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ABSTRACT

A study examined the extent to which literacy tasks were emphasized within a fourth-grade social studies classroom. Subjects, 21 fourth-grade students and their teacher at a private K-8 elementary school located in an urban area of the east, were observed over a 7-week period as they conducted a thematic unit on liberty. Data included audiotapings of the lessons, field notes, and interviews. Results indicated that: (1) non-fictional texts on liberty were used instead of a textbook; (2) when students read, it was most often an independent, silent activity; (3) listening played an important function in the classroom; (4) students were provided the opportunity to elaborate on their understandings of liberty rather than just recall information; and (5) student writing in the classroom served as a means for displaying acquired subject matter knowledge. Findings suggest that language was viewed as an integral part of the learning process in this classroom. (One figure of data is included; 29 references are attached.) (RS)

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**CREATING A LITERATE ENVIRONMENT FOR
LEARNING SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENT**

Paper presented at the International Reading Association
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INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that the level of literacy needed for full participation in American society is increasing. Due in part to technology, changes in the American workplace have been radical and quick to occur. As a result, concern for the quality of education our children receive in preparation for life and its problems in the 21st century is justified. There are calls for higher standards and improved teaching practices (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), calls for reform in teacher education (Carnegie Forum, 1986), and calls for increased cultural knowledge (Hirsch, 1987) as well as multicultural awareness (Banks, 1990).

Currently in some schools, curricular reform is taking place, and schools are attempting to make language a critical aspect of instruction within all subject areas. However, these schools are armed primarily with rhetorical support and have little empirical evidence to guide them in the development of literate environments in subject areas other than the language arts (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1990).

At present, there are almost no descriptions of classrooms that purposely integrate the language arts in content domains. This study focused on the teaching practices of one individual teacher who had participated in a staff development program designed to integrate the teaching of language arts across all content areas (King, Bean & Creek, 1991). Specifically, this study examined the extent to which literacy tasks were emphasized within a fourth grade social studies classroom. For purposes of this research paper, a literacy task is defined as an imposed classroom assignment in which knowledge of social studies content is gained or manipulated by way of reading, writing, speaking and/or listening.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of literacy tasks in which students are engaged during social studies instruction?
2. In what classroom contexts do literacy tasks occur?

METHODOLOGY

Since the activity of studying literacy is like learning literacy, the methods used should be social and interpretive (Bloome & Green, 1984). Therefore, a case study design was used, and the classroom was the unit of analysis.

Setting and Participants

The classroom studied is part of a private K-8 elementary school located in an urban area of the East. The organizational structure of this school includes features that are not yet common in most American schools. This includes multi-age classrooms, modified team teaching, and non-graded progress. Classroom assignments are made to provide heterogeneity and are balanced with respect to general academic ability. Children typically remain with the same teacher for a period of two years.

In addition to its unique organizational structure, this school's social studies curriculum is progressive. In 1990, using recommendations in Charting a Course: Social Studies for the 21st Century (National Commission of Social Studies in the Schools, 1989) and Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education (Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 1989), the school's curriculum committee designed a K-8 social studies curriculum that moves away from the traditional "expanding environments" approach. This new curriculum emphasizes depth rather than breadth of coverage and focuses on the intensive study of history, geography, and political science. In order to meet these goals, the use of thematic units is recommended.

Participants were 21 fourth grade students and their teacher. Students' ages ranged from 8 to 9 years. Their grade equivalent reading abilities ranged from 2.8 to 12.9, with a mean of 6.6, based on the April, 1990 scores on the California Achievement Test. Within this classroom, there were 3 African Americans, 18 white students, 12 girls, and 9 boys. The teacher, Dr. Mac, has a doctorate in education and over 19 years of elementary teaching experience. In addition to social studies, Dr. Mac also taught science and language arts.

Data Collection

Prior to collecting data, I visited the classroom several times during the daily social studies class period. My purpose was to establish rapport with the students so that when data collection actually began, I was not looked upon as a stranger in this classroom. Thus, my role throughout this investigation was that of participant observer. All data gathering techniques were pilot tested in another fourth grade classroom.

