



Kindergarten students' social studies and content literacy learning from interactive read-alouds

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that although many elementary teachers integrate social studies with the language arts, this instruction tends to be poorly designed with little emphasis on social studies learning. This study examined an instructional method rarely used as a form of integration at the primary-grade level—interactive read-alouds of informational text—in order to determine the degree that this intervention might simultaneously build kindergarten students' knowledge of economic concepts and content literacy in low-SES settings. As evidenced by students' responses during one-on-one assessments before and following the interactive read-alouds, students made statistically significant learning gains in both social studies and content literacy. Implications of the findings and areas for further research are discussed.

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Introduction

The marginalization of elementary social studies in the United States is a well-documented phenomenon. Although the National Council for the Social Studies recommends that elementary teachers devote 20% of their academic time to social studies instruction (NCSS, 1989), survey and observational studies make clear that many classrooms fall well below this guideline (e.g., [Center on Education Policy, 2008](#); [Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014](#); [Good et al., 2010](#); [Heafner & Fitchett, 2012](#)). In early childhood classrooms, some analyses estimate weekly time for social studies as low as 90 min or less ([Berson & Camicia, 2013](#); [Burstein, Hutton, & Curtis, 2006](#)). Students in low-SES communities may experience even fewer opportunities to develop social studies knowledge in school than children in high-SES communities ([Berson & Camicia, 2013](#); [Camburn & Han, 2011](#)). In many elementary classrooms across the U.S., making time for instruction is a sizeable, if not the largest obstacle to teaching social studies ([Rock et al., 2006](#)).

Elementary teachers who do find time to teach social studies often report integrating the social studies disciplines with the language arts ([Rock et al., 2006](#)). [Burstein et al. \(2006\)](#), for example, found that 36% of 172 K-5 teachers in one urban school district based their social studies instruction entirely on the reading basal. Another 32% of these teachers used

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literature with social studies themes to teach social studies. Rock et al. (2006) reported an even greater propensity towards integration for the more than 140 urban and rural primary-grade teachers in their study: 50% of the kindergarten teachers taught only through integration with the language arts and 45% taught through a combination of stand-alone social studies and integration during the language arts block. According to the researchers, these teachers viewed integration as a method "to bring the social studies into instructional time designated for tested curricula" (p. 466).

Many social studies researchers argue that integration with the language arts has the potential to make more time for elementary social studies as well as foster rich learning in all the social studies disciplines when teachers use reading, writing, and discussion as tools to support content goals (e.g., Brophy & Alleman, 2008). Specifically in the social studies discipline of economics, the focus of this study, it is common to recommend the reading of children's literature to help young students comprehend challenging concepts such as opportunity cost, money, and supply and demand (e.g., Meszaros & Evans, 2010; VanFossen, 2003). Reading texts aloud to young students also has the potential to support learning in both social studies and reading simultaneously. In her dissertation research, Harrington (2012) concluded that primary-grade teachers could use literary picture books to foster learning in both domains given teachers' attentiveness to both the social studies disciplines and reading when reviewing read-aloud texts. Meszaros and Evans (2010) would agree; they argued that integrating economics and the language arts benefits both social studies and reading and writing by providing a rich context for acquiring literacy skills.

Despite the possibility of using integrated approaches to increase time for elementary social studies and provide an authentic context for acquiring reading and writing skills, research suggests that much of the integration currently taking place in elementary classrooms today has a tendency to prioritize language arts instruction to the detriment of social studies learning (Alleman & Brophy, 2010; Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008; Sunal & Sunal, 2007). According to Levstik (2008):

pressure to devote more and more time to reading and mathematics combined with less concern with social studies content on some administrators' and teachers' parts may well result in little more than a few reading lessons with social studies themes (p. 54).

Boyle-Baise et al. (2008) documented the phenomenon of haphazard teaching of social studies as topics arose in the reading basal through their observations, interviews, and focus group conversations with 13 K-6 teachers. They explained "integration was more like a robbing of content from social studies to benefit reading than an enrichment of both" (p. 248). Similarly, Sunal and Sunal (2007) found many of the K-3 teachers in their study relied on the reading basal for their social studies instruction. The majority of these lessons appeared to focus on reading to the detriment of social studies; however, some of the lessons did appear thoughtfully planned with social studies learning goals in mind. Still, for numerous students, low-quality integrated instruction may represent the totality of their experiences in elementary social studies. Yet the reality that some (or much) of the integration observed today is merely an instrument for instruction in the language arts does not mean researchers and teachers should abandon attempts at examining more effective approaches to integration. The great number of elementary teachers who turn to integration as a way to ensure time for social studies makes it imperative that we identify more effective approaches that integrate social studies with the language arts.

Changing the trend in integration is especially pertinent given the recent adoption by many states of the K-5 Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects ([CCSS-RLA]; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA], & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). When compared to previous state standards, the CCSS-RLA give greater attention to building young children's knowledge of the natural and social world through sustained experiences with informational texts in the disciplines (Neuman & Gambrell, 2013). The CCSS-RLA state, "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" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 10). Altopf and Golston (2012) recognized the potential for using the adoption of the CCSS-RLA by a majority of the U.S. states to move social studies to a more central, integrated role in the K-5 classroom. They explained:

today's educators expect that even the youngest learners will learn about the diverse world in which they live—it's history, geography, government, and economic realities—while they meet the challenges of becoming fluent and effective readers (p. 6).

Yet Altopf and Golston (2012) focused their recommendations on literary, as opposed to informational, texts. As curriculum developers, districts, and classrooms continue to modify their curriculum and instruction to include a greater emphasis on content literacy, or the reading and writing of informational text, it is imperative that those committed to elementary social studies seize this opportunity to bring social studies to the forefront of the elementary classroom through effective integration with informational text types.

More research is needed on instructional approaches that integrate content literacy with social studies in order to identify methods that maintain a high level of learning in both domains. As such, this study examined kindergarten students' social studies and content literacy learning from one particular method of integration: the interactive reading aloud of a set of informational trade books on economic concepts.

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