the overall purpose of the bulletin was to encourage social studies teachers to undertake the process of "re-examining the assumptions underlying their curricular and teaching decisions, and in looking at the citizenship implications of what actually happens in their classrooms and schools" (1977, p. vi). Shaver was confident that "increased thoughtfulness among those whose consciously accepted role is citizenship education could have highly significant consequences" (1977, p. vi). Like Evans (2012) and Thornton (2005), Shaver recognized the potential for rationale development to influence teachers' content and pedagogical decision-making and increase connections between social studies and education for democratic citizenship.

According to Shaver and Strong, a rationale "is the statement and explication of the basic principles upon which your school behavior (both in the formal classroom setting and during the other encounters within the school's social and political system) is based" (1982, pp. 9-10). Newmann saw a rationale as "the vehicle through which the educator justifies to the community at large his or her use of the power that the community has delegated to institutions for formal education" (1977, p. 31). More recently, Dinkelman framed his approach to rationale development around the question, "what are you teaching social studies *for*?" (emphasis in original, 2009, p. 91).

Outside the world of social studies teaching and teacher education, teacher educators have more recently been discussing the benefits of developing a vision for teaching (Hammerness, 2006; Kennedy, 2006; Zumwalt, 1989). As Kosnik and Beck stress, "a vision is more obviously something that a teacher can be passionate about. Nevertheless, *we would not insist on this particular word*: what matters is that we have something like a vision, whatever terminology we use" (emphasis in original, 2006, p. 153). Echoing the literature on rationale development, Kosnik and Beck recognize that a "vision should always be seen as a work in progress, otherwise experimentation and gaining of new insights will be hindered" (2006, p. 153).

Hammerness (2006) centered her work around the idea that a teacher has a vision that guides his or her practice. These visions are personal, complex and not always easily verbalized, but they are vital to teacher decision-making. From Hammerness' perspective, a teacher's vision is a "measuring stick that can indicate how far current practice sits from where one wants to be" (2006, p. 7). These visions are seen as embodying "teachers' hopes for the future and playing a significant role in their lives and work" (2006, p. 1). A teacher's vision must guide a teacher's

practice. As a teacher approaches practice with an overall ideal in mind, their decision-making is rooted in a foundation.

Of course, a teacher's vision and a teacher's practice do not always line up. Schools are complicated, ever-changing entities. Teachers operate within a system where they almost always have to grapple with change. When a teacher's vision ceases to be in line with a teacher's practice, a difficult and necessary contemplation must follow. In Hammerness' view, this contemplation allows teachers to consider their purpose, rethink their vision, and adjust their practice (2006, pp. 7-8). This is the complicated work we are encouraging experienced teachers to pursue. Presented as intellectual professional development, rationale development has the potential to reframe and quite possibly transform teachers' content and pedagogical decision-making.

Rationale development is a core theme of a graduate-level social studies course, *Educating the Good Citizen: Competing Conceptions of Citizenship Education* (ETGC), Todd taught at Kent State. In the assignment description students are told that a rationale is:

a statement of what you believe is the purpose of social studies. A social studies rationale addresses what social studies is supposed to accomplish that other curricular areas do not. What will students know, be able to do, and value as a result of time spent in social studies classrooms? Going further, a comprehensive rationale situates your work as a teacher in the broader social context of schooling. What sort of contribution does social studies make to the realization of a more just and democratic society and to the "common good"? Ideally, a social studies rationale is more than a series of catch phrases in a "philosophy of education." It is a work in progress that will continue to develop as you reflect on your own rationale-based decision-making within your individual school and classroom contexts. (ETGC Syllabus)¹

As with the previously articulated definitions, Todd intentionally framed the idea that rationales are always being developed. Rationale development is a process of constantly rethinking and reframing a teacher's purposes for teaching social studies. If a rationale is simply seen as an assignment to be completed, or as a hoop to jump through, then the process itself can never reach its full potential, nor can a rationale then guide teacher decision making in social studies classrooms. The same goes when thinking about rationale development as professional development. Hopefully teachers will embrace rationale development as a process of continual self-reflection and as an opportunity to make meaningful connections between students and the social studies content.

