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Using Primary Sources in Content Areas to Increase Disciplinary Literacy Instruction

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) shifted the national discussion about literacy in content areas to disciplinary literacy. This transition was understandable given the links between social science and literacy (Herczog, 2013). Yet, for some teachers, implementing integrated instruction that links social studies and literacy remains an elusive task. In some contexts, Social Studies has been marginalized or completely removed from the curriculum. Literacy and social studies have a symbiotic relationship. In Social Studies and History classrooms, students are often required to read primary sources, such as documents (Carpenter, Earhart, & Achugar, 2014); however, many students struggle to understand informational material because the topics can be abstract and the texts contain content-specific vocabulary.

To better support students' literacy development in content-area classrooms, Brozo, Moorman, Meyer, and Stewart (2013) suggest that the field-of-content-area literacy "should focus on how to teach in ways that build on what we have learned about strategy instruction *and* create classroom activities that highlight the processes that discipline experts use to engage in their disciplines" (p. 356) a practice which is antithetical to focusing on the tensions between content-area reading and the role of literacy in content areas. A core aspect of historical thinking is to understand how to think critically and how to closely examine a wide range of informational texts by thinking like historians (Carpenter, Earhart, & Achugar, 2014; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2017; Wineburg, 2014).

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) promotes critical thinking and student engagement through four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc: develop questions and plan inquiry; apply discipline-specific concepts and tools; evaluate sources and use evidence; and communicate conclusions and take action. These

practices align to twenty-first century learning practices, namely communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity, which can drive students toward closer study of historical topics. To strengthen Social Studies instruction and enhance their pedagogical repertoire, teachers can design learning experiences that link content with targeted literacy skills needed to succeed in academic contexts (Di Domenico, Elish-Piper, Manderino, & L'Allier, 2018; Duhavlongsod, Snow, Selman, & Donovan, 2015; Graham, Kerkhoff, & Spires, 2017; Paul, 2018; Zaidi, 2016). In this paper, we describe how nine middle school Social Studies and high school teachers used primary sources to devise unit plans with student-centered inquiry that encourage disciplinary literacy skills.

Disciplinary Literacy and Content Area Literacy

Disciplinary literacy departs from the traditional discourse on content-area reading by suggesting that “different literacy skills are needed for specific disciplines” (Bernstorff, 2014, p. 33). Rather than using generic reading strategies, content-area reading requires practices unique to disciplines (Brozo, Moorman, Meyer, & Stewart, 2013; Manderino & Wickens, 2014). Disciplinary literacy uses an apprenticeship approach (Hillman, 2014) to help students build strategies, practices, and processes to make meaning in disciplines such as history and science (Manderino & Wickens, 2014; Paul, 2018; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2017). This discipline-specific thinking can shape the way students read texts and learn to understand the world (Manderino & Wickens, 2014). Disciplinary thinking needs to be taught as early as possible in elementary classrooms (Fang & Coatoam, 2013; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014) so students can develop practices that support their critical thinking in content areas such as Social Studies/History, Math, Science, and English to help them comprehend different kinds of texts.

Disciplinary literacy also considers the role of literacy in acquiring content knowledge and the need for literacy instruction in middle and high school classrooms (Manderino & Wickens, 2014; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). This approach helps “gain access to knowledge ... [and] opportunities to engage in critique of new knowledge” (Fang & Schleppergrell, 2010, p. 588) and as students read, they can learn to display behaviors similar to those of experts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). Through this kind of instruction, students discover how “to read, write, think, reason, and inquire with substantive content presented through texts of multiple genres, modalities, registers, and sources” (Fang & Coatoam, 2013, p. 630). Students’ practices also include specific ways of problem-solving, reading and using vocabulary and language, making connections across texts, reading challenging and complex texts, evaluating texts, and using texts to support arguments (Carpenter, Earhart, & Achugar, 2014; Hillman, 2014).

