

Integration of language arts and social studies in the upper elementary and middle grades

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Students come from different backgrounds and learn in a variety of ways. Educators are responsible for delivering quality instruction to students to ensure their success and work hard to assist them in meeting their individual needs. Young adolescents benefit from learning experiences that are highly integrative and connected to every day life. Therefore, unified studies or curriculum integration programs are being established in order to help meet the changing needs of our learners.

Curriculum integration is useful in upper elementary and middle grades education, making it possible to teach knowledge and skills simultaneously. This strategy implies using efficient teaching methods to meet the learning goals. Careful organization, motivation, and engagement are also required in order for integration to be effective. The overall use of curriculum integration across all subject areas is unknown. Teachers, however, seem to use this approach more often in language arts and social studies. Many students find this method beneficial as long as it is used properly as described above (Papai, 2000; Johnson & Janisch, 1998; Weilbacher, 2001).

Integrating social studies with the study of literature can empower students in their personal struggles toward adulthood as well as introduce them to larger social issues (Wasta & Lott, 2000). Because social studies instruction has time constraints in many elementary classrooms, social studies can be used to drive instruction in reading and language arts. This will permit students to study social studies topics in depth and teachers will not have the concern of being pressured by time. The aforementioned benefits can be accomplished by applying effective teaching strategies. The purposes of this literature review are to critically analyze previous articles on curriculum integration and to provide suggestions for future research in this area. The following categories will be evaluated and comprehensively described in this review: The integration of language arts and social studies including the benefits and challenges of curriculum integration and suggested teaching strategies for curriculum integration. The Integration of Language Arts and Social Studies

Benefits of Curriculum Integration

While many teachers continue to use traditional approaches to teach their students, several are turning to curriculum integration because of its advantages. One of the main reasons teachers use this approach is to help their students make connections across subject areas (Johnson & Janisch, 1998; Papai, 2000; Weilbacher, 2001). Students are excited about these connections and are stimulated to produce new ideas, thus increasing their desire to learn (Grant & VanSledright, 2001). Students who cannot see meaningful connections across content or skills are unlikely to be able to use their knowledge and skills to solve problems or make decisions about issues raised in the curriculum (Lipson, Valencia, Wixson, & Peters, 1993). Weilbacher (2001) performed interviews with four middle school teachers and found that they used curriculum integration because it assisted them in forming relationships with their students and helped to foster relationships among the students themselves. In addition, it made learning more relevant to their students. It also provided their students with opportunities to make connections among the traditional academic disciplines, the community, and their own experiences.

Moreover, curriculum integration enhances the meaning of what is taught and provides students with rich literacy instruction. Some teachers have found that focusing on social studies topics is an effective way to organize their students' literacy learning (Johnson & Janisch, 1998). Because social studies is a subject that endures reduced time allocations, integration is a way to respond to problems of content balance as well as save time and provide a holistic learning experience (Alleman & Brophy, 1993). Regardless of the many benefits to curriculum integration, teachers need to be cautious as to how they implement their integration practices. Several activities suggested in general textbook series describe ways to integrate social studies with other subjects. Too often, these activities either lack educational value in any subject or promote progress toward significant goals in other subjects but not in social studies (Alleman & Brophy).

Adding content drawn from a secondary subject can enrich the content in the primary subject. In addition, combining knowledge from a content-area subject such as social studies with processes from a skills subject such as language arts can be effective. According to Alleman and Brophy (1993), integration activities may or may not have educational value, depending on the nature of their primary goals. For an activity to be considered part of the social studies curriculum, its primary focus should be one of the social education goals that have been established for the social studies unit – a goal that would be pursued whether or not this particular activity were included.