Making an Argument for Rationale Development

The idea that purpose matters in social studies teaching is not new. Rationale development as an approach to improving the quality of social studies teaching and learning was first developed by Shaver (1977), Newmann (1977), and Shaver and Strong (1982). Collectively they defined rationale development as the intellectual, ethical, and potentially transformative process of personal reflection through which teachers formally articulate their purposes for teaching social studies. Recently, renewed interest in the power of purpose to improve social studies teaching and learning has emerged (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2004; Conklin, 2010; Dinkelman, 2009; Hawley, 2010, 2012; Hawley, Pifel, & Jordan, 2012; Powell & Hawley, 2009; Thornton, 2006).

Initially, Shaver (1977) conceived of rationale development as professional development for experienced teachers. Shaver saw the potential for rationale development to disrupt what Cochran-Smith and Fries (2005) refer to as a technical training approach to teacher education. Shaver longed for a day when teacher education programs would position teacher candidates to articulate their purposes as part of learning to develop engaging, worthwhile experiences for their future students. Instead of waiting for the world of teacher education to change, Shaver envisioned rationale development as a form of professional development capable of improving the practices of experienced teachers.

Shaver believed “that after a year or two of teaching, teachers are ready, if given the opportunity, to move from the discussion of ‘how to do it’ to rationale-building” (1977, p. 98). Additionally, Shaver saw rationale development as a way for experienced teachers to “wrestle with teaching problems at first hand, seeking and exploring their own assumptions and relating them consciously to their curricular decisions” (1977, p. 99). The results of this struggle were critical for Shaver due to their effect on students’ daily lives.

More recent arguments for rationale development have included connecting teachers’ developing sense of purpose with their conceptions of worthwhile knowledge (Thornton, 2005) as well as connecting teachers’ sense of purpose with their students’ experiences in classrooms (Kosnik & Beck, 2006). Both are ultimately concerned with student learning. Thornton’s (2005) work on teachers as gatekeepers works to connect teachers’ purposes with their practice. As Thornton asserts, “a lack of considered purpose does not necessarily lead to poor practice, but it does commonly lead to indifferent practice, where instruction lacks an adequate compass to guide what is worth teaching at a given time to a group of students” (2005, p. 6). Kosnik and Beck envision the potential

for a rationale to improve the teacher student relationship. As they see it, a developed sense of purpose “improves the teacher-student relationship and general classroom climate as students see that their teacher is not just making arbitrary demands but is working in a caring and purposeful manner to meet their needs” (2006, p. 154).

This connection between a teacher’s developing sense of purpose and students’ learning and experiences in classrooms has become a key component of those arguing for rationale development with teacher candidates and experienced teachers. Kosnik and Beck (2006) outlined three reasons for teachers to have well-developed visions for teaching. First “a vision keeps us aware of *the full range of goals and processes of teaching*” (emphasis in original, 2006, p. 153). Second, “a vision helps us to see *how the various aspects of teaching fit together*” (emphasis in original, p. 154). Third, “having an explicit vision is important so teachers can *explain to students the purpose of schooling and particular classroom practices*” (emphasis in original, p. 154). We argue that a fourth reason teachers need a well thought out rationale is that it positions teachers to make the tough pedagogical and curricular choices they face daily. As Evans (2012) highlighted, these choices can help confront the influence of curriculum constancy and work to provide a more thoughtful, engaging learning experience for all students in social studies classrooms.

What the Research Says About Rationale Development

Over the past decade social studies teacher educators have been researching the influence rationale development can have on both experienced and pre-service teachers (e.g., Conklin, 2010; Dinkelman, 2009; Hawley, 2010, 2012; Hawley, Pifel, & Jordan, 2012; Thornton, 2006). Much of this work builds on Barton and Levstik’s (2004) attempts to connect the teaching and learning of history with the development of participatory democratic citizens. While their writing is not explicitly focused on rationale development, Barton and Levstik recognized that without “a sense of purpose that is clearly thought out and articulated, teachers may fall prey to each new fad or harebrained instructional program or they may find themselves adopting the practices of their peers by default” (2004, p. 255). Furthermore, they contend that without “a clear sense of purpose, teachers’ primary actions continue to be coverage of the curriculum and control of students, no matter how much they know about history, teaching, or the intersection of the two” (2004, p. 258).

