Teachers Collaborate Using Lesson Study: Implications for Early Childhood Social Studies Students

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Students often do not understand the relevance of social studies, are not interested in it, and some early childhood students confuse it with other disciplines. Various external and internal factors prevent teachers from providing meaningful social studies instruction; however, practical solutions can be approached more appropriately and interestingly through collaboration. A team of second grade teachers’ participation in lesson study, a 50 plus-year old Japanese collaborative model, and implications of their activities for 41 students are reported in this interpretative case study. Data concerning students’ perceptions of their social studies classroom environments and attitudes about social studies lessons were collected before and after the lesson study, using surveys and focus group interviews. There were slight changes, both positive and negative, in students’ perceptions of their social studies learning environments, though they were puzzled about the discipline of social studies. Early childhood stakeholders benefit from learning what young students articulate about social studies and social studies learning environments. The description of team collaboration, with early childhood social studies, could be helpful also to teachers engaging in job-embedded professional development.

Key words: early childhood education, primary education, early childhood social studies, social studies, lesson study, teacher collaboration, classroom environment, constructivist environment, social studies marginalization, job-embedded professional development

Fewer U.S. teachers are teaching meaningful social studies, if any at all (Bailey, Shaw & Hollifield, 2006; Haas & Laughlin, 2001; Manzo, 2008; Wills, 2007). The marginalization of early childhood and elementary social studies in U.S. public schools is primarily attributed to accountability based on tested disciplines (Bailey, Shaw & Hollifield; Christensen, Wilson, Anders, Dennis, Kirkland, Beacham, et al., 2001; Haas & Laughlin; Manzo; O’Conner, Heafner & Groce, 2007; Pederson, 2007; Tanner, 2008; U.S. Center on Educational Policy, 2008; Westheimer, 2008). Social studies, however, was losing ground before the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 intensified this trend. An excerpt from a 1988 report by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Task Force on Early Childhood/Elementary Social Studies, for example, described problems evident then:

The overall status of social studies in elementary schools still needs improvement. We find teachers who feel unqualified to teach the content of social studies or who misinterpret them, confining instruction to a narrow focus on socialization skills or mere recall of facts from history, geography, and civics. We find that the time available for teaching the basic tools and concepts of the social sciences that can contribute to understanding human behavior receives an ever-shrinking slice of the school day (Section IV, para 2).
During the 1990s, Judith Finkelstein, Lynn Nielson, and Thomas Switzer surveyed 1,262 primary teachers (grades 1-3) and found only 8.6% devoted more than 150 minutes to social studies per week. They concluded, “primary social studies instruction is not a high curricular priority” (1993, Summary Section, para 1). In another study of that time, Joan Governale (1997) surveyed fourth grade students, teachers, parents, and community members concerning their attitudes about social studies. Teachers, in that study, were cited as being ill equipped to meet the challenges of rapidly changing demographics and increased class sizes. They expressed feeling unprepared to educate, adequately, students from increasing culturally and cognitively diverse backgrounds. Social studies education, for them, was not a priority.

As early as 1993, James Barth, James Spencer, and Ronald Shepherd argued that social studies is at risk and is slowly losing its viability because of classroom climates that develop estranged students who do not care about it. Students often do not understand how social studies relates to their own lives, or are not interested in it, and do not see the usefulness of it (Barth, Spencer, & Shepard, 1993; Chapin, 2006; Governale, 1997; Pace, 2007; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Three different school districts were investigated to learn what elementary teachers and their students said about social studies (Zhao & Hoge). Most children said, ‘it is boring and useless,’ ‘it's reading the textbook,’ and ‘it doesn't apply,’ (p. 218). Results revealed that kindergarteners and first-graders knew nothing about social studies, and most confused it with science. The second through fourth graders said that they believed social studies important but did not know why. Teachers, overall, acknowledged having difficulties identifying exciting social studies learning experiences and admitted that social studies did not get its fair share of effort. Researchers concluded that teachers’ overreliance on textbooks as a source for learning could be responsible for students’ lack of interest in the subject.

External and internal factors continue to plague social studies teaching in the early grades. Several climates of constraint undermine meaningful social studies teaching:

a) bureaucratic; withholding knowledge to control students;

b) conservative, must maintain the status quo;

c) threatening, must follow board policies

d) pathological and pessimistic, the students are the problem; and

e) competitive, the school atmosphere is dominated by ranking based on test results. (Cornbleth, 2002).

