Engaging Students With Disabilities in Text-Based Discussions

Guidance for General Education Social Studies Clasrooms

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Mr. Romero teaches social studies to eighth graders at Moore Middle School. Ms. Goodwin, the special education teacher, provides support to students with disabilities in his classroom. The teachers just wrapped up their weekly planning meeting, during which they discussed ways to support reading comprehension among students with disabilities during content area instruction.

"I'm having a hard time getting students to talk about what they read," said Mr. Romero. "We're reading informational text to support reading skills, but my students just aren't talking very much. I've tried putting students with a partner and asking them to talk about the passages after reading, but oftentimes they sit quietly, or they talk about other things."

Ms. Goodwin responded, "I've noticed that, too. The students have a really hard time getting started, and when they do start talking about text, the conversation is usually short and pretty surface level. I wonder what we can do to support meaningful exchanges around texts for our students?"

Students in middle school classes are increasingly expected to learn social studies content using text sources (Toste, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2013). The Common Core State Standards for literacy in social studies require students to (a) learn key ideas and details, (b) cite text evidence to support their conclusions, (c) determine word meanings from text and how a text presents information, and (d) integrate visual information with text information to distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment within a text (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). In order to keep up with today's literacy demands and be adequately prepared for postsecondary success, students need to be able to engage with text in a way that expands their knowledge and understanding of key information (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

Mr. Romero and Ms. Goodwin's experience is not uncommon. Initiating and maintaining high-quality, text-based discussions to improve reading comprehension and content knowledge poses challenges for both teachers and students. Many students struggle to read and understand grade-level text, and reading performance is even lower for students identified with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Compounding the problem may be that students have limited opportunities to read and discuss text during content area instruction (Swanson, Wanzek, McCulley, Stillman-Spisak, Vaughn et al., 2016). In fact, a recent observation study showed when teachers used text during content area instruction, they often read it aloud to students and summarized the content (Swanson et al., 2016). This results in more teacher talk than student talk, and students are not actively engaged in learning because teachers do the heavy lifting.

A content approach to text-based discussion is a method for engaging students in text reading by asking questions. This approach maximizes inquiry and results in improved content knowledge (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009; Vaughn, Swanson, Roberts, WAnzek, Stilman-Spisak et al., 2013) and reading comprehension (Vaughn et al., 2013; Swanson, Wanzek, Vaughn, Roberts & Fall, 2015). A content approach differs from strategy instruction in several important ways. Strategy approaches are aligned with models of thinking and learning (e.g., Symons, Snyder, Cariglia-Bull, & Pressley, 1989) and consist of teaching students cognitive processes and when to use them. In contrast, content approaches to reading are framed within a text-processing view of comprehension (e.g., Kintsch, 1974; van den Broek, Tzeng, & Linderholm, 1998). Instruction focuses more directly on the content in the text as the vehicle for instruction, engaging students in building coherent representations of the ideas presented in text. In this service, the text-based discussion practices presented here are structured around a guiding question; every student in the classroom should be able to answer this question by the end of the discussion (Swanson et al., 2017; Vaughn et al., 2014). The discussion is teacher led, yet students play a key, participatory role in the conversation. Even though the teacher initiates the discussion, the majority of the work—and the contribution of ideas—is conducted by students. The discussion centers on the text, and students support their statements by using evidence from the readings.

Not only is the type of discussion important; so, too, is the format within which discussions take place. For example, students benefit from

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small-group and whole-class discussion opportunities, which foster higher-level thinking about text (Nystrand, 2006). Findings from a meta-analysis of 42 quantitative studies of discussion-based interventions indicate that text-based discussion improved students' literal and inferential comprehension. (Murphy, Wilkinson, & Soter, 2011; Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009). This was true for both students with and without disabilities. Further, the effects of discussion for students with below-average achievement were higher than average-achieving students (Murphy et al., 2009), indicating that text-based discussion is more efficacious than just reading text alone. In a more recent series of studies, middle school students with disabilities were randomly assigned to receive a multicomponent intervention that focused heavily on text-based discussion within general education social studies classrooms or typical social studies instruction. Results indicated that students with disabilities who received the treatment

Figure 1. Sample selection for text-based discussion

Letter to Governor Clinton from George Washington

Headquarters, Valley Forge, February 16, 1778

Dear Sir:

I don't like to trouble you about this topic, which does not fall under your authority; but it is a subject that causes me more upset than I have felt since the beginning of the war. It loudly demands the most extreme energy of every person of weight and authority who is interested in our success. I mean the present dreadful situation of the army in need of supplies and our miserable future. It is more alarming than you can probably believe because to really understand, you would have to be here. For some days past, there has been starvation in camp. A part of the army has been a week without any kind of meat and the rest for 3 or 4 days. Naked and starving as they are, we cannot enough admire the outstanding patience and loyalty of these soldiers because their suffering has not caused general rebellion or for soldiers to run away. Strong symptoms of discontent have appeared, and nothing but the most active efforts anywhere can prevent a shocking disaster.

outperformed those who did not on standardized measures of content knowledge and comprehension Swanson et al., 2015; Swanson et al., 2017; Wanzek, Swanson, Vaughn, Roberts & Fall, 2016). Although a content approach to text-based discussion can be efficacious for students with disabilities, these types of discussions are often difficult to carry out in general education social studies classrooms (Vaughn et al., 2013).

Why might it be difficult for students with disabilities to talk about text? One reason for this might be that students have few opportunities or little support in the classroom to discuss text in a way that promotes deep reading comprehension and content learning (Swanson et al., 2016). Establishing discourse practices in classrooms requires careful planning, established routines, and structured support. Teachers may not know how to set up these routines. It may also be difficult to establish a balance between teacher talk and student talk, particularly given curriculum pacing requirements. Students need explicit modeling of how to engage in conversation as well as scaffolding to support their discussion skills.

Structured Text-Based Discussion

The foundation of high-quality, text-based discussion is structure. A highly structured discussion begins with an anticipatory set that piques student interest and provides a purpose for discussion. The text-based discussion includes questions that vary in type with the goal of learning the greatest amount of information possible from the text. It concludes with a review of the purpose for the discussion and a summary of how the discussion achieved its purpose.

Anticipatory Set

The anticipatory set may begin with a short story to grab students' attention and provide a purpose for the discussion. Consider the following anticipatory set in preparation for reading a passage titled "Letter to Governor Clinton From George Washington" (Figure 1).

Valley Forge was the site of the winter camp of the Continental Army in 1777 through 1778. Washington and his men suffered great physical hardships there, but

they became a trained force capable of defeating the British Army.

Imagine being a soldier encamped in the cold, with tattered clothing, inadequate food and supplies, and with no help on its way. Would you be tempted to quit? Why might you stay? [Stop and accept student answers.] In this text, Washington describes the conditions at Valley Forge and the men camped there.

As we read, we'll stop periodically to discuss what we think of the conditions at Valley Forge, the persuasive nature of George Washington's letter, and the men's perseverance during the difficult situations at Valley Forge.

For this sample selection, the teacher has written a variety of questions that focus on the purpose for the text discussion: (a) to discuss what students think of the conditions at Valley Forge, (b) to talk about how what George Washington wrote was so persuasive, and (c) to better understand how even in difficult situations these men persevered.

Text-Based Discussion

Content area text is a source of information that contains important main ideas and rich details. As teachers prepare for facilitating a discussion, selecting questions focused on understandings that every student should learn by the end of the discussion ensures that all students have an opportunity to learn key information from the text. Lists of rich questions that vary in type encourage ongoing discussion and sustained interest in the text. Some are literal questions that can be answered directly from the text. Others require inference-making. Still others require students to use background knowledge gained from prior class content. Preparing key understandings and accompanying questions should take anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes, depending on the text selection's length. Consider the passage in Figure 1. In this example, a teacher may select three key understandings for discussion and write questions that

Figure 2. Cue card with prompts for question types

Question Type	Answer	Examples
Who	A person or group of people	Who competes for the same resources? Who struggled the most at Valley Forge?
What	A description or an effect	What is the main character confused about? What does "all the pieces matter" mean?
When	Related to time	When do the soldiers begin to lose courage?
Where	A place or location	Where is Valley Forge? Where do the soldiers receive their supplies?
Why	A reason or a cause	Why did Ho Tep turn into a desert?
How	A process or a characteristic	How do elk and wolves relate to each other and how does that relationship lead to a healthier Yellowstone National Park?

prompt the development of each key understanding:

1. Understanding the conditions at Valley Forge
   - What is George Washington's letter about? (literal question)
   - What does the army need? What types of supplies? (background knowledge question)
2. How, even in difficult situations, the soldiers persevered
   - What about the character of his soldiers did Washington admire? (literal question)
3. Characteristics of George Washington's writing that made it so persuasive
   - Who are people of weight and authority who might help the army? (inference-making question)
   - Are the soldiers really naked? If not, why did Washington exaggerate like this? (inference-making question)
   - Why did Washington tell Clinton about his soldiers' admirable qualities? (inference-making question)

