An exploratory investigation into the outcomes of the integration of language arts and social studies lessons

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AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION INTO THE OUTCOMES OF THE INTEGRATION OF LANGUAGE ARTS AND SOCIAL STUDIES LESSONS

by
Kathryn C. Hall

An Action Research Thesis

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Approved by __________________________

Date of Approval _________________
ABSTRACT

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An Exploratory Investigation into the Outcomes of the Integration of Language Arts and Social Studies Lessons
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Dr. Robin Haskell McBee
Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this exploratory investigation was to find out what happens when the integration of language arts and social studies lessons takes place in a unit on the Underground Railroad in a fourth grade classroom. By applying a literature-based approach to teaching social studies concepts and using the theme of the Underground Railroad, I was able to integrate these two subjects in a way that was engaging to my students. This study involves 23 fourth grade students and took place over a one week period. The intervention involved replacing the students' social studies textbook with multiple pieces of literature. Group work, activity centers, leveled reading groups, and a final essay were also techniques used throughout the unit to stimulate student learning and assess student comprehension. Observation notes from each lesson of the unit, an interview with a focus group of five students, and student work were the three forms of data used to analyze the intervention. Observation notes were the main form of data, while the interview and student work served the purpose of supporting or arguing the themes that emerged in the notes. The study found that students were able to learn social studies concepts through the use of literature, and the intervention also resulted in a
positive change in student behavior during social studies classes as well as better attitudes towards social studies assignments.
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Curriculum Integration: Saving Social Studies

Introduction

Story Behind the Research

Language arts is a subject I have always loved and also a subject at which I have always excelled. Social studies on the other hand is a subject I have never been able to quite grasp, and because of this I have never been able to get good grades in the subject. Why couldn’t social studies be like language arts? Why couldn’t I comprehend what I was reading in my social studies text book, like I did each day when I read stories in language arts? These were questions I always asked myself growing up, because social studies was always a problem area for me in school. It was the subject at which I had to work the hardest and never saw the good grades follow, and it was the subject I absolutely hated because of this.

The truth of the matter is I was not the only student asking these questions of myself, and the tradition continues. As social studies seems to be becoming less and less “important” (because it is not a part of state testing), so does making social studies enjoyable and relevant for students. In many classrooms across America social studies has become a brief period where teachers teach and assess students merely to fill core curriculum standards (Cuthrell & Yates, 2007). The reason students cannot find meaning in this subject is because teachers are not teaching it so that it is “meaningful” (Lake, 2001, p. 5).

One of the first units I taught as a student teacher was an Integrated Language Arts (I.L.A.) unit based on a story told by Benjamin Franklin. The story was called “The
Hatmaker’s Sign,” and it was an entertaining story that integrated what the students were learning in social studies about Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence, and the American Revolution. For this unit the main activity required students to take turns working in stations where they participated in activities that they needed to use language arts skills to express knowledge of their I.L.A. story, as well utilize knowledge of social studies concepts.

I noticed the enthusiasm the students had working in these centers and the outstanding outcomes of that enthusiasm in their work. After grading the work they completed in each center I looked back to their social studies grades for their American Revolution unit and realized that many students did a much better job expressing their knowledge of historical concepts in I.L.A. than in social studies journals and tests. This quickly turned into something I wanted to explore.

Problem

What would happen if students were taught historical concepts through reading a story about them, rather than through reading a social studies textbook? Would this make these concepts easier to learn? Would it make them easier for students to relate to and connect to their own lives? Would teaching social studies through literature make social studies more meaningful?

If this was something I wasn’t sure was worth looking into, the idea became definite when I did short interviews with my students to get to know them better. One question I asked each student was to finish the sentence, “Something I would like to be better at is…” Answers to this included “drawing,” “being more organized,” “my handwriting,” and even “sky diving.” I was shocked that within all of these different
responses over a quarter of the class finished the statement with “social studies.” I thought it was interesting that so many of my students were admitting that they did not understand social studies and were not doing well in it, yet they wanted to do better. This was proof to me that trying something new with social studies would be something these students might enjoy and even appreciate, but first I needed to observe their social studies lessons as they were.

As I began to pay more attention to student behavior during social studies lessons I saw a major disconnect between the students and the lesson. Students were not involved and seemed extremely uninterested. I saw that it was always the same few students answering questions and participating, and the rest of the class seemed to be having trouble staying focused (e.g. fiddling in their desks or daydreaming). While the social studies book ensures that lessons meet the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for fourth grade, they aren’t always the easiest way for all students to gain knowledge. Lessons revolving around the textbook simply were not working for this class. I think this particular class needs more. They need something to make social studies come alive and make their social studies lessons more meaningful. From the look of things, students seem to be learning very little, and this was blatantly apparent through my observations.

**Critical Question**

As I began to research this problem, I learned that many teachers were having problems engaging their students in social studies lessons. I found that social studies has become a subject in which both students and teachers are losing interest because it is a subject that is not seen as a priority (Cuthrell & Yates, 2007). State testing is on reading,
writing, math, and science. Therefore, social studies gets left in the dark. In a time where meeting the standards is number one on the list of priorities for teachers and schools, subjects that aren’t tested fall down that list (Olness, 2007).

Social studies instructional time has been dwindling, because of increased pressure under the No Child Left Behind law, to perform well on state tests in other subjects such as language arts and mathematics (Center on Education Policy, 2008). I saw this happening in my classroom and I wanted this problem fixed. As I continued to research the problem I learned that one answer to this problem could be a strategy known as integration. This process involves connecting different subjects with one another to create a deeper learning and understanding by the children of these subjects (Olness 2007). If I integrated social studies into other subjects, would this gain student interest and engagement? Would this help my students learn social studies concepts? I came to the conclusion that there was no better way to find out than to give it a try. I decided to find out what happens when I integrate language arts and social studies lessons in a unit on the Underground Railroad in my fourth grade classroom?

Integrated Action

There are many strategies for integrating subjects, and picking a strategy is one of the most important parts of the process (Dickstein, Klein, and Turk, 2007). I decided to take a literature-based approach (Cuthrell & Yates, 2007), which is the idea of using stories and other books to expand on a topic of study. I used many different teaching strategies, with the main focus of teaching social studies lessons through the reading of literature rather than through the social studies textbook. The theme of the unit I taught and observed for this research project was The Underground Railroad. Each day of the
unit I read different pieces of literature to my students that taught them different elements of the Underground Railroad and slavery, and showed them different views of these two occurrences. Students also read literature on their own that focused on these topics and gave them yet another understanding of the events that occurred. My hope was that through hearing and reading all of these different pieces of literature, students would gain many different perspectives and form their own synopsis of the Underground Railroad.

Students were also taught social studies vocabulary as well as language arts vocabulary and were encouraged to use this vocabulary in their assignments throughout the unit. Having the vocabulary span across both subject areas allowed students to see these words more often than they usually would.

Along with the vocabulary students participated in computer based activities (i.e. a web based Underground Railroad where students had to travel, make decisions, and successfully escape), group work (jigsaw technique), and leveled reading groups. All of these different strategies of learning, along with using the literature based approach, allowed students to learn about the Underground Railroad in a more meaningful way.

The students' final project was a paper that they had written where they put themselves in the position of an enslaved person traveling the Underground Railroad. Students had to recall all the information they gained from the unit, all the perspectives they heard through the different pieces of literature, their own virtual traveling of the Railroad, and their unit vocabulary and grammar lessons in order to write these essays. This essay would allow me to see whether or not the unit was a success in helping the students to understand the role the Underground Railroad played in the lives of enslaved people and in this important period of American history. It would show me whether or
not students could learn social studies through a literature-based integrated teaching approach.

Context for Research

My project was conducted in a fourth grade classroom in a Pre-K to 8th grade school located in a suburban community in southern New Jersey near the Jersey shore. The school has approximately 1100 pupils, all housed in one building. Although all of these students share one building, the school has designated the downstairs of the building as the Elementary School (grades PK-4) and the upstairs of the building as the Middle School (grades 5-8).

