Integrating social studies and social skills for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities: A mixed methods study

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A B S T R A C T

Research indicates that academic growth and student behavior are inextricably linked. Schools that systematically address both academic and social/emotional learning (SEL) have shown increased student achievement when compared to schools that do not address both factors (Elliott, Huai & Roach, 2007; Hawken, Vincent & Schumann, 2008). Even with this understanding, outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD) continue to be of concern (Bradley, Doolittle & Bartolotta, 2008). This study explores the effectiveness of integrating SEL and social studies learning in the self-contained special education classroom for students with EBD using Storypath, an inquiry-based social studies curriculum. We hypothesized that the systematic integration of SEL opportunities into meaningful, well-planned and engaging academic instruction could provide students with an opportunity to authentically learn and practice key social and academic skills. Quantitative findings via an online survey and qualitative findings via interviews and observations indicate that students with EBD can successfully engage in less structured and more cognitively challenging academic activities and use SEL skills effectively in the context of these lessons.

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Introduction

Today’s social studies classrooms are increasingly diverse and inclusive of students with varying degrees of academic and behavioral abilities. For decades, the traditional approach to addressing the needs of students with significant academic, social, and emotional needs has been to provide intensive remediation in individual or small group settings outside the classroom. While research indicates that academic skills may be effectively addressed in this context, social/emotional skills that are taught and practiced in this context seldom generalize effectively into the settings where they are needed most (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Spence, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). This suggests that integrating SEL opportunities into well-planned instruction may provide students with an opportunity to authentically learn, practice, and generalize new social skills in an authentic and meaningful way. This is especially important in helping young people navigate a civil and civic society. The study of social studies embodies social understanding and the social aspects of the human condition.
(Brophy & Alleman, 2007). Therefore, social studies curriculum infused with social skills instruction can provide students with an opportunity to better understand the impact of the past and present while preparing them for the future (Sabin, 2010). For students with special needs in particular, inclusion of social skill development within the social studies classroom may lead to increased academic performance (Minarik & Lintner, 2016). Our study explores the integration of SEL and social studies learning in the self-contained special education classroom for students with EBD. Therefore, the research question that guided this work is: How does an inquiry based social studies curriculum (Storypath) affect the engagement and social skills development of students with EBD?

Theoretical framework and literature review

Students identified with EBD can be challenging to teach due to a variety of unique social, academic, and individual characteristics. These students are overwhelmingly male (Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout & Epstein, 2004) and often need additional guidance in the attainment and application of skills appropriate for school, such as following directions and maintaining a calm disposition in the face of adversity. Academic delays of one to three years are common (Vannest, Temple-Harvey & Mason, 2009) with only 51% of students with EBD graduating from high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Efforts to improve overall outcomes for students with EBD have relied primarily on highly structured programs consisting of low student to staff ratios in hopes of providing students with more individualized attention and support.

According to Neel, Cessna, Borock and Bechard (2003), relevant academics, presented in innovative and engaging ways, is critical to an effective special education program. Without such learning opportunities, frustration and boredom often lead to increased behavioral difficulties. Curriculum used in classrooms for students with EBD often focuses more on controlling behaviors and individualized academics, with less attention given to helping students become effective learners through the use of critical thinking, problem solving, interaction, and group work (Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990). Most learning relies on identification and memorization, with students given little opportunity to explore ideas, make comparisons, and test hypotheses (Steinberg & Knitzer, 1992). Instruction is likely to occur in isolation as students complete worksheets and packets as a means of mastering factual academic content (Jones, Dohrn, & Dunn, 2004). Compared to general education students, students with special needs are less likely to have access to literature, plays, poetry, drama, projects, and presentations (Marder, 2009). Research involving students with EBD continues to emphasize behavior management, often at the risk of academic achievement (Simpson, Peterson & Smith, 2011). Thus, in order to better support the academic progress of students with EBD and related disabilities, instruction in a special education classroom should more closely resemble instruction found in the general education classroom (Swicegood & Linehan, 1995). By implementing a variety of instructional strategies, an environment fostering intrinsic motivation and frequent opportunities for success is more likely to emerge (Walker & Fecser, 2002).

Constructivism and social studies

According to Poplin (1988), learning is not simply the taking in of new information, as it exists in the curriculum or text. It is the natural, continuous construction and reconstruction of new, richer, more complex and connected meanings by the learner. Constructivist teaching and learning involves students in experiences in which they construct conceptual understanding through a process of exploring, analyzing, and evaluating factual examples (Jadallah, 2000). Reid, Kurkjian, and Carruthers (1994) note that one difficulty in implementing constructivist teaching is that schools are grounded in standardization and have adopted a direct instructional method of teaching that is standards based. They argue, however, that the control of the learning should reside primarily with the learner. By teaching in ways that engage students’ imagination, the teacher can create a context in which teaching is more effective and rewarding, particularly when delivering social studies instruction (Egan & Judson, 2009).

Social studies instruction is oftentimes represented as chronological accumulations of facts, events, and ideas contained in textbooks, but effective teaching involves more than having students identify, define, and explain (Jadallah, 2000). Using this traditional approach, the world is presented as known and not wonderful (Egan & Judson, 2009). According to Hobbs (1979), art, music, literature, history, science, and other adventures in discovery can lead to the acquisition of basic skills. Further, students need the intellectual power to operate in today’s world by asking good questions and engaging in thoughtful problems solving (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Experiencing academic success can be both novel and a source of healing for students with EBD, thus learning should not be put on hold until a student’s behavior has improved (Valore, 2002).

Vartuli and Rohs (2007) stress the importance of content that leads to an emotional investment for students. Eagan and Judson (2009) believe that knowledge becomes much more meaningful to students when their emotions and imaginations are engaged in the learning process. One way to accomplish this is through storytelling, which includes vivid events, dynamic characters, and binary conflict (Egan, 1989). Storytelling is an effective instructional framework for providing social/emotional instruction for students from diverse backgrounds and those with emotional and behavioral challenges (Cartledge & Lo, 2006; Cartledge & Milburn, 1996).
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