Designing Engaging Tasks for Historical Inquiry:

A Professional Learning Experience for Social Studies Teachers

Nine teachers in New York City participated in a pilot project called “New York City as a Living Museum” — a grant-funded professional development project that sought to expand awareness and use of local primary sources in lesson plans. The teachers are middle and high school teachers with less than five years of teaching. All work in urban schools with diverse learners, including special education and ELLs students. The students are predominantly African American and Latinx and more than 60 percent of the students received free or reduced lunch. The teachers participated in a three-day, hands-on workshop to help increase their knowledge and use of local artifacts and primary sources to be used in their curriculum. The workshop focused on pedagogy—specifically using a process of contextualizing artifacts and using local

resources available in New York City to make broader connections to global events. Danker (2005) suggests teachers need to look no further than their own communities for materials to help students connect to the overarching themes of U.S. history. Workshop presentations linked local events in New York City (NYC) to themes from the Library of Congress (LOC) website by focusing on three model units: Immigration—Challenges for New Americans; Women’s Suffrage; and The Harlem Renaissance. During the workshop, presenters from the Museum of the City of New York, the New-York Historical Society, teacher educators from City University of New York, and the Gotham Center for New York City History gave walking tours to contextualize historical events, and modeled historical inquiry using primary sources and museum artifacts. The teachers were asked to focus their attention on key events in New York City history to more deeply explore existing LOC primary sets and a variety of collections featuring NYC, New York state history, maps, architecture, and other sources that align with local history.

Although most of the teachers were already aware of the LOC resources, some had not previously used the materials. Across all three days of the workshop, teachers consistently reported that the experience increased their knowledge of the Library of Congress (LOC) and introduced them to ways they could use the materials in their classroom. Post-workshop evaluations showed most teachers (90 percent) indicated they gained knowledge about how to use LOC resources in their classroom and how to use the materials when planning. As the workshop progressed, teachers who indicated the materials were relevant to their needs increased 10 percent and by day three, 38 percent more of the teachers believed the workshop objectives were clear and purposeful. Teachers were asked to create units based on a topic of their choice.

Most of the teachers' lesson plans addressed typical history topics and themes such as Growth, Development, and Change; Density; and Creativity (Figure 1).

