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Representations of Unions in American and Canadian Social Studies Standards

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Introduction

This research brief analyses the representation of unions within Social Studies standards in the U.S. and Canada, as part of a larger project examining how economic inequality is presented within official government curricula. Through our analysis of all high school state and provincial Social Studies standards, we provide both a general and critical reading of: a) Whether social studies standards address organized labor? b) If they do, what they say? c) What topics related to unions are not addressed in the standards? d) What differences exist among the U.S. states or Canadian provinces as well as between the United States and Canada?

We begin by providing an explanation of our methodology, including descriptions of our coding system, definitions, and rationale, before turning to a description of our findings. We present a quantitative analysis of messages conveyed explicitly in the standards, and then consider implicit messages, taking note of the silences and omissions in the standards. We believe such analysis has added significance because there is scant literature around the possible reasons *why* it may be important for students to learn about labor unions.

There are a number of reasons we would expect state and provincial social studies standards to address the role of organized labor historically and in the contemporary context. Unions have helped shape conditions in the workplace, propelled critical social policies, been at the forefront of various social movements, and created political dialogue around worker's rights. Young people thus need to be familiar with organized labor if they hope to understand the contemporary political economy. Such knowledge is essential for youth who will enter the workforce in a few years and will be called upon as adults to make difficult political decisions about topics ranging from taxes, to social welfare policies, to workers' rights and protections.

The focus of this brief is on the ideas about organized labor embedded in the standards themselves rather than on the degree to which these standards are taught in classrooms.

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Official curriculum standards serve as symbolic representations of what the state presents as valuable, paramount knowledge of a given field. While our study is informed by Jean Anyon's (1979) seminal work examining presentations of labor unions in Social Studies textbooks, we maintain there to be an important distinction between material in textbooks (written and produced by private companies), and curriculum standards sanctioned by state and provincial governments.

Guiding Research Questions

The following are questions that guide this research brief:

1. How, if at all, are labor unions represented in state and provincial social studies standards? When the standards address labor unions, what ideas do they communicate?
2. Are there differences between the ways that official social studies standards in the U.S. and Canada address the role and importance of labor unions?

Methods and Data

Our assessment of how organized labor is addressed in US and Canadian social studies standards emerges out of a broader examination of all high school Social Studies standards in each U.S. state and Canadian province, conducted over the last year by the Learning about Inequality Project. This project is a joint effort of researchers at UCLA and the University of Ottawa to understand how high schools in North America address issues of economic inequality and related topics. The state and provincial standards were collected through state and provincial department of education websites. Each state document was independently coded and verified by three researchers to ensure the reproducibility of the findings. We coded the standards for the following themes related to labor studies: historical reference to organized labor, modern reference to organized labor, unions' influence on social protections, unions' influence on wages, unions and campaigns for social change, negative attributions to unions, and general reference to organized labor.

Limitations

The scope of our analysis is limited because we do not make any claims about what or how high school teachers teach about labor unions. There is a broad literature that cautions against drawing strong inferences about what students are learning from an examination of official social studies standards (Vogler & Virtue, 2007; Ross, 2006; Journell, 2008; Westbury, 2008). We also acknowledge the likelihood that discussions, activities, and lessons involving labor unions might be taking place without any reference to official curriculum standards whatsoever. In the second phase of our study, we will interview teachers about their lessons that address labor unions. These interviews will examine teachers' interpretations and use of curriculum standards in states and provinces that emphasize these topics as well as states that remain silent on this topic.

Figure. 1: Description of coding categories and definitions

	Code Definition
Historical Only	References unions as they existed or played a role in the past, by indicating a historic time range or era. Does not give reference to unions in the present day.
Here and now	References unions as existing in the present. Teaching this standard would require addressing ongoing actions by unions or reasons for joining a union. This standard indicates that unions are alive today and have significance in influencing economic decisions.
Unions influence on social protections	References unions’ connection with improving working conditions, benefits, or negotiating for unemployment insurance. References to social protections can either be in the past or the present.
Unions influence on wages	References connection between unions and worker wages (i.e. the unions’ role in creating or increasing the minimum wage; protecting or increasing wages; and/or negotiating wages). References can occur in the past or the present.
Unions and campaigns for social change	This standard can reference social change in the past or the present, and addresses: a) Formation of unions or working to increase membership; b) Unions taking part in campaigns aimed at broader social change
Negative attributions to unions	Implies or states directly that unions could (or do) negatively impact the economy or society. Negative references to unions can be in the past or the present.
General Reference	A general or neutral statement about unions that does not mention the historic or present-day impact of unions economically or socially. This might include mentions of unions as “economic institutions” without further elaboration. This standard provides no guidance for further discussion

Findings

Our study found that slightly over half of the states and provinces (29 and 5, respectively) mention unions within the standards. We identified a total of sixty-seven distinct standards that address labor unions—fifty-six from the U.S., and eleven from Canada. (See appendix 1 for a full breakdown of codes, number of standards, and corresponding states and provinces.)

