

Every Day Successes: Powerful Integration of Social Studies Content and English- Language Arts

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Instructional time for social studies has been reduced nationwide, particularly in the elementary grades. Yet states continue to promote content standards in history, economics, civics, and geography for young learners. Purposeful integrative content that is appropriate for grades K-6, while sometimes difficult to find, seems to many elementary school teachers to be a favored approach. Research suggests that instructional time devoted to elementary social studies is minimal at best.¹ There also seems to be a discernible trend that teachers are finding ways to incorporate social studies throughout the school day, by carefully integrating content. Recognizing these realities, the author team (a classroom teacher and two teacher educators) has worked together for the past three years to document and report through publications and conference presentations how fifth grade teacher Mary Ledbetter finds time to plan and implement high-quality social studies instruction through content integration. We wanted to know how she does the work of social studies in her classroom and what high-impact strategies she uses to connect social studies content to other content in a very full curriculum.

We have found that purposeful content integration is an effective means of providing young children with rich learning experiences in the social studies. This article features the successful integration techniques that Mary uses as she and

her fifth grade students work together to learn social studies through integrated instruction.

Setting the Stage for Integrative Social Studies Instruction

Mary Ledbetter teaches social studies and English language arts (ELA) to fifth grade children at UT Elementary School, one of a handful of charter schools in Austin, Texas. The school serves a diverse population of children, the majority of whom reside in low-income homes. A seasoned teacher with over 20 years of experience, Mary masterfully weaves history, geography, culture, civics and economics into her social studies and ELA instruction year-round. Mary also regularly offers her classroom to preservice teachers as a demonstration site, and she visits our university social studies methods classes to share her expertise.

Walking into her classroom, visitors immediately notice Mary's extensive classroom library arranged on tall, tidy bookshelves. Children's literature related to current social studies themes also fills the magazine rack that sits just inside the doorway. One also notices a myriad of posters, maps, photographs, activity and learning centers, and primary sources scattered about the room.

Because Mary's departmentalized setting allows only 90 minutes to teach reading, writing, language arts, and social studies each





day, she intentionally integrates the content. Her classroom space serves as a laboratory in which children explore, discover, and learn with her.

Planning for Instruction and Setting Robust Goals

Although the required fifth grade social studies curriculum in Texas emphasizes studies of the United States, Mary has designed a diverse curriculum. She begins her planning for each unit of instruction the same way. After determining the major concepts or “big ideas” for each unit,² she gathers all of her resources and asks questions such as: What kind of literature do I have? What can the librarian find for me? What objects do I have on my shelf? What primary sources will contribute to children’s analytical and historical thinking skills? How can the textbook, reader’s theater scripts, and sources such as History Alive be resources? What social studies and literacy standards need to find a prominent place in this unit? What is the timeline for the historical events in this unit? What technology-based and multimedia resources are available? How can I piece it all together? And, finally, what would be the most effective way to engage children in the integrated content, especially in the limited time that I have?

Next, Mary calls upon her philosophy of teaching, based upon *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools*, which recommends that children have opportunities to

- Investigate topics in depth
- Exercise choice and responsibility
- Explore open-ended questions that challenge their thinking
- Actively participate in classroom and wider communities
- Engage in independent inquiry and cooperative learning
- Read, write, observe, discuss, and debate
- Build on prior knowledge
- Explore a wide variety of the cultures found in their community and the world
- Engage in the full grade-level curriculum
- Demonstrate their thinking in the context of being responsible citizens³

She also structures her lessons so that there are clear goals for the knowledge her students will acquire, processes that will challenge students to use their academic skills, and products that will demonstrate student learning during the end of the



activities, as described in *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*.⁴

Integrating Social Studies Throughout the Year

One of Mary's most successful strategies for integrating social studies is beginning the school year with instruction designed to help her students become a community of learners. Together, they begin to share their notions of themselves as members of family, classroom, school, and neighborhood. Mary uses literary devices of poetry to emphasize friendship and community.

Like teacher Barbara Knighton, whose social studies instruction has been featured in a number of publications, Mary uses this valuable time at the beginning of the semester to cement relationships and to set the stage for learning.⁵

Mary realizes that she has to make choices about the resources she uses and the content area emphases her students need at a particular time, and she always keeps the "big ideas" of social studies in mind when doing so. Highlights from two of Mary's units of instruction, which serve as exemplars of how she integrates social studies in her classroom, are featured below.

Life and Culture in Mexico

Mary makes strategic use of her knowledge about students' heritage by dedicating a significant amount of her social studies and ELA instruction to teaching about other cultures. Many of Mary's students are from Mexico or have family members in Mexico. Her students write frequently about visiting relatives in Mexico and their interplay with extended family, and they may point out the routes taken in their travels on their desk maps. Additionally, Mary's students enthusiastically borrow

new books about Mexico from the library. In September, her students research the historical background of *Dies y Seis* and report their findings. *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Munoz Ryan is the literature choice for the study of Mexico, which is the story of Esperanza and her family who faced the Depression in Mexico and California during the 1930s.⁶ The book foreshadows a unit to come later in the school year on the Great Depression and Dust Bowl in the United States. Mary also makes use of folktales in the study of Mexico, and the children have opportunities to re-hear folktales that Mary reads to the class in the listening stations. Some of their favorite folktales are *Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story*, and *Horse Hooves and Chicken Feet: Mexican Folktales*.⁷ Mary also provides video recordings of literature about Mexico through United Streaming, an online collection of videos on various topics.

