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## Social studies curriculum integration in elementary classrooms: A case study on a Pennsylvania Rural School

Julie Ollila<sup>a,\*</sup>, Marisa Macy<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Reynolds School District, USA<sup>b</sup> University of Central Florida, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Since the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, classrooms in the U.S. have experienced a steady decline in the amount of time teachers spend on social studies, with the elementary grades suffering the highest level of decline. There is currently a need to understand how teachers perceive the problem of insufficient social studies instruction time and gain their perceptions of curriculum integration as a solution. The purpose of the qualitative case study was to explore how 14 elementary social studies teachers in Grades 3 to 5 integrate social studies throughout the curriculum. In addition, another aim was to evaluate the outcomes of employing an integrated social studies curriculum on teaching civic competence to students. This qualitative case study included interviews and focus group discussions; data were then analyzed using a thematic analysis. It was discovered that teachers believed that by increasing instructional time for social studies, students' understanding of the subject and its concepts should also increase; however, the key disadvantage was the need to have adequate time and planning to integrate the subject. The interviewed teachers shared that the best method of integration is by incorporating social studies concepts in classroom projects and activities. From the results, it is then recommended for the integrated curriculum theory to be strongly considered by the key educational decisions makers in the country. The results can help the schools determine how to best increase social studies instructional time, improve quality of social studies education, and the positive effects of instilling civic competence among their students.

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### Introduction

Core subjects such as math and English are often prioritized in school over other subjects, such as social studies, based on instructional time allotted, national policies, and curricular marginalization (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012a; Pace, 2012). Two significant reforms have affected social studies instruction tremendously: the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Aktan, 2016; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012b; Kenna & Russell, 2014, 2015; Waters & Watson, 2016). The goal of NCLB was to address the wide achievement gap between groups of students as well as increase the accountability of teachers and schools.

Accountability is demonstrated by adequate yearly progress in the subjects of math and reading, which is measured through standardized tests given annually to all students from the third grade to the eighth grade. With the emphasis on

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [myccclub@yahoo.com](mailto:myccclub@yahoo.com) (J. Ollila).

mathematics and reading, social studies has been naturally sidelined. Since the NCLBA measures achievement through high stakes testing that mostly focus on mathematics and reading, the instruction time for these subjects has increased (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012a; Waters & Watson, 2016). With only 12 states assessing social studies, according to the 50-state report card, instruction time for the subject has decreased. According to Heafner and Fitchett (2012a), social studies instruction time was reduced by an hour per week between 1993 and 2008.

The CCSS, which is a set of standards designed for mathematics and reading that detailed what a student should already achieve by the end of each grade level until K-12 is reached, social studies is affected even more (Kenna & Russell, 2014, 2015). The standards are established for teachers to make sure students are prepared for success after their high school graduation, whether they continue on to college or join the workforce. Because there are no social studies in the CCSS, social studies instruction is devalued. Studies have shown that teachers are not to teach outside the standards, causing the social studies curriculum to deviate from being in-depth to focus only on textbook content (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012a; Waters & Watson, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics (2012), the average number of hours spent on social studies instruction in elementary schools is only 2.3 per week, compared to 5.6 h on math and 11.7 h on English. American children now receive very little or no formal education of basic social studies subject areas, such as economics, civics, geography, and history. For a nation to thrive, students are said to need social studies education for them to become valuable citizens (Misco, 2014).

To address the limited instructional time and marginalization of social studies at the elementary school level, teachers often resort to curricular integration (Pace, 2012). However, integration of social studies in the elementary classroom had been a concern even before the establishment of NCLBA and AYP (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012a). Researchers have argued that students learn meaningful concepts through this approach (Kinniburgh & Busby, 2008). The integration of social studies into core subjects is a constructive approach that values in-depth knowledge development through integration, specifically in reducing the instances of isolated information disseminated to students (Holloway & Chiodo, 2009; Mathis & Boyd, 2009).

Social studies education can promote higher order thinking skills among individuals (Newmann, 1991; Russell, 2009). Exposure to social studies curriculum will equip students with the ability to keep control of their lives in this changing world, developing civic competence or social conscience within students. Civic competence is grounded on commitment to democratic ideas and values and requires an individual to have knowledge about one's community, nation, and world (Isac, Maslowski, Creemers, & van der Werf, 2014; Lin, 2015). Such skills will allow students to exercise and develop inquiry processes, data collection and analysis, decision-making and problem-solving skills; skills of which individuals will need all throughout their life (Sunal, 1990).

Denton and Sink (2015) claimed that teachers are spending minimal time on social studies and yet there is a lack of studies assessing teachers' opinions and perceptions on this trend and use of integrated curriculum. Some educators embrace the need for social studies because they see value in having social studies knowledge and skills (Denton & Sink, 2015). On the other hand, some educators believe social studies can be sidelined because it is just an auxiliary subject for supporting test achievement; the subject is important but not to the extent of subject areas emphasized and covered by these tests. However, the majority of elementary school teachers believe that having an integrated curriculum is one of the best ways to reconcile the need to focus on tested disciplines while maintaining traditional notions of the core curricula. Elementary teachers prefer integration as their main method to teach social studies; however, time constraints, lack of training, and insufficient curricular resources all hindered effective integration (Denton & Sink, 2015). Training of teachers is important to increase the probability of curricular integration adoption (Harris, Wirz, Hinde, & Libbee, 2015). Additionally, teachers are less likely to use curricular integration if the materials needed for the practice are not properly understood, of which can be accomplished through training (Harris et al., 2015).

How teachers teach social studies in elementary classrooms is unknown, given the reduced time allocated compared to other subjects. Social studies is marginalized in many public schools in favor of core subjects such as English and mathematics (Pace, 2012; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2013). The lack of priority given to social studies is reflected by the minimal time allotted in teaching social studies compared to other core subjects (Fitchett, Heafner, & VanFossen, 2014). However, the effectiveness of curricular integration as a way to increase instructional time for social studies and teach civic competence has not been established based on the first-hand accounts and perceptions of teachers (Whitlock, Brugar, & Halvorsen, 2016).

Some teachers have decided to use curricular integration as a strategy to address the limited instructional time for social studies (Fitchett et al., 2014). Integrating social studies instruction with other subjects such as English can compensate for the lack of time allotted in elementary social studies (Castro, Field, Bauml, & Morowski, 2012), but the effectiveness of the practice has not been established. There is a lack of literature examining the perceptions of teachers on curricular integration. Unsuccessful practice of curricular integration may inadvertently lead to ineffective instruction wherein social studies concepts are not properly taught, and therefore not learnt by students (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012a; Taylor, Urry, & Burgess, 2012). The limited instructional time allocated to social studies along with unknown integration practices of social studies into other core subject areas may limit development of student civic competence, a skill that promotes higher order thinking (Castro et al., 2012). There is a need for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching, specifically where social studies concepts are woven into reading, mathematics, and science curricula (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012b).

Despite existing research, no empirical studies have been conducted on curricular integration of social studies into core subjects such as English toward student academic achievement based on the perspectives of teachers. There is a need to understand how teachers themselves perceive the problems of insufficient time allotted to social studies instruction and of

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