Internal factors may cause teachers to be disinterested or encumbered by poor instructional methods (Tanner, 2008). These, coupled with their own traditional learning in elementary schools, often results in a knowledge deficit and lack of understanding of their goal and mission of social studies (Sunal & Sunal, 2007-2008; Tanner, 2008). While secondary teachers predominantly specialize in certain content areas such as history or economics, elementary teachers’ content training is more comprehensive, thus, fewer training opportunities are available.

When teachers ignore social studies, they perpetuate the myth that it is unimportant (Bailey, Shaw & Hollifield, 2006; Haas & Laughlin, 2001; Zhao & Hoge, 2005), and the new generation of teachers will follow this lead. Without the support of a collegial group of experienced teachers to provide guidance in implementing meaningful social studies, they are likely to conform and set it aside.
Overcoming Social Studies Teaching Barriers

So, how can teachers control external and internal factors that inhibit social studies teaching? It is suggested that teachers join a collegial group in efforts to diplomatically redefine parameters: “Perhaps a pilot project could be undertaken in which two or three progressive social studies teachers teach in more meaningful ways and the outcomes, including but not limited to test scores, are documented and evaluated” (Cornbleth, 2002, p. 6). Planning, thus, can be approached more appropriately and interestingly through teamwork than by individual efforts (Gable, Mosjert & Tonelson, 2004; Mcfaden, Nelson & Randall, 2000). In job-embedded professional development groups (Zepeda, 2014), educators maintain dual positions as teachers and researchers, who pursue formalized action research, questioning, analyzing, reflecting, revising, and adopting their own constructs that have been designed to meet particular, immediate classroom needs. Through collaborative efforts, school cultures and classroom learning environments can become infused with vigor. They are places where students receive democratic opportunities to ‘do’ social studies that is useful and related to their lives.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

There is significant literature concerning the benefits of teacher collaboration for teachers and students. Some emphasize lesson study as a model for collaborative activities. Most research about lesson study, though, focuses on mathematics teaching (e.g., Clevenger, Kuhnley, O’Rourke & Umland, 2009; Cossey & Tucher, 2005; Hiebert, Morris & Glass, 2003; Jetter & Hancock, 2012; Perry, Tucher & Lewis, 2003; Robinson & Lekin, 2011; Sibbald, 2009) and older students (e.g., Alvine, Judson, Schein & Yoshida, 2007; Cluphf, Lux & Scott, 2012; Demer, Czerniak & Hart, 2013; Marble; 2007). While lesson study research surfaces rarely in history education (e.g., Halvorson & Lund, 2013), none has concentrated on early childhood social studies, particularly young students’ attitudes about social studies lessons and their perceptions of classroom learning environments relative to their teachers’ participation in lesson study collaborative activities. It can be difficult to extract research data from young children’s discussions (Cecil, 1995; VanSledright, Kelly, & Meuwissen, 2006), but it is important to learn as much as possible from those whose attitudes and perceptions are being studied. Early childhood social studies teachers and other stakeholders may benefit from learning what young students articulate about their thinking.

The purpose of this study was to examine the implications of job-embedded professional development, as second grade social studies teachers experimented with collaborative planning and teaching. Lesson study, a 50 plus-year old Japanese model was selected to structure teachers’ collaborative activities. Guiding questions for investigation were:

1. What are students’ perceptual changes related to second grade social studies classroom environments that occurred as a result of teacher participation in lesson study as a collaborative professional development model?

2. What are the effects on students’ attitudes towards social studies lessons that occurred as a result of teacher participation in lesson study as a collaborative professional development model?

Literature Review

The Constructivist Classroom Environment for Early Childhood Students

The constructivist classroom environment for primary students is a child-centered place for discovery. Teachers serve as facilitators who support students in their pursuits of personally meaningful goals while understanding it is acceptable to take different paths to reach those goals.
The teacher’s objective is for students to clarify misconceptions, engage in learning activities, and construct or reconstruct knowledge (Alesandrini & Larson, 2002; Palmer, 2005; Sherer, 1999). Experiences should require student involvement and be authentic, connected to their own worlds (Alesandrini & Larson, 2002; Chapin, 2006; Ellis, 2007). Thoughtful early childhood teachers avoid stereotypical activities or content instruction that lack purpose or relegate social studies to an adjunct discipline. Both content and process should be organized around important social studies content and concepts and delivered through intentional lessons (Mindes, 2005). One strategy is to wrap the acquisition of knowledge in problem solving activities, thus, providing students the opportunities to enter the problem from different portals, work cooperatively, and consider various perspectives (Ellis; Mindes; Palmer; Perkins, 1999).

