On Borrowed Time: How Four Elementary Preservice Teachers Learned to Teach Social Studies in the NCLB Era

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Introduction

This study presents the findings of a qualitative investigation about four elementary preservice teachers’ experiences learning to teach social studies in the No Child Left Behind era. The participants’ internship took place in an elementary school which devoted the majority of the day to literacy and mathematics instruction. Because previous interns in the school had limited or no opportunity to teach social studies, the four participants were required to complete an Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment to ensure that they were able to teach and reflect upon teaching social studies at least one time during the semester. Findings indicated the interns found the experience meaningful and rewarding because of their students’ enthusiasm toward the content and instructional approaches. After meeting the requirements of the assignment, the participants found ways to borrow time from the hours dedicated to literacy and mathematics instruction in order to address social studies topics and themes. The paper concludes with a discussion of teacher educators’ roles in preserving social studies education in American elementary schools.
compelled to reduce social studies instruction because of pressures to improve scores on high-stakes assessments in literacy and mathematics. Because this is the case for teachers at Apple Elementary School, a high-poverty rural school where I regularly supervise student teachers, I required my students to complete an Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment to ensure that they got at least one opportunity to teach and reflect upon teaching social studies. The assignment was developed in response to the school climate at Apple Elementary (see Participants and Setting section) and through a review of related literature.

Related Literature

Social Studies’ Decline

Social studies’ diminished presence in elementary schools has been referred to as a “side effect” of NCLB (Cawelti, 2006). The potential for school sanctions, as a result of the law’s punitive nature (Nichols & Berliner, 2007), has contributed to the adoption of commercial or scripted reading programs. Although they meet the federal government’s restrictive definition of scientifically based research (Shaker & Ruitenberg, 2007), the programs reduce opportunities for differentiated instruction (Myers, 2007) and overlook individual school and community contexts (Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005). This trend led to teaching reading in isolation from other subjects, despite evidence which demonstrated that when skilled teachers use interdisciplinary methods, “student achievement is equal to, or better than, that of students who are taught in the traditional separate-subject approach” (Hinde, 2005, p. 107).

Although instructional time for social studies in elementary schools was in decline prior to NCLB’s authorization, the legislation’s side effects exacerbated the problem because a departure from interdisciplinary instruction resulted (Hinde, 2005; von Zastrow & Janc, 2004). Meaningful social studies supports the reading, writing, inquiry, and analysis skills that are taught in other content areas, while achieving its disciplinary goal of providing “integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” (National Council, 1994, p. 3). With many teachers no longer able to use the interdisciplinary approaches that enabled them to address social studies concepts during literacy instruction, elementary school children’s social education and preparation for the responsibilities of adult citizenship were further reduced.

Teacher Preparation and Elementary Social Studies

While requirements for undergraduate social studies methods coursework may not have been directly affected by NCLB, one can conclude that with less than four hours a week of social studies instruction in the majority of America’s elementary schools (Leming et al., 2006), preservice teachers’ opportunities to observe and participate in its instruction during field experiences are jeopardized. Field experiences play a large role in shaping prospective elementary teachers’ beliefs about teaching social studies (Angell, 1998; Johnston, 1990), and student teaching is an essential and influential culminating teacher preparation experience (Fehn & Koeppen, 1998; Moore, 2003). Hynes-Dusel (1999) explained that “Student teachers learn more about what being a teacher is all about during the student teaching experience than any other time in their preservice years. This is where it happens” (p. 243). It seems reasonable to conclude that in the NCLB era, student teachers learn that social studies is nearly invisible in the elementary school curriculum and teaching is all about performance on mathematics and reading tests.

Without the opportunity to apply what they learned in social studies methods courses during student teaching, preservice teachers...
coming of age during the NCLB era may face a greater gap between preparation and practice than previous generations of preservice teachers. This gap is the result of a variety of factors including discrepancies between the teaching practices taught at the university level and those used in K-12 school settings (Clark, 1999). Nearly two decades before NCLB, Veenman (1984) explained the problem as follows; “the impact of teacher education courses is ‘washed out’ by everyday experience in the school” (p.147). Without opportunities to teach the subject, knowledge about meaningful social studies instruction seems particularly susceptible to “wash out” for elementary teachers prepared during the NCLB era.

