<http://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/free-resources/literacy/social-studies-in-literacy-routines>

Integrating Social Studies into Literacy Routines

What’s Here

Social studies is an often-neglected subject in elementary school because it isn’t generally assessed on the state standardized tests that young children take. However, informational text comprehension IS tested… and what better way to teach non-fiction reading strategies than through interesting and relevant resources about the world students live in? This page will help you integrate social studies instruction into your reading block and everyday classroom routines.

A Reading Strategy-Based Approach to Social Studies

The best social studies instruction is a balance of content instruction and reading strategy instruction. There are some lessons in which you want children to learn deeply about historical events and really delve into the material through projects and meaningful activities. (On the Fun Social Studies Ideas page, I share 15 awesome activities for you use during your content instruction.)

In other lessons, you simply use social studies texts to teach students how to comprehend non-fiction. Children learn how to use captions, photos, graphs, charts, glossaries, bold print, and so on to help them understand what they read. This reading strategy-based approach to social studies can be done during your reading block to make the most of your limited time.

Social Studies Read-Alouds:

A (Really, Really, Really) Important Note for Primary Grade Teachers!

For whatever reason, there’s a tendency in the early grades to focus on fiction. This is compounded by most reading series which focus too heavily on this genre even in the upper grades. On behalf of intermediate teachers everywhere, I beg you to take nonfiction text instruction seriously! Many students come to third grade with no knowledge of how to use photos, captions, or charts to help them read because they’ve been exposed almost solely to fairy tales and other fictional stories. The majority of text on many state standardized tests is nonfiction, and that puts third graders in a really rough predicament of having to learn strategies for a whole new genre in just 6 months. Research shows that 80% of reading that adults do in America is nonfiction, so it’s incredibly important for kids to learn this life skill.

And if those two reasons aren’t convincing enough…do a reading survey with your kids and discover what they like to read about. I guarantee they will mention animals, natural disasters, dinosaurs, and other nonfiction topics. Kids (especially boys) love to read informational books and magazines–and when they’re motivated to read, they’ll learn skills more easily and apply them to new texts.

One of the best things you can do for your K-2 students is have non-fiction read-alouds several times per week in place of your fiction read-alouds. Have kids predict what they think is happening in the photos, then point to the captions as you read them and explain how the caption helps you understand what’s happening. Think aloud as you read, modeling how to adjust your reading rate for non-fiction texts and re-read when you get to parts that are dense with information. Model how to use the index (“James really wants to find out what horses like to eat. Let’s check the index and see which chapter might tell us about that”). Have kids draw diagrams to help them understand what you’re reading. If you’re not sure what else to do, ask an upper grade teacher in your school. You are doing your students an incredible service by exposing them to nonfiction and getting them excited about learning about their world. On behalf of upper grade teachers (including those middle and high school) and your students, thank you for taking on this challenge!!

7 Ideas for Embedding Social Studies Into Literacy Routines

1) Use social studies-related texts to teach non-fiction reading strategies during your reading block. This can be done with trade books, leveled books from your reading series, books from the media center, your social studies textbook, newspapers, magazines, etc. (preferably a variety of these).

2) When teaching students about biographies, have kids research historical figures. Here are some Biography Projects from Mrs. Renz. The site provides directions for the project, student work samples, and kid-friendly links students can use to conduct their research. Mrs. Renz had her children research a famous person in history, create a timeline and poem, write a report and draw a picture, then dress up as the person and make a presentation. These are great ways to have your kids explore this important genre by researching historical figures that interest them. I’ve tried this during African-American history month, women’s history month, etc (you can download one on my American History Activities page).