Teaching approaches in primary social studies include:

a) individual investigations in the library, in the field, and on the Internet;
b) interviews; small-group collaboration; and

c) large group discussions, and the classroom environment must support children’s use of these learning strategies. (Mindes).

An effective social studies classroom-learning environment communicates to students that social studies is important. In Marge Sherer’s, The Understanding Pathway: A Conversation with Howard Gardner (1999), she asks Gardner to comment on being a self-proclaimed defender of disciplines:

Students can become amazingly flexible when they have a teacher who cares about a subject and cares about conveying it to them. If a teacher who has earned the students’ trust says, in effect, “Trust me this morning, this will be interesting and useful,” he or she will usually be given the benefit of the doubt. (pp. 13-14).

Advocates for meaningful social studies teaching are committed to creating classroom environments that make social studies personally relevant, promote critical voice, and share power.

Lesson Study Teacher Collaboration Model

The lesson study (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) collaboration model was selected for a job-embedded professional development (Zepeda, 2014) experience with second grade teachers. Positive features of the model include a) a structured framework, which minimizes wasted time, b) classroom observations, noncritical of teachers and their teaching, and c) an action research emphasis allowing teachers to deeply study teaching and learning elements within their control and closest to their daily professional lives. These involve student learning, teaching methods, lesson content, and pre-planning. Many outside experts, hired for in-service professional development, are expensive and unable to create a one-size-fits-all learning experience for Pre-Kindergarten-5 faculty. With lesson study, learning is centered on the practical needs of teachers and students, and costs are minimal.

Lesson study involves a group of teachers meeting within or across schools and is the core professional development process Japanese teachers use to continually improve teaching and learning. The focus of lesson study collaborative meetings is to develop a specific lesson with a targeted research theme. Attention is given to the process of working comprehensively with the issues involved with teaching any lesson (Feldman, 2004; Hiebert & Stigler, 2000). It is meant to be a generative process, encouraging participants to engage in practices based on powerful experiences and deep reflection. Through this trusting environment, teachers receive support in collegial development, empowering them to recognize and use knowledgeable others...
as resources (Chokshi & Fernandez, 2004; Lewis, Perry, & Hurd, 2004; Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004; Watanabe, 2002).

Lesson study is a cyclic model with structured process steps: In step 1 a group of educators gather and prepare for the lesson study cycle. They must a) agree on meeting times, b) recruit an outside participant as a facilitator, and c) invite other interested, outside observers to attend pre-observation meetings, classroom observations, and debriefing meetings. Their role is to offer feedback to the team concerning observations and suggestions about how to refine the lesson to maximize student learning.

In step 2 the team and facilitator first meet to discuss and decide on a theme. All meetings have one person designated as a facilitator and one as a note-taker.

In step 3 the team plans a lesson based on concepts that are either difficult to teach or difficult for students to learn. They also will consider a specific topic that they are required to teach each year. Research lessons are planned with detail, as resources, methods, and curriculum standards are considered.

In step 4 one teacher teaches the ‘research lesson’, and other group members observe. Observation methods focus on students’ responses to the lesson, not on the teacher.

In step 5 a debriefing meeting occurs after the observation. The teacher who taught should be the first person to speak, and then the floor opens to all other participants. The last person to speak is the facilitator who contributes a fresh perspective and summarizes the meeting. The difference with these observations, compared to traditional classroom observations, is that a teacher’s competence is not scrutinized; only students are observed, thus observers look for signs of student learning. Part of the facilitator’s role is assuring that observers do not criticize.

In step 6 the team revises the research lesson based on input offered by observing participants, and then the procedure is repeated. It is unnecessary to create dazzling, new strategies for every purpose; the importance is in carefully selecting the most appropriate strategies for each purpose. Every team teacher should teach the same lesson with revisions and be observed by the others before the lesson is refined to its final state of readiness. After the process is complete, the team meets to review and reflect upon the process and write a description. During lesson study, records are meticulously kept so that others using the lesson will be able to understand the process, what worked, what did not work, and so forth.

