

The Effectiveness of Using Picture Books with Adolescent Students in Inclusive Social Studies Instruction

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Introduction

Social Studies Instruction: Purpose & Resources

The primary purpose of social studies instruction is to educate children about the world around them and to enable them to become responsible and responsive participants in the world. In Alabama's sixth grade classrooms, social studies instruction is focused on the United States during 1877- present, chronicling the development of the United States through economic, geographic, historic, political, social, and cultural perspectives (Alabama Course of Study, 2004). Even though social studies is an important component of the education of American students, federal mandates in education have given instructional priority to math, reading and language—not social studies (VanFossen, 2003). In schools throughout Alabama and the US, social studies is a subject that “should be taught,” when time permits (Zhao & Hoge, 2005).

Prior to the 1930s, literature was the social studies curriculum for school-age children (Ravitch, 1998). Today, the primary basis of the social studies curriculum in the United States is the textbook. Social studies textbooks are a major source of planning and instruction for middle school social studies teachers who rely heavily on textbook content, structure, and materials as their dominant source of information (Parker, 2005; Goodland, 2004; Gavelek, Raphael, Biondo, Wang, 2000).

The Challenge for Adolescent Readers

According to the Carnegie Foundation, nearly 50% of all incoming ninth graders in the country's public high schools cannot comprehend the text their teachers expect them to read in order to complete class assignments (Wigfield, 2004). Many students reach high school without the strategies and skills needed to become independent readers. Reading ability is central to students' learning, to their success in school, and ultimately to their success in life. Individuals that cannot read well are seriously disadvantaged.

Two acts of federal legislation, The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) have been the catalyst for accelerating the literacy expectations of administrators, educators, and parents, and students. NCLB mandates that all students have access to high quality curriculum and pedagogical practices that are grounded in research-based best practices. IDEIA mandates access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities, to the extent possible. Research suggests that inclusion of students with disabilities into general education settings is beneficial (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Daniel & King, 1997; Holloway, 2001; Waldron & McLesky, 1998). But careful attention must be given to the specific needs of students with reading/learning disabilities (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Hickman, 2003; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007; Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer & Lane, 2000; Denton, Wexler, Vaughn, & Bryan, 2008). Consequently, classroom teachers are challenged to accommodate a wide range of diverse learners in typical class settings.

The federal government has committed energies and money to the improvement of reading in the early grades (K–3). Education agendas at national, state, and local levels reflect a strong commitment to

preventing reading difficulties in young children (Taylor & Pearson, 2002, National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, 2000; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). However, educators and policy makers must recognize that literacy development does not end in the elementary years. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 1998) indicated that over 66% of eighth grade students and over 50% of students in twelfth grade perform below proficiency level in reading.

An astounding gap exists between the ability of adolescent students to comprehend the textbooks they are being asked to read. Over 8 million students in grades 4 – 12 read below grade level and 3,000 students with limited literacy skills drop out of high school every year (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006). Unacceptable proportions of middle school students are struggling to read and understand content area textbooks written above grade level.

Statement of the Problem

A recent report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), The Nation's Report Card, indicates that more than 35% of fourth-grade students in the United States lack basic reading skills (USDOE, 2003). Upon entering high school, 25% of students still lack basic reading skills; about 40% lack the skills necessary to access grade-level text across all content areas. Thirty percent lack the ability to critically examine or elaborate on what they have read. The results in Alabama mirror the national results. High school students consistently perform lowest of all on the social studies portion of the Alabama High School Graduation Exam due to gaps in the curriculum/course of study between sixth grade (last SAT 10 in social studies) and tenth grade (first AHSGE in social studies) and the test specification items on the exam.

Relevant Research

According to results from the NAEP reading exam, struggling readers are common in middle school. Forty-two percent of eighth grade students tested read at a basic level; 26% read below the basic level.