Teacher educators need to be proactive in our pedagogical decisions and scholarship in order to mitigate how NCLB’s side effects exacerbate the gap between theory and practice. In response, I developed the present study of the Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment, which required elementary student teachers to teach and reflect on an interdisciplinary unit or series of lessons that integrated social studies, music, and/or the arts with literacy or mathematics. Music and art were included because the humanities enrich young children’s understanding about social issues (Wheat & Kapavik, 2004). The assignment also provided the participants with at least one opportunity to respond to student curiosities and questions. Brooks, Libresco, and Plonczak (2007) called this teaching in “spaces of liberty” and maintained that it is jeopardized by the standardization of curriculum that has accompanied NCLB.

Methods

Participants and Setting

The participants were four female student teachers. They were 21 or 22 years old and senior elementary education majors at the same small liberal arts university. The Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment was a course requirement for a professional seminar the participants took while student teaching. Having their experiences included in the research study was voluntary, and all four agreed to participate. These participants were specifically selected from a cohort of 14 interns who student taught during fall 2006 because of their placements in a school that was known to have little or no time for social studies instruction.

They student taught for 12½ weeks at Apple Elementary School (a pseudonym), which is located in a small town in a rural area. It is part of a school district that has experienced declining enrollment despite an influx of English Language Learners. Thus, the district needs to provide increasingly diverse learning programs with reduced state funding. Over 1/3 of the school district’s population comes from low-income homes. The student teachers in this study were all from middle and upper class families, and their placement at Apple Elementary was their first exposure to the challenges of teaching children who live in poverty.

The participants reported that the school day was divided into separate instruction time for each content area, with the majority of the day devoted to mathematics and literacy, and no opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching. Apple Elementary School had just adopted a new commercially-developed literacy curriculum that provided a detailed protocol for reading and writing instruction. The mentor teachers were evaluated on their use of the curriculum, so they required their student teachers to follow it with little or no variation.

The time allocated for social studies at Apple Elementary School was minimal, and no time whatsoever was spent on the subject in kindergarten and first grade. In second and third grade, social studies instruction alternated with science, so students studied one subject for the last 30 minutes of each school day for three weeks and then switched to the other subject for the next three weeks. In grades four and five, the teachers divided instructional re-
Responsibilities for social studies and science with a grade-level colleague. Each teacher taught one content area to both classes for 30 minutes daily. Thus, the participant who student taught in fourth grade had no opportunity to teach social studies — except when completing the Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment. The other participants were assigned to kindergarten, first-grade and third-grade classrooms.

The Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment

The student teachers were required to design and teach a lesson or series of lessons that integrated social studies, music, and/or the arts with literacy or mathematics during the first six weeks of their 12 1/2 week student teaching experience. Although they were encouraged to develop and teach an entire thematic social studies unit, this was not required because mentor teachers at Apple Elementary were often reluctant or unable to allocate sufficient time due to pressure for performance in subjects assessed by state exams (see the Discussion section for further discussion of my decision to compromise social studies education goals for this assignment).

Once the student teachers developed their plans, they arranged for me to observe them teaching at least one lesson. After teaching, they wrote a reflective journal about the experience. They were asked to describe the students’ learning and response to the content, explain what they enjoyed or found challenging about teaching the lesson(s), and discuss whether or not it was difficult to find time to teach the lesson(s). We devoted one professional seminar session to discussing the results. Because their experiences were positive, our discussion centered on identifying what characteristics made the lessons successful. We also developed ideas for how to infuse those characteristics into their teaching for the rest of the semester — particularly when following the more structured protocols required by Apple Elementary School’s new commercial literacy curriculum.

Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative research design was used to answer the following research questions:

1. How do elementary education student teachers integrate social studies, music, and/or the arts into their teaching of mathematics or literacy?

2. How do the student teachers respond to and evaluate the results of teaching (an) interdisciplinary lesson(s)?

The goal was to illuminate and understand their experiences by gathering descriptive data. Generalizability (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) of the findings to a larger population of student teachers was not a goal.

There were five data sources. The student teachers’ lesson plans and my lesson observation notes served as data points that revealed how the student teachers integrated social studies, music, and/or the arts into their teaching of mathematics or literacy. I observed at least one of the interdisciplinary lessons each participant taught, and I conducted post-observation conferences shortly after each observation. The notes I took during and immediately after these conferences provided the third data point. The student teachers’ reflective journal writing about the assignment provided detailed insights about how the student teachers responded to and evaluated the results of their teaching the lesson. The fifth data source served a similar purpose; during the professional seminar session in which we discussed the results, the student teachers created a graphic representation of what made the lessons meaningful for children.