Method

This study took place at a pre-Kindergarten-12 American international school in a Middle Eastern country. Though students from around the world attend the school, the primary language is English, and the curriculum is US-based. There were four, second grade social studies team members (pseudonyms: Judy, Amy, Sheila, Anne) and one lesson study facilitator, the elementary school curriculum coordinator (N = 5). Participation in the study was voluntary, and I served a dual role as participant and researcher. All teachers were US citizens, and their teaching experience ranged from 11 to 23 years. The curriculum coordinator was a former elementary and middle school teacher. Second grade participants (N = 41) were a convenient sample obtained through parent, guardian, and student consent (mean average age 7.7 years).

Interested educators were invited as outside observers: a middle school Spanish teacher, two fifth grade teachers, the Pre-Kindergarten-2 principal, and two instructional technology teachers. There were 11 observers altogether, thus, each observer had two or three students on which to focus his or her attention. The lesson study procedure was explained to the outside
observers, and they began preparing to schedule time away from their classes. The second grade team members were allowed four half-day sessions and another shorter meeting session to implement the lesson study, and substitute teachers were scheduled for those days. Four, second grade, teachers met for a half-day to plan the lesson. During this time, coincidentally, the Pre-Kindergarten-5 social studies curriculum was undergoing a drastic change, and the Social Studies Curriculum Committee had been revising it for months. The scope and sequence was transitioning from a traditional curriculum model to one based, solely, on important concepts. The research lesson, thus, served dual purposes. It was a research lesson for the lesson study and a model of a second grade, concept-based social studies lesson for the new curriculum. This particular research lesson was one of a series that would, in time, be written for the environment theme within the umbrella concept of community.

In the first research lesson plan, second grade students were reminded of positive and negative choices they make each day in their world. To recognize and build on prior knowledge, students engaged in a card sorting activity using a T-Chart. The cards’ faces displayed pictures or sentences revealing common positive and negative choices related to students’ school lives. Within small groups, students discussed and decided on which side of the T-Chart (positive or negative) each card should be placed. After the sorting activity, students were asked to visualize a beautiful, clean school environment, and then, at another point, asked to visualize one that had not been treated with care. Afterwards, they were requested to collaborate with group members to write or draw their own ideas of positive and negative choices, within the school environment, and share group responses with the whole class.

On the second day, the lesson study group met for a pre-observation meeting. Teacher 1 (Judy), with observers in the room, taught the first round of the research lesson, and then the debriefing meeting was held in a private room. After the meeting, Teacher 1 (Judy), Teacher 2 (Amy), Teacher 3 (Sheila), and Teacher 4 (Anne) met to refine the lesson, incorporating the strategies suggested by the lesson study group.

On day three, the lesson study group met for the pre-observation session, Amy taught the refined lesson, and the debriefing meeting followed. After debriefing with the whole group, the second grade team discussed strategies suggested by observers and refined the lesson a second time. On the fourth day, the lesson study group (team and observers) met for the pre-observation session in the afternoon. Because of an unforeseen time issue, Sheila and Anne taught the lesson to their students simultaneously in their adjoining classrooms, and there were enough observers to cover both classes. At the end of this final whole group meeting, the facilitator, acting as the final commentator, first asked each team member, as is customary in lesson study, to comment on the process and insights gained from the entire collaborative experience. All responses were positive, and then a number of people from the entire group expressed gratitude. The middle school Spanish teacher enthusiastically thanked us for the experience and wanted to get involved in spreading it via faculty meetings. One of the fifth grade teachers said that his thoughts about teaching had changed completely since he had joined us. The other fifth grade teacher thanked us for helping her “grow professionally.” Later on, the Pre-Kindergarten-2 principal said that she had been working on required teacher evaluations the week after the lesson study, and the experience had changed the way she conducted evaluative observations. She became more attentive to observing the children’s learning versus the traditional observation of teachers’ teaching.
Data Collection and Analysis

The interpretative case study employed qualitative and quantitative methods. The interpretative process emphasized detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events and conditions and their relationships within a natural setting, the school.

The Constructivist Learning Environment Survey (CLES) (Taylor & Fraser, 1991) was used to identify and measure the second grade social studies students’ pre- and post-study perceptions of their social studies classroom environments. Students’ attitudes concerning social studies lessons were collected in focus group interviews before and after the lesson study; sessions were audiotaped and transcribed. A second outside educator, not involved with the project, provided ongoing peer reviews as my interpretations of the data, as participant-researcher, were discussed with this individual at significant intervals.