It is a newer school, which allows for many luxuries other teachers and students do without. This new school is a state of the art high tech facility featuring three computer labs (two with ceiling-mounted LCD projectors); three wireless, mobile laptop carts; three science labs; and a large gymnasium. Every classroom is equipped with a TV and five Dell Pentium classroom computers. Technology is at every teacher’s finger tips, and it is something the students enjoy.

My class is made up of 23 fourth grade students; 19 are Caucasian; one is Chinese; another is Russian, and two students are of Hispanic heritage. I have no “English as a Second Language” (ESL) students and no students with an “Individualized Education Program” (I.E.P.). I do, however, have six students who get special help in Language Arts. This is received through the addition of a teacher’s aide to our classroom each day during our I.L.A. clocked period.

My 23 students have a great deal of energy and enthusiasm, but these attributes do not always go towards their academics. They are a talkative and easily distracted group
who sometimes see learning as an impossible feat. This needs to be addressed through lessons that are designed to intrigue them. Hands on activities, group work, and technology are just some of the strategies this class responds to in a positive way.

For my research I used many sources of data. I used field notes, observations, and student work from the class as a whole. I also focused on a select group of students for shadowing and interviewing. These students, who I call my focus group, were students who in my first conducted interview mentioned wanting to do better in social studies, but I also made it so that this group represented the class as a whole appropriately (in terms of gender and learning readiness).

To really understand what I did with my students I think it is first important to really understand what subject integration is. To understand every aspect of integration will help to understand my action research as a whole, from the methods I chose, to the results I found.

Review of Relevant Literature

Interdisciplinary teaching, thematic teaching, synergistic teaching, or integrated curriculum; no matter what the title, the operation remains the same. Integration is an “education that is organized in such a way that it cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association to focus upon broad areas of study” (Shoemaker, as cited in Lake, 2001, p. 2).

In a jam-packed school day, with too many subjects and not enough time, many teachers find it difficult to fit it all in (Cuthrell & Yates, 2007). Integration is the idea of merging content by connecting different areas of study, and thereby covering otherwise overlooked curriculum (Olness, 2007). Social studies is an example of an “overlooked”
subject; it is a subject that has been found to be slipping down the list of priorities for teachers, students, and schools (Cuthrell & Yates, 2007). In this paper the process of curriculum integration is explored, and the idea of integration being a savior for social studies and other disregarded subjects, is considered.

What is Curriculum Integration?

Curriculum integration finds its basis in the work of famous theorists such as Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Jerome Bruner. Each of these theorists holds a holistic view of learning and is concerned with children having an understanding of concepts and underlying structures. They believe that the goal of education is for students to experience a deep learning that will stay with them for a lifetime and will be meaningful (Lake, 2001, p. 5). This idea can undoubtedly be linked to the integrated approach. Integration has been defined as “moving away from memorization and recitation of isolated facts and figures to more meaningful concepts and the connections between concepts” (p. 6), an idea with which Piaget, Dewey, and Bruner would indubitably agree.

The actual process of curriculum integration is not as simple as it might seem. It is not as easy as just teaching two or more subjects at the same time. It involves preparation, technique, and a deep understanding of the concept. There are many different views and methods of integration that must be understood before implementing the approach. Some of the practices involved are:

- Developing cross-curriculum sub-objectives within a given curriculum guide
- Developing model lessons that include cross-curricular activities and assessments
- Developing enrichment or enhancement activities with a cross-curricular focus including suggestions for cross-curricular "contacts" following each objective
- Developing assessment activities that are cross-curricular in nature
- Including sample planning wheels in all curriculum guides (Palmer, as cited in Lake, 2001, p. 2)

These practices involve a great deal of hard work on the part of a teacher, but they ensure that integration is being applied correctly, which is key in making it successful. Different levels of curriculum integration are another way of understanding the approach. Varied levels allow teachers to use integration in different ways for specific subject combinations, which is simpler for a teacher to understand and apply.

Teachers could integrate in a fragmented format, which deals with separate and distinct disciplines; a connected format, where they would connect topics within a discipline; a nested approach, which includes social, thinking, and context skills that are targeted within a subject area; or in a webbed approach (thematic), where teachers use a theme as a base for instruction in many disciplines (Fogarty, as cited by Lake, 2001, p. 4). These examples are just a small portion of the levels that have been studied, but they give an excellent glimpse into the diverse ways of integrating curriculum.

Just as there are many different names for the process of integration, there are also many definitions. Each piece of literature found on the topic will offer a different definition for the term; however, these definitions and explanations all seem to share one common theme; they all define integrated education as "meaningful" (Lake, 2001, p. 6,
Rosberg, 1995, p.12, Ferguson & Young, 1996, p. 266), state meaningful curriculum as their goal, or address something along those lines.

Making curriculum meaningful can be done in many different and unique ways. One approach is to find a relationship among concepts. For example, one might figure out a way to bring a social studies concept into a math lesson or base a science lesson off of a subject students are reading about in language arts. This is a form of reinforcement for students. Other approaches that are both easy and have been proven successful are integrating a combination of subjects, using an emphasis on projects, incorporating flexible student grouping, using flexible scheduling, creating thematic units as organizing principles, and using sources that go beyond textbooks (Lake, 2003, p. 3). All of these approaches allow for the success of integration.

It is evident that there is a great deal that goes into curriculum integration. There must be an understanding of the meaning of integration, the process of it, and the different levels and strategies before implementation can occur.

*What Curriculum Integration is Not: The Separate Subject Approach*

There are some integration theorists who believe that integration should be a way of life in classrooms and that there should be no separate subjects at all. These theorists have a more extreme view of curriculum integration, but they make a valid point about the value of integration at any level. "It is as if, in real life, when faced with problems or puzzling situations, we stopped to ask which part is science, which part mathematics, which part art, and so on" (Beane, 1995, p. 618).
For these strong believers in curriculum integration, school is not strictly about meeting Core Curriculum Content Standards or passing state tests. It is about teaching students to be problem solvers and preparing them for life. “Teaching the content and skills children will need to solve the problems that occur in real life and the interconnectedness of these occurrences is a primary goal of education (McBee, 2000, p. 254).” How do teachers accomplish this task? Curriculum integration is one possible maneuver (McBee, 2000, p. 254).”

The way we school students in the United States is labeled as the separate subject approach. Theorists argue that this approach does not prepare students for the world they will one day enter into as adults, and that “there is no real unity, no real sense to it all” (Beane, 1995, p. 618). Beane (1995) believes that school should be an integrated study of life skills and should not be broken up into subjects or compartments in any way. Integration of all subjects gives reason to what the students are learning, and can improve students’ performance and retention of content and lead them to be excited about school, have better attitudes towards school work, and be more involved in the classroom (McBee, 2000).

Beane (1995) argues that the separate subject approach that is being taken is hurting our schools, our teachers, and most importantly our students.

Students and teachers do not come together on a random or voluntary social basis – they do not meet casually and decide to “do school.” Instead they are brought together to do something – namely the curriculum – and if that curriculum is fraught with fundamental problems, then the
relationships between teachers and students will most certainly be strained (p. 617).

Deep-seated supporters of curriculum integration, like Beane, argue that the separate subject approach is the source of this strain, and that the approach “offers little more than a disconnected and incoherent assortment of facts and skills” (p. 618). What is the answer to this problem? The answer according to Beane is curriculum integration; a focus on life itself, instead of pieces of facts and information within subject areas.

**Why Use Curriculum Integration?**

“Integrating curriculum offers you the opportunity to be more efficient in your instruction. By merging content, learning is reinforced because new content connects to other areas” (Olness, 2007, p. 31). It is education as a method of developing abilities and preparing students for life and further learning (Lake, 2008). Most supporters of curriculum integration are not anti-separate-subject (approach), but they do believe that integration can benefit certain subjects, and allow students to enhance their learning as well as teachers to improve their teaching.

