

Revitalizing Elementary Social Studies Using Informational Texts

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Abstract

One component of the United States' public school curriculum core is social studies. Since the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), elementary social studies has been marginalized, and in some cases, eliminated from the school day in favor of increased time for literacy and mathematics instruction. Kentucky's adoption of the ELA Common Core standards in 2010 and emphasis on informational texts to teach reading, may turn out to be an opportunity to re-position social studies' importance in the elementary school day. This study seeks to understand whether the ELA Common Core is the impetus teachers need in order to revitalize social studies instruction in the elementary grades.

Key words: *informational texts, social studies, elementary teachers*

Statement of the Problem

In 2010, the state of Kentucky became the first state in the nation to adopt the Common Core Standards for mathematics and English Language Arts (Gewertz, 2010). Elementary teachers have increased their use of informational texts in their literacy instruction in order to meet the 50% non-fiction and 50% fiction balance required by ELA CC. Elementary teachers in Kentucky have some degree of autonomy when selecting informational texts to use in their classrooms. The researchers in this study were curious to discover whether the informational texts they select are of social studies value and used as a springboard for social studies content instruction. It is plausible to expect that increased usage of informational texts would result in increased time spent on social studies content knowledge. How elementary teachers translate the ELA CC and integrate social studies skills, knowledge, and concepts is possibly the key to restoring social studies' status in the elementary curriculum.

Research Questions

- 1) To what extent do elementary teachers claim to use informational texts to teach social studies?
- 2) To what extent do elementary teachers align the use of informational texts to Kentucky's and national social studies standards?
- 3) To what extent do elementary teachers assess their students' social studies content knowledge when using informational texts?

Participants

- 1) Population frame: the 22 counties in MSU’s service region
- 2) Population frame source: the KY Council on Postsecondary Education website:
<http://cpe.ky.gov/campuses/svcregions.html>
- 3) Elementary schools (grades K – 5) within the population frame source: the KY Department of Education website (2018): <https://applications.education.ky.gov/src/>
- 4) Identification of all potential participants: websites of every elementary (K – 5) school in MSU’s service region.

Total elementary schools in MSU’s 22 county service region: **96**

Total (N) elementary teachers: **1,815** (see Table 1)

Table 1. Number of Elementary Teachers by County in Morehead State University’s Service Region, 2017-2018

County	n	County	n
Bath	48	Letcher	123
Boyd*	156	Lewis	27
Breathitt	37	Magoffin	46
Carter	80	Martin**	--
Elliott	28	Mason	66
Fleming	58	Menifee	30
Floyd	131	Montgomery	94
Greenup*	120	Morgan	56
Johnson*	226	Pike*	160
Knott	134	Rowan	84
Lawrence	75	Wolfe	36

*includes independent district **N = 1,815**

**information unavailable

Method

The researchers employed **quantitative research** methods, more precisely, *descriptive research* to ascertain elementary teachers’ practices using informational texts to teach social studies. The researchers selected *descriptive research* because the study has to do with teacher

perceptions, practices, and demographics (Gay & Airasian, 2000). They conducted an extensive review of the literature in order to operationalize the term, informational texts, and to determine the variables to be explored in the study. From there, they developed and received IRB (Institutional Research Board) approval of a 32 question *survey* asking teachers to respond to questions about their familiarity with informational texts as teaching devices; their instructional practices; their familiarity with and use of social studies standards, ELA standards and the intersection of the two; and their assessment practices as related to social studies and ELA standards. The researchers disseminated their survey using **SurveyMonkey** (2017) between February 28 and March 30, 2018.

Of the 1,815 (N) teachers, 101 emails were returned as invalid and removed from the list due to changes in teachers' employment status. The updated population total became N = **1,714**, with **208** respondents by March 30th, 2018 for a **12.1% return**.

Findings

1) **Research Question 1:** *To what extent do elementary teachers claim to use informational texts to teach social studies?*

- 44.74% STRONGLY AGREE and 28.95% AGREED with question, "I teach social studies content and skills as a method for teaching reading."
- 46.07% STRONGLY AGREE and 38.22% AGREED with question, "I utilize informational texts to teach social studies content and skills."
- 56.32% STRONGLY AGREE and 36.32% AGREED with question, "I believe teaching social studies with informational texts helps students with their vocabulary acquisition."
- 62.11% STRONGLY AGREE and 31.58% AGREED with question, "I believe teaching social studies with informational texts helps students to make connections between content and their lives."
- 64.74% STRONGLY AGREE and 30.00% AGREED with question, "I believe teaching social studies with informational texts is beneficial for my students."