I adapted the Student CLES survey instrument to a social studies contextual frame and created the student focus group interview questions used to help measure students’ attitudes about social studies lessons. Instruments were sent via e-mail to four social studies educators for validation. Three of the social studies educators served as social studies methods instructors at two different universities in the southeastern United States. One of the three also taught social studies research courses to graduate students. The fourth educator regularly taught social studies at the school in which the lesson study occurred, therefore, I was able to speak face-to-face about the instruments with her. I took all suggestions for change into account and modified the instruments accordingly. A pilot study was implemented, with one, second grade student, before the Student CLES was administered to any of the remaining student participants. Although I had time and was willing to change the instrument, the nature of the student’s responses made it unnecessary to revise and revalidate the document.

Of the 41 students (N = 41), 16 were selected for the pre- and post-study group interview and CLES survey processes. Participants were selected randomly, using only one criterion: parental or guardian permission. While each student had individual copies of the CLES survey, I explained the survey carefully, answered clarification questions, read each part of the survey to the students, and gave as much time as needed for students to mark their answers. Questions used to direct the focus group conversations were the same for the pre- and post-study interviews. “Student discussions are difficult to use effectively because young children do not always possess the needed discussion behaviors or skills” (Cecil, 1995, p. 54). Thus, as the interviewer, I worked flexibly and sometimes reworded questions, on the spot, in order to get feedback (VanSledright, Kelly & Meuwissen, 2006). The questions were:

1. Do you know what social studies in school is all about? If so, please explain what you think it is.
2. Suppose that you are in your classroom, and your teacher is teaching a social studies lesson. What is the teacher doing? What are the students doing?
3. Do you enjoy social studies lessons? Why or why not?
4. Think about the best social studies lesson that you have ever had? What are some of the things that you were doing during that lesson?
5. What are some of the things that you have learned during your social studies lessons this year?

To answer the first research question, What are students’ perceptual changes related to second grade social studies classroom environments that occurred as a result of teacher participation in lesson study as a collaborative professional development model? measures were
collected from CLES surveys to obtain each teacher’s mean score. Final mean scores calculated through pre-and post-study CLES surveys were compared, for each teacher, to verify any perceptual changes that may have occurred among students after their teachers participated in the lesson study. Results are displayed in Table 1. Question 2 of the focus group questionnaire related to students’ perceptions of the social studies classroom environment, therefore, students’ responses to this question were used to qualitatively supplement CLES data when considering the first research question.

To answer the second research question, *What are the effects on students’ attitudes towards social studies lessons that occurred as a result of teacher participation in lesson study as a collaborative professional development model?* Transcriptions of pre- and post-study interviews were analyzed first through open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); topics, frequently surfacing, important to the research question, were recorded. Redundant codes were condensed and further narrowed through a content analysis technique (Neuendorf, 2002). Focus group interview questions required communicative responses to specific questions, though the interview sessions were open to naturally occurring speech. Thus, emergent coding of the content, in which “a coding scheme is established after all responses are collected” (p. 194) was used. The emergent coding option was employed because no useful standard classification or coding scheme existed for this particular research. Therefore, respondents’ answers were transcribed and examined for theme dimensions and analyzed for frequencies. I analyzed the transcriptions as a “human coder” (i.e., individuals who make judgments about variables as applied to each message unit)” (Neuendorf, p. 8). I made all efforts to control bias by: a) creating a relevant questionnaire and having it edited and approved by four social studies educators before using it in the research, b) carefully reading and rereading the transcripts “in a constant state of discovery and revision” (Neuendorf, p. 6), and c) meeting consistently with a research-experienced educator, not involved with the project, to gain peer reviews of my data interpretations. While member checks were considered, this approach as not selected as the most reliable option when working with the second grade students participating in the focus groups. Finally, examples from students’ focus group discourses are used, in the results section, to draw attention to their communicative actions and to support interpretations of their responses.

**Results**

**Students’ Perceptions of their Learning Environments**

A foundation of this study is the premise that knowledge is not transmitted but constructed by individuals. Learning environments that support constructivist theory communicate common characteristics related to these elements: a) personal relevance, b) critical voice, c) shared control, d) uncertainty, e) student negotiation, f) commitment, and g) teacher support. The adapted student version of the Constructivist Learning Environment Survey (CLES) (Taylor & Fraser, 1991) provides a series of 44 questions with the above listed components embedded within the following headings: *Learning about the World, Learning about Social Studies, Learning to Speak Out, Learning to Learn, Learning to Communicate, Interest in Learning Social Studies, and Teacher Support in Learning Social Studies.* Each question requires one of three responses, which are assigned varying degrees of value. These are Almost Never (1), Sometimes (3), and Almost Always (5). Question 7 is scored in the reverse manner, and omitted or invalid responses are scored 3.