In order to make the copious amount of data collected manageable, analysis involved using codes to identify and make sense of
“certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, [and the] subjects’ ways of thinking” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173) that stood out as I read and reread the data. These codes allowed me to sort the data, consider regularities and patterns, and ultimately identify the major themes. Because there were multiple data sources about each of the student teachers, I selected those themes that occurred consistently and extensively among the participants and across data sources. The themes were elementary students’ enthusiasm and joy, teacher satisfaction, and student teachers’ increased dislike of standardized testing.

Findings

Table 1 presents a summary of how the participants were able to meet the Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment requirements.

Table 1

Approaches to the Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student teacher</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>One week-long interdisciplinary unit (social studies, science, literacy, and mathematics)</td>
<td>Apples around the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>One week-long interdisciplinary unit (social studies, science, literacy, and mathematics)</td>
<td>Apple production process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Three lessons that integrated social studies, music, and literacy</td>
<td>Colonial America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Three lessons that integrated social studies and music into literacy</td>
<td>Hanukkah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings are presented in two sections; first, a detailed narrative of Carol’s unit provides a rich description of how one participant integrated social studies into her teaching of mathematics and literacy. The second section, “What the Student Teachers Discovered,” describes the themes uncovered in the data analysis.

Narrative of Practice: Carol

Carol student taught in a kindergarten classroom and was able to teach a week-long interdisciplinary unit during the third week of the semester. Her mentor teacher assigned the topic and required her to teach specific benchmarks from state standards in mathematics and literacy. Carol titled the unit “A is for apple: Apples through the seasons and around the world,” and it was designed to teach enduring understandings (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) about graphs, how to use and read the letter “A,” growing cycles, and community celebrations. The latter allowed her to teach social studies and take advantage of a week-long event that took place in Apple Elementary School’s community: a Harvest Festival that culminated with a parade and a fair the Saturday after her unit ended.

Carol planned a different graphing activity for each of the five days of mathematics instruction to help her kindergarten students begin to understand graph use. On the fourth day of instruction, Carol used maps of the United States and the world to help the children compare data from graphs about where apples are grown. This inclusion of basic geography during mathematics stimulated the children’s curiosity, and they asked questions like, “Why don’t we grow apples there?” while pointing to the American Southwest. Each mathematics lesson effectively built on the one before it and was thematically connected to the week’s literacy instruction.

The kindergarten literacy curriculum at Apple Elementary School used a letter of the
week approach. Carol’s mentor required her to make sure the children could sound out /a/ when reading and writing, identify words with /a/ sound on a worksheet, and identify /a/ sound when a story was read aloud. She used children’s books and post-reading activities about apple orchards and apple trees to meet the literacy benchmarks, but she was able to forgo the emphasis on the letter /a/ for one lesson that integrated social studies and literacy through learning about the Chinese Harvest Moon Festival. Carol used a storyteller approach to share a legend that Chinese children hear on the day of the festival, and her kindergarteners were enthralled with the chance to learn how other children celebrate the harvest season. She used a world map and pictures of the festival to enrich the lesson, which had social studies and arts and humanities standards as the primary objectives. She began the lesson with a discussion about the harvest festival taking place in their community and then said:

I am going to tell a story about a place far away that also has harvest festivals, but their lives are a little different than ours are here. There is no book about it for little kids, so I want to tell you about this very special festival. Then we are going to make our own kids’ book about it, so other kids can learn about it too.

The children were captivated by the story and asked questions about China and the Harvest Moon Festival. Then they wrote individually about the festival taking place in their community and then said:

Rather than reading them a normal story, they were told a special story that they had to use their minds to see. Instead of more drill and practice of letters, they were able to have more free writing time which usually is more fun for them since it is not so restricting. Everything is so focused on math and language arts, especially in Kindergarten because it is a rush to get them to recognize letters, write letters, write words, and start reading. It was very nice to introduce them to something different for once, a topic they don’t ever hear about, people who live in another part of the world.

When I asked her if there would be more opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching, she explained, “Although [my mentor teacher] was very open to this during my unit and thought this specific lesson was great, once I was done, we were back to the much more structured language arts program the school has.” For one week, Carol was able to help her kindergarteners enjoy learning through developmentally appropriate interdisciplinary instruction that ex-
posed the children to geography and other cultures. In that week, she also experienced the benefits of interdisciplinary teaching, and she began to look for ways to borrow time during literacy and math instruction to address social studies topics and themes.