Actual data were collected over a seven week period during which time students were engaged in a thematic unit on "Liberty". I was an observer three days per week, and the days of the week that I observed varied from week to week. My goal was to gather three types of data: audiotaped lessons, field notes, and interviews.

Each observed lesson was audiotaped and later transcribed. Field notes were also taken during observations. These notes contained five types of information: the literacy task observed, the time and duration of the observed literacy task, the

instructional materials used, the way in which students were grouped, and the social studies content addressed. Interview data from students and the teacher were audiotaped and later transcribed.

One randomly selected student was interviewed after each observation, as time permitted. Eventually, 11 students were individually interviewed. The purpose of the interview was to capture students' perceptions of literacy tasks and their notion of Liberty. This line of questioning is significant since much of the research on student motivation and perceptions of schooling has tended to ignore subject matter (Stodolosky, Salk & Glaessner, 1991). Although the questions I asked changed, depending on the day's lesson, the following questions represent the types of questions I asked.

Explain to me what you did today in social studies.
 What did you learn today that you didn't know before?
 Why do you think your teacher asked you to do this?
 What helped you to understand -----?
 Did you enjoy -----?
 Did you do anything today that you didn't particularly like to do? If so, what was it?
 What does liberty mean to you? Can you give me an example of liberty?

The teacher was interviewed five times during the study. The purpose of each interview was to gain the teacher's perception of what was happening in his classroom and to share with him what I perceived to be happening. Again, my questions changed throughout the study, but the following list represents questions that were asked during all of the teacher interviews.

What was your rationale for having students do -----?
 How did you select this task?
 What did you want your students to learn?
 Were your expectations met?
 This is what I saw happening... Is this what you saw?

* Not all data were used to answer the research questions presented in this paper. The data set just described represents a larger study, which is not fully reported in this paper.

Data Analysis

The act of separating data collection from data analysis has been done to fulfill the expectations of those reading this paper. However, in qualitative research, collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process (Merriam, 1988). Consequently, at the end of each week, I transcribed the lesson tapes and re-read my field notes and my research questions. This enabled me to refocus my attention for data collection the following week. Then, after all data had been collected and transcribed, I began intensive,

systematic analyses.

Glaser's Constant Comparative method (1969) was used to code and categorize the data. For instance, in order to answer Research Question #1, I read field notes and compared each instance of reading, writing, speaking, and listening by asking the question, "Is this instance of reading (or writing, etc) like the previous instance?" When instances were similar, I grouped them in the same category. When instances were different, they were placed in separate categories and all subsequent instances were compared to each existing category. Rules for placing data into a category were written as coding progressed.

After all data had been coded, an independent rater was consulted to establish reliability regarding the way in which the data were examined. This rater was not involved in the study nor did he have a complete understanding of the purpose of this investigation. Using the rules I had established, the rater coded the reading, writing, speaking, and listening categories of four sets of field notes. He also calculated the percentage of observed time devoted to each category. We had 96% agreement.

FINDINGS

What is the nature of literacy tasks in which students are engaged during social studies instruction?

Listening. Throughout this study, students were engaged in listening events from 29% to 60% of observed class time. An analysis of the listening data revealed that students listened to three types of information: substantive, procedural, or learning process. The properties of each subset include the following.

SUBSTANTIVE

- content of video disc,
- content of teacher lecture,
- content of primary historical documents,
- content of magazine articles,
- content of classmates' work,
- interpretation of content made by teacher and students,
- teacher-made subject matter connections.

PROCEDURAL

- directions about classroom procedures, rules, assignments, or materials.

LEARNING PROCESS

- explanation of learning tools such as a graphic organizer,
- teacher's feedback about student performance.

In comparing the percentage of time students listened to substantive, procedural, or information about the learning process, Figure 1 indicates that listening to the teacher give directions

about classroom rules, assignments, or materials was the most prominent listening activity. Students heard comments about the learning process in 4% of listening instances while 45% of listening time was devoted to subject matter.