Each teacher selected four students from the pool of second graders having parental or guardian consent to participate in the study. I made every effort to urge teachers to select
students randomly from the participants (\( N = 41 \)), so it is unlikely that any of the selections were biased. All focus group students (\( N = 16 \)) were surveyed in a relaxed setting, as I read the questions to students in groups of four. Students could ask questions and discuss a topic or question at any time, and there were no time limits. Because of students’ choices to remove themselves from the post-study session, there were no post-study CLES data from Anne’s (Teacher 4) students. Results from the pre- and post-study Student CLES for Judy, Amy, and Sheila (\( N = 12 \)) are displayed on Table 1, offering a general picture of the results:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison of Student CLES Means for Each Class</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy’s Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy’s Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila’s Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne’s Students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ overall perceptions of classroom environment change and the categories of greatest and least change, for each teacher, are presented in this list for comparison:

Judy: Overall change +2%

Greatest improvement

| Learning to Speak Out +16% |
| Learning about Social Studies -10% |

Least improvement

Amy: Overall change -4%

Greatest improvement

| Learning to Learn +3% |
| Teacher Support in Learning -11% |

Least improvement

Sheila: Overall change +2%

Greatest improvement

| Teacher Support in Learning +21% |
| Learning to Learn & Learning about Social Studies (both) -9% |

Anne: Student CLES data were unavailable because her students selected not to complete the post-study CLES.

Numbers indicate that there were slight changes, both positive and negative, in students’ perceptions of the learning environments for three teachers from pre- to post-study (–4 to +2%). During focus group interviews, I was the interviewer, and students were familiar with me (see VanSledright, Kelly & Meuwissen, 2006). Four groups of students from each classroom were asked to discuss specific questions. Question 2, embedded within the list, addressed the social studies classroom environment, “Suppose that you are in your classroom, and your teacher is teaching a social studies lesson. What is the teacher doing? What are the students doing?”

Responses to this question supplemented quantitative data concerning students’ perceptions of their classroom environments. With few exceptions, one recurrent theme in both pre- and post-study interviews was that the ‘teacher is teaching and the students are listening’. Tables 2 and 3 are included here only to illustrate this point. They display the prevalence of these particular themes in Question 2, Parts 1 and 2, of the pre-study interview:

Table 2
Frequency of Student Responses to Pre-study Focus Group Interview Question 2, Part 1: Suppose that you are in your classroom, and your teacher is teaching a social studies lesson. What is the teacher doing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching You</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking/Telling Us What to Do/Giving Directions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing on the Board</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (watching me, standing, sitting)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Frequency of Student Responses to Pre-study Focus Group Interview Question 2, Part 2: Suppose that you are in your classroom, and your teacher is teaching a social studies lesson. What are the students doing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening/Paying Attention</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (reading, drawing, games, working together)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ Attitudes about Social Studies Lessons

Four groups of students, one from each class, were interviewed before and after the lesson study procedure. The purpose was to gain information concerning their attitudes about social studies lessons before and after their teachers’ participation in lesson study, thus answering the second research question, What are the effects on students’ attitudes towards social studies lessons that occurred as a result of teacher participation in lesson study as a collaborative professional development model?

The first interview question was designed to learn if students understood the meaning of social studies. Comments, particularly pre-study comments, indicate that many students were confused about the term ‘social studies’. They often had social studies confused with science, language arts, and mathematics. Example comments showing evidence follow,

Student 1: It’s like when we have to do, like, when we have to finish all these sentences and do the punctuation thing.

Student 2: It’s about science, and reading, and learning.

Student 3: Listening to the teacher, and then she puts the paper down.

The sheet of paper has a hundred of pluses on the paper.

Student 4: Or minuses. And she says...do all this in, like, two minutes. She says go and then she says stop.

Interviewer: Yes, that’s math. Do you remember any of the lessons in social studies?
Student 4: You go to the science lab. And you learn about whales, and you learn about chicks, and you learn about crocodiles, you learn about squirrels. This compares with the findings of Zhao and Hoge (2005) in that the primary students either did not know what social studies was, confused it with other disciplines, or did not know why it was important.