Content area textbooks are written above the assigned grade level. This is extremely problematic for students who read on or below grade level; 78% fit this description. Many struggling readers with learning disabilities at the secondary level read on a fourth or fifth grade level, but the adopted textbooks at their respective schools are written at or above grade level. The disparity between their reading ability and the required reading materials in middle school and high schools is challenging (Mastropieri, Scruggs and Graetz, 2003). Harniss, Dickson, Kinder & Hollenbeck (2001), "warn that textbooks are not designed for the below-average or even the average reader, but for the above-average reader" (p. 130). Failure is eminent without effective scaffolding.

Picture books can serve as a scaffold for adolescents in a number of ways. Picture books can be used to scaffold learning of complex concepts, bridging gaps between personal experiences and texts, making connections between students' existing literacy resources and the ones necessary for various disciplines (NCTE, 2006). Using picture books in middle school and high school classrooms can enhance all content learning (Tiedt, 2000).

Professional literature on this topic is replete with discussion of advantages to using picture books:

- Students find picture books more interesting, focused on the multiple perspectives of a single topic (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2000).
- Accessibility and student confidence can be enhanced for students who have difficulty reading or who use English as their second language (Billman, 2002; Henry & Simpson, 2001).
- Picture books can present complex ideas, making content learning easier at multiple levels (Tiedt, 2000; Henry & Simpson, 2001).
- Picture books can help students visualize the place and time of historical events and faraway lands. (McGlenn & McGlenn, 2004; Miller, 1998).
- Picture books engage reluctant readers, motivating them to tackle reading/writing assignments and much-needed reading practice (Moje, Young, Readence & Moore, 2000; Miller, 1998).

- Students empathize with characters (Levstik, 1986).
- Books help sensitize children to others, help children see solutions to problems, reduce inner turmoil, and dissolve attitudinal barriers (Turner, Broemmel, & Wooten, 2004).
- Picture books support adolescent readers by leveling the playing field, building background knowledge, fluency, offering rich language experiences – varied, precise, accurate vocabulary and figurative language (Moore, Alvermann & Hinchman, 2006).

Picture Books and Social Studies Instruction

Two quasi-experimental studies address the efficacy of using children’s literature for content area in content areas instead of traditional content area textbooks. Guzetti, Kowalinski, and McGowan (1992) used China as a theme to teach one sixth-grade class using literature relating to the theme and another class using only textbook and traditional activities from that textbook (Guzetti et. al., p. 119-120). The researchers found that there were statistically significant differences that favored the literature-based group.

Smith, Monson, and Dobson (1992) studied the effects of using historical novels in an integrated language arts approach to social studies and literacy instruction. A pretest and posttest was given to assess student’s knowledge about U.S. history. The researchers found that students in the treatment group (instruction using historical fiction novels in place of basal readers) recalled significantly more details, main ideas, and overall historical information than students using just the social studies text. Morrow and Gambrell (2000) suggest, “the use of literature-based instruction integrated into content areas deserves careful analysis” (p. 577).

Purpose, Need & Significance of the Study

The present study seeks to determine whether there is a significant difference in the performance and retention rate of students taught social studies content using content picture books as compared to students taught social studies content using a traditional textbook.

Gaps that exist for adolescent students are cause for concern in the area of social studies achievement. Can the use of pictures books in social studies instruction close help close the achievement gap? Research is needed to determine just that--whether performance and retention in inclusive social studies instruction can be enhanced by the use of picture books. Study implications can provide a model for social studies instruction and the provision of appropriate, authentic reading resources to be used in teaching social studies.

Methodology

Setting

This study was conducted in a North Alabama School district. This district serves a diverse student population including students from African American, Caucasian, Indian, and Asian backgrounds. The participating schools were chosen because they met Annual Yearly Progress for the 2005-2006 school year and the students in these schools perform similarly according to comparisons on SAT-10 achievement data on the social studies subtest grade six.

Schools

Sixth-grade students from seven middle school social studies classes participated in this study. Students from five classes (n=145) at Washington Middle School (pseudonym) and two classes (n=48) from Gompers Elementary School (pseudonym) made up the target population. The participants represented a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds and academic levels of achievement.

