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ABSTRACT

Educators tend to view curriculum integration as an obviously good idea and thus adopt an attitude of "the more integration, the better." However, the analysis of elementary social studies presented in this report indicates that many of the activities suggested in the name of integration either: (1) lack educational value in any subject or (2) promote progress toward significant goals in another subject but not in social studies. Furthermore, many of these activities are quite time consuming and some of them have the effect of distorting the ways social studies content is represented or developed. Examples of these and other problems with so-called integration activities are presented, and guidelines that teachers can use for judging the value of proposed integration activities, both their education value in general and their social education value in particular, are offered. (Author/DB)

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## Abstract

Educators tend to view curriculum integration as an obviously good idea and thus to adopt an attitude of "the more integration, the better." However, the authors' analyses of elementary social studies series indicate that many of the activities suggested in the name of integration either (a) lack educational value in any subject or (b) promote progress toward significant goals in another subject but not in social studies. Furthermore, many of these activities are quite time consuming and some of them have the effect of distorting the ways that social studies content is represented or developed. The authors present examples of these and other problems with so-called integration activities and then offer suggested guidelines that teachers can use for judging the value of proposed integration activities--both their education value in general and their social education value in particular.

# IS CURRICULUM INTEGRATION A BOON OR A THREAT TO SOCIAL STUDIES?

Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy[1]

Curriculum integration is one of those "obviously" good ideas. Articles and inservice speakers extol its potential for enhancing the meaningfulness of what is taught, saving teachers time by reducing the need to make as many preparations, reducing the need to rush to try to get everything covered, and making it possible to teach knowledge and skills simultaneously. In addition, for social studies and other content area subjects that suffered reduced time allocations as a result of the "back to basics" movement, integration is often pictured as a way to restore needed content emphases. In general, integration is pictured as a viable response to problems of content balance and a way to save time and make for natural, holistic learning.

These seemingly compelling arguments have predisposed most educators to view integration as a desirable curriculum feature. Indeed, the implicit maxim is "the more integration, the better." A few years ago, we shared this predisposition. Even now, we find it hard to resist the notion of integration as a good idea in the abstract. However, in recent years we have been carefully examining the best selling elementary social studies series, looking not only at the student texts but at the questions, activities, and evaluation methods provided as ancillary materials or suggested in the teachers' manuals. We have found some positive features in these series, but also some undesirable ones, including much of what is done in the name of integration. Too often, activities described as ways to integrate social studies with other subjects

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either (a) lack educational value in any subject or (b) promote progress toward significant goals in another subject but not in social studies.

Rather than expanding the scope and enhancing the meaningfulness and impact of the social education curriculum, these so-called integration activities disrupt its coherence. In effect, they amount to intrusion of language arts or other skills practice exercises into social studies time and, thus, are better described as invasion of social studies by other school subjects than as integration of social studies with these subjects.

Focusing on instructional activities, we will provide examples of what we consider to be inappropriate integration attempts, drawn from curriculum materials and from classroom observations. Then we will suggest some guiding principles that can serve as criteria for distinguishing productive from counterproductive integration attempts, presented in the form of a checklist that can be used as a self-monitoring tool.

## Forms of Integration

Worthwhile integration implies that a single activity accomplishes significant curricular goals in two or more subjects simultaneously. Integration comes in many forms. Sometimes the nature of the topic makes integration natural or even necessary. Some topics inherently cut across subjects (e.g., to teach about ecology, one must draw content from both science and social studies). Other topics are primarily identified with one subject but require applications of another in order to be learned meaningfully (e.g., map and globe studies are part of geography and consumer education is part of economics, but both of these topics require applications of mathematical knowledge and skills). Problems with so-called integration activities usually do not occur with these more natural forms of integration, although we have seen map

and globe skills exercises and consumer economics exercises that were mostly artificial mathematics skills practice rather than authentic social education activities.

Most of the problems occur with forms of integration that are not inherently rooted in the topic itself and thus involve integration for integration's sake. These forms can be used productively. One example involves adding content drawn from a secondary subject in order to enrich the content in the primary subject (e.g., reading about and displaying the works of an artist as a means of enhancing the study of a historical period). Other examples involve combining knowledge from a content-area subject such as social studies with processes from a skills subject such as language arts.

