

A Look into a Texas Fourth-Grade Classroom Enacting an Inquiry-Based Researcher's Workshop to Integrate Literacy and Social Studies

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Abstract

This article is guided by a commitment to equitable, affirming, child-centered literacy education, and the belief that student-led inquiry can be embraced within schools since this is an authentic way for children to learn about their world. This article describes how elementary educators can use an inquiry-based researcher's workshop to integrate literacy with social studies. It begins with an overview of the literature showing why educators and children might benefit from this approach. The article then provides a detailed look into inquiry-based researcher's workshop with examples from a fourth-grade, Texas classroom. This structure provides asset-based support for diverse learners, pushes students to engage in critical literacy with meaningful topics, and assists students in acquiring deep comprehension skills through contextualized purposeful practice.

Keywords: *inquiry, researcher's workshop, literacy integration, project-based, content areas*

Children are naturally curious (Jirout & Klahr, 2012; Piaget, 1969). From an early age, children use their senses to explore, play, discover, and learn. Many early childhood environments tap into this innate sense of wonder through discovery learning with the understanding that children's curiosities and interests often drive inquiry outside of school (Bruner, 1961; Saylor & Ganea, 2018). Yet, traditional instruction for

school-aged children does not always lend itself to following children's innate curiosities (Engel, 2011). Moreover, the current sociopolitical climate of public schools (i.e., high-stakes testing, scripted curricula) confines educators by not allowing for discovery or cross-curricular learning. This climate affects educators who long to teach the whole child rather than teach to a test.

In Texas, for example, elementary educators are hurriedly adjusting to professional development demands through the state that require completion of HB 3 Reading Academies (Texas Education Agency, 2023). These academies specifically focus on early skills in reading (e.g., phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and fluency), what is most recently being called the science of teaching reading. At the same time, these same educators are pressured to “teach to the test” so that elementary students’ high-stakes test outcomes reflect a certain type of reading and writing development (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018; Hoffman et al., 2001). Unsurprisingly, these top-down policy demands, though not inherently bad, tend to overlook more immediate needs, including asset-based approaches that value children’s identities as well as authentic connections to other content areas, such as social studies. Thus, educators need a structure that emphasizes holistic literacy development while also tapping into children’s authentic curiosities.

As a team of literacy educators committed to equitable, affirming, child-centered literacy education, we are united and striving for educational change by promoting a holistic approach to literacy and cross-curricular learning. Therefore, our article is guided by the belief that child inquiry can be embraced within schools since this is an authentic way for children to learn about their world. We describe how elementary educators can use an inquiry-based researcher’s workshop to integrate literacy with social studies. We begin with an overview of the literature showing why educators and children might benefit from this approach. We then offer a detailed look into an inquiry-based researcher’s workshop with examples from a fourth-grade, Texas classroom.

Inquiry-based Researcher’s Workshop

Goudvis and colleagues’ (2019) inquiry-based researcher’s workshop builds upon literacy education as authentically integrated with other content areas, rather than a siloed discipline. Like Atwell’s (1998) other workshop structures,

the researcher’s workshop seeks to uphold a deep understanding of the complexities and interconnectedness of all learning content areas (McNeil, 2021). Each researcher’s workshop unit contains four successive phases: immerse, investigate, coalesce, and take public. Each lesson in the four phases follows a gradual release of responsibility (GRR) (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) workshop structure: engage, model, guide, practice, share.

In our approach to the inquiry-based researcher’s workshop, we realized a need to emphasize specific pedagogical commitments that would support our efforts alongside teachers in today’s literacy education climate. These commitments reflect equity (Gorski, 2016; Muhammad, 2020), critical literacy (Comber, 2015; Freebody & Luke, 1990), and sustained comprehension through literacy integration (Duke et al., 2006), each of which we think is interrelated and encompasses the inquiry-based researcher’s workshop model.