“There just isn’t enough time to get it all in” (Lake, 2008, p. 5). This is a concern of many teachers today; there just isn’t enough time to teach all of the requirements. State testing expectations force teachers to focus on language arts and mathematics, leaving subjects like science and social studies out of luck (Center on Education Policy, 2008). Curriculum integration can serve as an answer to this dilemma. If teachers can find meaningful association between subject areas, and can plan a lesson or unit that
makes sure to touch on all subjects equally, then they have found “a way to meet both the needs of the student and the requirements of the state” (Lake, 2008, p. 7).

In a study of ten elementary school teachers who integrated their curricula, McBee (2000) found that nine out of ten teachers saw an increase in student attendance and observed that students were excited about their studies and stayed more interested in their instruction; all as a result of the interdisciplinary approach. One teacher in this study indicated that she saw how integration had made learning valuable to her students. This approach was allowing students to see the connection between subjects, as well as the connection to their lives outside of school. McBee reports that all of the ten teachers who were part of the study continued to use integration in their classrooms because of the positive change they saw as a result of the intervention.

If that isn’t enough reason, there has been research that supports the claim that “breaking learning into bits and pieces can actually make things more difficult for students (to learn)” (Olness, 2007, p. 18). This can be proven through a body of brain research that found that “the search for meaning and patterns is a basic process in the human brain,” and therefore “learning would be best accomplished when information is presented in meaningful, connected patterns” (Lake, 2008, p. 6), which is exactly what integration aims to accomplish.

*What are the Potential Dangers of Curriculum Integration?*

Just like with any theory or practice, it is important to be aware of the potential hazards of applying curriculum integration. These risks are important to take note of if
you were to apply the tactic in your school or classroom. Being aware of what could happen is crucial.

"Loss of integrity in one of the disciplines" (Olness, 2007, p. 22) is one risk you take when integrating subjects. Teachers need to understand that adding a project, performance, or assignment to a subject can be a "superfluous or superficial" (p. 22) stab at integration. They must be sure there is meaningful content is being learned and that they are putting forth their best effort to make sure this is occurring.

Another problem that could occur is a trade-off of broader knowledge in several subjects for in-depth learning in fewer subjects. Teachers must take proper measures to ensure that objectives for all subjects being integrated are being met (Cuthrell, 2007, p. 22). To make sure that meaningful learning is occurring, teachers should use multiple methods of instruction, such as textbooks, teacher instruction, cooperative learning, group reading, discussion, reports, and read alouds (Olness, 2007).

Another potential risk of integrating subjects would be "a decline in skill (of the students)" (Ibid, p. 23). If students are only participating in project-based approaches, they are loosing the ability to complete other tasks. There must be a mixture of levels and strategies being implemented, not just one. If integration is not exercised correctly it could backfire so that students are actually being impaired by the method. "Teacher planning, collecting books and other resources, scheduling activities, and designing authentic assessments are all necessary to implement an effective integrated program" (p. 23). Using a combination of these methods can prevent all of these potential risks. It all comes back to understanding the process of integration.
How to Implement Curriculum Integration

There are many different approaches a teacher can take when implementing curriculum integration in his or her classroom. What teachers need to do is figure out the best way to use integration, and what ways will best work for their own classrooms and their individual students. Rosberg (1995) discusses three possible approaches teachers may want to consider.

The first approach is labeled “Whole Language,” which is a way of “thinking about children as language learners” (Rosberg, 1995, p. 3). According to Rosberg, this approach is centered on students learning about language and teachers investigating ways to teach literacy. Students are given opportunities to use language, are encouraged to research and explore language, and are anticipated to make sense of language. In this approach students learn “from whole to part” (p. 3), and learn in a social context as opposed to on their own.

Another approach to curriculum integration is called “Literature-Based Teaching,” which is the idea of using stories and other books to expand on a topic of study (Rosberg, 1995). The focus of this approach is to bring appropriate literature, into lessons or units, which will add to what the students are learning about. This approach necessitates the use of materials that have meaning and relevance to students, and the materials should represent a wide range of different genres and authors. Literature-based integration allows teachers to use informational books and stories to make connections with language arts and other subjects (science, social studies, or math). This tactic of integration builds on the idea that reading a story about a topic is more interesting than
memorizing facts out of a text book. And because it is more interesting it also makes more sense to a student (Ferguson & Young, 1996).

One last approach of curriculum integration is the “Project Approach.” This way of integrating subjects centers on involving students by letting them make choices and decisions about their learning. Implementing projects allows a teacher to let students travel any road they would like. The projects usually will last about two to four weeks, and topics can be anything to which the student can connect. “Projects allow children to do in-depth investigations of topics that interest them” (Katz & Chard, as cited by Rosberg, 1995, p. 10). This approach involves actively engaging students in learning that is based on their own particular interests and needs, and it is both interesting and rewarding for the student (Rosberg, 1995). The teacher must be sure to provide some structure for the projects, but the topic should come from the student.

Each of these approaches deals with integration in a unique way, but all have equal benefits to the classroom. “If done in an appropriate manner, it is a more effective and efficient way to teach. Also, it makes education more meaningful, relevant, and interesting for the teacher and the student” (Rosberg, 1995, p. 14).

*Integrating Language Arts and Social Studies*

The idea that social studies is taking a backseat to subjects like language arts and mathematics is not just an idea, but a fact. According to a report from the Center on Education Policy, since the No Child Left Behind Act took effect, there has been a large shift in the amount of instructional time allotted for social studies at the elementary level in a large number of districts. According to this document forty-four percent of all
districts nationwide have added time for language arts, and/or mathematics, at the expense of social studies, and other subjects (science, art, gym, and music) that are not tested by the state. Where these changes have been seen and the extent to which it is happening is great. Findings show that cuts in social studies class time (and other non-tested subjects) have been 75 minutes per week or more (Center on Education Policy, 2008). Most districts that reported these increases also reported increases in time allotted for mathematics. Where are they getting this extra time? These same districts reported to have cut time in other subjects or periods, such as social studies, science, art, music, physical education, recess, or lunch (Center on Education Policy, 2008).

Theodore K. Rabb, a professor of history at Princeton University states that, “It is clear that, with some notable exceptions nationwide, the amount of class time given to history, especially in the first eight grades, has been shrinking almost by the month (Manzo, 2005, p.16).” Many claim that because of this imbalance in elementary schools many students will be unprepared for history courses they will later encounter in middle and high school. It is important for students to receive a well rounded education so that they will be prepared to function later on in their lives (Manzo, 2005).

This is not what schools are supposed to be doing. Social studies has standards that need to be met as well.

The departments of education in both New York City and New York State, along with many other locations, call for social studies students “to become life-long learners who construct authentic inquiry, read critically, evaluate information, and take action.
One idea is to link social studies and other unpopular disciplines to the accountability favored subjects of reading or writing (Olness, 2007, p. 32).

In an elementary school study, students almost universally held negative attitudes towards the subject of social studies (Cuthrell & Yates, 2007). This may be because social studies is not seen as a “highly valued” subject and, in turn, teachers do not give it their best effort. Many teachers end up teaching straight out of the text book just so they can say that they filled the minimum requirements of state guidelines. This approach leaves students uninterested in learning and understanding (Cuthrell & Yates).

In a survey of 900 elementary and middle school principals about the impact of No Child Left Behind it was found that schools were spending more time on reading, mathematics, and science and less time on social studies (as reported in Cuthrell & Yates, 2007). Cuthrell and Yates suggest that with the marginalization of the subject happening all over the country, teachers and administrators need to redesign their curriculum to increase the teaching of social studies goals and objectives. They concluded that a good way to go about doing this would be by integrating the social studies content with literacy.

