

Increasing Instructional Time in Social Studies Through Thematic Units

*Terry L. Lovelace, Barbara Crossland
Northwest Missouri State University*

Introduction

Most people agree with the concept that children are our future. This begs the question, how can we best help our children to prepare for their futures? Many state departments of education appear to believe the key for success for students lies in their ability to score well on achievement tests, particularly in the areas of communication arts and mathematics. This is evidenced by many school districts' reaction to mandated assessments in reading and mathematics required by the 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Because NCLB focuses on communication arts and mathematics, programs such as social studies, physical education and the arts are being reduced or eliminated from many elementary schools' curricula. Sri Shapiro (1998) of the University of North Carolina in Greensboro wrote, "This vulgar notion that good teaching is reducible to higher scores on the test is surely the most limited of ways to think about the nature and purpose of teaching (51)."

The Executive Director of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, Quentin Lawson, stated, "It's clear to any educator that over the past 10 to 15 years there has been a major constriction of some very important subjects that are essential to our culture and general intellect" (Zamosky, 2008). This narrowing of the curriculum has been "exacerbated and almost legalized, or moralized, as a result of No Child Left Behind" (Zamosky, 2008). One of the detrimental effects of standardized testing is this narrowing of the curriculum.

According to Tanner (2008), "Social studies takes a back seat" . . . and ". . . is so unimportant it is scheduled less than gym (p. 42)." Cuban (1991) noted that social studies is often taught in the afternoon, when energy and attention levels are low while communication arts and mathematics are usually taught in the morning. This lack of attention is compounded by a decrease in teaching time devoted to the social studies.

A nationwide survey was conducted in 2005 to evaluate the impact of NCLB on the curriculum of elementary schools. After four years of implementation, 33% of school districts surveyed reported decreased time spent teaching social studies in order to increase time spent teaching reading and mathematics (Rentner, 2006). Two years later the Center for Education Policy (2007) reported that 44% of districts surveyed nationwide reported cutting instructional time from social studies (Zamosky, 2008). In a national survey of elementary teachers conducted at the Center for Survey Research and Analysis (2006), 31% of fifth-grade teachers and 63% of second-grade teachers reported teaching social studies three hours or less each week. Primary students reportedly received instruction in social studies less than one hour per week.

In this climate of high-stakes testing and accountability, social studies is often marginalized in the elementary school curriculum. "Because social studies is not included in the testing agenda in district and state standardized tests, elementary teachers are choosing to spend time teaching other skills that will boost test scores" (Burstein, Hutton, and Curtis 2006,15). "Findings published by the Council for Basic Education (CBE) revealed that 30% of elementary school principals surveyed said their schools have reduced the amount of time spent on social studies instruction, and 50% of principals in schools with

large minorities reported decreased time for social studies instruction" (Burroughs, Croce, & Webeck, 2005, 14).

Studies show that teachers spend a large portion of the school day preparing students for standardized testing (Jones, 1999). Eighty percent of teachers surveyed spent more than 20% of total instructional time in test preparation. This time for test preparation is time taken from regular instruction. Rep. William Goodling (R-Pa) put it aptly when he stated, "You cannot fatten cattle by weighing them" (Neil, 1998, 45-46). Many educators contend that we are setting children up for academic failure by limiting social studies instruction (Zamosky, 2008).

What is not being tested (social studies) has been shortchanged in order to provide remediation for those areas under state and federal assessment scrutiny. There is little surprise that students' attitude towards social studies has become apathetic at best. Assessment truly does drive instruction!

The elementary years of education serve as a foundation for academic success. Those early experiences also form the foundation for civic participation in a democratic society later in life. A principle goal for public schools has always been civic development (Carnegie Corp & CIRCLE, 2003). Social studies are a critical curriculum area that covers civic development (Chapin, 2006). Cathy Roller, director of research and policy with the International Reading Association stated, "We expect the public schools to educate citizens. Social studies are a major player in that arena and are integral to teaching a sense of civic duty and how all of the important things about a democratic society work" (Zamosky, 2008). While other curriculum areas and classroom/school climate are factors in civic development, social studies is a key curricular area. G.Thieman, president of the National Council for the Social Studies, stated, "Democracy is not a natural state. It has to be taught; it just doesn't happen. Just because you were born in a democracy doesn't mean you're going to die in a democracy" (Zamosky, 2008).

NCLB's obsession for increasing time-on-task and achievement in the areas of communication arts and mathematics has resulted in the neglect of other areas equally critical to the development of young citizens. A representative of the Center on Education Policy (CEP) said, "NCLB has torn apart our social studies curriculum. We are raising tomorrow's leaders and it's forcing us to fill their heads with math facts that do not make them better leaders or help students make choices" (Rentner et al., 2006, 10).