More specifically, our approach to literacy values multiple dimensions of meaning-making and communication (Compton-Lilly et al., 2022; Gutiérrez et al., 2009) which happens through reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Driven by student inquiry and their content-driven wonderings, the workshop model integrates literacy learning across the curriculum, stretching beyond the traditional “literacy block.” Integrating literacy and other disciplines has the potential for robust and practical instruction that fosters deep comprehension (Cervetti, 2021; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Hwang et al., 2022; Ness, 2016).

Using Inquiry-based Research’s Workshop for Literacy Integration in your Classroom

In this section, we offer examples of how Nicole (alongside Camille and Kelly) designed lessons to guide her fourth-grade students’ inquiry-based learning while emphasizing literacy instruction. This unit aimed to foster students’ analysis of different perspectives on World War II to inform students’ understanding of historical issues and their impact. In what follows, we describe Goudvis et al.’s (2019) phases of inquiry

accompanied by examples. Through the intentional integration of literacy with social studies, this unit encompassed almost all the instruction for its three-week duration.

Immerse

The purpose of the immerse phase is to support students' exploration of stories, ideas, and concepts through multimodal texts. Educators can tap into children's innate sense of curiosity and wonder through an immersive experience where children generate wonderings about the overarching unit theme. To guide our unit, Injustice and Opportunity in World War II, we developed an enduring understanding and essential questions. These components represent the big-picture ideas of the unit and are investigated throughout all lessons in the unit (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Enduring Understanding and Essential Questions

Enduring Understanding:
Analyzing different people groups' perspectives on the issues in World War 2 can inform our understanding of history and its impact on today.

Essential Questions:

- What major events led to World War II?
- How does comparing and contrasting key people groups and their actions help us get a deeper understanding of World War II?
- How have past injustices from the time period of World War II impacted opportunities and progress in today's time period?

For the first two lessons, students were immersed in the events and conflicts of World War II. The first lesson had five stations—World War II in the United States, timelines, Nazi Germany, individual stories, and maps—with relevant books, websites, photos, timelines, and maps at each table. Students had time at each station to write their noticings and ask questions about what they discovered from the materials (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2

During the first immersive lesson, students were given language frames to confront misunderstandings and develop wonderings.

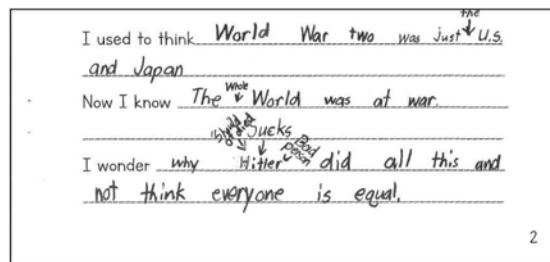


Figure 3

Students collaboratively and individually developed wonderings during the first WWII immersive lesson.



The second immerse lesson introduced the setting of a novel study, *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989), that students were doing concurrently with the World War II unit. *Number the Stars* tells about a Danish girl during the Nazi occupation who works with her family to get their Jewish friends out of Denmark. In this lesson, students looked at maps from the time that displayed how the Nazis had spread across Europe, talked about the Nazis' perspective toward the Jews and the destruction the Nazis wreaked, and learned about the major alliances and countries in the war. The extensive background knowledge students accumulated

from these lessons truly immersed them in the topic and engaged them in pursuing answers to their wondering questions.