For the discussion itself, each student needs a copy of the text. Because students with disabilities often face the hurdle of reading grade-level text with ease (NCES, 2017), teachers may choose a text-reading method that allows all students in class access to the text, such as the teacher reading aloud, students reading in pairs, or students reading independently. It is important for teachers to know that students who struggle with reading can learn content from reading text silently and should be given the opportunity whenever appropriate (Reed, Swanson, Petscher, & Vaughn, 2014). The general procedure during text-based discussion is for students to read a section of text, followed by teacher-initiated questions and discussion. Teachers can decide what length each section of text reading may entail based on the key understandings and planned questions. With well-written questions prepared ahead of time and delivered in a thoughtful, systematic manner, text-based discussion can produce rich, deep understanding of social studies content (Swanson et al., 2017; Vaughn et al., 2013; Vaughn et al., 2014).

Explicitly teaching question types.
High-quality questions vary in style and purpose. Some encourage short answers to confirm factual knowledge that can easily be found in the text (e.g., *who, what, when,* and *where* questions). Others encourage longer answers that require connection between ideas within and across texts as well as inference-making skills (e.g., *why* and *how* questions). At first, call on students with disabilities to answer factual questions that tend to be a little easier, but do not stop there. With instruction, students with disabilities can engage in thought-provoking, difficult questions (Swanson et al., 2015). Within the inclusive social studies classroom, explicitly teaching how to answer different question types can be beneficial to all students but particularly students with disabilities. Figure 2 contains a cue card that can be used by teachers when preparing for a text-based discussion to ensure that they are using a variety of question types.

Explicit instruction in how to answer different types of questions may be minimal for some types, such as *who, what, when*, and *where* questions. However, questions that require inference-making (i.e., *why* and *how* questions) can be far more difficult for students with disabilities (e.g., Saenz & Fuchs, 2002). Spending extended time on these two question types may serve to provide students with disabilities the support they need when answering the questions that are not only the most difficult but also more common in content area classes as they move through the grade levels. With these levels of difficulty in mind, instruction in teaching how to answer different question types may span 2 to 3 days, with less time spent on easier question types and more time spent explicitly teaching inference-making skills:

Day 1: *Who, what, when*, and *where* questions
Day 2: *Why* questions
Day 3: *How* questions

These lessons do not need to be long, but they should be explicit in nature and should follow a pattern where the teacher models the skill, followed by guided practice and, finally, independent practice. An introductory explicit lesson teaching *why* questions will contain many different parts. First, begin by establishing a purpose for the skill students will be learning:

> Social studies is full of amazing stories. They involve people doing sometimes wild, brave things, and we often ask, "Why did she do that?" or "Why did he feel that way?" or "Why did the army flee?" We ask a lot of *why* questions. I want to make sure you know what I expect of you when I ask a question that begins with the word *why*.

Next, direct students to the cue card resource (Figure 2) and conduct a think-aloud:

> Take a look at your cue card. Find the word *why*. When I ask a question that begins with *why*, you are going to tell me a reason or a cause. Let me give you some examples from real life. I might ask, "Why did Paula fall down?" You might give me a reason or what caused her to fall. You might say, "She tripped over a stick." Here's another example. "Why didn't the basketball team score a basket?" You might give me a reason like, "The basketball goal was raised way too high!"

Next, provide an opportunity for students to practice the skill, first with an example from their own lives and then, with an example from social studies text:

> Now, I'm going to ask you some *why* questions. I'll give you 5 seconds to think of the answer in your head, and then when I tell you, give the answer to your partner. Here's the first question. "Why did you choose pizza for lunch?" [Go through partner answer procedure with a couple of questions.] Now, let's look at a social studies passage and answer a *why* question. It's much harder when we're thinking about historical figures, but we look

for clues in the text. Look at your passage (Figure 1). George Washington says that he feels "more upset than I have felt since the beginning of the war." My question to you is, "Why does George Washington feel upset?" Read the next two sentences and see if you can figure out a reason that he is so upset. [Allow student answers.] Later in the passage, it says that George Washington is alarmed. My question to you is, "Why was George Washington alarmed?" Read the next two sentences to learn the reason he was alarmed. [Allow student answers.]