2) **Research Question 2:** *To what extent do elementary teachers align the use of informational texts to Kentucky's and national social studies standards?*

- 79.78% STRONGLY AGREE and 15.85% AGREED with question, “I am familiar with the Common Core State Standards for ELA/ Literacy (CCSS ELA/L).”
- 65.95% STRONGLY AGREE and 23.78% AGREED with question, “I am familiar with the proportion of literary and non-fiction/ informational texts my students are required to read in accordance with the CCSS ELA/L standards.”
- 42.70% STRONGLY AGREE and 35.68% AGREED with question, “I am familiar with the Kentucky Academic Standards for social studies (KAS SS) for my grade.”
- 32.41% STRONGLY AGREE and 38.62% AGREED with question, “I consult the Kentucky Academic Standards for social studies (KAS SS) when selecting informational texts for my students to read.”
- 22.83% STRONGLY AGREE and 35.33% AGREED with question, “I am familiar with the National Council for the Social studies (NCSS) standards for social studies.”
- 24.53% STRONGLY AGREE and 55.66% AGREED with question, “I am familiar with the NCSS Ten Thematic Strands (i.e., I. Culture, II. Time, Continuity and Change, III. People, Places and Environments).”
- 11.21% STRONGLY AGREE and 36.45% AGREED with question, “I consult the NCSS Ten Thematic Strands when selecting informational texts for my students to read.”

3) **Research Question 3:** *To what extent do elementary teachers assess their students’ social studies content knowledge when using informational texts?*

- 59.20% STRONGLY AGREE and 29.31% AGREED with question, “I assess my students’ literacy knowledge and skills acquired from reading informational texts in accordance with the CCSS ELA/L.
- 32.95% STRONGLY AGREE and 41.62% AGREED with question, “I assess my students’ social studies content knowledge and skills acquired from reading informational texts.”
- 29.07% STRONGLY AGREE and 38.37% AGREED with question, “I assess my students’ social studies content knowledge and skills acquired from reading informational texts in accordance with the Kentucky Academic Standards for social studies (KAS SS).”
- 16.37% STRONGLY AGREE and 25.73% AGREED with question, “I assess my students’ social studies content knowledge and skills acquired from reading informational texts in accordance with the NCSS Ten Thematic Strands.”
- 35.84% STRONGLY AGREE and 44.51% AGREED with question, “I believe assessing my students’ social studies content knowledge and skills acquired from reading informational texts is important.”

Discussion

This survey study was designed to understand elementary teacher practices and perceptions regarding the use of informational texts as a means for teaching social studies. Social

studies is not tested as part of schools' accountability measure until the fifth grade in the state of Kentucky. Many elementary schools, particularly in eastern Kentucky where resources are scarce and poverty is high, choose to prioritize reading, writing and mathematics because of their role in yearly performance measures. It is not uncommon for elementary students to spend four hours per day on reading and writing and two hours per day on mathematics instruction.

A focus in primary grades is learning to read. As students enter third and the intermediate grade, the focus shifts to reading to learn. It is logical to expect that as students are reading to learn, they are exposed to a wide variety of texts ranging from literary to informational. The results in this survey show that this is the case. Elementary teachers should capitalize on their use of informational text readings as a means for teaching big ideas in social studies. The results of this study show that elementary teachers claim to be teaching social studies content and skills, but are to a lesser degree aligning their instruction with state and national standards and assessing what students learned. This leads the researchers to conclude that the elementary teachers are well-intentioned in their obligation to teach social studies and may even see their actions as being integrative across the disciplines.

However, the *integrated* curriculum idea leaves social studies behind (Pace, 2012) because as the data show in this survey, social studies content and skills is not being explicitly addressed in many elementary classrooms. To truly integrate the core subjects (e.g., literacy and social studies), students need opportunities to ask compelling questions, big ideas through disciplinary lenses, read a variety of sources, and present findings before a variety of audiences (Grant, Swan, & Lee, 2017). Perhaps what is needed to revitalize elementary social studies is for teachers to see social studies as the vehicle for teaching reading and writing in third through fifth grades as opposed to the other way around.

Follow-up qualitative research in the form of interviews, case studies, and classroom observations may reveal more substantive practices and intentions of elementary teachers' informational texts usage to teach social studies. Repeating this survey study within a larger population of elementary teachers is also warranted in order to determine the generalizability of the results across a more diverse demographic. For now, our hope is for this study to inspire a collaborative movement between elementary teachers and curriculum specialists to resolve the conundrum of social studies' legitimate place in the elementary classroom.

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