At Washington Middle School, 214 students were enrolled in grade 6 at the time of this study. Washington Middle School is located in a rural community and has a 6th - 8th grade configuration. There are 96 sixth grade students enrolled at Gompers Elementary School, which offers grades K-8. Gompers Elementary School is located in a small rural community. It is the smaller of the two schools in this study.

Participants

At Washington Middle School, a total of 135 students participated in pre-survey and post survey only. A total of 97 students participated in the entire study. There was a 28% mortality rate due to one class period (N= 25) not returning their pretests to the teacher and to student absences from school during data collection of one of the instruments (pretest, posttest and/or retention test). At Gompers Elementary, a total of 48 students participated in the pre-survey and post-surveys only. Thirty-eight students participated in the entire study. Two students who participated in this study received special education services. There was a 21% mortality rate due to student absences from school during data collection of one of the instruments (pretest, posttest, and/or retention test).

Two inclusion classes of sixth graders (N= 27) were participants in this study. Twelve of the twenty-seven students were identified as students receiving special education services. The remaining students in the inclusion classes were classified as struggling readers based on results from the 2005-2006 Stanford 10 test. Five other participants were students who receive special education services but were not regular members of the inclusion classes. A total of 17 special education students from Washington Middle School participated in this study.

Research Design

The mixed research design for this study included both quantitative methods to examine student achievement and retention in social studies. Independent and dependent t-tests were run to statistically analyze student performance and retention rate. The level of significance for this study was .05.

Instrumentation

Pre- and post- tests were used to examine achievement by treatment group. Pretests were administered one week prior to the intervention. Posttests were administered prior to the intervention. Both instruments were given to control and treatment groups.

A retention test was used to investigate retention rate by group. The retention test was administered three weeks after the intervention. The test was administered to both control and treatment groups.

Criterion-referenced objective tests were developed in an effort to increase content validity. Items were taken from the textbook publisher's sixth grade test data bank. In constructing the multiple-choice tests, a variety of items were incorporated (fact-recall, identifying cause and effect, drawing conclusions, sequencing, and drawing inferences). Literal, critical and inferential comprehension items were also included.

Professional Development and Instruction Overview

The intervention was implemented over an eight-week period. Prior to the intervention, the teachers were randomly assigned by the researcher to the picture book group and the control group. Mrs. Rangel's five classes at Washington Middle School made up the treatment group. Mrs. Dilworth's two classes at Gompers Elementary School comprised the control group. During the research intervention, both groups studied the same content material on immigration, drawn from the sixth grade Alabama Course of Study.

The teacher in the treatment group received professional development on using social studies content picture books as an instructional tool. A National Board Certified teacher conducted the training. The training consisted of strategies and materials on using historical fiction and non-fiction picture books as an instructional tool for adolescent students. Objectives from the Alabama Sixth Grade Social Studies Course of Study were identified and literature that met the objectives for Immigration was chosen.

One week after the administration of the social studies pretest, instruction of the unit objectives began for both the treatment and control group. Students in the control group were instructed using the state adopted textbook. The teacher used the textbook as the main source of instruction during the unit of study. Instructional strategies consisted of reading the text orally and silently, defining vocabulary, completing worksheets, role playing, and answering questions at the end of each section.

The treatment group was instructed using picture books. Instruction for the treatment group involved picture books as the main source of instruction. Instructional strategies consisted of reading the picture books orally and silently. Various pictures from each book were shown on transparencies, providing an opportunity for students to look more closely at the pictures and engage in grand conversations (Peterson

& Eeds, 1991). After reading picture books, students participated in character analysis by drawing stick figures and writing the characters thoughts, feelings, strengths, weaknesses, and perspectives. Comprehension strategy, 3-2-1, (3 important facts, 2 interesting details, and 1 possible test question), developed by Zygouris-Coe, Wiggins, & Smith (2004), was utilized. Students summarized the picture books using the GIST strategy (Frey, Fisher & Hernandez, 2003), where participants summarized picture book using exactly 20 words.