Taylor (1985) examined the effectiveness of reading and/or writing instruction in social studies that focused on text organization, main idea statements, and important supporting details. Ninety-eight 6th grade students were randomly assigned to one of four groups: Group A, receiving reading and writing instruction in social studies focusing on main ideas and important details; Group B, receiving reading instruction alone; Group C, receiving writing instruction alone; or Group D, a control condition. Three-to-five page selections from the students' social studies textbook were used as reading material for the reading and writing instruction as well as for the tests in reading and writing. The selections for the instruction consisted of the material currently being studied by the students in social studies class. Students received five reading lessons and five writing lessons. Lessons alternated between reading and writing and occurred once a week during the regular social studies hour. Lessons were provided by four regular classroom teachers who were randomly assigned to the study groups and followed scripted lesson plans written by the investigator. The inclusion of subjects who were randomly chosen for participation is a definite strength of this study. Results indicated that students who received the reading instruction, in general, included more ideas in their summaries than students who did not receive the reading instruction. However, the students who received the reading instruction did not produce higher quality summaries. Whereas other studies have found curriculum integration to be valuable, the results of this study do not support the notion that a relatively integrated program of reading and writing instruction in a content subject is particularly effective in terms of enhancing students' reading and writing skills (Taylor, 1985).

Another study was conducted on literacy development through content-based instruction. Papai (2000) interviewed and observed one middle school teacher and six students who were part of a pull-out, multi-grade, ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) class. Because of the small class size, the teacher was able to become familiar with each student's education and literacy background. In this particular classroom, thematic units were used to reinforce content area knowledge in the major subject areas focusing on English language competencies in each of the four language skill areas (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). The students in this class developed literacy abilities that extend beyond reading and writing in English to include a wider range of academic competencies. The students' grades in all of their content areas consistently increased over the course of the school year from mostly C's and D's to B's, C's and even A's in certain subjects. They developed in their language abilities, content knowledge, reflective questioning, technical skills, and general awareness of the world around them. Although this class was successful on many levels, there was one issue that required improvement, namely the lack of collaboration with the subject area teachers. The explanation for this phenomenon was time and flexibility constraints. A productive collaboration between this teacher and his peers would have allowed the subject area teachers to express some of the language difficulties the ESOL students had in their classes (Papai, 2000).

Challenges of an Integrated Curriculum

In spite of the many reports showing benefits of integrating language arts and social studies (Papai, 2000; Johnson & Janisch, 1998; Wasta & Lott, 2000), there are some challenges that teachers might be confronted with. First of all, teachers become anxious when asked to implement something new in their classrooms, regardless of the grade level or subject area they teach. Few teachers have experience with curriculum integration, as teacher preparation programs typically do not give it much attention. Consequently, they may be hesitant at first to apply this new approach until becoming familiar with it. Organizing an entire school into interdisciplinary teams might relieve stress from individual teachers and is expected to facilitate curriculum integration (Vars, 2001).

Possible disadvantages may occur when integrating language arts and social studies. Some activities are potentially useful as vehicles for pursuing significant social education goals but are structured with so much emphasis on language arts that the social education purpose is unclear. Problems can occur when teachers are focused on covering topics and skills rather than on accomplishing social education goals. Several teachers' manuals that accompany social studies series suggest many art projects, isolated skills exercises, and other activities that have minimal social education value and little or no connection to the main ideas developed in the units. Therefore, teachers cannot depend on these manuals to focus their efforts on activities that call for appropriate use of integration (Alleman & Brophy, 1993).

Furthermore, many activities are problematic because they are time consuming and call for knowledge that is not developed in the lessons, thus making the task difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish (Alleman & Brophy, 1993; Weilbacher, 2001). Activities should develop the key ideas in a unit and be difficult enough to be challenging and to extend learning. However, they should not be so difficult as to leave students confused or frustrated. Feasibility problems may also occur if the activities for implementation are not within the constraints under which the teacher must work. Certain activities may not be feasible because they are too expensive, require space or equipment that is unavailable, involve unacceptably noisy construction work, or pose risks to the physical safety or emotional security of all students. Teachers must be realistic about constraints and may need to consider alternatives to the activities they plan (Alleman & Brophy).

The middle school teachers in the study conducted by Weilbacher (2001) decided not to continue using curriculum integration because they were afraid to violate the trust that they were attempting to build with their students. These same teachers were upset because they felt a need to defend their work, while teachers who use traditional forms of curriculum are seldom asked to do so. Another major factor that caused the teachers to stop integrating curriculum was the loss of their teaching partner. One teacher tried to integrate as much of her curriculum as possible, but she found that

the time it took to help a new partner learn how to do curriculum integration was overwhelming.