What the Student Teachers Discovered

During the professional seminar that was devoted to discussing the results of the Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment, each student teacher wrote a summary statement about the best part of the experience. Their statements described their students’ enthusiasm and engagement with the lesson, as well as how the students were creative and helped one another. Each participant also reported that her students “learned better” with the interdisciplinary instruction, although these anecdotal observations were not measured systematically.

The assignment also resulted in a heightened opposition to testing and the standardization of curriculum. This consequence was to some extent intentional. After all, I had wanted my students to teach social studies and increase their ability to use interdisciplinary techniques; these goals are in opposition to the trend of compartmentalizing elementary curriculum into isolated subjects in order to optimize test preparation. Nevertheless, I was taken aback by how vehemently the participants expressed their aversion. Barbara wrote the following in her journal:

Testing makes schools lose sight of the true meaning of learning. Now that I actually have taught an interdisciplinary unit and have seen the numerous benefits that [resulted], it makes me that much angrier that there is such a rigid math and language arts only schedule. The schools are turning students into machines that produce answers they are not really learning.

Carol was also outspoken in her opposition to the focus on literacy and mathematics, which, in her kindergarten classroom, made up “100% of the day.”

Another theme that emerged in the student teachers’ writing was the increased joy, motivation, and learning they saw among their students during their interdisciplinary lessons. For example, Helen captivated her third-grade students’ interest during lessons about Colonial America. She consulted with a music education professor and decided to include “Yankee Doodle,” a song that was popular during that time period. Helen’s students examined the history and meaning of song lyrics, and at the conclusion of the lesson, they sang and marched to the song. The lesson addressed state standards in literacy, arts and humanities, and history. Her students enjoyed the experience, and Helen’s reflective writing explained how she took great pride in her students’ enthusiasm and had “a new confidence for incorporating music and other interdisciplinary activities in the classroom.”

Helen also reported a sense of satisfaction as a result of her interdisciplinary lessons, a feeling the other student teachers shared. For example, Lynn taught three interdisciplinary lessons about Hanukkah as an extension of a story in the fourth-grade basal reader. Since residents of the Apple Elementary School community were predominantly Protestant and Lynn’s students were representative of this demographic, learning about the traditions of another faith provided a multicultural experience. In addition to meeting language arts benchmarks, the lesson addressed state standards in geography and civics and government. Like Helen, Lynn consulted with a music education professor to select songs to include in the lessons. The introductory lesson was taught during the final 30 minutes of the school day. The children were wound-up, and she ran short of time and did not bring closure to the lesson. She went home feeling like the lesson had flopped. However, first thing the next day, her
students asked if they could play the music in the background while they worked on their morning warm-up activities, and she explained, “Throughout the day, I had students coming to my desk during free time to ask me more questions about Hanukkah.” This was the first time her students talked about a lesson the day after, and their enthusiasm contributed to an effective second and third lesson. Student enjoyment of learning was readily apparent during Barbara’s first-grade unit about the process apples go through to get from “seed to table.” It was a highly successful unit that addressed state standards in history, economics, and literacy. Barbara’s unit included kinesthetic techniques to help the children learn the process as well as opportunities for student collaboration, planning, and problem solving. The children spent three days writing and practicing mock investigative news broadcasts (Maxim, 2006) that explained the seed-to-table process. Barbara videotaped the final broadcasts, and the children were able to take copies of the tape home to share with their families. I encountered a unique example of one student’s enthusiasm when I observed Barbara teaching during the “dress rehearsal,” which was briefly interrupted by an inquiry from the office. One student had left school early for an appointment, and his mother was on the phone to verify that the local news station was really coming to class tomorrow. She was worried because she had not received a permission slip so her son could participate. The boy’s enthusiasm was remarkable, and his confusion about a mock-broadcast and the real news reflects the difficulty many young learners face in distinguishing real and fictional occurrences. Additionally, Barbara had evidence of the lasting nature of the students’ learning when her class took a field trip to an apple orchard one month later. Every student remembered all of the details of the seed-to-table process.

The student teachers in this study all had successful experiences with their interdisciplinary teaching, and they taught the lessons early in the semester. The confidence that resulted helped them plan more successful lessons during the second half of their 12½ week internship. By the end of the semester, Barbara, Carol, Lynn, and Helen were skillful at borrowing time from literacy and mathematics in order to address social studies concepts.