The narrowing of the elementary curriculum and the detrimental effects of NCLB on social studies instruction are difficult issues to address. Through action research and reflective practices, classroom teachers Anders, Dennis and Warren came to approach social studies not as a "discrete subject but rather as an inherent part of the curriculum and a necessity for life" (Christensen et al., 2001, 207). An interdisciplinary approach is especially important when reading instruction overshadows other content to the extent that teachers "may sacrifice teaching their students the foundations of citizenship" (Hinde, 2005, 105). Conceptual thematic units that focus on social studies content, reading, writing, math, science, etc. meet the needs of students on different levels through performance based tasks that allow for differentiated instruction and reflect a shift from memorization to higher level thinking.

Not only have educational reforms resulted in less time for social studies instruction, classroom populations are becoming more diverse as the number of students with disparate learning needs increases. Inclusion has become a fact of life. Curriculum integration through thematic units is one of the biggest time savers; it allows for the integration of subject areas and different learning styles (Hawkins, 1997).

Thematic social studies units based on the 10 themes identified by the National Council for the Social Studies (Schneider et al., 1994) allow teachers to integrate abstract, complex ideas into the elementary curriculum. A well-designed thematic unit weaves social studies instruction with content from other curriculum areas, problem solving activities, and activities that tap higher level thinking skills, such as completing graphic organizers, constructing dioramas, reading high-interest trade books in addition to the textbook, acting out readers theater scripts, writing and reciting a monologue based on a biography of a famous person during a living museum presentation, etc.

While there is limited research related to how teachers integrate thematic units into existing curricula (Merryfield, 1993), we do know that teacher's beliefs and life experiences strongly influence what they decide to teach in the classroom (Haney, Czerniak, & Lumpe, 1996). Zollers, Henderson, and Savage

(1998) described the dramatic improvement in standardized test scores at a Boston public school. Though students' scores once ranked near the bottom of all elementary schools in the city, the student body now ranks in the top third, the attendance rate is well above average for the city, and the waiting list for entering some of the grade levels exceeds five times the space available. One key element in this school success story is thematic units that extend literature and writing activities across the curriculum.

One example of a thematic unit culminating in a performance-based task is presented by Michael Whelan (2004). Each middle school student must complete four major interrelated assignments during the unit: researching and writing a history term paper, creating a museum exhibit, writing a historical newspaper that is included in the exhibit, and making an oral presentation about the exhibit on the day the museum opens to the public. In addition, students write a reflective paper known as the "So what?" piece in which they justify why someone today should care about the topic of their exhibits, each of which is based on something that happened long ago. Rather than the sage on the stage, the social studies teacher becomes a guide on the side. Students flow from one classroom to another as they follow their own work agendas, working independently, with small groups, or with the teacher/consultant as they prepare for the Expo.

Compacting the curriculum by administering pretests at the beginning of a thematic unit allows for enrichment and acceleration that meets the needs of gifted students while increasing instructional time for social studies (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992). Results of the pretests can help a teacher differentiate assignments within the unit and assign students to appropriate cooperative learning groups. Instead of writing the answers to the questions at the end of the chapter in the social studies textbook, students who have demonstrated mastery could conduct oral histories to learn more about World War II. This task targets communication arts skills as well as social studies content. Cooperative learning groups can address the needs of advanced learners as well as students who know less about the social studies content. Authentic assessment can augment traditional teacher-made tests; portfolios, rubrics, and checklists are effective devices for evaluation of activities and products from conceptual thematic units (Riley, 1997).

Integrating social studies through literacy and children's literature is a powerful strategy. McCarty (2007) stated that multiculturally-themed tradebooks provide multiple advantages. Multicultural trade books allow children to "get to know" a person from another culture while textbooks tend to teach in generalities. Trade books also tend to be more reader-friendly than textbooks.

The inclusion of social studies trade books in thematic units can help overcome inherent problems in students' comprehension of social studies textbooks such as

- High readability
- Assumptions of unrealistic levels of prior knowledge from readers
- Strategies for learning from these expository texts and references for enhancing understanding of various concepts were either very limited or missing altogether (Kincade & Pruitt, 1996).

Many resources are available to help teachers to integrate social studies through tradebooks. Since 1972 an annual bibliography of K-12 trade books has been published each May in the "Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People" insert in *Social Education*. NCSS committee members who read, review, and choose trade books worthy of inclusion in classrooms write the annotations for this supplement (McCarty, 2007). The International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council cosponsor Children's Choices, an annotated list of recommended books that appears each year in the October issue of *The Reading Teacher*. Additional resources include *Children's Literature in Social Studies: Teaching to the Standards* (Krey, 1998) and *Linking Literature with Life: The NCSS Standards and Children's Literature for the Middle Grades* (Sandmann & Ahern, 2002).