Using a literature based approach offers a strong solution for integrating these two subjects. “Children’s literature extends the social studies curriculum, increases student participation, and draws on students’ first hand experiences (Olness, 2007, p. 34).” Ferguson and Young (1996) believe that literature can add a human dimension to the study of history and social studies and that this human dimension makes the information “understandable, enjoyable, and memorable (p. 262).” Instead of spending social studies...
time reading from a textbook, teachers can combine social studies and language arts time and combine the two studies.

Many reading anthologies have caught on to this idea. Many already combine the subjects by containing nonfiction stories that are appropriate for the social studies curriculum. Using these types of anthologies can help to accentuate social studies content while also teaching language arts skills, and they may even sway students to explore further than their textbooks (Olness, 2007, p. 35).

If these reading anthologies are not an option for teachers, Dickinson, Klein, and Turk (2007) offer five strategies for using literature in history and social studies classrooms. First is the era driven approach. A teacher must choose an era or event in history and then select a piece of literature which invites important discussion of this particular era he or she would like to cover. The next is a theme based approach where teachers choose themes that they would like to explore with their classes, and then an appropriate piece of literature. The next is the essential question approach which would be a unit designed around an overarching "essential question," with a text that helps address it. Another is the identity driven approach which focuses on a person or a group of people with a piece of literature that helps illuminate that identity. Lastly, is the literature based, which is where a teacher selects a particular text on its own merits and designs a unit around it, illuminating various aspects of the text. (p. 298)

One crucial piece of integration that teachers do have to keep in mind is to make sure no subject is being left behind. When integrating social studies and language arts, or any subjects for that matter, teachers must be certain to meet goals and objectives for all
subjects involved. If it is the integration of social studies and language arts, the “social studies content should be in depth as well as the language arts (Cuthrell & Yates, 2007, p. 23).” The approach should not result in the strengthening of just one subject.

**Curriculum Integration: Student Evaluation**

When first integrating curriculum, there may be a concern about how to evaluate students. Teachers should evaluate in the same ways they always do, but they should also incorporate new ways, such as “observations, conferences (individual and group), student journals, and work done by students at the end of each unit (Rosberg, 1995, p. 7).” What teachers should do is prepare for these evaluations by creating a checklist of skills that they would like students to acquire in the unit. This checklist should be based on curriculum requirements and include specific skills, such as complete sentence writing. Another form of evaluation could be to ask students how they feel about their own progress, what information they have learned, and skills they have developed (Porter, as cited in Rosberg, 1995).

**Conclusion**

Curriculum integration has many names but it has one primary purpose, to make education “meaningful.” It is the process of connecting subjects so that lessons bring together a mixture of pieces of curriculum in a meaningful way (Lake, 2001). It is a way to make subjects more interesting, make class time more enjoyable, and make learning more relevant. It is a way of turning the separate-subject approach into something more plausible, and it is a way to allow teachers to cover subjects like social studies that often get overlooked or minimal coverage. Integration offers the chance for teachers to be
more efficient in their instruction. It allows them to merge content so that new content ties into other subject areas, and in turn learning is reinforced.

Whole language, literature based, and a project-based approach to curriculum integration all deal with integration in unique ways but serve the goal of making learning more effective and teaching more proficient (Rosberg, 1995, p. 14). One subject that would really benefit from all three approaches is social studies. It is a subject in which both students and teachers are losing interest because it is a subject that is not seen as a priority. State testing is on reading, writing, math, and science; therefore, social studies gets short shrift. In a time where meeting the standards is number one on the list of priorities, subjects that aren’t tested fall down that list. Integration is the answer to this growing problem. It would not be a difficult task to combine social studies and language arts, and by following the literature-based approach teachers can strengthen language arts skills while teaching students social studies concepts. This will not only make it easier to fit everything in, but it will also allow students to enjoy a subject from which they have been held back.

Research Methods

Overview of Action Research

Making social studies meaningful was my main goal for this action research project. I was seeing a complete disconnect between the students and their social studies lessons, and I wanted to find a way to turn that around. I needed to engage students in a way that they wouldn’t be tempted to get out of their seats for a drink, ask to go to the bathroom, or play with items in their desks. I wanted to allow my students to enjoy social studies, learn it, and understand how it plays into their own lives.
The first step I took in making this change was getting rid of the students’ social studies text books. We were not going to be using this book for our week long unit. I would be reading students other pieces of literature that taught them the same concepts, but in a different manner. These books included; *Who Owns the Sun*, by Stacy Chbosky, *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky*, by Faith Ringgold, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, by Deborah Hopkinson, *A Place Called Freedom*, by Scott Russell Sanders, and *...If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad*, by Ellen Levine. Each of these stories would allow my class to understand a different concept of the Underground Railroad and slavery, and would give students a new insight into these concepts.

Students would be presenting what they learn in a different format than they usually do. Before the intervention students would complete individual work each morning in their social studies journals and workbooks. This work included defining vocabulary, answering chapter questions, and practicing other social studies skills. This strategy would be put on hold during our Underground Railroad unit. Students would no longer be coming in each morning to a board filled with work to complete individually. Instead, each morning I would write one question on the board, such as, “What do you know about the Underground Railroad.” Students would then take time to answer this question in their journals until everyone got settled in. We would then discuss the answer to this question, and that discussion would lead us into the day’s lesson.

Each story I read to my students was a picture book so that students were getting a visual picture of these events as well. We started with the story *Who owns the Sun?*, which lead the class into a deep discussion of ownership, and freedom. This story, like the others I read, was not a difficult story to comprehend, but it had a big idea for
students to grasp. This allowed students to understand the story, discuss it, and take it as far as their individual minds would let them.

Throughout the week students participated in classroom discussions of these stories and their concepts and worked on activities involving the stories. This literature students were hearing changed the dynamic of the classroom. Students were going to be participating in group work, singing and interpreting music, drawing maps, and learning astronomy. It was no longer a class where we were reading chapters in the textbook and going over corresponding questions and vocabulary.

One activity students successfully completed took place on the last days of the unit in social studies class. Students worked in groups with a book called ... *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad*. This book is divided into chapters that each answered a question about the Railroad, such as “What dangers did you face?” Students were broken up into groups of three or four and given a section of the book to read on which to become an “expert.” Students then had to create a lesson and teach the rest of the class what they learned in their section.

The major analysis of this unit would come from a paper students would be working on throughout the week long unit. In this paper students had to pretend they were a slave traveling the Underground Railroad. Each paragraph of this essay asked the students to write about a different aspect of themselves (as a slave), and their experiences. This paper would be titled “Lighting the Way to Freedom,” and it would allow me to see what students learned from the unit. Because I was reading them different stories about the Underground Railroad instead of information from the text, they were gaining different accounts of this historical event. I wanted them to take these stories they were
hearing each day, and use them to create their own story. I would be looking for the use of vocabulary words we discussed and other factual information they had learned from the literature.

Language arts class was where students would also be learning about the Underground Railroad. During language arts class students would be working with a story in their reading anthologies called *A Place Called Freedom*. This story is about a family traveling the Railroad and escaping slavery. Language Arts was basically run in the same manner as it usually was, but with a story that coordinated with what the students were doing in social studies. During language arts lessons students would be reading aloud and individually, participating in grammar lessons, leveled reading groups, and activity centers, all of which centered around their anthology story and learning concepts related to the Underground Railroad from yet another perspective.

*Data Collected*

For this study, I was trying to answer the question, “What happens when I integrate language arts and social studies lessons in a unit on the Underground Railroad in my fourth grade classroom?” In order to do so, I collected many forms of data that were both meaningful and insightful. I used a form of qualitative inquiry that consisted of observations from before and after the intervention, an interview with a focus group consisting of five students, and artifacts that consisted of student work during the integrated unit. These three sources of information gave me a complete data set that provided insight and meaning that surrounded my critical question (Phillips & Carr, 2006).
The observation angle was my main source of data. This was where I ended up seeing exactly what happened when I integrated social studies and language arts. Each day of the unit I kept a small notebook with me during social studies and language arts lessons. I jotted down short notes to remind myself of things that happened during the class. Immediately after the class I went to the computer and reflect on everything that happened during class that day. The notebook I kept during lessons helped me to remember details. If a student said something insightful, I wrote it down so that I would remember to put it into my notes later. The aim of my observation notes was to see if student behavior changed at all during this unit. I wrote examples of student participation, student comments, class interruptions, and things that I noticed that were different.