Second graders in the research study also did not seem to see how social studies could be important in their own lives. Social studies learning appeared to be fixed, in their minds, as something that exists outside their immediate world. There was evidence also of social studies as a narrow focus on socialization skills. These are some representative comments made by a few students during the pre-study focus group interviews,

Student 1: It’s kind of like talking about the people…in the…like, what presidents came in, like, in 1991 or something like that…. and also about the oceans sometimes.

Student 2: It’s not about doing stuff that you want to do.

Student 3: It’s about learning how to do stuff at school.

Although post-study interviews did not show that students made great strides in understanding social studies as an academic discipline or why it is important in their lives, they did not seem to be quite as confused about the subject. Consider some of their post-study comments:

Student 1: It’s about the world. It’s about the world and stuff, and it’s about learning and knowing about what it’s about.

Student 2: It’s like when we learn about the world. Like Asia and—

Student 3: Like Africa and the country we’re in. Yeah, I know what it is…my mom taught me…it’s about, like, the world and people.

Student 4: Social studies is, like, drawing maps and, like, positive choices and negative choices.

Students were asked if they enjoyed social studies lessons. During pre-study interviews, many responses were enthusiastically positive, yet when urged to share why they liked it, it was obvious that most students had vague ideas about social studies lessons.

Student 1: Because it makes you smarter.

Student 2: Because you’ll get a great job when you grow up probably. And you can learn about the world.

Student 2: And you can learn more things about school and everything, and you will get a good job and everything. I want to get a good job.

Student 3: Because you learn how to, like, read maps and learn how to fold paper. It shows you stuff that you haven’t learned yet.

Some students’ post-study comments were more specific, yet focused on their short-term memories of the team of second grade teachers’ lesson study model lesson about environments. It is possible that students were not accustomed to actual lessons that were called ‘social studies.’

Student 1: I would like to have more [social studies lessons].

Student 2: I don’t know; I forgot the other activity besides the trees (one of the activities in the lesson study experimental research lesson about environments).
Interviewer: Well, we sorted the cards during that lesson.

Student 3: Oh, yeah. That was my favorite. That was my favorite one, but I liked doing the trees too. I like to draw those things.

Conclusions and Discussion

In this study I considered various reasons why early childhood and elementary teachers may fail to teach meaningful social studies, thus producing students who do not like or understand it. Experimenting with Catherine Cornbleth’s suggestion that teachers might overcome barriers by joining a collegial group, perhaps a pilot project, in efforts to teach in more meaningful ways (2002), I established a second grade social studies lesson study group.

My first assumption was that teachers who collaborate to interlace meaningful social studies content with active methods could influence classroom-learning environments. Thus, the primary focus was on ‘how’ social studies is taught. I did not presume that teachers were either traditionalists or constructivists before the lesson study. The principal intent was to understand second graders’ perceptions of their own social studies learning environments. A second assumption was that teachers’ collaboration in planning and teaching intentional, meaningful social studies lessons could affect students’ attitudes about social studies lessons. Again, I did not presume that these second graders were confused or held negative notions about social studies. The goal was to learn what their attitudes were before and after their teachers’ participation in collaborative planning and teaching.

Data gathered from the second grade focus group interviews and surveys are limited because of the small sample size, which was originally \( N = 16 \) during the pre-study phase and then changed to \( N = 12 \), because four students selected not to participate in post-study data collection. Developing a research practice consistent with children’s rights to have their voices heard, particularly about issues related to their lives, “requires an honest engagement with its limitations and constraints as well as its possibilities” (Waldron, 2006, p. 105). The use of lesson study as a collaboration model for teachers, in this study, served as a viable form of teacher-led, job-embedded professional development for the team, but their participation did not influence students’ perceptions of their learning environments or their attitudes about social studies to a large degree. More collaborative experiences, larger sample sizes, and more time are needed to show evidence of true change.