3) Use calendar, news, or sharing time to discuss the day in history. The History Place- This Month in History makes it easy to integrate social studies into your daily routine. You can print out a list of interesting and important events in history by month and share them with your class during your calendar time. With a little planning ahead, you can check out related books from your media center and follow-up with a read-aloud, informational text lesson, or comprehension activity. You can even put a Today in History widget on your computer’s dashboard or desktop and have the day’s facts at your fingertips. There are lots of ways to incorporate this idea, but I find ‘The History Place’ exceptionally good because you can see all dates at once and plan ahead, and the events are specifically chosen to be of interest to kids. There’s also a Photo of the Week, Speech of the Week, and links to many more History Place resources.

4) During your time in the computer lab (or when students use classroom computers), have kids complete historical web quests. Kidipede: History for Kids is a great resource for online scavenger hunts and basic overviews of various time periods in history. I once taught a curriculum that required third graders to learn about a variety of ancient cultures (none of them in depth) and this site was a great tool for me to familiarize the children with the time periods in a way that was interesting for them and not overwhelming.

5) Use read-alouds to supplement or even drive your social studies curriculum. Pull a handful of key vocabulary words from the trade book and put them on the board to discuss with students before and after reading. Allow children to give input on the topic or theme of books. I have a request form in my classroom for students to suggest topics they’d like me to read to them about. Popular requests include slavery, mummies, 9/11/01, various wars, Washington DC, New York, endangered species, and famous athletes, as well as books about specific countries where the students are from or have relatives living.

6) Leave two time-lines up in your classroom for students to add to throughout the year. I have one from 1800-2010 and one from 5000 BC to current. As we read about different historical events in all subjects (including shared readings, our reading basal series, and science), we compose a brief sentence to go on the appropriate timeline and have a student illustrate it. This helps the kids see how various events relate to one another (i.e. Jim Crow laws were in the 1950’s because they were after slavery). I know a middle/high school teacher who has kids keep their own personal timelines in their notebooks. Adding to the timelines takes about 5 minutes during a lesson and leaves a lasting reference that can be used for more teaching points throughout the year.

7) Set aside a few minutes a day for current events discussion. Each child can be responsible for bringing in an article once a month or once a week to share, or you can have kids bring in things that interest them anytime at all. Show students how to use newspapers, magazines, and the internet to gather their resources. A great source for interesting current events is Yahoo’s Most Viewed Odd News, which gives very short briefings and photos about weird stories from around the world. (Examples: ‘Nepal Boy Claims to Be Shortest in the World’, ‘Moooove Slowly and Don’t Hug Cows, Hikers Told in Switzerland’, and ‘Thieves Have Their Cake But Can’t Eat It’ (about 2 crooks in Germany who robbed a grocery store and only took a cake). Kids adore these types of stories, and all you have to do is visit the webpage where they’re compiled and print out a story or two that appeal to kids. This activity takes very little time and gets kids interested in reading the news and following what’s going on in their world. You can also have some very interesting character-building discussions for some of these articles, such as one recent day’s odd news telling of an Iraqi who was forced to change his tee-shirt because it had “We Will Not Be Silent” written in English and Arabic–what a great way to talk about censorship and freedom of expression. Kids can have the chance to exchange and defend their views and see firsthand that there are not always right and wrong answers.

Recommended Resources

Social Studies Content Integration information from Benchmark Education. Great research-backed ideas for teaching reading and writing strategies with social studies content.

Strategies for Reading Comprehension from Reading Quest: Making Sense in Social Studies. Activities, instructions, and printable charts!

Printable/downloadable 95-page document on reading strategies for the social studies class from Gretchen Koe and Anne Fitzpatrick of Mercer Middle School in Seattle. Very adaptable for elementary students.

Close Reading eBook Resources

SnapLearning has been a longtime supporter of The Cornerstone, and I believe strongly in the value of their digital resources. They provide hundreds of grade-appropriate eBooks, both fiction and non-fiction, which you can assign to your students and send to their devices! The eBooks come with interactive exercises and assignments which you can later review and assess. Best of all, the content is Common Core-aligned. If you want to check out their close reading portfolio (which is an awesome set of interactive exercises), you can request a free trial demo.

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