I also took observation notes before the unit, when social studies were taught through the textbook, and language arts was not connected. Even though I took these notes as an observer, because I was not teaching at this time, looking back on them helped me to see the before and after perspectives and make comparisons between the two. These notes consisted of similar elements of what was happening in the class and helped to provide me with a more well-rounded view of what was transpiring before and during the intervention. They also provided me a more thorough data set for answering my critical question.

I did a focus group interview after implementing the. This group was chosen because they were either students who had mentioned (in a prior interview) wanting to improve their performance in social studies, or because I felt the students would give well-rounded insight into the unit. In this focus group interview I wanted to question
what students thought about the new way we learned social studies, what they learned in the unit, and other insights that they had and wanted to share. Conducting this interview allowed me to hear different perspectives of what happened throughout the week and determine what the students’ views of the intervention were.

Student work served as my last source of data. While I took all student work and grades into consideration when trying to construct meaning from my study, their final project (Lighting the Way to Freedom Essay) was my main interest. This essay was intended to show me what they had learned in the unit and whether or not they were able to fully understand the Underground Railroad and slavery through hearing and reading literature as opposed to a social studies textbook. In the essays I was looking for specifics of the Underground Railroad (people, places, and events). I expected that I would be able to get a good sense of whether or not the students could incorporate these elements into their papers and thus demonstrate understanding of the content covered. Throughout my research I had to remind myself that my goal was not about proving or disproving anything; it was about finding out what would happen if I changed the way students learned social studies concepts. Enacting this unit was about discovering not only for me, but also for my students. Using these three forms of data allowed me to look at my critical question from three different perspectives, and each gave me an additional perspective to use when answering my critical question.

**Analysis of Data**

Before coming to any conclusions concerning my data, I had to first analyze my notes, interview, and student work. I started with my observation notes. I went through my notes from each day (both the notes prior to the intervention and after), and began
writing down themes that were beginning to emerge. This included elements such as patterns in student behavior and similar student comments. I then set up a coding system for each theme using symbols. Then every time I saw something in my notes that went with a theme, I coded it with that theme’s symbol. This allowed me to see where my themes could be supported in my notes. The last thing I did was create a table where I listed the themes, and wrote how many times those themes showed up in my notes. Since I only had notes of two lessons prior to the observation, I used only two days of notes from after the intervention to create my table. I used lessons from two Mondays, one from before the intervention and one from after, and two Tuesdays. This strategy of analyzing data allowed me to look at my notes in an organized manner, compare social studies classes before and after, and reflect on the change that occurred in my classroom in a fair manner. The table that I created was a way of reducing my observation data to a more manageable form. It allowed me to get a picture of what my observation notes showed me, as well as compare the two sets of observation notes to see what changes occurred in the classroom due to the intervention.

I also coded my interview with my focus group (using symbols), and used the same themes as I did for my observations. I did not include my interviews on the chart, but rather used what the students told me in the interview to support, or repute what I concluded from my chart. I used this same approach when taking student work into consideration. Did student work support my findings? Did what students tell me in our interview go along with what I was seeing in my observation notes? These were the questions I focused on. All of this helped to steer me towards an analysis that was accurate and reliable.
Trustworthiness

My research was completed solely by myself, but I drew conclusions about the effectiveness of the integration strategy through observations made by my coordinating teacher, and discussions with her as well. Each day during our planning period my cooperating teacher and I would go over the notes I took and add to them observations that she had picked up on but I had missed. This adds yet another perspective to my research, as well as assurance that what I was witnessing was not a biased perception. This, along with my interviews with my students and their work during the unit, assisted me in making accurate conclusions about my research. While all of this adds to the trustworthiness of my research, it is not to say that my research contained no biases.

I noticed after I had completed my research and began going through my data that during the unit I may have been focusing too much on student improvement and avoiding any negative aspects that may have occurred. Since I was seeing such a positive change in my students I was focusing on that instead of looking at both sides of the spectrum. I see now how this might take away from my study. Because I was not always looking at my study with a broad view, I will now not be able to draw conclusions without taking this into consideration.

I also must keep in mind that this study was based on just one week long unit. It did not take place over a long period of time, and the method was not attempted with any other unit of study. In just one week of observations, based on one unit of study, it is impossible to conclude that my finding would be accurate in any other format. Further, the Underground Railroad is a topic on which there is a great deal of literature, thus making it an easy unit to plan. I have to keep in mind that this may not be the case for
other fourth grade social studies concepts. While I was happy to see a positive change in my students I cannot set aside the fact that this was just one unit of study. I did not try this approach with any other topic and, therefore, cannot make any assumptions about how it would work with another theme. One last aspect of my research that serves as a limitation was that this was a new approach to learning. The students have been working with their social studies books the whole year and participating in a very structured social studies class each day. This was an absolute change from that. I think that not using the social studies textbooks, reading stories to the class, and using many different strategies (i.e. group work, reading groups, computers, and activity centers) may have been the source for the change I saw in many students, and for some of the perspectives they shared with me during the interview. Since I did not try the approach with any other unit or with any other subjects, my research is still at a place where it is incomplete.

Findings

Analysis and Interpretation

The data I collected consisted of field notes from my week long unit, an interview I gave my students at the end of the unit, and work they completed during the unit. I had to look at all three of these data sources and find meaning behind them. Creating Table 1 was one of the first steps I took, this chart allowed me to draw conclusions about what changes occurred after the intervention.
Table 1
Action Research
Integration of Language Arts and Social Studies
Observation Notes (During and After Integration)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Support for Finding (Before Intervention)</th>
<th>Support for Finding (After Intervention)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate Understanding</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Connections</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to Connect</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with Subjects</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnect</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble Staying Focused</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost Interest</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Effort</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My observation notes are what support the themes I have listed in Table 1. When I saw in my notes that a student answered a question correctly, or made an insightful comment, this was a sign that students understood what they were being taught. If I saw a student describing how their life would be different if they had no freedoms, or how being a slave would make them feel, I considered that as them making a life connection to what they were learning. If I made a note about the extraordinary effort a student put into a project, or how students would tell me how much they liked a book I read them, then these would be signs that the students were enjoying the new approach. I also noted when students would be working diligently or jumping out of their seat to answer a question as support for the analysis that students wanted to connect to social studies.
lessons. When students would quietly listen to a story I was reading them or work
silently on independent work with little disruption, that was support showing that they
were engaged in the lesson. I found evidence that students were connecting social studies
to other subjects when I made a note that a student brought up social studies concepts
during another part of the day. Another code was disconnect, which was what I observed
occurring in social studies when students were having trouble answering questions or
coming to my desk to ask me what a question. If they were getting out of their seats or
playing with things inside their desks, then they were having trouble staying focused on
what they were supposed to be doing. If the teacher called on a student to read aloud
from the textbook and that student did not know where they were in the book, this
seemed to be evidence that students were not interested in the social studies textbook.
When I walked around the room and saw blank workbooks because students were not
doing what they should have been or a student couldn’t give an answer to a chapter
question, this was proof that students might not be putting forth the proper effort. These
behaviors are examples of the things found in my notes that supported the themes in
Table 1.