In the latter forms of integration, the focus of the instruction and the accountability pressures placed on students may be on the knowledge, the processes, or both. If students were asked to write to their political representatives about their legislative roles or policy positions, the assignment would be primarily a social education activity although it would include application of writing skills. In contrast, students might be asked to write about an imaginary visit to the White House as an exercise in descriptive writing. If the emphasis in structuring and grading the assignment were placed on the technical aspects of composition and form, the assignment would be mostly a language arts activity, not a social studies activity. Finally, students who were studying book reporting skills in language arts and the American Revolution in social studies might be asked to read and report on biographies of key revolutionary figures. Such an assignment might promote progress toward important goals in both subjects, especially if the goals were made clear to the students and the reports were graded separately for technical features and for historical content.

Social studies series frequently seek to integrate subject matter by adding content drawn from other subjects (artistic or literary works, biographical inserts) or by calling for use of language arts or other skills to manipulate social studies content. These so-called integration activities may or may not have educational value, depending on the nature of their primary goals. If its primary goal is not an educationally significant one, an activity does not belong anywhere in the curriculum. If its primary goal is educationally significant but is not a social education goal, the activity may belong in the curriculum but should not be scheduled during social studies time. For an activity to be considered part of the social studies curriculum, its primary goal should be one of the social education goals that has been established for the social studies unit--a goal that would be pursued whether or not this particular activity were included.

## Activities That Lack or Mask Social Education Goals

Unfortunately, many of the activities that we have observed in social studies classes, as well as many of the activities supplied with or suggested in the manuals that accompany current social studies series, lack significant social education value. Some of these lack educational value in any subject and are just pointless busy work (alphabetizing the state capitals, counting the number of states included in each of several geographical regions). Others may have value as language arts activities but do not belong in the social studies curriculum (exercises that make use of social studies content but focus on pluralizing singular nouns, finding the main idea in a paragraph, matching synonyms, using the dictionary, etc.). Others are potentially useful as vehicles for pursuing significant social education goals but are structured

with so much emphasis on the language arts aspects that the social education purpose is unclear.

For example, a fourth-grade manual suggested assigning students to write research papers on coal. Instructions emphasized teaching the mechanics of doing the investigation and writing the paper. There was little mention of social education goals or major social studies understandings such as "humans have unlimited wants and limited resources" or policy issues such as conservation of natural resources or development of energy alternatives. With the task narrowly conceived and the focus on research and report writing, it is unlikely that the 25 or so individual reports will yield enough variety to allow students to benefit from one another's work. Consequently, the social education value of this assignment will be minimal and its cost-effectiveness will be diluted further because of the considerable time required to obtain and read content sources, copy or paraphrase data, and make presentations to the class.

Similar masking of social education goals was seen in a unit on families in which students were asked to recreate their families by portraying each member using a paper plate decorated with construction paper, crayons, and yarn. The plates were to be used to "introduce" family members to the class and then later combined to create mobiles. This is another time-consuming activity, and it is structured to emphasize the artistic dimensions rather than the social education dimensions. If it really served significant social education purposes to have students introduce their families to classmates (we doubt that it does), they could do so more effectively through photographs than through primitive paper-plate representations. We would prefer that the class spend the time learning about the nature of and reasons for variations in family configurations and roles in different cultures and historical periods.

A comparable example was seen in a fourth-grade unit on tropical regions, in which students were asked to construct examples of homes in tropical parts of the world. Again, such an activity would take a great deal of time, especially if authentic building materials were used and the instructions emphasized artistic construction activities rather than social education concepts and principles. To address effectively social education content such as the impact of climate and local geography on living conditions, the teacher would do better to lead discussion of a collection of pictures selected to illustrate variation in shelters and ways that they are impacted by local conditions, rather than have students construct models.

## Cost-Effectiveness Problems

Time-consuming art and construction projects are often labeled as ways to extend or integrate social learning, but they often fail to focus on significant social understandings. Some of these develop or at least allow opportunities to use social studies knowledge or skills (construct models or maps of all or parts of the home or school), but others simply lack social education value (carve pumpkins to look like U.S. presidents).

Besides artistic construction, role play is another frequent basis for activities that are either inherently limited in social education value or too time consuming to be cost effective. For example, a unit on families called for students to dress in costumes, play musical instruments, and participate in a parade as a means of illustrating how families celebrate. On the following day they were to write about the event. This series of activities offers tie-ins with humanities and physical education and provides a stimulus for language arts work, but it lacks significant social education content.