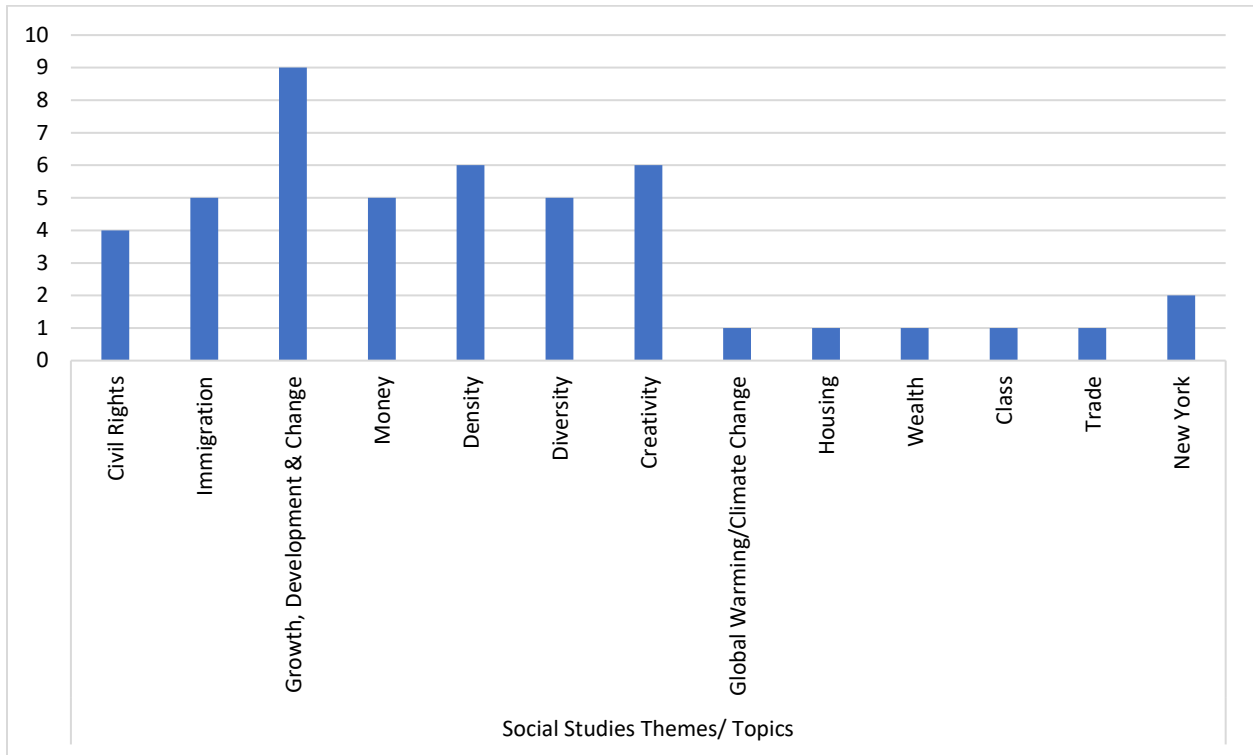


Figure 1: Social Studies Topics and Themes in Teachers' Units

However, the teachers reconceptualized and implemented one of their units to integrate what they learned from the workshop. In order to foster students' disciplinary literacy skills, the teachers incorporated a plethora of primary sources into their units (Figure 2). The teachers' lesson plans included artifacts, paintings, photos, and quotes. The teachers identified several local resources on the LOC website to address a range of topics.

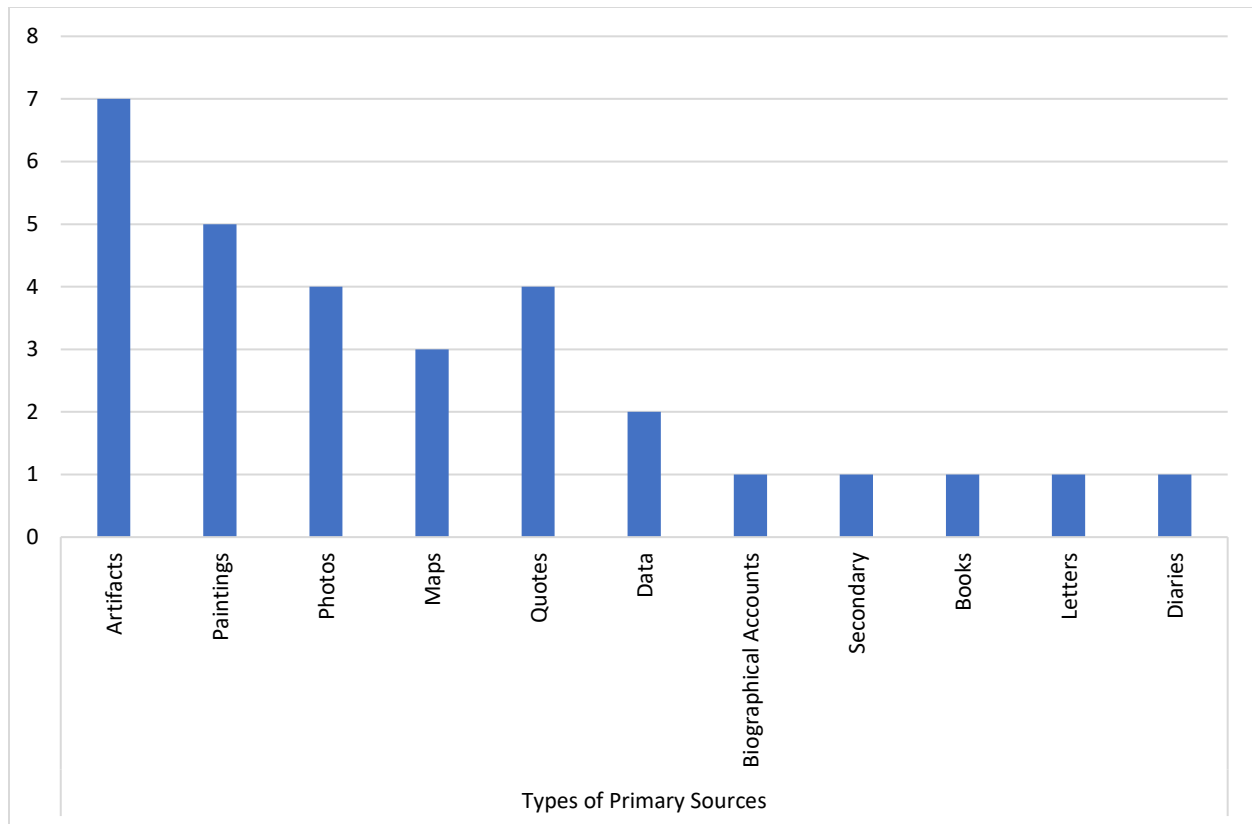


Figure 2: Types of Primary Sources

To promote student-centered learning (Table 1), the teachers shifted their pedagogical focus (Dobbs, Ippolito, & Charner-Laird, 2016; Graham, Kerkhoff, & Spires, 2017) to design engaging activities that emphasized skill development, critical thinking, as well as close reading and analysis of sources. Teachers juxtaposed multiple texts and sources when redesigning their units. For example, they incorporated photographs, maps, and poetry to explore local history or used maps, photos, and diaries to examine the impact of growth on individuals. Some examples of activities completed with primary sources were:

- Have kids think they are historians
- Researching artifacts
- Asking questions about artifacts
- Linking primary sources

- Connecting with New Yorkers who made an impact
- Drawings
- Secondary sources
- Solve problems for the future
- Connect pictures and artifacts to create a story
- Sketching
- Ask like a historian
- Giving students choice
- Gallery in the class
- Postcard Snapchat
- Past, present, future
- Immigration, work backward
- Little Syria, born now
- Students curate the museum (can be done online), tell a story
- Carousel- one theme, 5-6 pictures, a key question
- Author's purpose
- Inference
- What do you see? (details)
- What connections can you make to today?

Teachers reported that activities completed with primary sources, namely those listed in Table 1, led to student-student collaboration, intensified students' interest in the lesson as they analyzed primary sources, and helped students think critically when they connected history topics to larger

themes by “connecting small to the large picture.” Most lessons incorporated maps and data. Students worked in teams to analyze data and note observations from statistics, such as in Figure 3, an image that encouraged conversations on issues around labor.



Figure 3: Activity Completed on Day Two of a Unit on the Industrial Revolution

Teachers designed activities which, provided scaffolding for a range of literacy skills and promoted critical thinking. During a unit on the Industrial Revolution, high school students built upon their background knowledge of child labor from a historical perspective to examine contemporary labor laws and employment statistics throughout the world. Then students did a Gallery Walk—walking around the room in groups to examine and discuss in groups the various sources such as political cartoons and photographs, which are posted on the classroom walls for review—to explore the question, “Does child labor still exist?” The teacher posed follow-up questions such as, “Would you buy clothing made in Indonesia knowing that you are supporting child labor?” Students then considered the social implications and human rights issues linked to

child labor. The unit prompted students to reconceptualize themselves as consumers, define civic engagement for the twenty-first century, and develop a broader perspective on local versus global economies.

Using Inquiry to Make Local and Global Connections

To emphasize the role of primary sources, the teachers re-conceptualized their curriculum to incorporate more inquiry-based learning experiences for students. Reframing their instruction around inquiry is a significant pedagogical shift because inquiry classrooms reposition students as active learners who are engaged in exploration and problem-solving (Hayden, 2019; Marino & Eisenberg, 2018; Mitchell & Hessler, 2019; Wu, Tseng, & Hwang, 2015).

In inquiry-centered classrooms, students interact with authentic, real-world material and sources, rather than traditional textbooks (Wu, Tseng, & Hwang, 2015). Inquiry-based instruction is grounded in the work of developmental and constructivist theories that place the learner at the center of the teaching and learning process. This approach calls for the student to draw upon his or her prior knowledge to experience in active learning through authentic exploration of the world around them (Rogers, 1989; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Dewey, 1916).

One sixth-grade Humanities teacher participating in the workshop designed a unit called, “Who am I? Who are we?” Throughout the unit, she helped students “build a worldview about themselves...by [interacting with sources such as] texts, pictures, videos, films, etc., [to explore] self, race, ethnicity, culture, geography, history, school community, region, and the world.” She wanted students to understand that “history is largely the result of human decisions.” Within her unit plan, students had the chance to explore on their own by reflecting and learning about their community. For example, during one lesson on diversity and the importance of identity, the teacher modeled the inquiry process by sharing her own family photos, reading the poem “My

Name” by Sandra Cisneros, and using what she called “A Story Map of Jamaica” (Figure 4) to connect herself to the local community. After modeling the process for students, the teacher juxtaposed geography of the local neighborhood with other texts such as *The Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss, “We and They” by Rudyard Kipling, and “Welcome to Holland” by Emily Perl Kingsley. Consequently, students engaged in small group discussions to explore their own lives in relation to their community. In class, students used local maps and photos to analyze demographics and life in the neighborhood where the school was located, Jamaica, Queens, and compare it to life in the 1960s through sources found on the LOC website.

