

TE 865 Inquiry Project

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The core subjects of social studies and English are undeniably linked together. Although reading comprehension and writing proficiency are necessary skills in all subjects, it is especially apparent in the social studies classroom, in which students often must read a high volume of dense text and write about it analytically and critically. In a recent study of using historical fiction in the social studies classroom entitled “Historical Fiction in English and Social Studies Classrooms: Is It a Natural Marriage?”, author KaaVonnia Hinton explains, “[As a result of this study,] The lessons we learned point to our growing understanding of the habits of mind of two disciplines, English and history/social studies; how literacy instruction is crucial in both domains; and how there seems to be a natural benefit involved in collaborating across these disciplines. At times, the boundaries of the two disciplines blur” (Hinton, 2014). Since these two subjects are so inextricably intertwined, teachers must seek opportunities for collaborative learning and cross-curricular instruction, which greatly benefits the students in multiple ways.

To begin, the importance of reading independently cannot be overstated or underestimated. Indeed, in the world of high-stakes standardized tests presented to students across the nation, students are expected to read a great deal of text quickly and fluently. This is especially true of the redesigned SAT, which demands students read multiple passages covering a variety of topics from history, to scientific research, to current events issues. Penny Kittle, in her comprehensive text covering ways to incorporate independent reading into the high school curriculum, *Book Love*, states, “Speed reading is of little value in the world, yet speed is at the center of standardized testing and the reason many students do poorly” (Kittle, 2013).

Additionally, scholar Katrina Smith in her essay “Using Literature in the Social Studies Classroom and Cross Curricular Teaching at the High School Level” , explains that “The existent dichotomy between high stakes testing and abundance of curriculum goes against conventional

wisdom to teach in depth rather than cover breadth” (Smith, 2008). Regardless of these rather bleak truths, students need the experience of reading independently and fluently to bolster all areas of their academic success. Thus, the best approach to tackling this immense issue is to provide students with opportunities to develop the skill of reading, and not just in their English or language arts course. By improving reading skills in a variety of school subjects, students are more likely to build their skill set and read with greater comprehension.

The social studies or history classroom provides the perfect opportunity for students to hone their reading skills. In addition to the core curriculum, students can engage in independent reading related to a current unit of study. Kittle urges teachers of all subjects to build portfolios of student reading across genres with increasing textual complexity (including history and social studies) to boost their reading proficiency (Kittle, 2013). By examining a nonfiction book related to the historical event being studied, or by exploring a related novel, students are more likely to grasp the concepts of that particular event while also sharpening their reading skills. Indeed, Smith states that “Literature provides a way for students to attain a degree of cultural literacy that goes beyond just knowing the history of a country or region of the world” (Smith, 2008). Furthermore, Hinton states “ teachers... wish to promote another key habit of mind: historical empathy, which needs to be built upon contextualizing the historical period” (Hinton, 2014) . This idea of historical empathy is particularly relevant and meaningful for students, as the idea of creating a personal connection to a culture or event helps students retain information and makes history “come alive”. As such, engaging students with independent reading promotes a greater sense of awareness of multiple perspectives regarding a particular historical or current event and shifts a student’s thinking regarding a historical subject in a powerfully transformative way.

Furthermore, it is important to further highlight how this type of open-ended activity is practical for teachers to implement and beneficial for instruction. The importance of students building real-world connections between history, culture, and the “real world” is the primary benefit, as this extends a student’s thinking beyond the textbook or an impersonal list of facts and dates and rather builds a student’s sense of “historical empathy” as stated earlier. Furthermore, extending lessons beyond the primary history textbook is extremely beneficial as well. Smith states, “When using textbooks, Social Studies become an abstraction or simply too boring. Unfortunately, Social Studies quickly become a subject that students make no connections to, or see relevance in understanding” (Smith, 2008). Using independent reading helps students make those connections. Teacher Tarry Lindquist also explains that including historical fiction also promotes equity: “Reading historical fiction promotes academic equity because comparing books from one unit to the next provides kids with equal opportunities to develop historical analogies” (Lindquist, 2015). Thus, the support for using independent reading in the history and social studies classroom is overwhelmingly positive, and teachers need only know where to begin this important endeavor for their students.

There are several ways to implement independent reading or book study projects into the social studies curriculum. Furthermore, teachers need not sacrifice a large quantity of their limited instructional time in doing so. In addition to the core curriculum (in a history curriculum this usually includes the textbook and several selected primary source documents), the teacher has multiple opportunities for engaging students with a partner text. This can come in several forms: core texts, book groups (or book clubs), and independent reading groups. With a core text, the entire class studies a book together, usually as a supplement to a particular unit. With a book club, students can select a group to read with a peer group (usually three or four other

students) to read together and conference periodically. Finally, students can also choose a separate book individually and can read one or several books at their own pace, conferencing with the teacher or other students periodically. Penny Kittle's book and website provides detailed suggestions for how to set up these type of activities, including how to get help from school librarians, how to point students to particular books, and how to engage with students who are all reading separate books. However, of all these activities, Kittle's greatest takeaway point is that teachers need only devote 20-30 minutes of instructional time per week (or 10 minutes every other day) to build in this activity to the curriculum. Students can spend a brief amount of time at the end of each class period engaging in silent reading, conferencing with the teacher or their group, or working through a guided assignment to help them make meaningful text-to world connections. Teachers need not scrap their entire curriculum for independent reading to be effective, but the benefits for students are vast and readily quantifiable.

The selection of books to supplement the core curriculum depends on a variety of factors including a student's reading level, a student's level of interest in a particular book or genre (such as historical fiction, nonfiction, or graphic novels), and the relevance to a particular book or books to the current unit of study. Essentially, this is where book clubs or independent reading becomes a rather smart option for educators. Selecting just ONE book that fulfills all these requirements can be a daunting or perhaps even an impossible task. However, allowing students to select books individually allows for students to pick a book that is close to their reading level and something that will interest them. For example, taking a singular historical event such as World War II and pairing a book with it can be overwhelming, as the sheer volume of books dealing with this one event alone is staggering. However, giving students options allows them to

survey the wide variety of literature available to them, select an engaging book that they will connect with, and allows other students to see books that they might not have considered.

For teachers, there are a variety of ways to measure what students are reading, how they understand the text, and how they are interacting with classmates during group discussions. Yet again, Kittle's website provides an extensive collection of resources for tracking student reading and building in meaningful ways to link the text to the curriculum, including individual responses, group projects, and book presentations or "book talks."

As the research states, the importance of reading comprehension and fluency is an increasingly prevalent reality in the American classroom and, as such, reading is something that can no longer afford to be confined to the English classroom. Thus, finding ways to implement independent reading into the social studies or history curriculum is both immensely beneficial to both the teacher and the students in any given environment. Teachers simply need to know where to look to begin creating a more engaging, interactive learning experience for their students.

Bibliography

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