Another activity, suggested as a follow-up to a lesson on jobs in the family, called for the teacher to divide the class into groups of four and assign roles of mother, father, brother, and sister. Each group would role play the following situations: A child wants to learn to ride a bicycle, a child wants to make a halloween costume, or the children in the family want to do something special for a parent's birthday. Again, these activities appear to lack social education value, and nothing is said to the teacher either about structuring the activities beforehand or leading debriefing discussions afterwards so as to focus students' attention on important social education ideas.

Cost-effectiveness problems are also presented by collage and scrapbook activities that call for a lot of cutting and pasting of pictures but not much thinking or writing about ideas linked to major social education goals. Instructions for such activities are often given in ways that focus students on the processes involved in carrying out the activities rather than on the ideas that the activities are supposed to develop, and the final products often get evaluated on the basis of criteria such as artistic appeal. As a result, students may spend a great deal of time on such activities, yet fail to accomplish significant social education goals.

If activities are worthwhile at all, it is because they fulfill important curricular purposes, not just because they cut across subject matter lines. We believe that the time spent on activities that cut across subject-matter lines should be assessed against the time quotas allocated for those subjects, in ways that reflect the cost effectiveness of the activities as means of accomplishing each subject's major goals. Classroom time allocated for social studies should not be diverted to activities that lack significant social education value. Thus, making puppets to depict United States presidents might be justified if planned primarily as an art project and assessed against art

time, but we do not see how this could be justified as a social education activity unless it were structured so that the students also spent some time researching and synthesizing biographical data.

## Content Distortion

Attempts at integration sometimes distort the ways that social studies content is represented or developed. For example, a unit on clothing included a lesson on uniforms that called for a follow-up activity in which students would make puppets of people dressed in uniforms. The teacher was to set up situations where two puppets would meet and tell each other about the uniforms they were wearing. This activity is problematic because it is time consuming, because it emphasizes art activities over social education content, and because it calls for knowledge that was not developed in the lesson (which provided only brief information about the uniforms worn by fire fighters and astronauts). Most fundamentally, however, it is problematic because it results in a great deal of social studies time being spent on uniforms, a topic which at best deserves only passing mention in a good unit on clothing as a basic human need.

Content distortion was also seen in a unit on pioneer life that included a sequencing-skills exercise built around an illustration of five steps in building log cabins. The last three steps in the described sequence were arbitrarily imposed rather than logically necessary, and in any case, they did not correspond to what was shown in the illustration. It appeared that the authors wanted to include an exercise in sequential ordering somewhere in the curriculum and chose this lesson as the place to include it, rather than seeing this exercise as important for developing key knowledge about pioneer life.

Unnecessary counting and sequencing activities often are inserted into social studies materials as a way to incorporate mathematics skills. Another example called for students to read statements about various constitutional amendments and identify the amendments by number. This already dubious assignment was complicated further by directions calling for the amendment numbers to be put into the proper squares of a 3-by-3 matrix which, if filled out correctly, would yield the same "magic number" as the sum for each row and column. As if this were not convoluted enough, the instructions called for the students to "put the number of the amendment in the box with the same letter as the sentence that describes it." This illustrates what can happen when integration is sought as an end in itself by materials developers who are focused on topic and skills coverage rather than on accomplishing social education goals.

## Difficult or Impossible Tasks

Ill-conceived integration attempts sometimes require students to attempt to do things that are difficult if not impossible to accomplish. A fifth-grade lesson on the English colonies called for students to demonstrate their understanding of the joint stock company by diagramming its structure to show relationships and flow among the company, stocks, stockholders, and profits. Besides being a distraction from the main ideas in the unit, this activity seems ill-considered because the operations of a joint stock company, although relatively easy to explain verbally, are difficult to depict unambiguously in a diagram. Again, it appeared that this activity existed because the curriculum developers felt the need to include a "making a diagram" exercise somewhere, rather than because they saw it as a natural and appropriate way to develop understanding of key content.

Another activity that is questionable for similar reasons called for students to construct battle maps illustrating strategy and key events in a Revolutionary War battle. Another called for students to use pantomime to communicate one of the six reasons for the Constitution as stated in the Preamble. Even if one grants the notion that exercises in pantomime belong in the social education curriculum (we don't), this is about as farfetched and inappropriate an application of pantomime as we can imagine! Finally, a lesson on feelings included an assignment calling for students to draw happy, sad, and hungry faces. In the absence of familiar and commonly shared cultural expectations concerning the facial manifestations of hunger, how are students supposed to go about the task of depicting a hungry face?