Dinkelman’s work examining the challenges of rationale-based teacher education positioned rationale development as a process that goes “beyond the empty rhetoric of a ‘teaching philosophy’ and towards

a practical, vital statement of the aims that direct the very real deliberation teachers engage in as they sort out questions of what is worth knowing and how best to teach it” (2009, p. 92). Echoing Newmann (1977), Dinkelman conceived of rationale development as a process of attending to teaching’s ethical and moral dimensions (2009, 92). His approach to rationale development was built on the idea that teachers of all levels are constantly engaged in a demanding and difficult process of critical reflection.

Hawley (2010) followed the work of Dinkelman (2009) and highlighted some of the difficult aspects of the rationale development process. Hawley (2010) worked with first year teachers as they encountered the difficult nature of beginning a teaching career. Perhaps one of the most important findings of Hawley’s research was the realization that a gap exists between what beginning teachers believe to be their purpose and what they are actually able to do as beginning teachers. Hawley (2012) later posited that perhaps teacher education was partly to blame for this apparent gap. It is plausible that teacher education programs have inadvertently dismissed the critical component of considering teacher purpose and rationale development in preparing teachers to make decisions.

While the concept of a rationale for teaching dates back several decades, it is only recently that researchers have focused specifically on the effects of rationale development on teacher decision-making. There is still much to be learned, however, the basics of rationale development have been established. Ultimately, as Dinkelman (2009) explained, rationale development should be conceived as part of good teaching, where “good teachers are always in the process of developing their rationales, as they commit themselves to continual examination of the ways in which theory and practice speak to each other in the unique context of each teaching moment” (2009, p. 92).

Beginning the Rationale Development Process

Below is the rationale assignment that Todd uses with his students at Midwestern State. It is designed to help students develop an initial rationale for teaching social studies. Todd has used it with both teacher candidates and experienced social studies teachers. The questions are designed to work together and build upon each other. Of course, teachers should feel free to begin with any of the questions.

1. What are the most important goals of social studies in terms of what students should know, be able to do, and value as a result of taking your social studies courses? Why are these goals valuable for democratic society and the development of civic competence?

If useful for your work, please consider the following categories of goals:

- (a) knowledge
- (b) skills (intellectual and/or behavioral)
- (c) dispositions (attitudes, values, inclination for civic action)

Identify five to eight goals. Explain each goal and discuss why it is important for a democratic society, and illustrate with one or more examples how students could demonstrate that they have achieved the goal.

2. As a result of achieving these goals, what kinds of civic action will your students be prepared to take to strengthen democratic society within their local school and community contexts and to the nation at large?

3. How do issues of cultural diversity, poverty, gender equity, racism, homophobia, multiculturalism, globalism, and “the common good” inform your thinking about both the content and methods of social studies? Feel free to think about the issues on this list that inform your practice. You are also more than welcome to add to the list.

4. Identify two major social problems and issues facing our society that you hope your students will help work to improve in their civic roles as a result in part of studying social studies? In a paragraph for each social problem or issue,

Describe it briefly,

Explain why it is a major problem or issue,

Explain how it relates to the life conditions of some of your students,
and

Explain how studying history or one of the social sciences with you could help your students think and act productively with regard to the problem or issue.

5. What are three examples of social studies content you would choose to teach and three examples of social studies content you would choose to not teach to make the goals of your rationale a reality in your social studies classroom? This question is designed to push you to begin to make connections to the idea of “worthwhile knowledge” and is intended to give you a chance to make connections between the ideas and goals of your rationale and your decision-making related to content selection.

6. Describe an example of a lesson that you would like to teach in a high school social studies class. Feel free to use one of the examples in #5 as part of responding to #6.

