

LITERATURE-BASED SOCIAL STUDIES: RESTORING ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION UNDER THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

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The advantages of utilizing trade books for instruction offers teachers an alternative to traditional, textbook-based instruction and is a clear choice for bringing social studies back into the elementary classroom.

Introduction

Elementary social studies education appears to be on the verge of extinction. Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the amount of time spent on social studies has decreased dramatically, “with the most profound decline noticed in the elementary grades” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2008). The Center on Education Policy’s (2008) analysis of 2007 survey data on the impact of NCLB indicate that a large majority of districts reported increased emphasis and instructional time allocated to English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, while more than half (53%) of the districts that reported cutting instructional time in other subjects cut social studies instruction by at least 75 minutes per week. In many schools, this could easily mean that social studies instruction has been dropped all together. According to Zamosky (2008), this trend is most evident in low performing schools, where teachers and administrators are feeling the pressure to raise the levels of student competency to meet the demands of NCLB high stakes testing. It’s hard to believe that a situation such as this has evolved in a nation that values its role as a leader in the global community and prides itself on its history and system of government (NCSS, 2008).

What can teachers do to insure that social studies instruction and learning remain a vital part of the landscape of elementary education? We can place social studies content and procedural knowledge at the core of instruction by utilizing a literature-based approach to social studies instruction during the extensive quantity of time dedicated to English and language arts instruction. Instead of making random literature selections for reading and writing instruction, we must make a conscious selection of materials that will provide opportunities for students to develop the historical and critical thinking skills necessary for participatory citizenship. The National Council for Social Studies’ annual list of Notable Trade Books makes it easy to locate quality literature

selections, which deal with a variety of historical eras, social and political issues, economics, geography, and multicultural topics. In addition to the obvious advantage of the purposeful inclusion of social studies content into English language arts instruction, utilizing trade books, like those identified by NCSS, offer advantages that traditional, textbook-based instruction does not offer.

Advantages of Utilizing Trade Books for Literature-Based Social Studies Instruction

First, trade books have been found to be better written than texts, have a more coherent structure, and are better able to capitalize on students' natural curiosity (Edgington, 1998). Literature enriches social studies content with, "detailed descriptions, complex characters, and melodic passages" (McGowan, Erickson, & Neufeld, 1996, p. 203) that make the content more memorable, allow the reader to construct understandings in powerful ways, and hold great potential for promoting citizenship learning. Van Middendorp and Lee (1994) conclude that while trivial facts that students encounter in their textbooks are easily forgotten, a story belongs to them forever.

Second, trade books are offered at a variety of reading levels and can be utilized in a manner, which allows for better individualization of instruction. Offering a wide variety of trade books in the classroom "allows students the opportunity to read comfortably in materials consistent with their abilities" (McGowan & Guzzetti, 1991, p. 17). This enables the below grade level reader the opportunity to learn important social studies content, while it allows the more advanced reader to learn content and find challenge and motivation in books written at a higher reading level.

Third, trade books take students beyond the endless facts they face in their textbooks and allow them to learn content with greater depth and understanding. Literature deals with the affective dimension of human experience, providing the feel of the situation, and giving the reader clues as to how to react emotionally about historical events and people. The National Standards for History (1996) suggests that, "Historical narratives have the power to disclose the intentions of the people involved, the difficulties they encountered, and the complex world in which such historical figures actually lived" (p. 63). It is the stories of individuals that bring history to life and provide a context for deeper analysis of historical topics. Erickson, McGowan, and Neufeld (1996) suggest that students form strong bonds with story characters that have faced daunting challenges, and that this bond often motivates learners to uncover more information, "positively influencing their historical understanding in the process" (p. 205). Cline and Taylor (1978)

and Swibold (1983) provide a thoughtful summary of the potential of using a literature-based approach to social studies instruction:

It appears then that knowing about the past, as history textbooks enable one to do, is not quite the same as understanding and feeling about it. Caught up in another time and place, readers unwittingly become involved interpreters rather than passive receivers because the content is so alive and memorable. A well-written book, whose theme becomes "real" to the reader caught up in it, can often shed light on problems and relationships in a way that no textbook can do (Cited in Fuhler, 1991, p. 235).

Additionally, utilizing trade books for social studies instruction creates opportunities for students to recognize multiple perspectives, evaluate the merit of particular interpretations of events, and determine the reliability and authenticity of sources. When reading materials present conflicting points of view, it not only increases students' interests in the topic under study, but also encourages students to make historical judgments. Moreover, trade books allow for the treatment of contemporary issues that are unlikely to be covered in the social studies textbook.

Classroom Context

The advantages of utilizing trade books for instruction offers teachers an alternative to traditional, textbook-based instruction and is a clear choice for bringing social studies back into the elementary classroom. However, it is important to recognize that the context in which history is presented, examined, and discussed is a critical factor in students' historical understanding (Freeman and Levstik, 1988; Levstik 1989, 1990) and development of critical thinking skills. Classroom environments, which are student-centered and where learning is both personal and collaborative will encourage student participation and provide opportunities for critical thinking (Collins, 1993). Personal learning can occur when students are asked to formulate questions prior to, during, and after reading. Teachers can ask students to respond to narratives through a variety of writing activities which ask them to go beyond what they have read to experience the text in personal ways (Collins, 1993). Meaningful reading experiences accompanied by written critical reflection enable students to think and feel beyond their existing understandings and are the best way for students to create new meaning and to establish their own viewpoints (Wolk, 2003).

Providing opportunities for collaborative learning is an equally important aspect of social studies instruction. "Since language is used to interpret

experience” (Houser, 1999, p. 214), it is important to allow students opportunities to talk about, discuss, and debate the issues raised in narratives. Wolk (2003) believes, “not allowing children to engage in open discussion on important issues and topics is the most detrimental void in schools” (p. 104). It is critical to allow students to discuss what they have read so they can become more knowledgeable about the content, have the opportunity to hear different opinions and perspectives, and learn to form their own opinions on social and political issues. Classrooms that are rich in student talk and discourse and value the knowledge that students bring with them to the classroom enable students to think critically and reflectively about topics and issues raised in the narratives and in the classroom.

In addition, research projects based on literature selections, which offer both personal and collaborative learning, allow students to begin their research with some background knowledge of their topic, questions and assumptions they feel need verification, and a greater ability to formulate a research question (Nadeau, 1994). Students learn to locate both primary and secondary sources, evaluate those sources for relevance and quality, organize the information they have gathered as well as their own ideas, and present their findings orally or in writing. These are the skills that are essential to participatory democratic citizenship. In addition, teachers can help students recognize that reading, writing, and public speaking are the most direct ways that citizens can express themselves and participate in public life (Stotsky, 1992).

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