Only five states and one province explicitly mention *unions existing in the present*. These standards portray labor unions as active, vibrant forces, as an example from Missouri illustrates:

“Analyze the roles people, business, labor unions, and government play in the United States economy: 1. How monopolies affect people’s lives and how they are regulated; 2. How boycotts, strikes, and embargoes affect trade and people’s options.”

Five states address *labor unions’ influences on social protections*—defined here as connections with improving working conditions, benefits, or negotiating for unemployment insurance. A standard from California, for example, asks students to “understand the operations of the labor market, including the circumstances surrounding the establishment of principal labor unions, procedures that unions use to gain benefits for their members, the effects of unionization, the minimum wage, and unemployment insurance.” Only three states reference *labor unions’ influence on wages*. One example, from New Jersey, states the following: “Analyze the impact of the collective bargaining process on benefits, income, and fair labor practice.”

Five states and two provinces contain standards coded as *labor unions’ connections to campaigns for social change*, defined here as references to the formation of unions or efforts to increase membership, or unions taking part in campaigns aimed at broader social change (such as the Civil Rights movement). References could be made either in the past or the present to qualify under this code. Significantly, four of the six U.S. standards in this category were double-coded as *historical-only references*, such as one from Maryland: “Describe the Latino quest for civil rights and the formation of the United Farm Workers Union.” Neither of the remaining two standards made connections to labor unions and campaigns for social change in the present.

Fifteen states and one province reference *unions existing in the past*, indicating a historic time range or era, with no reference to the present day. The language used in these standards tends to be vague and offers little to no prompting of further inquiry, such as one standard from Alabama, which states: “Tracing the history of labor unions and methods of contract negotiation by labor and management.”

Twenty-three states and three provinces have standards coded as *general reference*—defined as “a general or neutral statement about unions that does not mention the historic or present-day impact of unions economically or socially, and provides no guidance for further discussion.” An example from Tennessee helps illustrate the extreme neutrality of the general reference category: “Describe the major events in the rise of the labor movement, including the national labor unions.” Similarly, from Idaho: “Explain the purposes of labor unions.” Some within this category make effort to locate labor unions’ actions and impact, though done in a way that still offers no guidance for further inquiries. Many of these do so by framing labor unions as “institutions,” such as one from Alabama, which states: “Recognizing the role of economic institutions, including labor unions and nonprofit organizations, in market economies.”

Only one standard was coded as *negative attributes of labor unions*, and its negative valence may result from ambiguous wording rather than the intent of its authors. New Jersey calls for students to: “Relate social intolerance, xenophobia, and fear of anarchists to government policies restricting immigration, advocacy, and labor organizations.”

Some of the Canadian standards serve as a counterpoint to the overwhelmingly vague, “neutral” framing of labor unions throughout the U.S. standards. An example from Prince Edward Island is much more explicit in connecting labor unions and citizen-student political agency: “How have governments in Canada, past and present, been reflective of Canadian societies? Teacher note: In order to make students aware that the political process is more than the political party

process, have the class brainstorm various ways people can/try to affect political decisions (lobby groups, protests, court legislation actions, non-party organization, unions). Having identified a number, have students research and report on a historical and current example of each identifying who, what, when, why, and effects (short- and long-term).”

Analysis

While there are few references to labor unions in the aggregate, the times when unions are included in the standards provide opportunities for analysis of the messages they convey. Many of the standards that address unions present only vague or *general references* that provide little to no guidance for further discussion, such as the following standard from Indiana: “Recognize that economic institutions, such as labor unions, nonprofit organizations and cooperatives, evolve in market economies to help members and clients accomplish their goals.” The verb “recognize” calls for the student to make no judgment, form no opinion, or engage in any critical thinking about the role of unions. In this example, labor unions are described as an “economic institution,” and categorized as virtually synonymous with “nonprofit organizations and cooperatives,” without any gesture toward differentiating these entities. The message conveyed by the standard would be considerably different if, for example, the phrasing asked students to “Analyze how institutions such as labor unions, nonprofit organizations and cooperatives evolve in market economies to help members and clients accomplish their goals.” The difference between *recognizing* and *analyzing* a chronological or causal relationship amounts to the difference between a certain unquestioning acceptance of the status quo on the one hand, and a provocation for students to further explore, question, and form their own ideas about the relationship between labor unions and market economies on the other. As the standard is presented, however, labor unions simply “evolve in market economies” to help individuals “accomplish goals.” Thus framed, labor unions are merely solitary economic actors, much as individuals are, positioning themselves for optimal accomplishment in the marketplace.