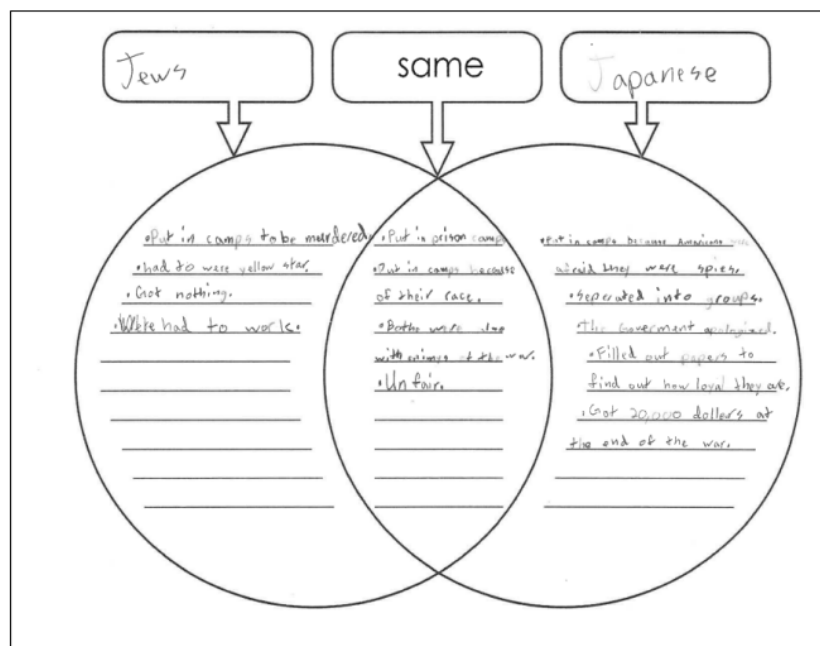
Investigate

After students were immersed in resources and developed their own questions, the investigate phase included lessons with literacy-specific instruction to support comprehension while

engaging with varied texts. In the third lesson of the unit, we used a compare-and-contrast graphic organizer to compare *Number the Stars* to the children's book *The Yellow Star* (Agra Deedy, 2020). Following the workshop model, Nicole read aloud *The Yellow Star*, pausing to think aloud and model for her students how to use the graphic organizer to compare elements of both texts (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Students used a graphic organizer to compare and contrast different individuals and groups of people's experiences during WWII.



After modeling, Nicole invited students to begin helping her with the graphic organizer. Students were easily able to make connections between the two texts. In fact, students were so quick to make connections that she stopped modeling quickly, and observed aloud, “I see lots of you have ideas. Are we okay if I have you finish the rest with partners?” to which audible “yeses” were heard. Students had built so much background knowledge and interest in the topic that they were able to extend their thinking

easily through the compare-and-contrast graphic organizer.

Additionally, the lesson concluded with a question that pushed students to make an inference based on what they had read. The question read, “In both chapters 2-3 of *Number the Stars* and the book *The Yellow Star*, why are people willing to risk their lives for others?” Before composing their short response, students discussed in small groups to make in-depth connections:

Neil- They're still humans. I just remember how White and Black happened. It's not about the color of your skin, but-

Evan- the content of your character

Neil- who you are.

Students began to make connections to other forms of discrimination in history, like the Civil Rights Movement. They also were able to communicate why it mattered to fight for those being oppressed or why people might have done it despite the danger. After writing their response, students supported their claim with text evidence from either text of the characters standing up to the Nazis, such as taking down the Nazi flag, wearing the yellow star intended for the Jews, hiding Jewish friends and family in their homes, and others. Then, students explained how these examples proved their answer, demonstrating a robust depth of thought.

Other investigate lessons followed over the next few days, each using the same compare and contrast graphic organizer to support in-depth connections between multiple texts that assisted students in researching their inquiries. As a part

of their research questions, Nicole invited students to compare and contrast two different groups that were a part of World War II. Nicole also followed each lesson with a critical literacy question to support students in constructing short-answer responses using text evidence.

Coalesce

Once students gathered resources and information to answer their unique questions, they synthesized the information they recorded and developed a unique learning product. Nicole's students synthesized their new knowledge about World War II to compose an essay comparing and contrasting two groups who contributed to it. The structure was set up, so students did not just report facts (see Figure 5). Rather, students were allowed to introduce their two groups with a one-sentence summary each. Then, one main body paragraph gave a specific similarity between the two groups, and the second main body paragraph gave a specific difference. Their conclusion wrapped up their thoughts and could include why the groups mattered. Our intention was to guide students into deeply considering their groups' actions and impact, not just brushing the surface with relevant facts.