Findings

Pre-Test Means by Group

An independent sample t-test was run to determine whether there was a significant statistical difference between the mean scores of the treatment group and the control group. Data analysis yielded no statistical significance between the mean scores of the treatment group (48.86) and the control group (51.97), $t(133) = -.886$, $p > 0.05$. These results show that before the intervention, there were no gaps in performance between the control and treatment groups. Mean results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Achievement by Group

An independent sample t-test comparing group mean scores yielded $t(133) = 8.129$, $p < 0.05$. Table 2 indicates the mean performance on the posttest for the treatment group ($M = 91.36$, $SD=10.51$) was higher than the mean performance for the control group ($M=73.78$, $SD= 17.53$). The control group yielded a 21.87% increase while the treatment group yielded a 42.50% increase. There is significant statistical evidence supporting the use of picture books when teaching adolescent students social studies. Mean results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

Retention by Group

Three weeks after the completion of the Immigration Unit, both the control and treatment group were given a retention test. An independent sample t-test of retention test means yielded $t(133) = -.036$, $p = .972$. The mean retention score among students in the control group was 79.47 ($S.D = 8.21$). The mean retention score among students in the treatment group was 79.38 ($S.D. =15.07$). There was no statistical significance between the mean retention score of the control group and the mean retention score of the treatment group. Mean results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 about here

Although mean retention scores were not statistically significant, there was a meaningful difference between the mean scores of the treatment group and control group when data were disaggregated. When data were disaggregated for special education students, a dependent t-test for regular education students in the control group ($N=36$) yielded $t(35) = -2.93$, $p = .006$. The mean retention score among regular education students in the control group was 79.86 ($S.D = 8.20$). A dependent t-test for regular education students in the treatment group ($n=80$) yielded $t(79) = 9.29$, $p < 0.05$.

The mean retention rate among regular education students in the treatment group was 82.85 ($S.D. =15.07$). When data were disaggregated, results reflect an increase in the retention mean scores in both the treatment group (3.5%) and the control group (.4%). Means results are seen in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4 about here

Table 5 about here

Discussion

For the past eighty years, educators and experts in social studies have recommended methods that go beyond text and teacher-centered instruction to engage students actively and imaginatively in social studies (Dunn, 2000 p. 132). This study indicates that picture books can provide such a method and be used as an effective instructional tool with adolescent students.

In an effort to bridge the gaps adolescent students face, they must be given the opportunity to read text everyday that taps their interests and expands their knowledge of the world in a meaningful way. The results of this study indicate that this could be done through the use of picture books.

Results indicate that children's literature increases students' achievement regardless of their academic placement. As today's classrooms become increasingly more diverse with the inclusion of special education students and English language learners, it becomes necessary for teachers to build background knowledge. This diverse population of students needs more than textbooks; it needs libraries and classrooms that are equipped with a wide variety of printed materials that covers the range of abilities and interests of adolescents (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000).

Historically, social studies has been stereotyped as simply information and facts or name and dates. The teachers' instructional practice has been to stand in front of the class spouting facts; the students' role has been to memorize those facts. This can be summed up in one word – boring (Zhao and Hoge, 2005). However, study results suggest that students' attitude toward social studies can change when instruction incorporates picture books. Students using picture books looked forward to social studies. The social studies content became more meaningful to the students, and students developed an increased interest and desire to learn social studies content. When students enjoy reading, they read more. This is consistent with other research which indicates that motivation to read is an integral part of re-engaging adolescent, reluctant readers (Allen, 1995; Taylor, Hasselbring and Williams 2001).

Further Research

This results of this study suggest numerous areas for further research. First, the duration of this study was eight weeks. Replication of the study could extend the duration of the study for an entire semester or school year to discover the achievement and retention of adolescents over several units of study. Second, the focus of the research on the effectiveness of social studies picture book instruction. No consideration was given to differences in academic performance or retention rate by demographic category (i.e., special education, English language learners).

Replication of the study could examine performance, retention, and attitudes by demographic variables. Third, this study was design to specifically investigate the effectiveness of social studies instruction using picture books. No data was collected to investigate whether initial professional development for the teacher of the treatment group impacted student performance. Further study could examine the impact of professional development on study results.