Finally, wrap up the lesson by reviewing the skill and how to use the cue card resource:

> So, if you get confused and you cannot remember what type of answer to give me when I ask a *why* question, what resource might you use to help? [Look at the cue card.] And what type of answer should you give? [A reason or a cause.]

It is important to note that these lessons are not just "one-shot" events. After the introductory lesson, teachers may choose to focus on *why* questions, for example, during text-based discussion over the next few days to provide students with disabilities plenty of practice opportunities.

Use the cue card for high-quality feedback. Teachers may also use the cue card when giving feedback during

a text-based discussion. High-quality feedback avoids providing students with answers when they struggle and instead provides information for them to solve the problem themselves. In the following example, a teacher uses the cue card to provide feedback that includes telling the student what is wrong and how to fix the problem:

> I asked the question, "What writing techniques did George Washington

use to persuade Governor Clinton that his men needed help?" Check your cue card. How will you answer a what question? [With a description.] Good. Go back and reread the first paragraph and see if you can describe two writing techniques George Washington uses.

Turn-and-talk procedure. Students with disabilities included in content area classrooms may find it difficult to engage in large-group and even some small-group discussions. Students may rely on their peers to provide answers to teacher questions or become disengaged when asked to complete difficult tasks without adequate support. However, a technique that can be used to help engage students in discussion is turn-and-talk. During turn-and-talks, one half of the class is answering a question or a prompt at once. The other half of the class is listening to the partner.

Teachers who successfully use turn-and-talks in their classrooms follow a simple procedure using the same procedural language from day to day. They explicitly teach the procedures to their students and use prompts during practice for as long as necessary until students can perform the procedures without error. The procedure entails three steps:

1. Question: The teacher asks a question and tells students how much time they will have. Time may vary from 30 seconds to 2 minutes.

Follow a simple procedure using the same procedural language from day to day.

2. Turn: Students turn to their predetermined partner. Assigning partners prior to the turn-and-talk activity is key to seamless implementation.
3. Talk: The teacher sets a timer for the allocated time. Students take turns answering the question and engage in further discussion. When time is up, the teacher asks a few students to share their discussion.

Prior to implementing turn-and-talk for the first time, take some time to prepare. Decide who will be partners. What will you actually say during each turn-and-talk step? Here is an example of how a turn-and-talk might sound during a text-based discussion:

> George Washington writes that his soldiers need supplies. What kinds of supplies do you think they need? I am going to give you 30 seconds to brainstorm what supplies they might need. Turn to your partner. Partner A, you'll start. Give one idea. Then, Partner B, you'll add an idea. Switch back and forth to add more ideas to your list. You may begin. [Set your timer and allow 30 seconds to pass. As partners talk, circulate around the room and listen.]
>
> I want to hear from a few partners. As you name the supply, I'm going to list them on the board. Patricia, name two supplies you discussed. [Students share answer.] Jesus, two more supplies. [Student says, "I don't know."] This answer is not in the text, but think of some supplies soldiers might need to win a battle. I'll come back to you. Mark, one more supply. [Student shares answer.] OK, Jesus, two supplies. [Student shares answer.]

At the Teacher Toolkit web site, there are two videos of teachers using turn-and-talk (Teacher Toolkit, n.d.). One is in a middle school science class. The other is in a prekindergarten class.

Prevent wandering and incorrect information. Some students may wander from the purpose of the discussion. For example, even if it is interesting to think about what George

teacher might say, "You know? That's a really interesting thought. Let's jot that down on the board because we'll want to learn about that later. Now, let's get back to discussing what is in George Washington's letter."

Students with disabilities who experience difficulty learning content knowledge from text also may struggle telling the difference between fact and incorrect statements—particularly if a peer presents the information. Consider this possible scenario: While discussing conditions at Valley Forge, the teacher asks a follow-up question about the weather. A student says, "It probably wasn't snowing since Valley Forge is in Virginia." This is incorrect and the teacher needs to correct the multiple pieces of misinformation. The teacher might say something like,

> Remember that Valley Forge is in Pennsylvania. Let's look on our U.S. map to see where Pennsylvania is located. It is in the northeastern part of the United States. We know from our past reading that the Continental Army camped there in the winter. In Pennsylvania, it gets very cold and snows quite a bit.