Figure 5

Students were able to develop unique comparisons and demonstrate deep comprehension of people and concepts during this time period.

World War 2 Inquiry Report

During World War Two there were a lot of amazing people.

Queen Elizabeth and Doris Miller were doing different jobs. Doris Miller was a cook and a brave soldier during Pearl Harbor. When the alarm called the ship's crew to battle station, Miller headed a gun magazine amidship. Doris Miller died in action while protecting his lieutenant and commander. Princess / Queen Elizabeth was a princess during world war 2 when princess Elizabeth turned 18 in 1944. She passed the driving test, learned to read maps and fix and repair engines.

Both princess/queen Elizabeth and Doris miller were doing jobs that they weren't supposed to do. Doris Miller was supposed to be a cook but when Japanese soldiers started attacking he fought in Pearl Harbor. Queen/princess Elizabeth was supposed to be a princess when ww2 started, princess Elizabeth joined the army as a mechanic.

Doris miller, and queen Elizabeth were known a lot Doris miller was known as the first African American soldier. Queen Elizabeth was known as the queen of England.

Take Public

In the final phase, students shared their learning products with others, in this case, with each other. The goal of this phase is to support students in connecting their learning with the world. Many students displayed critical thinking in their writing, particularly surrounding examples of injustice. One student—Adah—focused on fairness in her notes in her lesson book. At the end of her essay, she displayed this focus by writing, “The WASPs and Tuskegee Airmen were both brave. They proved that women and Black people could fly.” Another student—Bailey—wrote about women in the workforce during the period, writing, “They worked hard like the boys but weren’t paid good,” and later, “not paid like they should.” Another student—Heather—was able to make connections to how this period of history changed perspectives that impact us today. She wrote about how women working changed perspectives on women’s rights, saying, “The women working showed the world women can be helpful everywhere, not just at home.” These students are displaying higher levels of thinking, as they consider justice and history’s impact on today. Through a deep immersion in the topic and scaffolding through organizers and modeling, students were able to reach higher levels of comprehension and build deep thinking skills.

Concluding Thoughts and Implications

In addition to engagement and excitement, students also understood that these big ideas were meaningful. We moved beyond simple stories of the past and used multiple texts, integrated contents (ELAR and social studies), and literacy-specific structures (compare and contrast, short-answer response, and essay writing) to engage in real, weighty topics. Such authentic knowledge-building is meaningful and supports sustained comprehension, teaching students about life and how to think critically. The high engagement for this unit also seemed to be directly correlated to students’ success.

Because students understood the concepts on a deeper level than basic recollection of facts, they interacted with ideas in more complex ways. Additionally, and most importantly, students were able to write about their learning. Because they were engaged and saw the content as meaningful, students were able to interact with texts more deeply and complete complex written tasks.

The inquiry-based researcher’s workshop is a promising learning structure that has received little empirical attention. As teacher-researchers, we aim to study the benefits of fostering literacy and learning for students, teachers, and communities. We find that this structure provides asset-based support for diverse learners, pushes students to engage in critical literacy with meaningful topics, and assists students in acquiring deep comprehension skills through contextualized purposeful practice.

AUTHORS’ BIOGRAPHIES

Camille S. Talbert is a doctoral student in Baylor University’s Department of Curriculum and Instruction focusing her research on teacher education, equity, social justice, mentorship, and literacy. Prior to graduate studies, Mrs. Talbert served as an elementary teacher, reading specialist, and curriculum specialist in Texas and Ohio.

Nicole B. Sussman is an educator and leader in Midway Independent School District in Texas. She has spent time teaching fourth grade and leading her campus in an initiative to foster student-led inquiry learning. Sussman recently earned her master’s degree from Baylor University. Her research focuses on inquiry, cross-curriculum learning, and comprehension.

Kelly C. Johnston is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Baylor University. Dr. Johnston examines how children and youth engage with literacy across contexts and the implications for literacy development and well-being in underserved communities. Her

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neurodiverse identities and practices have been marginalized through formal education.

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