Identify the objectives for the lesson.

Explain how the objectives relate to some of the overarching goals you want your students to achieve. Explain how the lesson is relevant to one or more of the major social problems or issues you identified.

Describe how students’ learning in this lesson will contribute to their abilities to engage in productive civic action.

Potential Benefits of the Rationale Development Process

As part of a research project conducted on the rationale development process of experienced social studies teachers, Hawley, Pifel and Jordan (2012) highlighted three benefits the participants experienced. Participants discussed how the rationale development process provided structure for their pedagogical decision-making, helped them develop the ability to connect their purposes with their practice as social studies teachers, and provided an improved sense of professionalism.

Providing structure. All teachers, not just beginning teachers, seek to provide structure to their pedagogical decision-making. The participants in Hawley, Pifel, and Jordan's study reported that the rationale development process allowed them to become more "structured and focused in their approach to teaching" (2012, p. 251). This is exceptionally important when considering the ever-changing, complex environment of the school. As policies change and standards shift teachers must accommodate, and do so rapidly. Without a structured purpose teachers may experience a disequilibrium that breeds frustration and burnout. Participants reported experiencing the rationale development process as a way to formally structure their purpose. Participants saw the process as focused foundation building. These foundations served as supports in turbulent teaching conditions.

Connecting purpose and practice. While it is imperative that teachers have a structured purpose, teachers must also develop the skills to translate that purpose to practice. Once again, the participants in Hawley, Pifel, and Jordan's (2012) study reported that the rationale development process helped bridge this transitional gap. For the participants in the study, a main focus of their intended purposes was to promote active democratic citizenship. However, how each individual teacher defined active democratic citizenship varied, as should be expected. These are ideas that may serve as pillars of a teacher's purpose, yet simultaneously exist in the abstract. Participants reported that the rationale development process helped to "define citizenship education and why it is important" (p. 252). As teachers struggle with the literal process of defining their purpose, they inevitably work to understand how this will look in practice. For these participants, this necessary contemplation lead to well-informed pedagogical changes.

Improving professionalism. The final theme revealed in Hawley, Pifel, and Jordan's (2012) work involved improving professionalism. Participants reported that the rationale development process resulted in an empowerment that lead to increased confidence and the feeling of

professionalism. This is exactly the type of empowerment that Shaver and Strong (1982) originally discussed. Shaver and Strong pointed to the importance of a teacher honing the ability to explain his or her pedagogical decision-making from a purposeful foundation when explaining their teaching with school administration (p. 10). This structured purpose would be helpful in gaining administrative support for what may sometimes seem to be unorthodox methodology. When a teacher is empowered with confidence, they can begin to move away from the ordinary and into a way of teaching that may be truly transformative.

Conclusion

Whether it's called a vision for teaching (Hammerness, 2006; Kosnik & Beck, 2009; Zumwalt, 1989), or a rationale (Dinkelman, 2009; Hawley, 2010, 2012; Newann, 1977; Shaver, 1977; Shaver & Strong, 1982) doesn't matter. What does matter is that teachers spend time working through the process of articulating their developing sense of purpose. Whether it has always been there, lurking in the shadows of their thinking, or never even crossed their minds, the point is that taking the time to develop a rationale for teaching has the potential to position individuals to make more ethical choices as social studies teachers. As Evans (2012) reminded us earlier, teachers have choices. These choices will influence the type of content teachers view as worthwhile and the types of engaging lessons they develop for their students.

These choices, when supported by a thoughtful rationale, will be a small part of each teacher's individual efforts to confront the long-standing influence curriculum constancy has had on social studies teaching and learning. Together, social studies teachers and teacher educators can collectively work to engage students in worthwhile learning. Hopefully, teachers will be inspired to put in the effort to develop purposeful rationales designed to provide structure, give support to their work, and to increase their sense of themselves as professionals.

Note

¹ This definition is also used as part of a rationale assignment in our undergraduate social studies teacher education program. Todd would also like to acknowledge the influence Todd Dinkelman's thinking has had on the rationale description he has used with both undergraduate and graduate students.

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