Conclusion

Picture books can play an important role in the academic success of adolescent students during inclusive social studies instruction. Classroom teachers must give careful consideration to instructional materials which engage students meaningfully. Adolescent students, in particular, can be successful in social studies when given an opportunity to see history and its connection to their lives through beautifully illustrated picture books. Such innovation allows educators to bridge curricular gaps by connecting English language arts with social studies.

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Table 1. Social Studies Pretest Means by Group

Group	N	Pretest Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Treatment	97	48.86	18.63	1.89
Control	38	51.97	17.53	2.84

N=135
t(133) = -.866, p = .377

Table 2. Social Studies Posttest Means by Group

Group	N	Posttest Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Treatment	97	91.36	10.51	1.06
Control	38	73.78	13.09	2.12

N=135
t(133) = -8.129, p = <0.05

Table 3. Social Studies Retention Test Means by Group

Group	N	Retention Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Treatment	97	79.38	15.07	1.53
Control	38	79.47	8.21	1.33

N=135
t(133) = -.036, p = .972

**Table 4. Social Studies Retention Test Means by Group and Placement
Regular Education**

Group	Retention w/ Education	Mean Special	Std. Deviation	Retention w/o education	mean special	Std. Deviation
Treatment	79.38		15.07	82.85		12.46
Control	79.47		8.21	79.86		8.20

Treatment Group t(79) = 9.29, p < 0.05

Control Group g(35) = -2.93, p = .006

Note: Treatment Group N=97 with special education students and n=80 without special education students. Control Group N=38 with special education students and n=36 without special education.

**Table 5. Social Studies Retention Test Means by Group and Placement
Special Education**

Group	Retention w/ Education	Mean Regular	Std. Deviation	Retention w/o education	mean Regular	Std. Deviation
Treatment	79.38		15.07	63.05		15.89
Control	79.47		8.21	72.50		6.36

Treatment Group $t(16) = 4.25, p = .001$

Control Group $t(1) = -3.50, p = .177$

Note: Treatment Group N=97 with regular education students and n=17 without regular education students. Control Group N=38 with regular education students and n=2 without regular education.

Appendix: Picture Books--Annotated Bibliography

Bierman, C. (1998). *Journey to Ellis Island: How my father came to America.*

Toronto, Ontario: Madison Press Books.

This story is about an eleven-year-old boy named Julius Weinstein. With his mother and sister, they, escape German persecution in Russia and board a ship sailing to America. Their journey brings the reader from the 1920's to the 1990's. Yehuda, the author's father, must prove that he is strong enough to be allowed to enter New York. He does this by running around Ellis Island not once but twice!

Hest, A. (1997). *When Jessie came across the sea.* Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

This story is about a 13-year-old girl's journey from a shtetl in Eastern Europe to America. As Jessie describes her journey, young readers experience the hardships and triumphs of coming to America.

Levine, E. (1993). *If your name was changed at Ellis Island.* New York: Scholastic.

The introduction of this nonfiction book explains that it tells the stories of the immigrants who came through New York Harbor from the 1880s until 1914, when the great migrations ended. The book is written in a question and answer format, beginning with "What was Ellis Island?" and continues with questions and answers concerning the reasons people chose to come to America, the ocean trip, the processes at Ellis Island, and many other pertinent issues.

Thompson, G. (2003). *We came through Ellis Island: The immigrant adventures of Emma Markowitz.* Washington, DC: National Geographic Society.

This story is about Emma Markowitz, a Jew who fled Russia with her family in 1893. The story is told through Emma's letters to her grandparents back in Russia and diary snippets from all members of the family, each providing a glimpse of the hope and despair that characterized immigrant life in America in the early 20th century.

Yin. (2001). *Coolies.* New York: Puffin Books.

This story is about two brothers who came to America from China and helped build the transcontinental railroad. The story begins and ends in the present time, framed as a story told by a grandmother to her grandson while they honor their ancestors during the Ching Ming Festival.