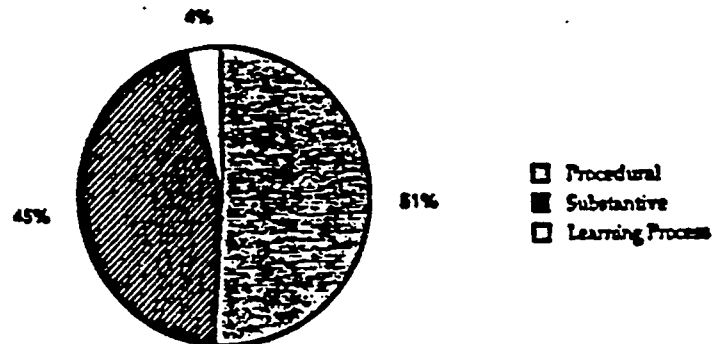


Figure 1

Percentage of Time Students Listened to Substantive,
Procedural, and Learning Process Statements

Speaking. Students were regularly observed speaking in this classroom. Instances of student speech ranged from 6% to 44% of observed class time. As with listening, speaking data were categorized into three subsets: substantive, procedural, and learning process. Eleven properties emerged and are listed below.

SUBSTANTIVE

ask question about subject matter,
make comment about prior knowledge or an experience
related to subject matter,
answer a question about subject matter,
make an elaborative comment about subject matter.

PROCEDURAL

ask questions about classroom procedures, rules,
assignment, or materials,
make comment about prior knowledge or an experience
related to classroom procedures,

make unprompted comment about classroom procedure,
 rules, assignment, or materials,
 answer question about classroom procedure, rules,
 assignment, or materials,
 make elaborative comment about classroom procedure,
 rules, assignment, or materials.

LEARNING PROCESS

answer question about learning process,
 make elaborative comment about learning process.

When students spoke in class, they most often answered a teacher-initiated question about social studies content. The second most prominent type of student speech occurred when students made elaborative comments about social studies content. Such comments usually occurred after one student answered a teacher-initiated question but other students wanted to add something about the topic being addressed. Dr. Mac encouraged students to make such comments.

Writing. Writing as a whole group activity was not observed on a daily basis; however, individual students were observed in daily writing activities throughout this study. Writing data and their properties include the following.

COMPOSITION

one page research report,
 ten questions about the U.S. Constitution,
 notes taken during lectures or videos,
 responses written in students' journals.

LOW LEVEL WRITING

sentences written on worksheets or in workbook,
 fill-in-the-blank answers.

In this social studies classroom, the writing process was not emphasized.

Reading. Even though a social studies textbook was not used, students were observed reading a variety of texts and materials as they learned about liberty. These texts include the following.

articles and posters displayed on bulletin boards,
 classroom library books,
 directions to the learning centers and video disc,
 encyclopedia entries,
 multiple page lessons found in a workbook,
 primary historical documents,
Scholastic News magazines,
 single page worksheets,
 student-written journal entries.

Silent reading was observed most often, regardless of student grouping arrangements. Oral reading was observed in only 20% of all reading instances.

In what classroom contexts do literacy tasks occur?

In order to answer the first research question, reading, writing, speaking, and listening were artificially separated and analyzed. In actuality, however, a combination of reading, writing, speaking, and listening behaviors was most often observed. This section will highlight four classroom contexts involving literacy tasks so that the breadth and depth of such tasks can be described. The term literacy event is used to refer to activities that combine reading, writing, speaking and/or listening.

Classroom Context #1 - LECTURE

The first type of literacy event involved a combination of listening and writing. Near the beginning of the unit, Dr. Mac researched and wrote two historical vignettes, or lectures. The first vignette dealt with the Revolutionary War and the second with the forming of the U.S. Constitution.

The day before the first vignette was presented, students discussed the difficulty in deciding what to include when taking notes during a lecture. They concluded that a lecture would be most beneficial if it were presented in a hierarchical format (i.e., presentation of main idea followed by supporting details).

Following this discussion, Dr. Mac decided to use the hierarchical format when presenting each vignette. He created a graphic organizer and wrote it on the board to visually show students the main ideas and details. These consisted of important names, dates, and places. Students were now able to concentrate on the listening task at hand because throughout the each lecture, Dr. Mac pointed to the board, which helped guide their note taking. This was done not only to structure the activity for the students, but also to show them that their input about this classroom activity was valued (Teacher interview, 1/25/91).