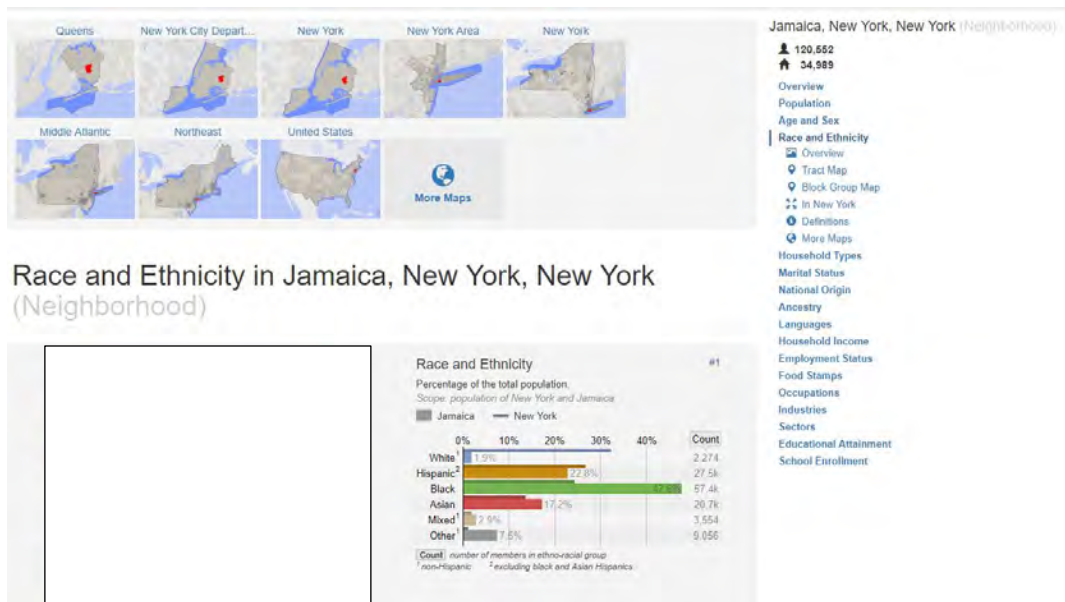




Figure 4: Maps and Data Used for “A Story Map of Jamaica” [source of maps:

<https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/New-York/New-York/Jamaica/Race-and-Ethnicity>]

Then, students interviewed parents and guardians about the history of the neighborhood and brought in old photos that depicted earlier times in the neighborhood, which served as artifacts to document daily life in the past. Over the course of the unit, the class's investigation revealed that a former Tuberculosis hospital in Jamaica, Queens was replaced by a Macy's Department store. This prompted students to action, to further investigate whether the community was aware of how buildings in the neighborhood were previously used.

Conclusion

Through a variety of instructional strategies, teachers provided students with access to Social Studies and History content that students then assessed in relation to their own lives and neighborhoods. These strategies included close reading and analysis of diverse texts and facilitating small group discussions about different kinds of primary sources. Most teachers created lesson plans with student-centered activities that promoted disciplinary literacy and inquiry. Planning focused on:

- Incorporating primary sources
- Using different local resources including museums, neighborhood/community resources, and collaborating with other teachers
- Incorporating activities to engage students and facilitate student inquiry
- Generating inquiry-based units and lessons

The teachers' lessons included several elements of disciplinary literacy instruction—specifically strategies that promoted critical thinking, inquiry, and deeper learning when working with sources (Carpenter, Earhart, & Achugar, 2014; Fang & Coatoam, 2013; Hillman, 2014; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). For example, while teaching, teachers modeled analysis processes when working with artifacts and other sources that helped students make connections

between historical events and the present. The teachers reported that most students could connect global issues to local history as they discussed topics and primary sources.

To better engage students, teachers used lesson plans with primary sources that encouraged students to investigate connections to their lived local experience. Connecting local knowledge or individual histories to the broader context and the world are critical elements of disciplinary literacy (Manderino & Wickens, 2014). When teachers incorporate these perspectives into Social Studies and History classrooms, students can explore historical events at the micro and macro levels. In this project, the teachers designed learning experiences to support students' disciplinary literacy skills, to foster students' literacy development in the content areas, and help position students and their communities in the broader discussion about social justice issues. Throughout the implementation of the various unit plans, the use and analysis of primary sources acted as a springboard to foster students' disciplinary literacy skills.

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