The following guiding principles will help teachers determine if an individual instructional activity is appropriate for an integrated learning experience in social studies: Each integration activity must be a useful means of accomplishing a worthwhile social studies goal; the activity must represent social education content appropriately and not distort the integrity of the subject matter; the activity's benefits to social education must justify its costs (for both teacher and students) in time and trouble; the activity must be geared to the appropriate level of difficulty; and the activity must be feasible for implementation within the constraints under which the teacher must work (e.g., space and equipment, time, and types of students) (Alleman & Brophy, 1993).

Suggested Teaching Strategies for Curriculum Integration

Although there are some challenges to curriculum integration, it is possible to overcome the aforementioned problems by performing adequate teaching methods. Effective teaching strategies to implement curriculum integration require teachers to adhere to well-defined goals and objectives. The teacher should make sure to have a significant social education goal as the primary focus of the activity. An outsider should be able to clearly recognize the activity as one in the social studies curriculum. Teachers should ask themselves if the activity would be desirable for the social studies unit even if it did not feature cross-curricular integration. The activity should allow students to apply authentically important social studies content. It should also involve valid application of skills from other disciplines. If the activity is structured properly, students should understand and be able to explain its social education purposes. If students engage in the activity with these purposes in mind, they should be likely to accomplish the purposes as a result (Alleman & Brophy, 1993).

Alternative useful techniques have been proposed by other researchers. To enhance the sharing of multicultural literature, teachers need to draw on readers' prior knowledge, have students respond through their own experiences, and provide information about the author's background and purpose. Using a KWL chart can serve as a guide for future lessons by discovering what the students already know and what they would like to learn (Papai, 2000). Teachers also need to experience personal connections themselves to realize the empowering nature of such literature. They should thoughtfully engage in reading the literature and then share similar processes with their students (Mathis, 2001). Language activities should be planned to heighten students' appreciation for written and spoken language. Ideas for these language activities could come from a language arts or social studies textbook or could be developed by teachers.

Various methods can be used to assist students with writing and content area learning. Teachers can help develop the students' reading comprehension and writing abilities by providing structured lessons on how to find the main idea, how to take notes, and how to summarize what they have read (Papai, 2000). Journals can also be used to help children record information from their reading and to help them understand their responses to their learning. To extend the students' writing, teachers can suggest that they keep a literature log, a notebook where they record their thoughts and ideas about the books they read. Students can also keep a learning log, a folder where they record their thoughts and ideas related to the social studies centers created by teachers (Grant & VanSledright, 2001). Discussion

Curriculum integration in the language arts and social studies subject areas proved to be effective for both students and teachers. Several studies revealed that the use of content-based instruction expands the students' conceptual knowledge base while teaching language through meaningful activities. A unified approach to social studies and reading/writing instruction is more efficient than either subject alone. Through the use of social studies themes as the content in reading and language arts lessons, teachers were able to explore social studies topics in depth while helping their students become skilled readers, writers, and thinkers (Johnson & Janisch, 1998).

It is noteworthy, however, that despite many reports showing the benefits of this approach, there are some disadvantages, which can be overcome by proper teaching methods. It is recommended that teachers think about curriculum integration as something that is feasible and desirable in specific circumstances. Teachers should be able to assess the activities in which the students are involved not just based on their enjoyment and successful completion, but also on their educational value so that they deserve inclusion in the curriculum (Alleman & Brophy, 1993). In addition, students' assessment should be based on objective and well-defined outcome variables. Learning experiences must be authentic rather than theoretical so that students can apply their knowledge to everyday life and make connections across various subject areas.

There is limited empirical research on curriculum integration. The few available studies, however, support its implementation. Literature on this issue consists of only one prospective controlled study, which showed the benefits of combining language arts with social studies.

The outcomes of future research should be generalizable and universally acceptable within the teaching community. In order to do that, investigators should perform well-designed studies with appropriate outcome measures. Meanwhile, based on the available data, curriculum developers should encourage the implementation of an integrated approach to language arts and social studies in their current teaching practices. Teachers should follow the recommended guidelines specific to this issue. In addition, administrators should provide teachers with the support they need to carry out this

implementation.

It is imperative that curriculum organizers, administrators, and teachers work as a team to choose the most effective methods for integrating subject areas. Better collaboration between education professionals and an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum development may result in further improvement in our students' education. References

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