The themes that I was seeing emerge dealt with what I was noticing in terms of
student behavior. As far as positive behaviors that I was seeing, these occurred after the
intervention when students were demonstrating an understanding of social studies
concepts much more than they had before. They were able to discuss the stories I read to
them and answer questions pertaining to those stories. Students were quick to raise their
hands to give me answers, and there was a high level of participation. I also began to see
examples of students making connections with what they were learning. They
understood that the slaves were not free and that they were. They could tell me about the freedoms they were afforded and discuss how they would feel if those freedoms were taken from them. After the intervention examples of enthusiasm and enjoyment were also apparent in my notes, whether it was a project they were doing that incorporated art, working in groups, or listening to their teacher read a story. Before the intervention I was seeing that students wanted to connect but didn’t seem to be able to, while after the intervention I saw them accomplishing this connection. Students were finally engaged in social studies lessons, and even connecting social studies concepts with other subjects. They were bringing up things that they learned in social studies class in language arts class, or telling me about a book they saw in the library that was about slavery.

While these were the positive behaviors I was seeing in my notes, in order to be fair I had to also take note of the negative behaviors of my students. Before the intervention there was an apparent disconnect between my students and their social studies lessons. Students were not grasping what they were being taught. This could be seen through the incorrect answers that students were giving or when students couldn’t discuss what they had just read. Students also seemed to have trouble staying focused during social studies class before the intervention. They were playing in their desks, or getting out of their seats. I even caught one student doing math work instead of the social studies they were supposed to be doing. Students were showing a lack of interest by behaving in this manner, and because they were not interested they were putting very little effort into their work. They were not answering the questions in complete sentences, skipping over questions, or even not bothering to do the work at all.
My observations from before and after the intervention were showing me positive reactions to the changes I had made. I saw that students were showing me that they understood the concepts they were learning about slavery and the Underground Railroad. On the very first day of the unit during a discussion of “ownership” one of my students explained to the class that the boy in the story I had read them “didn’t have the freedoms we have.” He went on to define the word freedom as, “the power to do whatever you want.” I knew then that the students were learning important concepts even though the context for learning was the very different trade book instead of a textbook. I also found through analyzing the data presented in Table 1 that during the intervention there was a great deal more evidence of student understanding than in my observations prior to the intervention. These results show that the intervention increased student knowledge of social studies concepts.

I also saw a big increase in students connecting social studies to their own lives. This is something I did not see at all prior to the intervention, but found evidence of two times afterwards. Students were hearing different stories about the Underground Railroad, from different perspectives which made it easy for them to put themselves in that position, and connect the situation to their own lives. On day one of the unit they discussed freedoms they had, and how they would feel if those freedoms were taken from them. The words they shared with the class, “scared,” “angry,” “confused,” were evidence of this connection that they were making. They were able to understand how the child in the book might be feeling, because they thought about their own freedoms and what they mean to them.
Not only were students showing improvement, but they seemed to be enjoying social studies class more. As seen in Table 1, there was double the evidence of student enjoyment during the intervention. On the second day of the unit, one of my students asked right as she walked through the door if I would be reading them another story. This was an enthusiasm I never saw in my students, and especially not in social studies class. This enjoyment was also evident during language arts, where they worked in activity centers on assignments that centered around a story on the Underground Railroad. One of these activities asked students to take a virtual trip on the Underground Railroad, and this was a part of the unit my focus group (in our interview) specifically told me they enjoyed.

This excitement seemed to lead to another finding. As I began to see fewer disruptions in social studies and more discussion, I came to realize that students were not only behaving well, but were active in my lessons and engaged in what we were learning. I saw students, who I had noted earlier in the intervention playing in their desks, or did not pay attention, get involved in class discussions, answer questions, and give examples. Table 1 shows a doubling of student engagement during the integrated action. This could be due to the fact that this was something new and new equals exciting or because the Underground Railroad is simply a topic students enjoy more than others. However, better grades, excellent essays, and findings from student interviews suggest that this engagement was due to the literature based approach of integrating curriculum.

I noted more than once in my observations before the intervention that many students were not connecting with their social studies lessons even though they seemed completely capable of doing so. There is a part of each social studies chapter titled “Real
Voice," which is a brief account of a person who lived during that time. I saw that many students who seemed uninterested during social studies classes would hear the teacher ask someone to read this section and immediately raise their hands to read. This seemed to be the students’ favorite part of each chapter and the part they enjoyed discussing the most. I also saw that while students seemed to dread doing their social studies work, when there was a project that included drawing, being creative, or group work, they were eager to participate. Again, this seemed to suggest to me that students wanted to connect but just seemed to be having trouble doing so through the textbook. Indeed, I saw even more of this after the intervention began. They wanted to discuss the literature, participate in activities, and work on their essays. They didn’t seem as distracted as they usually did.

I was also seeing a theme emerge of students connecting social studies with other subjects. As Table 1 shows, I did not see this at all before the intervention, but saw two occurrences afterwards. During a vocabulary lesson in language arts one of the words I was teaching was “plantation.” We discussed the definition, and I explained what a plantation was and how it would connect to our anthology story. One of my students raised her hand to ask if the story from social studies class could have taken place on a plantation. I saw this as a sign that students were able to take what we were learning in one subject and connect it to another, and this helps them to make sense of both subjects.

All of this was a huge improvement from what I saw during my observations prior to the intervention. What I was seeing during social studies classes before the change was what can only be described as a disconnect between the students and the lesson, the students and the textbook, and the students and their assignments. I was seeing students
playing in their desks during lessons, not following along when classmates were reading aloud. I would see them getting out of their desks multiple times, instead of focusing on their independent work, and ending up getting poor grades because of all of this. I actually counted one student getting out of her seat eight times during the forty minute period. This to me was unacceptable. This disconnect, however, seemed to fade drastically after the new approach began. I only noted one or two disruptions during each social studies period, which was a huge improvement.

Also, prior to the intervention students were having trouble staying focused in social studies. The teacher would call on a student to read and would get a “Where are we?” response, or I would walk around the room while students were working independently on work only to find many of them doing anything but social studies work. They might be drawing, building boxes with index cards, reading library books, writing notes to friends, getting a drink, or asking to go to the bathroom. This was another habit I saw fade after the intervention. For the week-long unit students had one major assignment (the essay), and when they were given time to work on it, they wanted to do so. If they finished their essay early, they would be allowed to go to the computer to type it up, and all but a few were able to accomplish this.

My notes seemed to point to the social studies textbook as the main source of the problem I was seeing before the intervention. Students were not reading the chapters in a way that they comprehended the information. They were not getting the story of what happened, but instead a set of facts that were not connecting together in their heads. When they read their answers from their independent work, half of the time their answers
were incorrect or incomplete, and they constantly come up to mine or my cooperating teacher’s desks to ask for more explanation.

My observations showed that the negative themes were not showing up as much, or even at all in some cases, after the change, while the positive themes were showing up more (refer to Table 1). There seemed to be a positive change in my students and in our social studies classes. Through integrating social studies and language arts using a literature based approach, students seemed to show an improvement in classroom behavior and class participation. They seemed to let go of some of their negative behaviors and show more of their positive behaviors. While I must keep in mind that this could be due to the fact that this unit was taught in a new way, with many different and interactive teaching strategies, there is no doubt that some of the credit must be given to the integrative literature based approach that was used during the week long unit.

My student interviews with a focus group of five students not only gave me more insight into my study but also backed up what I was seeing in my observation notes. “I really liked hearing the different stories and learning about the Underground Railroad and slavery from these stories instead of our social studies book,” was a version of a response to the intervention that I heard many times during the interview. This focus group was made up of the students who had admitted in a prior interview to wanting to perform better in social studies class, and in the end they felt that they had. According to one student in the post-intervention interview, “I think because I liked the stories so much, I did a better job on my work, and I remember what the stories taught me.”

Students mentioned the stories I read to them, working in groups, the virtual trip on the Underground Railroad, and the activity centers as some of their favorite parts of
the unit. The student viewpoints gathered in this focus group interview gave me insight into how the students felt about the intervention and reflected what I had written in my observations: that positive changes were occurring.

Another aspect of my data was the work that students produced during the unit. I took into account all students grades, but paid special attention to their final assignment, which was the Lighting the Way to Freedom Essay. These essays were proof of what students had learned in the unit. The students wrote essays using all the knowledge that they gained from the different stories we read, and their work was some of the best I have seen from them.