**Discussion**

Despite concerns about NCLB’s over reliance on high-stakes standardized testing (Nichols & Berliner, 2007) and the resulting emphasis on teaching elementary content in isolation and reduced instruction time for subjects that are not tested (von Zastrow & Janc, 2004), the law passed for a reason. America needs teachers and schools to make a difference in children’s lives and leave none behind academically. Those academic goals must include reading, mathematics, and other disciplines, for without social studies, students miss the opportunity to develop skills that are essential for active citizenship. The need to prepare informed, responsible citizens has never been greater as 21st century Americans must join the rest of the world in addressing crucial international issues such as globalization, conflicting cultures and religions, climate change, and environmental issues (Cawelti, 2006). Beginning teachers must be prepared to lead children through learning experiences that promote the civic values that foster active citizenship.

In response to these problems, this study gave student teachers the opportunity to teach social studies, music, and the arts, even though they were interns at a school that taught reading and mathematics in isolation due to the pressures of NCLB. The Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment allowed the participants to transform their classrooms into “spaces of liberty” (Brooks et al., 2007) where children were captivated by the content, were presented opportunities to enjoy learning, and were posi-
tioned to support one another. The student teachers did not forget the experience; during the rest of the semester, they found ways to create “spaces of liberty” by subtly modifying the standardized curriculum used at their school. For example, Barbara planned writing instruction for her first-grade students that went beyond the commercial language arts curriculum by creating scenarios that addressed social studies or science concepts. Her students observed and wrote about the scenarios, and she used kinesthetic experiences to help her students deepen their understanding about the concepts and the writing process. This was not an isolated event or approach; other student teachers found ways to enrich the commercial curriculum as well. Given the current state of near-invisibility of social studies and interdisciplinary teaching in Apple Elementary School’s curriculum, it is doubtful that they would have developed these skills without the Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment. The learning experiences the student teachers continued to plan after meeting the assignment’s requirements offer hope that they will continue to find ways to teach in “spaces of liberty” as inservice teachers. Additional research that examines how elementary teachers prepared during the NCLB era to go on to teach social studies and create “spaces of liberty” are needed to determine the impact experiences like the Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment have on inservice teachers’ practice and their students’ learning.

The Interdisciplinary Teaching Assignment was designed with Apple Elementary School’s culture in mind. I knew the school climate well because of previous supervision experiences there; I had also provided workshops for the school’s inservice teachers. Even though I wanted to require my student teachers to implement multiple interdisciplinary social studies units, I knew the mentor teachers would be unable to allow enough time. Thus, I had my student teachers learn to teach social studies on borrowed time. I also knew the assignment would be received more favorably by the mentor teachers if social studies, music and/or the arts were integrated with literacy or mathematics rather than the other way around. As a teacher educator in the NCLB era, I had to modify some of my goals as a social educator in order to ensure that my student teachers had some opportunity to learn to teach social studies. Had I attempted to require multiple social studies units, I would have contributed to the gap between theory and practice by giving assignments that my students could not realistically complete in their classroom settings. This would also have strained my relationships with the mentor teachers. As our discipline’s presence in America’s elementary schools is threatened by national curricular trends, teacher educators must respond in order to preserve the pedagogical skills new teachers need to be effective social educators. We must help our students learn techniques that allow them to teach social studies despite its current state of invisibility in the curriculum and inspire them to hope and advocate for a time when they can put the discipline back at the center of thematic, interdisciplinary instruction (Lindquist & Selwyn, 2000).

In closing, Lewis (2007) predicted that NCLB “is likely to become irrelevant. That is, its influence will dwindle unless its policies and purses are directed toward supporting changes in teaching and learning that are more aligned with what is best for kids and society” (p. 483). It is not enough to hope and wait for that prophesy to come true. Teacher educators must prepare novices who can find joy and be successful in their profession despite the current emphasis on high-stakes testing and standardization that has demoralized many teachers (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). At the same time, we must prepare our novices to be agents of change for the transformation Lewis anticipated and ensure that elementary school teachers prepared in the NCLB era know how to teach social studies. We need to provide more proactive opportunities like the Interdiscipli-
nary Teaching Project, so preservice teachers discover what it is like to teach in “spaces of liberty” (Brooks et al., 2007) that provide elementary students with meaningful citizenship and social education experiences. The unacceptable alternative is reactive: wait to see the long term ramifications of having a generation of elementary teachers with no experience teaching social studies and then respond.

References


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