Classroom Context #2 - MLK COLLAGE

The second literacy event involved reading, speaking, writing, and listening. This activity provided students with the opportunity to interact with one another for the purpose of interpreting and synthesizing the subject matter. To do this, pairs of students read different chapters from the Martin Luther King, Jr.: His Life and Dream (Farris, 1986) workbook. Students also participated in a school-wide celebration of King's birthday. Then, working in groups of four, students created a collage to summarize the information in the chapter they had read. Each student was required to contribute something to the collage and

provide an oral justification for its inclusion. When all groups were finished, a large group discussion took place. Each group presented its collage to the class and answered classmates' questions. A large classroom collage depicting King's life was created from the individual collages. The large collage was hung on the wall and was a frequent reference point throughout the remainder of the unit.

Classroom Context #3 - STUDENT RESPONSE JOURNALS

The third type of literacy event required students to write in response journals, read each other's writing, and respond orally. In preparation for one writing assignment, students read and discussed excerpts from the Declaration of Independence, King's "I have a dream speech", and President George Bush's letter written to Saddam Hussein prior to the onset of the Persian Gulf War. During class discussions, students first considered each document and its relationship to the theme of liberty. Then students discussed the similarities and differences of each document as it related to liberty. Students were also encouraged to discuss these topics with their parents. Finally, students wrote a journal entry that compared and contrasted the three documents in terms of their own personal notion of liberty.

This literacy event provided students with the opportunity to think deeply about the concept of liberty in more than one historical context. Moreover, it served three functions: to know oneself, to participate in community activities, and to demonstrate academic competence (Marzano, 1991).

During the Liberty unit, writing was used as a means of making history have personal significance to students. For example, one series of lessons included watching a Civil War video (Burns, 1989). After viewing the video over a three day period and discussing the content each day, students wrote an unstructured journal entry. Using McTighe's think/pair/share format (1988), the process of sharing written ideas with one another was discussed. One student reported difficulty with the sharing process because "my partner had different ideas that I didn't agree with" (Daryl, 2/4/91). Dr. Mac immediately asked the class "How does this experience relate to the Civil War?" The resulting discussion enabled students to see the personal relevance of an historical conflict. In this instance, Dr. Mac used writing and discussion as a way of making history come alive for students.

Classroom Context #4 - VIDEO DISC TECHNOLOGY

The fourth type of literacy event involved the interactive video disk, listening, writing, and speaking. Technology as a tool for learning is often dehumanized in relation to student/teacher interactions; however, the opportunity to program this technology, to select particular sections for use, and to add or give directions to commercially produced material, provided many

learning alternatives in this social studies classroom.

Three specific lessons were designed using The Statue of Liberty video disc (Burns, 1985).

1) Quick Quotes - a whole group lesson on paraphrasing short quotations from the disc;

2) Big Quotes - a program completed by pairs of students that required them to write what was said, who said it, why that person had been selected to speak, and how that quote impacted the student's view of liberty;

3) Faces, Feelings, and Futures - a series of frames selected from the video disc to be viewed by students at their leisure, after which they were required to write a list of adjectives and then an essay describing their interpretations of the immigrants' lives and thoughts. In conclusion, lessons involving literacy tasks and the video disc technology promoted snared discussion, high level thinking and were very motivational for students.

DISCUSSION

Reading

Unlike the teachers studied by Gagnon (1987) and Shaver et al. (1980), this teacher did not view his social studies textbook as THE source of content knowledge, and consequently, the textbook was not used during this unit of instruction. Instead, non-fictional text about liberty as well as non-fictional text exemplifying liberty were used to teach the concept. The use of these materials is compatible with recent curricular guidelines such as California's History-Social Science Framework (1988). However, the framework also advocates using children's literature, which was not observed in this classroom. When students read, it was most often an independent, silent activity. This is in sharp contrast to other fourth grade social studies classrooms where the majority of reading events were oral (Armbruster, et al., 1991).

Listening

Even though a variety of reading materials were used, students were exposed to a large amount of subject matter by listening to the teacher. This finding is similar to other classroom observational studies where students depended on the teacher, not the textbook, as the primary source of information (Goodlad, 1984; Stodolosky, 1989). In this study, the video disc also provided students with substantive information about liberty.