Each paragraph of the essay asked the students to write about a different aspect of slavery and the Underground Railroad. The first paragraph asked the students to create their character. Tell who they are, their age, where they lived while they were a slave, what kind of work they did, who they worked for, what their bosses were like, and what their living conditions were like.

In the second paragraph students had to write about how they first heard about the Underground Railroad and why they wanted to travel on it. The third paragraph was to be where students described what their journey was like, the route they took, and the dangers and obstacles they faced. Then in the final paragraph students would write about where their journey ended and the results of their travels.

"Get working," my master yelled at me," writes one child describing how owners talked down to slaves. "The plantation in Alabama was one of the worst plantations in the world," writes another student, touching on what he learned about Alabama having the worst plantations of all the southern states. Another student writes, "One day I was
putting water in a bucket, and I didn’t fill it high enough, so I was whipped,” which describes the brutality the students learned of when it came to slavery. I was floored by some of the words used in essays. One student wrote about “an abolitionist named Bobbi” who helped him escape to New York. Others described living conditions as “harsh and dirty,” and getting “three dresses, two meals a day, and a one room log cabin where six slaves lived.”

These essays further substantiated what I was finding in my observations. Students were not only enjoying social studies more and connecting with it, but they were learning it and able to show what they learned through these essays. The student essays were factual; filled with writing risks, such as quotations, similes, and metaphors; interesting; and well written.

Conclusions

So what happened when I integrated language arts and social studies lessons in a unit on the Underground Railroad in my fourth grade classroom?

My analysis of my observations, student interviews, and student work reflects that the integration of social studies and language arts allows students to learn social studies in a new way that is more intriguing and insightful for students. The outcomes of this intervention were positive, as seen through daily observations of social studies and language arts lessons, student interviews, and student work.

Students were able to learn social studies concepts through the literature-based approach that was used just as well, perhaps even better than through the social studies textbook. They were also able to learn these concepts on a deeper level and were able to connect them to their own lives. This could be seen in their final essays, where students
used facts, appropriate content vocabulary, and rich writing to describe their own
imagined journeys to freedom, as is exemplified in the excerpt below.

I asked him where we were going and he said, “The
Underground railroad.” “What’s that?” I asked. He said,
“It is a way of setting slaves like you free by hiding them in
houses. Let’s go... and hurry, it will be daytime very
soon.”

In addition to learning in this way, observed behavior and student interview
comments reflect how much they actually learned. They enjoyed hearing the different
pieces of literature and discussing them, completing activities dealing with the
Underground Railroad, and even writing an essay where they took on the persona of a
slave traveling the Underground Railroad. They were clearly engaged in these lessons,
and extending their learning well beyond acquiring the basic facts. Class was no longer
about finding anything else to do during social studies. Now it was about hearing a great
story, discussing the story, and working on activities that were based on what they
learned from the story.

All of this seems to point to the last of my conclusions, which is that literature is
the opportunity to bring social studies to life for students. My class was not just learning
about the Underground Railroad, slavery, the significant figures during this time, or the
definitions of chapter vocabulary words. They were hearing stories about these things
and having lively discussions about them. They were finding meaning and connecting
these things to their own lives. The literature brought a new light to our social studies
class; it allowed my students to see history as a story rather than random facts.
Based on my limited experience and systematic study of it, I believe that integrating language arts and social studies instruction in a fourth grade thematic unit leads to greater, deeper conceptual understanding and increased interest and enthusiasm for school studies. I learned that students can come into each class excited, confident, and curious, instead of restless and bewildered. My findings suggest that integrating social studies and language arts is a simple way to make more time for social studies, make social studies more meaningful, and improve student academic performance.

Implications

It wasn’t until we had finished our integrated unit, and I went back to teaching social studies class the old way (through our social studies textbook), that I saw the impact of my project, and how much the students learned through it. The next social studies unit dealt with the Civil War, and students were starting this unit with knowledge that they had gained through The Underground Railroad Unit. It was at the beginning of this Civil War Unit that I saw just how well my students were able to obtain knowledge of social studies concepts through an integrative literature based approach, because they were applying what they learned in our Unit to what we were now learning in our social studies textbooks.

Students could better understand this war because they now understood slavery on many levels. They were aware of the split between the after having looked at maps of free/slaves states and routes of the Underground Railroad. They had learned that the North meant freedom and the south meant slavery. Seeing the light bulbs go off on their faces as I began to explain the war’s central conflict was another sign that the unit was successful, and integration only produced positive results.
This made it clear to me that students can learn in many different ways, and as a teacher you have to find the way that best works for your particular class. Researching a new method of teaching social studies had a positive impact on my fourth grade class. They were all enjoying social studies for the first time, and understanding it in a new way. Could another approach work? Maybe, but for us, this approach was a success.

This leads me to wonder what other ways I could integrate. I want to try other approaches I learned of through different articles. Why should social studies have to be taught through a textbook approach when there are so many other strategies to try?

As I reflect on what I did in my unit, I wish that I would have also done lessons in science and math that tied into The Underground Railroad. Would that have had even more of an impact on my students? How could I have done this? It worked so well for my fourth graders that I wish we had done it with in more subjects, and with other topics. This would have given me even more insight into its strengths and weaknesses.

I still question whether it was completely due to the integration, or whether it was the fact that social studies was taught in a new way, with many different strategies? I also wonder if this was just something that worked in my particular classroom, or if it would work in another setting. I would like to one day explore these questions by using integration in other ways, with other subjects and other themes. If I were to attempt this approach with another grade level, or with another group of kids would it end with the same results?

There are many questions that are to be explored further but it is impossible for me to know the answers without using the approach in another unit and in another environment. Nonetheless, I was happy with the results of this integrated action. I was
proud to see my students enjoying social studies more and working at it. I was happy to try different strategies and observe students working successfully in different ways.

I learned through my research that integration is about making learning “meaningful” and “connected,” and that is exactly what my research showed. It is apparent through my triangulated data that students did find meaning in the Underground Railroad and were able to understand the concept and make connections with their own lives. Not only did it change social studies class for my students, but it changed it for me as well.
References


http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/8/c016.html


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APPENDIX A

Consent Form
Dear Parents,

As part of my student teaching I am obligated to complete an action research project that I will be researching during my time in your child’s classroom. Your child is invited to be a part of my study on integrating social studies lessons with I.L.A. lessons, and finding out whether or not this helps students better understand social studies concepts.

The Macmillan/McGraw-Hill Anthology that the students use for I.L.A. already has stories that connect to what the children learn in social studies. What I will be doing is working along with their anthologies and using other literature to help students learn about slavery and the Underground Railroad. If you agree to let your child be a part of my study I will be using examples of his/her work to back up my research, as well as possible interviews I will conduct with him/her.

I assure you that the records of this study will be kept private, as well as your child’s identity. The only people who will read my research paper are me, my advisor, and my Action Research class professor.

It is entirely up to you. If you do allow your child to be a part of my study you are free to withdraw your child at any time.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Miss Hall

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Parent / Guardian Signature ___________________________ Date ________________

Approval:
Principal ___________________________ Date ________________
APPENDIX B

Final Essay Handout
Lighting the Way to Freedom

You have heard and read many stories about the Underground Railroad, and developed an understanding of what slavery was and why slaves wanted to escape. Now, I would like you to pretend you are a slave who has just traveled on the Underground Railroad. You are going to write a four paragraph story in which you tell about yourself and your escape. You are to answer these questions in your story.

**Paragraph 1**: Who are you and where did you live while you were a slave? How old are you? What kind of work did you do for your master or mistress? How did he or she treat you? What were your living conditions like?

