

## **A Case for Integrating Language Arts Methods with Social Studies Methods in a Teacher Preparation Program**

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### **Abstract**

*The case for integrating language arts methods with social studies methods in a pre-service teacher education program is discussed. Moreover, there is evidence that schools are fragmenting the language arts in order to teach students the necessary skills to pass state-mandated tests. Fragmenting the language arts in this way precludes the deep study of important and meaningful topics. With the new Common Core State Standards Initiative, many individuals believe that it is time to assist pre-service teachers with understanding the benefits of using the language arts as tools to learn across all content areas. Both the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) and the International Reading Association (IRA) standards support such integration.*

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Much has been written about how the language arts are tools for learning across all subject areas (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Routman, 2003). Yet schools are not necessarily places where the language arts are being used to develop young minds to think deeply about the world. Frank Smith (1986), for example, points out that, “Tests must be administered; instruction must be directed towards the tests, the ‘language arts’ are arbitrarily and artificially fragmented” (p. 190).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) has exacerbated the fragmentation of curriculum. The fear of not meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) has caused many teachers and administrators to implement draconian policies. Jonathan Kozol (2007) writes that some fifth-grade teachers in New York set aside all other lessons for two hours each day to drill children for the test. They do these practices three months prior to the exam. Moreover, in Atlanta, schools have been intentionally constructed with no playgrounds, so that no time can be

wasted on things that do not raise test scores. In other school districts standardized exams are now administered to children in their kindergarten year in order to get them ready for the tests.

Allington and Cunningham (2007) lament that “for many years, literacy instruction in elementary schools has focused on skills and largely ignored knowledge, particularly deep knowledge of topics” (p. 53). They further add, “The knowledge part of the curriculum, usually found in the subjects of science and social studies, are almost ignored in the primary grades of these schools” (Allington & Cunningham, 2007, p.53). Equally disturbing is what has been happening to social studies instruction in American schools since NCLB was enacted in 2001.

### **Social Studies is Being Left Behind**

It has been widely documented that social studies instruction has been doing a Houdini act in American elementary schools since the passing of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001 (Bogle & Ellis, 2009; Burroughs, Groce & Webeck, 2005; Center for Education Policy, 2008; VanFossen, 2005). Now, ten years after the federal government began mandating annual assessments in *only* math and reading, social studies as well as science continues to be marginalized in many schools, particularly in those having difficulty meeting their AYP (Bogle & Ellis, 2009). Schools are feeling increased pressure to raise their test scores; therefore, subjects that are tested tend to be where most schools focus the bulk of their attention.

The Center on Education Policy (CEP, 2008) conducted a comprehensive five-year study to look at changes in the depth and frequency of curriculum and instruction since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind legislation. They found that almost 62% of reporting school districts had both increased instructional time for math and communication arts, and had decreased time for other subjects. During the time this study was being conducted, we surveyed elementary principals in 45 states and had similar findings (Bogle & Ellis, 2009). Clearly, social studies instruction is being reduced and replaced by increased instruction in language arts and math as well as instruction in test preparation.

### **Social Studies is Vitally Important**

What’s so wrong reducing the amount of instruction time in social studies? We would argue, plenty. Aside from the fact that the curriculum continues to narrow and even more schools are unable to meet their AYP, we are now facing huge numbers of American children entering high school who have been taught very little about history, economics, geography or citizenship. These children are our future and they will be the ones expected to carry on the democratic traditions of our government to the next generation. Perhaps Gayle Thieman, former president for the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) summed it up the best when she said, “Democracy is not a natural state, it has to be taught; it just doesn’t happen. Just because you were born in a democracy doesn’t mean you’re going to die in a democracy” (as cited in Wiebe, 2008, para. 7).

Teaching of social studies is vital. American citizenship guarantees certain fundamental rights, but along with those rights come duties and responsibilities. We must prepare young people for their citizenship responsibilities and we cannot afford to leave it out. Given the facts that there is a fragmentation of the language arts coupled with reduced time for social studies instruction, it seems unlikely that the integration of the language arts with social studies will become the norm. However, a national movement—the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS, 2010)—has been gathering steam and offers us hope.

### **The Common Core State Standards Initiative**

Most states (45 of 50) in the United States have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010). Moreover, the CCSS are predicated on integrating the English Language Arts with subject-matter knowledge, as captured in the following statement: “reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language as well as in mathematics . . . serve as the backbone of the present document” (CCSS, 2010, p. 3). The CCSS, for example, emphasize reading as the tool for learning about knowledge in the content areas—“By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas” (CCSS, 2010, p. 10).

Elementary-grade standards also link the language arts with content knowledge. Second grade students are expected to read and comprehend “informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 2-3” (CCSS, 2010, p. 13).

### **Aligning with Standards**

We argue that the curriculum standards adopted by the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) in 1994 can easily be aligned with the CCSS. These standards included the following essential skills: 1) acquire information and manipulate data, 2) develop and present policies, arguments, and stories, 3) construct new knowledge, and 4) participate in groups (p. 8).

To develop the first essential skill (i.e., acquire information and manipulate data), teachers need to increase students’ skills in reading, studying, searching for information, using social science technical vocabulary and methods, and using computers and other electronic media. This could align with CCSS for English Language Arts 1, 7, & 10 featured below.

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. (CCSS, 2010, p. 35)

The second essential skill (i.e., develop and present policies, arguments, and stories), can be developed by, increasing students' ability in using the writing process and classifying, interpreting, analyzing, summarizing, evaluating, and presenting information in well-reasoned ways that support better decision making for individuals and society. This could align with CCSS for English Language Arts 1, 2, & 3.

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. (CCSS, 2010, p. 3)

The third essential skill (i.e., construct new knowledge), can be developed by helping students conceptualize unfamiliar categories of information. Teachers can also assist students in establishing cause/effect relationships, determining the validity of information and arguments, and developing a new story, model, narrative, picture, or chart. These skills add to students' understanding of an event, idea, or persons while also meeting criteria of valid social studies research. This could align with CCSS for English Language Arts 4, 5, & 6, which are listed below.

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g. a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text. (CCSS, 2010, p. 3)

Finally, the fourth essential skill (i.e., participate in groups), can be developed by helping students express reasoned personal convictions and recognize ethical responsibilities in groups. Students be capable of participate in negotiating conflicts and differences, maintaining an individual position because of its ethical basis, and fulfill responsibilities associated with citizenship in a democratic republic.

The International Reading Association (IRA) Standards for Reading Professionals also offer hope in achieving the goal of integrating the language arts with social studies. The IRA Standards for Reading Professionals (2010), for example, state that “candidates create a literary environment that fosters reading and writing by integrating foundational knowledge, instructional practices, approaches and methods, curriculum materials, and the appropriate use of assessments” (p. 40).

### **Conclusion**

With both the IRA and NCSS advocating the integration of the language arts when teaching social studies, we feel justified to offer a combined methods course in our teacher preparation program to show future teachers both the importance of integration of the language arts with social studies and give them the skills that will enable them to do so. We also encourage other teacher preparation programs to do the same.

We realize, however, that even with the CCSS and the support from our learned societies, we still face an uphill battle. The classrooms where our teacher candidates go for their field experiences are still not places where integration is the norm. Rather, administrators and teachers, fearing repercussions from poor test scores, continue to fragment the language arts and diminish the importance of social studies. But for us to focus only on the difficulty and ignore the need is neither ethical nor satisfying. What is the future of social studies instruction?

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