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Integration of Project-based Learning in Elementary Social Studies

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In this age of high stakes testing, we must be vigilant to deliver innovative and intentional social studies content in the elementary classroom. The marginalization of elementary social studies in the United States is a well-documented phenomenon (Strachan S. , 2015). Levstik (2008) states

> pressure to devote more and more time to reading and mathematics combined with less concern with social studies content on some administrators' and teachers' parts may well result in little more than a few reading lessons with social studies themes (P. 54).

A historical read-aloud to appease the social studies does not provide our students with enough experiences to create democratic citizens capable of interpretation, synthesis, and analysis.

The National Council for the Social Studies recommends that elementary teachers devote 20% of their academic time to social studies instruction (Strachan, 2015). The time devoted to social studies falls short of the recommendation in many classrooms according to survey and observational studies (Center on Educational Policy, 2008; Fitchett, Heafner & Lambert, 2014; Good et al., 2010; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012). Regardless of the time teachers have to invest in social studies, to prepare students to take care of themselves, and become involved in society, it is vital to teach meaningful social studies. According to Hoge (2016) school has two jobs, the first is to prepare the individual to take care of him or her self and the second is to provide instruction designed to prepare individuals for their essential involvement in civil society.

Meaningful Social Studies

The ability to take care of oneself and to be involved in civil society are intertwined. Dewey claimed the purpose of education is a democratization of society to encourage valuing of others (Dewey, Democracy and education, 1916). I believe these two goals can be met through the interrogation of content and incorporation of project-based learning in elementary classrooms, to create purposeful and powerful learning experiences.

The purpose of elementary social studies is to enable students to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world (NCSS, 2017). Social studies lessons that feature student-led activities provide

opportunities to investigate issues, analyze documents, and synthesize information. These skills are vital to the development of informed decision-making citizens. Instruction should provide opportunities to develop skills for productive problem solving and decision making (NCSS, 2017). Students should be able to make connections and expand their knowledge and viewpoints through social studies lessons (NCSS, 2017). Dewey argued that people learn from sharing experiences with others and hearing about their lives (1916). When we provide students with a task that requires them to hear the viewpoints of others we are encouraging social growth. Expanding students' experiences presents an opportunity to appreciate similarities and differences of others.

Social studies should provide authentic instruction that involves students directly in the analysis and interpretation of historical information. According to Barton (2001), teachers should help students formulate historical questions, gather information for a variety of sources, evaluate authenticity and reliability of sources, compare conflicting accounts, take the perspective of people in the past, and connect pieces of information into coherent explanations. To incorporate the skills Barton identifies, it becomes essential to integrate social studies in other content areas due to time restraints and to create a more powerful interconnected learning experience.

Integration

NCSS (2017) has acknowledged that integrating elementary social studies into multiple content areas eases the competition for instructional time. The integration process provides a way for teachers to spend a higher proportion of the school day on the development of academic skills that are tested while infusing social studies content. There is a fear that this process could devalue the relevance of social studies. NCSS (2017) articulated this fear by warning of the potential of social studies becoming a grab bag of random experiences. Through purposeful integration that upholds the importance of social studies themes and the development of a logical sequence an effective form of integration can emerge. Effective integration according to Parker (2005) is

> a curriculum approach that purposefully draws together knowledge, perspectives, and methods of inquiry from more than one discipline to develop a more powerful understanding of a central idea, issue, person, or event. The purpose is not to eliminate the individual disciplines but to use them in combination (P. 452-453).

Alleman, Knighton, and Brophy (2010) discuss curriculum design through the development of big ideas as a method to prevent the social studies grab bag effect. Building off the work of Taba (1962), the curriculum is designed around major concepts that encourage discussion to develop. It is important to look beyond the standards and think of big ideas, "ask yourself what is the point" (Alleman, Knighton, & Brophy, 2010, p. 28)? Alleman, Knighton, and Brophy (2010) suggest four steps in developing big ideas.