**Paragraph 2**: How did you first hear about the Underground Railroad? What did you want to travel on it?

**Paragraph 3**: What was your journey like? What route did you take? What dangers or obstacles did you encounter?

**Paragraph 4**: How and where did your journey end? What was the result of your trip?

Remember to use what we have learned about the Underground Railroad in our unit. Be sure to take **Writing Risks** and be **Creative**! Don’t forget to create a **title**, and include the author (that’s you!). After editing your work, you will type your final draft on the computer. Have fun!
APPENDIX C

Samples of Final Essay
Lighting the Way to Freedom

Whack went the whip from my master. I am a slave that lives in Mississippi. Everyday I pick cotton and work on the farm for hours. I am ten years old and my master is Master Jacob. If I don’t do what he asks me to do, he hurts me by hitting me with a whip. It hurts a lot to. I live in a tiny house with only one room. It is called a shanty. It smells like dirty socks and looks rundown. I also have to sleep on the floor, it is so uncomfortable.

One night when I was sleeping on the hard floor in my shanty I heard two of the other slaves talking outside. They were talking about a plan to escape. I heard them talking about an abolitionist that would help them get north to freedom. I heard them mention a place called the Underground Railroad. I had no idea what this place was, but I sure wanted to find out.

I started asking around and found out that the Underground Railroad was a route to freedom where people would help you by giving you a place to stay. I also found out that if I got caught, I would be whipped like never before. Was it worth it?

I talked to my best friend George, who was also a slave. We decided anything was better than being a slave. The next morning we were ready to escape from slavery. We had a hard dangerous journey. We had to swim through a lake, find our ways through dark woods, and
stay clear of any slave hunters. One day we were walking through a giant forest and George grabbed my arm and pointed to a huge bear! We ran as fast as a cheetah to get away, and luckily we did.

Finally after months of traveling we made our way to Maine, a state that did not have slavery, or cotton fields to pick. I was so happy to be free, and never have to be a slave to anyone ever again.
Lighting the Way to Freedom

“Get Working!” my master yelled at me. I ran as fast as a leopard into the field, and started working on plowing the farm. Howdy, I’m Gavin Runaway, and I’ve been on this plantation for ten years. My mama said I was born here, and I believe her. I have one sister, and one brother. They are both younger than me. My brother’s name is Ray, my sister is Hunter. We are a very close family, I love them more than anything.

We are all slaves down here in Georgia, and live a horrible life. One thing I am happy about is that we are all together. Mama tells me stories about kids who get taken from their parents. I don’t know what I would do if that happened. We just do what we are told so we don’t upset our masters.

My mom and sister work in the big house cooking and cleaning. My dad and I work on the fields. If we do not do a good job and work our hardest we get whipped by the master. I don’t cry much anymore, and I have never seen my dad cry. I guess you just get used to it.

The other day Pa came running in from the fields after work. He said we are going to get out of here, and travel north where they do not have slavery. I couldn’t believe it, is there such a place?

One night Pa woke me up in the middle of the night and said we are leaving. I couldn’t take anything with me, not that I had much. We ran off into the night and found a spot to hide for the next day. We traveled
only when it was dark, because we didn’t want to risk getting caught. It
was a scary journey for all of us, especially my Hunter.

We traveled for one month, and finally made it to New Jersey. We
settled in Cape May where Harriet Tubman worked in a hotel. Harriet is a
good friend of ours since she helped us get hear. I am so happy we
escaped, even though the journey was long and hard. Freedom is the best
thing to have, and I will always cherish it.
Lighting the way to Freedom

Whack my brother was whipped because he refused to be sold. I am Jacob “Whips” Selma. My master calls me Whips because I have an open mind and I try to fight slavery, and always end up being whipped. Actually I have got quite used to it. My master’s name is Ronald William Jackson Selma. He has me working on the cornfield all day and most of the night. The plantation I work on in Alabama is one of the worst plantations in the world. We work long days, and get no pay.

I live in one of the smallest shanties I have ever seen, and I have the biggest family. It sure does get crowded with me, my mom, my dad, four sisters, and six brothers! My master is nice when he wants to be. His favorite slave is my father, who works harder than anyone. Being a slave is hard. You have to do work all day, and you barely get any food or sleep. My sisters and mother all work in doors in the masters mansion, so they do not have it as bad as I do.

The other day I heard my father whispering to my mother about the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad is a path to freedom. I asked my father about it, but he said he never wants to hear me mention it, because getting caught escaping could be deadly.

One day I was putting water in a bucket, and I didn’t fill it high enough, so I was whipped. I decided then that I needed to escape. I had
been listening to all the slaves discuss how they would leave, and have been going over them in my head. I had to break free, and I did.

I left one night while my family was asleep. I didn’t want to leave them behind, but if I got north I could get a job, make money, and buy them and bring them north with me.

The journey was not easy, and I missed my family. But many abolitionists helped me, and I was very careful not to get caught. I finally made it to New Jersey, and I was finally free. Two years later my family joined me.
Lighting the Way to Freedom

I am Georgia McGraw and my journey begins here. As I was fanning Master Jon on a bright and sunny Louisiana day I got the signal from Papa saying that tonight would be the night that we were going to try to escape on the Underground Railroad. Me, Papa, Aunt Ledi, Uncle Sam, and Freddy were all leaving as soon as we saw the master turn his lights out.

I lived in a one room log cabin where six slaves lived. I couldn’t wait to leave. I almost enjoyed working more than I did staying inside that harsh dirty place. I only was given three dresses to wear, which I never got to clean. We were given two meals a day if we were lucky. We didn’t have it as bad as some other slaves, but we still wanted our right to be free!

We heard about the Underground Railroad from Mama. She wanted us to travel on it even though she didn’t get to. Master Jon heard her and told Papa. Mama was whipped to death. We all cried so we got whipped too. Master didn’t care how old you were, he whipped ten year olds like me, and even six year olds like my brother. Mama wanted us to be free, so we left without a trace.

It was the middle of the winter so our journey was cold and hard. We were heading north and we were determined to get there. It was cold, and my fingers felt like icicles! It was the most horrible thing we had ever been through, even worse then being whipped. But we knew that Mama
would keep us going. Finally we were coming close to the end of our journey.

We had to sleep one night outside in the woods, and in the morning a hearse would pick us up. We would get in coffins so that nobody would know. After over a day in the coffin I was woken up by sunlight, and a sign that said Illinois. We were free at last! And now we were able to start a new life, I feel like a new person!
Lighting the Way to Freedom

One Spring day I was standing chained in a shop. Suddenly, a man came in and pinched my arm, opened my mouth, and made me stretch my feet. This man paid for me and left with me. He took me to his house. I am Teddy, I am ten years old, and I am a slave. This man, my master, made me do things including planting crops, and picking cotton. I was treated very mean.

One night I heard knocking on my cabin door. When I opened the door, I saw a man there who told me to come with him. So I did. I asked him where we were going and he said, “The Underground Railroad.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

He said, “It is a way of setting slaves like you free by hiding them in houses. Let’s go! And hurry it will be daytime soon.” So we left and had to find a hiding place quickly. A moment later, we found a house. We went inside and a man put us in a secret room in his house, and there, we went to sleep.

When we woke up the next morning we had to leave right away. I noticed to men walking up the road, so we ran into the tall grass. We stood as still as a statue until they were out of sight. We walked for days through woods, forests, and lakes. We finally got to a state called North Carolina, that is a state where there is no slavery. Finally free!
I asked a farmer if I could work for him for money, food, clothing, and shelter. He said yes. Now I have everything I need. The journey was worth it!
Focus Group Interview Questions

1. We just finished our unit on the Underground Railroad. Tell me some of the things we have learned about this past week?

2. Did you enjoy learning about slavery and the Underground Railroad?

3. For the past week we have put our social studies books away, and have learned about the Underground Railroad through different books. Which way do you prefer?

4. Was it easier to learn about the Underground Railroad, and slavery through the picture books?

5. What was your favorite part of our Underground Railroad Unit?

6. What didn’t you like about the Unit?

7. You’re final project was to write an essay where you had to imagine you were a slave. How did you feel about writing this essay?