Listening played an important function in this social studies classroom. Not only did students listen to the teacher lecture about social studies content, but they also listened to him give procedural directions. This finding could be attributed to the fact that students in this classroom had never used video disc technology or response journals prior to this unit of study. It appears as though procedural information was given to teach

students how to use these tools since as the unit progressed, students spent less time in whole group instruction and more time engaged in independent learning activities.

Speaking

In addition to listening and reading activities, students participated in discussions about liberty. In contrast to social studies classrooms where students merely recalled information (Stodolosky, Ferguson & Wimpelberg, 1981; Wilen & White, 1991), the discussions in Dr. Mac's classroom provided an opportunity for students to elaborate on their understanding of liberty. Discussions did begin with the usual teacher-initiated question followed by student response, but in this classroom the first student's response was not immediately accepted by the teacher. Rather, it was typically followed by three or four additional student responses. By delaying his interpretation of students' responses, Dr. Mac gave all students the opportunity as well as the responsibility of evaluating each other's comments. Thus, in this classroom, students were provided with an opportunity to verbalize their ideas and feelings in order to better understand them (Vygotsky, 1978).

Writing

Student writing in this classroom served as a means for displaying acquired subject matter knowledge. Like the elementary social studies teachers reported by Gilstrap (1991), the teacher required several writing projects ranging from student response journals to the traditional research report. However, since students did not prepare writing samples for publication, and it is unlikely that they took the time to revise and edit their compositions, an opportunity to learn about the writing process itself was not utilized.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the structure of the school in which this study occurred was not the central focus of this research, it most likely had an influence on the instructional practices that I observed. The teacher's experience is also a probable influence on the findings. However, when the time came to select a site for this study, I relied on a strategy called nonprobablistic sampling. Nonprobablistic sampling is an appropriate sampling strategy in qualitative research since generalization in a statistical sense is not the goal of this type of investigation (Merriam, 1988). The form of nonprobablistic sampling that I used is called "purposeful" (Patton, 1980), which is based on the assumption that in order to discover, understand and gain insight, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this investigation is that instruction must provide multiple opportunities for students

to interact with one another since some literacy tasks will be recognized as meaningful while other events will not. Think/pair/share activities, cooperative learning groups, and literature discussion groups are some of the ways in which students can become active participants. The process of sharing student writing also provides an excellent means of reading and writing in a social context. Moreover, when instruction emphasizes oral and written language, the classroom becomes a community with a shared history.

Instruction must make connections for students. As adults, we tend to infer the connection between two concepts or experiences, and we sometimes forget that children are not as adept at making connections. Teachers must alert students to upcoming events as well as cue them about their participation in the event. These connections should incorporate students' values, interests, and past experiences and relate them to what was taught and how it was taught. When student experiences are used as a starting point in instruction, a sense of ownership can be developed that will enable students to become collaborators in learning events.

Most importantly, practitioners must have a clear sense of where they are going and why. Teachers must strive to become reflective individuals, capable of making professional decisions about learning conditions within their classrooms. All teachers hold a set of beliefs about children and how they learn. These beliefs may be tacit and unstated, but they influence the decisions teachers make in instructional contexts. Teachers need opportunities to read, reflect, and share their classroom experiences with one another. During this study, Dr. Mac and I frequently discussed our perceptions of the learning process during the Liberty unit. Our collaboration provided both of us with a better understanding, through reflection and sharing, of this particular classroom culture.

In conclusion, language was viewed as an integral part of the learning process in this classroom. This contrasts to classrooms where language is viewed as a product to be assessed and attention is focused solely on what has been learned. Students should be given regular opportunities to manipulate the subject matter by speaking about it, reading about it, writing about it, and listening to others talk about it. Language can be used as a means of "criss-crossing" topics, experiences, and problems (Tierney & McGinley, 1987). In doing so, students are exposed to multiple perspectives: those of the teacher, those of the texts, and those of fellow students. This allows students to evaluate, compare, and personalize subject matter instead of merely memorizing it.

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