1. Acknowledge that a shift from isolated facts to be memorized to networks of connected ideas would be desirable.

2. Commit to this style of structuring your teaching thoughts and lessons.

3. Learn your curriculum.

4. Review the content you teach in a given unit. Ask yourself, "What is the point? Identify the big ideas before you plan. What is the underlying theme? What is the content in the text an example of?" (P. 28)

Once you identify a big idea the lesson/unit plan can be constructed with the incorporation of the Common Core Standards, the C3 Framework, and state standards. According to Berson and Berson (2013) the implementation of the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*, teachers across the United States are expanding their integrated approach to social studies instruction and literacy studies. Many social studies researchers argue that integration with the language arts has the potential to make more time for elementary social studies as well as foster rich learning in all the social studies disciplines when teachers use reading, writing, and discussion as tools to support content goals (Brophy & Alleman, 2008). According to Common Core Standards, the C3 Framework, and state standards, students benefit when subject areas are not taught in isolation but are integrated into meaningful ways to help students acquire content knowledge and develop skills to help them become successful and responsible citizens (Herczog, 2012).

Curriculum integration that focuses on the development of big ideas and supports them with standards is advantageous to the learner. This type of integration advances the rigor and relevance of classroom learning by making the curriculum more meaningful to students' lives (Hargreaves & Moore, 2000). Hinde states, "subjects are brought together so that students can internalize a complex idea" (Hinde, 2005, p. 106). The ability to introduce complex problems

or issues to the class makes the content more authentic. The authentic tasks increase student participation and enjoyment in the class. Students had more positive attitudes towards learning and experienced significant advantages when teachers employed integrated methods (McBee, 2000).

The effective integration of curriculum requires preparation on the part of the teacher. Knowledge of the various disciplines is fundamental to effective interdisciplinary teaching (Hinde, 2005). When teachers and curriculum planners develop content with big ideas as the initial point of development, implement standards that support the big idea, and incorporate student-led pedagogy effective integration can occur. Hinde notes "when skilled, knowledgeable teachers employ integrated methods, student achievement is equal to, or better than, that of students who are taught in the traditional separate subject approach" (2005, p. 107). Integrated methods require a pedagogy that supports integration to be effective. I believe project-based learning is an effective method to engage students in the integrated curriculum.

Project-based Learning

Project-based learning has become increasingly popular in schools across the country (Larmer, 2018; Lo, 2018). As teachers look for new methods to maximize time and effectiveness project-based learning has become intriguing. In the research of Cintang, Setyowati, and Handayani (2018) six challenges to the implementation of project-based learning in elementary schools surfaced. The issues of concern were students' capabilities, discipline, time constraints, equipment, inequality, and the cost of implication (Cintang, Setyowati, & Handayani, 2018).

One of the fears brought to the attention of Cintang, Setyowati, and Handayani (2018) was the ability of the student to be able to complete a task with the complexity associated with project-based learning. Burner (1960) confronted this assumption by claiming that education everywhere is the same and through the process of scaffolding any subject could be taught. In addition to scaffolding, the teacher could familiarize the students with completed projects to help the students conceptualize a finished product (Cintang, Setyowati, & Handayani, 2018). Teachers who model tasks and make connections to concepts will provide students with the necessary support to be successful.

The ability to manage the classroom was another challenge to the implementation (Cintang et al., 2018). Dewey acknowledged that a traditional teacher can keep order in the classroom, but experiential learning looks different

(1938). Experiential learning is the process of learning through doing and reflecting on that experience, essential steps in project-based learning (Felicia, 2011). A classroom that has implemented project-based learning often looks busy, loud, and disorganized. This is a result of freedom being given to the students to direct their investigation to construct knowledge. In project-based learning, the role of the teacher changes from director to facilitator (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). The teacher must use their time to assist students in the learning journey not exercise authoritative control.

Time constraints were the third challenge teachers communicated in the implantation of project-based learning (Cintang et al., 2018). Through the integration of social studies into content areas such as reading and writing, the strain for time would be reduced. This integration is logical and Hagan and Simpson (2016) claim there are frequent demands to integrate social studies and literacy. The integration of multiple content areas could help teachers utilize time more effectively, making it more likely social studies is part of the daily curriculum. If young learners of this nation are to become effective participants in a democratic society, then social studies must be an essential part of the curriculum in each of the elementary years (NCSS, 2009). Infusing social studies in multiple content areas provides an opportunity to engage students in authentic tasks that led to memorable learning experiences. Larmer (2018) claims students want to learn actively and through this process it leads to better retention of knowledge and skills.