Of the aforementioned categories that constitute the “positive” examples of labor unions, it is worth noting that only three U.S. states have standards coded in two separate categories: California, New York, and New Jersey. The few “positive” standards that do exist often point to noticeable silences in other states or provinces. For instance, the standard from Maryland quoted above referring to the United Farm Workers Union, highlights the failure of California’s standards to mention the central role of this union in California’s labor and civil rights history.

The vast majority of all standards that reference labor unions do not speak to their potential social value. Very few of the standards address what labor unions *do*, or the contributions they make for members or society as a whole. Unions are essentially framed as “neutral” entities, devoid of any individual or societal value. Further, the majority of standards fail to account for *any* role labor unions play in the present. The majority of standards *coded as historical references* focus on labor unions within the first half of the twentieth century alone and do not ask students to make any connection that might link this history to present realities.. Even more recent references often do not highlight labor unions as active, vibrant social actors in the present day. For example: “Examine the economic development of Arkansas after World War II (e.g., timber industry, catfish farms, poultry industry, agriculture, retail, tourism, labor unions).” Here, we can see how labor unions are simply part of a U.S. postwar “economic development,” no different from tourism, retail, or farming.

Any comparative analysis of the United States and Canada must begin by re-stating the limitations of available data: analysis of the Canadian standards is based on only twelve discrete standards mentioning labor unions. That said, there are significant differences in the overall messages conveyed between the two countries. While the majority of standards from the United States were coded as *general reference*, providing little to no grounds for further conversation, only a quarter of Canadian standards fell into this category. In addition, Canadian standards are far more likely to describe labor unions as having direct impacts on society, both historically and in the present. Rather than footnote labor unions as historical afterthoughts (as is the case in much of the U.S. representations), the Canadian standards are much more likely to convey to teachers what students should know about the societal benefits provided for by labor unions. One example from Ontario is illustrative of this: “Promoting Equity and Social Justice— analyse ways in which personal actions (e.g., voting, establishing student social justice clubs, supporting fair/ethical trade practices through consumer action, participating in the public policy— creation process, working for political candidates, participating in a labour union, engaging in advocacy activities, reducing energy consumption) can empower individuals and reduce the impact of inequity or social injustice in local, national, and international contexts.” There is nothing to be found in any of the U.S. standards that describes labor unions as connected to ideas of “social justice,” “ethical trade,” “advocacy,” or “reducing the impact of inequity” as forcefully as this example does.

Policy Implications

Our analysis has shown that organized labor often receives little attention within the official government social studies standards. When U.S. state standards mention unions, the standards tend to undervalue their societal contributions, and present them as historical artifacts rather than significant actors shaping the workplace and social life today. . Such neglect distorts young people’s understanding of the political economy and their place within it.. As Linne et. al. (2009) writes, “for all the talk of schools preparing young people for the work world, we are failing to teach them even the basics of how that world is structured and how they can be empowered through collective action.” If young people are not prepared through a basic civics education, they cannot be expected to become competent and engaged members of public life.

Appendix 1

State/Province	Historical only	Here and now	Unions influence on social protections	Unions influences on wages	Unions and campaigns for social change	Negative attributions to unions	General Reference	Total
Alabama	3						1	4
Alaska							1	1
Alberta							1	1
Arkansas	2							2
British Columbia	2						1	3
California	1		1	1				3
Idaho							1	1
Indiana							1	1
Kansas	2						1	3
Kentucky							1	1
Louisiana					1		1	2
Maryland					2		1	3
Massachusetts	1							1
Michigan		1			1		2	4
Minnesota	2						2	4
Mississippi			1					1
Missouri		2					2	4
Nebraska	1							1
Nevada							1	1
New Jersey			2	1		1	1	4
New Mexico	1						1	2

New York	2	1		1			1	5
North Carolina							1	1
Ohio	1							1
Oklahoma	1				2		1	4
Ontario					3			3
Oregon							1	1
Prince Edward Island		3			1			4
South Carolina							1	1
South Dakota		1						1
Tennessee	2		1				1	4
Utah	1							1
Washington			1					1
West Virginia				1				1
Yukon							1	1
Grand Total	22	8	6	4	10	1	26	75

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