Activities should develop the key ideas in a unit and be difficult enough to provide some challenge and extend learning but not so difficult as to leave students confused or frustrated. Too often, activity suggestions call for students to display or use knowledge that has not been taught in the curriculum and is not likely to have been acquired elsewhere (e.g., having first graders role play scenes from Mexico when all they have learned about Mexico is its location on a map, having fourth graders debate state-level budgetary cuts when the only background information they have been exposed to is a single textbook page describing the roles of legislators).

## Feasibility Problems

Activities also must be feasible for implementation within the constraints under which the teacher must work. Certain activities are not feasible because they are too expensive, require space or equipment that is unavailable, involve unacceptably noisy construction work, or pose risks to the physical safety or emotional security of the students. For example, a suggested

follow-up to a lesson on following directions called for the teacher to post the four cardinal directions in the proper locations around the classroom, then have the students line up and march around the room to music as the teacher called out directions to "March north," March east," and so on. This attempted integration of social studies with physical education would not have much social education value even if it were conducted in the gym, but at least it could be implemented feasibly there. To attempt to implement it in a classroom crowded with desks and other furniture is to invite chaos and injury.

Failure to be realistic about constraints led to rejection of an integration activity proposed by a teacher that we know. She planned to take her class to see a small exhibition of art by Monet, in order to illustrate how his work had been impacted on by the geographical features of France. However, this would have involved a 200-mile round trip, so the plan was rejected. The teacher would have done better to plan a more viable alternative, such as to acquire prints of the artist's work and bring them to class for observation and discussion.

## Selecting Appropriate Activities

These notions about assessing activities that integrate across subjects for their educational value in general and their social education value in particular involve applications of a set of principles that we have developed for assessing, selecting, or designing learning activities that will enable school subjects to be taught for understanding, appreciation, and application (Brophy & Alleman, in press). The most basic of these principles is goal relevance: Each activity should have at least one primary goal that, if achieved, will represent progress toward one of the major social education goals that underlie and justify the social studies curriculum. This principle

applies just as much to activities that integrate across subjects as to activities that focus exclusively on social education. Teachers who value social education and want to enact a coherent social studies curriculum will need to bear this in mind and make sure that the thrust of that curriculum is not blunted by significant time spent in activities with only marginal social education value.

In view of the kinds of problems noted here, we believe that it is important for teachers to stop thinking about curricular integration as necessarily a good thing and begin to think about it as something that is feasible and desirable in some situations but not in others. Activities that allow for integration across subjects may be desirable, but only if such integration does not interfere with the accomplishment of the primary social education goal and the activities are appropriate in difficulty level, are feasible for classroom implementation, and offer educational benefits sufficient to justify the time and trouble needed to acquire them.

Teachers cannot depend on the manuals supplied with contemporary market-share social studies series to focus their efforts on activities that meet these criteria. In the name of integration, these manuals suggest a great many art projects, isolated skills exercises, and other activities that have minimal social education value and little or no connection to the main ideas developed in the units. The most recently published series have deemphasized the insertion of isolated basic skills exercises into social studies units, but they have begun to emphasize new features such as literary selections and cooperative learning activities. Sometimes these new features are selected and used in ways that are well suited to development of unit topics, but sometimes they are not. Some of the activities that are based on the inserted literary selections are essentially language arts activities with little or no social

education value, and some of the suggested cooperative learning activities involve artificially forcing the cooperative format onto learning situations to which it is not well suited. Thus, although its particular manifestations evolve, the problem of so-called integration activities that diminish the coherence and thrust of the social education curriculum persists.

Consequently, teachers will have to learn to assess suggested learning activities, not just for whether their students are likely to enjoy the activities and to be able to complete them successfully but also for whether the activities offer sufficient educational value to merit inclusion in the curriculum. We offer principles and guidelines for making such decisions in Brophy and Alleman (in press). For judging activities that purport to integrate across subjects, we suggest that social studies teachers additionally consider the following questions:

-- Does the activity have a significant social education goal as its primary focus?

-- Would this be a desirable activity for the social studies unit even if it did not feature across-subjects integration?

-- Would an "outsider" clearly recognize the activity as social studies?

-- Does the activity allow students to meaningfully develop or authentically apply important social education content?

-- Does it involve authentic application of skills from other disciplines?

-- Do students have the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills?

-- If the activity is structured properly, will students understand and be able to explain its social education purposes?

-- If they engage in the activity with those purposes in mind, will they be likely to accomplish the purposes as a result?

## References

Brophy, J., & Alleman, J. (in press). Activities as instructional tools: A framework for analysis and evaluation. Educational Researcher.