In the research of Cintang, Setyowati, and Handayani (2018) they identified two other challenges to implementing project-based learning. Teachers were worried about the cost of materials, but this issue was remedied through the introduction of project ideas that were budget friendly or the acquisition of materials through the school budget (Cintang, Setyowati, & Handayani, 2018). The inequality of students and their ability to complete tasks also concerned teachers (Cintang, Setyowati, & Handayani, 2018). This fear can be addressed by grouping the students in ways that would pair students with different strengths, so each student has an opportunity to have success. It is also important to note the process of project-based learning is where knowledge is acquired and skills are utilized. A finished product may not be required to achieve the goal of the task.

Sample Lesson

To provide understanding of how project-based learning can be used as an instructional strategy that fosters the incorporation of multiple content areas, I

have provided a sample lesson plan aligned to fourth-grade curriculum. The big idea for this project is understanding local history. The big idea covers two themes identified by the National Council for the Social Studies, culture and people, places, and environment (NCSS, 2018). A primary source viewing activity is the entry event for the project. According to Barton (2001) the use of historical photographs is a practical way of engaging young children in authentic historical inquiry. Photocopies of *Two Seminoles in a canoe at bow of an unidentified steamboat* (image below) should be distributed to each student in the class (Florida Memory, n.d.). The image can be found on the Florida Memory

State Library and Archives of Florida website https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/149189. Each student will work with a partner to play hide and seek using this primary source. The first student should select a person from the image and provide a series of sensory clues to help their partner identify the selected person (Lederle, 2013). A student might say, "I am standing on a boat, I have a hat on, my arms are crossed, who am I?" Each partner should take turns playing the game. This strategy draws students' attention to specific elements in the photograph enhancing their ability to analyze it.

After the viewing of the photograph the students should develop questions about the people in the image. The teacher should encourage the students to discuss what they know about the Seminoles and describe the history of their people through the completion of a KWL chart. The topics students identify in the

wonder column of the KWL chart can be used as points of investigation to answer the questions who are the Seminoles and why did they migrate? The students' goal will be to investigate and present information to the class that answers their questions. Students' projects will differ as they seek answers to elements of wonder they identified in the construction of the KWL chart. Students who can peruse answers to questions they have raised can lead to higher levels of motivation (Grant, 2011). As the students explore different ways to describe who the Seminoles are such as how they dress and what clothes they wear will lead to presentations that cover a variety of topics. Selwyn states "I want students to be excited about learning, and to gain skills and confidence in their ability to pose and answer their own questions" (2011, P. 280). This project-based learning task provides that opportunity.

According to Parker (2018), engagement in a topic should come first to inspire a desire within the student to learn more. Through the process of creating a need to know the student becomes invested in the learning task. Larmer and Mergendoller (2010) identify the need to know as the first step in the creation of project-based learning tasks.

Answering a driving question that is linked to core content knowledge is the second element (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). This element requires the ability of the teacher to make sure the topics of investigation the students will develop on the KWL chart are complex enough to cover the themes related to the big idea. I suggest encouraging the investigation of topics like beliefs, behaviors, and ways of life.

Providing students with a voice and a choice is the third element (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). Encouraging each student to participate in constructing the KWL chart numerous ideas can be generated then students could have a choice of topics to explore as the teacher is mindful of the creation of appropriate groups.

Through the investigation of multiple topics, the students will have the ability to develop 21st-century skills such as the use of technology and communication (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). Students should be encouraged to create something new that communicates what they learned. Larmer and Mergendoller (2010) identify inquiry and innovation as the fifth step. Steps six and seven include an opportunity for revision and public presentation.