Students’ pre- and post-study interview responses and CLES survey results showed little overall change in the classroom environments as a result of their teachers’ participation in collaborative planning and teaching. The teacher talking—student listening scenario, presented in Tables 2 and 3, is simply meant to reveal its pervasiveness in students’ perceptions; not a unique picture for many US classroom settings. It does not, however, represent the ideals set forth for constructivist learning environments. Some of the basic contrasts between traditional and constructivist classroom environments are detailed:

In a traditional classroom, an invisible and imposing, at time, impenetrable, barrier between students and teacher exists through power and practice. In a constructivist classroom, by contrast, the teacher and the students share responsibility and decision-making and demonstrate mutual respect. The democratic and interactive process of a constructivist classroom allows students to be active and autonomous learners. Using constructivist strategies, teachers are more effective. They are able to promote communication and create flexibility so
that the needs of all students can be met. The learning relationship in a constructivist classroom is mutually beneficial to both students and teachers (Gray, 2005, p.2).

It is possible that these second grade students were autonomous learners and possessed the power to share in responsibility and decision-making, though, responses did not indicate that students perceived their learning environments to be constructivist as described above. Student CLES survey results showed that teachers’ overall classroom environments improved in these areas: a) Students learning to speak out, b) Students learning to learn, and c) Teacher support in learning. While there are obvious difficulties in properly interpreting conclusions about this (e.g., students more familiar with the post-study survey questions), it is important to note that in two of these categories students scored the improvements quite high (Students learning to speak out = 16%) and (Teacher support in learning = 21%). Perhaps students did perceive that they were given more support and power during the research lesson.

The second grade students in this study were puzzled about the discipline of social studies. Perhaps their teachers had not defined social studies or taught social studies concepts and skills with intent. Even after the lesson study, one teacher, Sheila, stated that much of social studies is about day-to-day living and learning with others in the classroom environment. The NCSS counters this familiar expression. Many times, teachers suggest that at the primary level everything they do is related to social studies, but it is important to recognize that “an effective social studies program cannot just be a haphazard collection of unrelated activities. It must be organized systematically around concepts from history and the social studies” (NCSS, 1988, Section II, para. 10).

In a case study reporting meaningful social studies experiences with 22 kindergarteners, Ann Martin (1990) explained that, …teachers [must] recognize that children already think about important events, subjects, and human concerns that affect all persons….Thus, curricula nicely packaged with ideas such as “my rules,” “my feelings,” “neatness,” “property”%“arouses the suspicion that such curricula are designed more for keeping children under control than for exploring the world and widening their views of it. (p. 306).

When social studies is integrated throughout the day, with only a socialization purpose, it is difficult for children to conceptualize social studies as a separate entity. Sometimes early childhood teachers see social studies also as separate, an unwelcome add-on unrelated to their basic skills program (Martin). Before this study began, I asked the participating teachers this question, “Would you say that the social studies knowledge that your students gain from your social studies lessons is what you expect?” Anne’s response was, “No, I don’t think it is right now because I think that I have rushed it, and I sometimes squeeze it in, and it’s an add-on. I think they enjoy it, but I don’t think what they actually gain, maybe over a long period of time, is sticking with them.”

It is inappropriate to presume that social studies education will occur naturally; so intentional well-constructed lessons are vital. “Teachers must carefully plan and assess lessons in order to provide the experiences that result in meaningful learning….Lessons involve students in active learning and processing of information described as ‘minds on’ learning” (Sunal & Haas, 2002, p. 17). Regarding early childhood curricula, Carolyn Gosse and Lisa Hansel (2014) note young children enjoy discussing complex concepts; any misconceptions that preschoolers might have will be clarified as social studies concepts and skills are revisited in later grades. Thus, instead of our teacher, Anne, being concerned about social studies not “sticking with...
them,” she might consider that teaching explicit social studies concepts and skills provides foundational, prior knowledge needed by these students in later years.

It will be interesting to see how current education reform will affect early childhood social studies in the United States. Common Core State Standards (CCSS) originally adopted by 46 US states and the District of Columbia require young children to learn about key content areas, particularly history, through texts. Even kindergarteners must engage in discussions and use academic language that emphasizes skills in gathering evidence from texts (Neuman & Wright, 2014). Curriculum and specific knowledge are glossed over by educators every day (Gosse & Hansel, 2014), and for decades early childhood and elementary grades have neglected to build the content substructure that students need for success with the CCSS. To provide students with necessary foundational concepts and skills, social studies will need more teaching time and emphasis (Wattenberg, 2014). Teachers will require relevant materials, time to discuss students’ learning in an environment of collaboration and trust, and a social studies curriculum carefully selected to focus on the most critical knowledge and skills needed by early childhood students.

References


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Web-Based References


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