Palmer and Stewart (2003) note the tremendous increase in the number of nonfiction trade books published during the last five years. Many children prefer to read "learning" books rather than "story" books; the availability of such books and the wide range of topics, high quality illustrations, readability levels, and engaging formats make expository reading more enticing for elementary school students. Incorporating expository text in thematic units provides opportunities for students to engage in authentic literacy tasks. Pearson and Duke (2002) found that students who learn to use the organization and

structure of informational texts are better able to comprehend and retain the information found in them. As elementary teachers blend reading and social studies instruction, students only acquire important social studies concepts but also learn reading strategies that help them read and retain information from content area textbooks. Pairing thematic instruction with high-quality information trade books such as those listed in the Notable Books list, and the possibility for engaging instruction in social studies, math, and science increases (Palmer and Stewart, 2003). By sixth grade more than 75% of students' reading demands in school are with expository and nonfictional materials (Moss & Hendershot, 2002). Incorporating expository trade books in social studies thematic units seems to be a viable option for increasing instructional time in social studies as well as content area reading skills.

Incorporating social studies methods such as inquiry charts in thematic units may help students develop the "need to know", a powerful motivator for learning social studies content and reading to learn. Tierney and Pearson (1992) reported people read and retain information from expository texts because they have a personal need to know rather than a desire to master a body of facts (Tierney & Pearson, 1992). As students develop standards-based inquiry questions about history, geography, government, etc., they become actively engaged in reading to find the answers to their questions.

Pairing fiction and nonfiction books in thematic units allows elementary teachers to increase instructional time in the social studies while increasing students' reading achievement. Pairing *Children of the Dust Bowl* (Stanley, 1992) and *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1999), a Newbery Medal winner, as core readings in a social studies thematic unit about the Dust Bowl provides sixth-grade students with opportunities to read fiction and nonfiction text that presents important concepts in social studies.

Combining paired narrative and expository tradebooks helps build students' engagement in learning. *Fever 1793* (Anderson, 2000), can be paired with Murphy's *An American Plague* (2003) in a thematic unit that addressed social studies (American history), science (diagnosis and treatment of yellow fever), communication arts (writing a readers theater script), and math (creating a bar graph showing the cyclic pattern in yellow fever epidemics). The multicultural aspects of the historical events of the plague (blacks were mistakenly believed to be immune to the plague and volunteered to nurse the sick) provides opportunities to discuss the epidemic from different perspectives. Teacher-planned literacy activities in this thematic unit can ensure that children focus on the salient parts of these books that reinforce specific social studies concepts such as viewing events from others' perspectives.

As elementary teachers incorporate social studies instruction in communication arts, they can also implement the latest teaching strategies based on best practices: cooperative learning, concept mapping, integrating content, discovery learning, "hands-on" manipulatives, and higher-order thinking skills--practices that researchers demonstrate are successful in the classroom (Casas, 2004).

Incorporating reading methods such as literature circles in thematic units provides students with opportunities to interact with both informational and narrative text. As students write about the connections they make with these books, discuss their responses in Think-Pair-Share groups and two-column journals, and compare different authors' interpretations of the same information, they increase time spent studying social studies content while practicing mandated language arts skills.

Whelan (2004) emphasizes that ensuring success in this type of thematic instruction is based on giving the classroom teachers planning time together. He urges schools to organize planning time so that grade-level teachers working with the same students can plan together.

Teaching an effective integrated curriculum in elementary settings begins at the university level (Brewer & Brown, 2009). Methods instructors are responsible for teaching social studies content in general education classes as well as instructing teacher candidates in social studies methods that address state and national standards. As they study social studies pedagogy, teacher candidates should practice integrating curriculum as they design thematic units. The focus on writing thematic units strengthens university methods courses and prepares teacher candidates for effective curriculum integration in their own classrooms.

Brewer and Brown (2009) emphasize the need for social studies methods professors to provide quality examples of thematic units that include detailed lesson plans. The standards-based lesson plans should demonstrate strong connections between the content areas. Examples of inappropriate integration of

content areas should also be demonstrated, especially lesson plans and units that are biased and inaccurate. Training in determining content validity in thematic units is also important.

Therefore, preparing preservice teachers for today's elementary school classrooms requires that teacher education programs introduce these practices to their students early on in their training. Results of research studies indicate that when teacher candidates write interdisciplinary thematic units, they realize that there are no lines separating content areas (Wolfinger & Stockard, 1997). Writing a thematic unit is an important objective in the social studies methods course for elementary education majors at Northwest Missouri State University. Teacher candidates follow these steps:

- Review the Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) from the Missouri curriculum.
- Review Bloom's Taxonomy and practice writing ABCD behavioral objectives (Mager, 1984).
- Review the Hunter Lesson Design (Hunter, 1994).
- Select a topic based on the social studies GLEs.
- Write an introduction to the unit that includes a rationale for teaching the content, the Big Idea for the unit, ABCD behavioral objectives congruent with GLEs from social studies and other content areas, web or concept map showing the content that will be covered in the unit.
- Write a detailed Hunter Lesson Plan, annotated bibliography of fiction and nonfiction trade books, webquests, plans for a bulletin board, and teacher-made test.
- Present the unit to the class.

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