The class will read the informational text from the Florida Department of State http://dos.myflorida.com/florida-facts/florida-history/seminole-history/ once groups are formed and topics have been selected. There has been a transformation from reading dominantly fiction to nonfiction since the introduction of the

Common Core (Berson & Berson, 2013). The reading of the informational text continues in this lesson supports the trend identified by Berson and Berson. According to Stranchan (2015) reading text aloud to young students has the potential to support learning in both social studies and reading simultaneously. The read-aloud also demonstrates how expert readers interact with text to build comprehension (Saunders, Berson, & Berson, 2014). In the process of the read-aloud the students will cover the English language arts standards: LAFS.4.RI.1.1 refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text and LAFS.4.RI.1.2 determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text (Collaborate Plan Align Learn Motivate Share, 2018). As students read the informational text as a class they should highlight vocabulary words such as Seminoles, migrate, runaways, trade, and legislation. The teacher should clarify the new terms or provide an opportunity for the students to acquire understanding. Each group can take notes from the read aloud to add to their knowledge.

The use of research skills and the incorporation of technology is essential to project-based learning according to Larmer and Mergendoller (2010). Students will use the available technology to search for information about their topic. Berson and Berson (2013) state that Common Core encourages inquiry-based learning in which teachers facilitate scaffold reading experiences, rather than delivering content through direct instruction. To scaffold the learning experience, I recommend directing the students to two resources and then giving them additional time to locate their own sources. Berson and Berson (2014) state "gathering information is a critical part of the inquiry process, and involves the analysis and synthesis of information from a variety of sources" (P. 4). I recommend the using the Seminole Tribe's information page https://www.semtribe.com/History/Introduction.aspx. This resource will provide an alternative perspective from the read-aloud. This makes it possible to cover standard LAFS.4.RI.3.9. integrate information from two texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably (Collaborate Plan Align Learn Motivate Share, 2018). Multiple accounts from different sources provide students with a variety of perspectives that adds depth and perspective (Berson & Berson, 2013).

I recommend the Florida Memory State Library and Archives of Florida webpage https://www.floridamemory.com/as an additional source. This is a resource that provides the students with access to primary sources. Florida Memory has a rich collection of pictures, resources that trace the tribe's history, and accounts of the Seminole Wars. When used effectively, primary resources can

engage students in complex topics and support them as they build critical thinking skills and create new content knowledge (Strachan, 2015).

Students will use the knowledge they gathered from the research conducted to make an argument about why the Seminoles migrated. Through this process, the teacher will help students recognize and evaluate evidence of the discipline to support an argument with content specific knowledge (Berson & Berson, 2013). Each student is required to fulfill Florida Sunshine State standard LAFS.4.W.1.1. to conclude the project. Standard LAFS.4.W.1.1. states students will write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information (Collaborate Plan Align Learn Motivate Share, 2018). Communicating this task prior to student presentations is important as it leads to higher levels of engagement.

Each group is required to present their findings to the class in a method that they and the teacher approve. Some options are a science fair style board, an Animoto presentation, or a three-dimensional model. Giving the students choice in how they present their knowledge is important (Larmer, 2018). The presentation element of the project covers several Sunshine State standards that include: LAFS.4.RI.1.2 determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text, LAFS.4.RI.1.3 explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text, including what happened and why, based on specific information in the text, LAFS.4.RI.2.5 describe the overall structure (e.g., chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in a text or part of a text (Collaborate Plan Align Learn Motivate Share, 2018). LAFS.4.RI.3.9 integrate information from two texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably (Collaborate Plan Align Learn Motivate Share, 2018). Standard LAFS.4.RI.4.10 by the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 4–5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range (Collaborate Plan Align Learn Motivate Share, 2018). Standard LAFS.4.SL.2.4 report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace (Collaborate Plan Align Learn Motivate Share, 2018).

Conclusion

As teachers are continuously pushed to prepare students for high stakes testing, we must find innovative ways to incorporate meaningful social studies curriculum in elementary school. The integration of content areas is an effective way to gain time and help students make powerful connections. Using project-based learning as an instructional method to drive content integration can be an effective way to help students learn how to think.

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