One technique that is essential to a high-quality, text-based discussion and can minimize problems caused by off-topic talk and inaccurate information is teaching students how to cite text evidence during discussions. Text-based evidence includes information that supports the student's answer. This can be information stated right there in the text or information in the text that informed an inference or conclusion. One of the best ways to teach students to find and cite text-based evidence is to use explicit

interesting reading. In fact, yesterday, we started reading a letter written by George Washington. One of the skills you need to learn to be successful in school is to cite text evidence. That means when I ask you a question during our reading time, you don't just rely on your memory to answer the question. Instead, you combine your memory with what the author really says in the text. So, let me give you an example. Let's reread the first part of George Washington's letter to Governor Clinton. [Reread.] In this letter, George Washington said that they were naked and starving. How do we know they were starving? There is a clue in the passage. There is evidence that they were starving. Read the passage again silently to yourself and put your finger on the sentence that proves they were starving. [Give students a few minutes. Circulate around the room.] OK! Everyone in the class is pointing to a sentence with evidence that they were starving. I'm going to point to the sentence with evidence, and I want you to make sure you're pointing to the same sentence. Here's the sentence [point to the sentence and read]: "A part of the army has been a week without any kind of meat and the rest for 3 or 4 days." Everyone, make sure you're pointing to this sentence. Now, what should you say when you're citing text evidence? We're going to use a sentence starter. We're going to say, "In the text, it says...." Everyone say that with me. [Choral response.] So, if you were answering the question, "How do we know they were starving?" an answer would be, "In the text, it says that part of the army has been a week without any kind of meat." I want you to try it. Turn to your partner. Partner B, answer this question: "How do we know they were starving?" Start your answer with "In the text, it says...." [Circulate and make sure students are using the sentence stem.] Caroline, tell me the answer your partner gave to this question, "How do we know they were starving?" [Ask two or three Partner A students to share.]

Using explicit instruction and scaffolding, teach students to cite text evidence.

Washington's tent looked like at Valley Forge, this not only diverges from the purpose of the discussion; it's also not a text-based discussion point since the text does not support the information. What should a teacher say to redirect the conversation? In this case, the

instruction coupled with scaffolds. Here is a short sample of how explicit instruction used to teach students how to cite text evidence might sound:

> This year in social studies, you may have noticed that we do a lot of

Using explicit instruction, a teacher may teach one or more sentence stems

used to cite text-based evidence per week. Some example sentence stems are as follows:

- In the text...
- The author mentions...
- The author uses this sentence... to let us know that...
- It said on page...
- From the reading, I know...
- For instance, in the text...
- In paragraph ___ of the text it says...

Then, to encourage students to cite text-based evidence, challenge them. Say something like, "Today, we're going to discuss a new reading. I want to challenge this class! Every time someone cites text-based evidence using the sentence starter 'In the text, it says...,' I will award the class a point. Let's see how many points you can earn today!"

Discussion Closure

At the end of the discussion, students will benefit from a well-crafted closure that summarizes key information that aligns with the purposes for discussion. A closure for this section of text-based discussion might sound something like this:

> Today, we learned about the conditions at Valley Forge. Turn to your partner and tell him or her two things about the conditions at Valley Forge. [Have one or two groups share.] We also learned about how even in these difficult conditions, the men persevered. That means they stuck it out even though it was difficult. Why do you think they wanted to stay? What cause were they fighting for? Why was the cause so important to them? [Students discuss.] Finally, we noticed that George Washington was such a persuasive writer! He exaggerated at one point. Who can find that in the text and read it to us? [One student reads the short sentence.] He also bragged about his soldiers. Why did he do this? [Students discuss.] Tomorrow, we will continue reading the letter from George Washington and we'll learn more about exactly what he wants for his soldiers.

Conclusion

Students in middle school social studies classes are expected to learn content through text. Unfortunately, many students, particularly those with disabilities, struggle to comprehend grade-level texts (NCES, 2017). Implementing high-quality, text-based discussions is no easy task, yet it provides a way to support students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Many teachers can relate to the challenges expressed by Mr. Romero and Ms. Goodwin. We have provided a guide for content area teachers and special educators to initiate and maintain high-quality, text-based discussions during social studies instruction. When teachers incorporate these characteristics within text-reading routines, they provide (a) explicit instruction on *how* to engage in discussions about text, (b) support and scaffolding so that students with disabilities can successfully participate in those discussions, and (c) opportunities for higher-level thinking about text. We encourage educators to utilize the characteristics described in this article to support the reading comprehension and content learning of students with disabilities taught in general education social studies classrooms.

Funding

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