In addition to reading about Mexico and investigating Internet resources, Mary's students routinely are out and about in the community. They visit MexiArte, a contemporary arts museum featuring the work of Latino and Latina artists, participate in the community's *Dies y Seis* parade, and interview family and community members about their experiences in Mexico. This year, Mary's students will investigate Mexico City through a historical and geographical unit of study comparing Mexico City and Austin, Texas. The unit will utilize historical maps from the university's collection and contemporary Google Earth maps, an array of nonfiction resources, and a historical study of both cities. Rather than have a superficial, "holiday perspective" about Mexico (e.g., "Let's only study Cinco de Mayo"), Mary's students gain a deep reverence for the history, culture, art, and daily lives of their geographic neighbors because they continue to learn about Mexico throughout the school year.

Great Depression and Dust Bowl

Later in the school year, Mary's students enter the classroom and see the haunting black and white photographs of the Migrant Mother series by Dorothea Lange on display around the room. Mary asks the students to take a "gallery walk," and carefully analyze each photograph. Each student is given a stack of post-it notes upon which to write questions and queries. Within 20 minutes, each photograph contains numerous post-its with questions, and the curiosity of each child is piqued. Several days later, the children also investigate the life and work of Dorothea Lange during a mini-biography study.

The Great Depression and Dust Bowl unit of study follows those of Industrialization and Immigration in the school year. Mary uses a myriad of strategies and resources during the unit. Mary continues the unit with a short online teaching video on the Great Depression through the Brain Pop website (www.brainpop.com). In the following weeks, Mary and her students view a video segment about the Dust Bowl using *American Stories: A Future Reborn*; pen an original poem (format provided); complete several learning stations to explore artifacts featuring photographs, newspaper advertisements, historical readings, and objects from the era; analyze the meaning of a Depression-era song, "Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?"; read excerpts from *Out of the Dust*⁸ and from their history textbooks; undertake a Document-Based Question (DBQ) exercise; and complete a final assessment project by creating a poem and a painted illustration. During this unit, Mary's students gain a rich historical, geographic, and economic understanding about a pivotal crisis in American history through a connection of social studies and ELA content, make contemporary comparisons to the country's economic status, and realize empathetic connections through the use of poetry and literature.

Multiple Resources and Strategies

Several key elements are evident in Mary Ledbetter's instruction throughout the school year. Together, they provide a framework for purposeful social studies in her fifth grade classroom:

1. **Children's Literature:** Mary selects one major piece of children's literature for each unit of study and several shorter pieces, which may include picture books, poetry, nonfiction, biography, or folktales.
2. **Reading, Writing, Listening:** Mary provides daily opportunities for her students to read, write, and listen. She often uses literacy strategies to aid her students' writing development, such as RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, and Topic). RAFT may be used as an effective assessment tool in which students are given a framework for written response. For example, for the Great Depression unit, Mary might assign students to assume the role of a migrant farmer and use a friendly letter format to write to an imaginary audience such as the President of the United States on the topic of the Great Depression's impact on individual people.

3. **Technology:** Computer technology is regularly a part of Mary's teaching. She finds her Promethean whiteboard and the use of Internet resources such as Brain Pop, United Streaming, Atomic Learning, and the National Public Radio website to be particularly helpful for introducing students to various social studies topics.
4. **Primary Sources:** Over time, Mary has collected a wide variety of primary sources to enhance students' learning. In her teaching, she utilizes personal artifacts, data-based questions (DBQs), photographs, documents, and commercially available artifact kits.

Conclusion

Social studies instruction is deeply important to Mary; she wants her students to develop a passion for social studies. She describes her desire in this way: "I want them to love social studies, I not only want them to understand it, I want them to want to know more. One of my primary goals is to leave my students with a lot of information and understanding, but also a lot of questions. I want them to go and check out the Internet or a book...and [then] come and share with the class."

As we have shown, Mary utilizes careful planning informed by robust goals, a wealth of resources, a firm grasp of curriculum across subject areas, a substantive knowledge about quality children's literature that promotes social studies, and a rich knowledge base about teaching and learning. Year after year, by applying this knowledge and by masterfully integrating social studies content and ELA skills in her classroom, Mary is able to see her fifth graders come to "love" social studies. 📖

Notes

1. For example, K. Manzo, "Social Studies Losing Out to Reading, Math," *Education Week* (March 16, 2005):16-17; T. Rock, T. Heafner, T., K. O'Connor, J. Passe, S. Oldendorf, and A. Good, "One State Closer to a National Crisis: A Report on Elementary Social Studies Education in North Carolina Schools," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34, no. 4 (2006): 455-483.
2. J. Brophy, J. Alleman, and B. Knighton, *Inside the Social Studies Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
3. S. Zemelman, H. Daniels, and A. Hyde. *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools*, 2nd ed. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998).
4. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
5. J. Brophy, J. Alleman, and B. Knighton.
6. P. M. Ryan, *Esperanza Rising* (Carmel, CA: Hampton-Brown, 2000).
7. T. dePaola, *Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002); N. Philip, *Horse Hooves and Chicken Feet: Mexican Folktales* (New York: Clarion Books, 2003).
8. K. Hesse, *Out of the Dust* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1997).

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