

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

Finding Time for Elementary Science and Social Studies

In almost all elementary classrooms these days, there is heavy emphasis on teaching reading and math. Large blocks of time for both subjects are mandated and well-protected. Many teachers feel that the time left for science and social studies is not sufficient for both content and skills instruction. Since it is not possible to literally create time, teachers must instead use time in more inventive ways.

A solution being explored and implemented in many schools is to use the time dedicated for literacy to teach content for social studies and science. This concept is *not* teaching reading in the content time, but teaching content in the reading time. That is a different paradigm and means there is time to teach the science and social studies content in a period that is protected, as opposed to trying to squeeze reading skills into an already shortened schedule for science and social studies instruction. However, this solution is not without frustrations. One that is frequently mentioned is the need for validation that this solution will not adversely affect performance of students in terms of literacy skills.

Linking the Language (www.linkingthelanguage.org) is a private education organization in Georgia. According to the authors of this program, use of literacy time is indeed a valid solution, and they have identified research to support it. They cite research by Beck & McGowan, 2001; Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Goudvis & Harvey, 2007; Hahn, 2002; and Marzano & Pickering, 2005 that indicates:

"The variety of teaching and learning strategies that can take place during read aloud is limitless. Read alouds also provide intentional and essential attention to building students' background knowledge and academic vocabulary, which many believe are at the heart of the achievement gap. Such integration promotes the transfer of knowledge, and viewing science and social studies concepts through the lens of literacy magnifies and extends both content and comprehension."

Linking the Language authors also reference an article in *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2008, that says, "Schools, administrators, and teachers are recognizing that devoting blocks of language arts instruction to scientific and social studies topics ensures access for all students to the complete curriculum." The authors refer to this strategy as "working smart," and offer this explanation as additional support:

“Teaching reading, language arts conventions, writing, comprehension, questioning and critical thinking fit quite naturally within narratives and informational texts that contain, reflect, or link to science and social studies concepts. Rather than finding time to teach science and social studies as discrete and separate subjects, we advocate teaching science, social studies, and reading/thinking concepts within the well-protected language arts block.”

Also supporting this solution is the *Literacy Matters* organization, housed at Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) located in Newton, MA. *Literacy Matters* offers research that supports improvement of critical thinking skills associated with goals usually tied to reading or language arts. Their website (<http://www.literacymatters.org/content/socialstudies.htm>) lists specific skills that are enhanced by using social studies and science content in reading instruction. It also lists other sites that offer resources in this area.

In an *Education Week* article titled, “Successful Schools Avoid False Choices” (published online October 12, 2009), Karen Chenoweth, of Education Trust, indicates, “Skills such as making inferences, drawing conclusions, and separating facts from opinion, for example, are all worked on within the science and social studies content areas.” In this article, Ms. Chenoweth goes on to cite remarkable progress in reading performance by schools using content to teach reading.

With the abundance of research to support the practice, it seems intuitive to implement this strategy to use academic time to its fullest potential and to increase student learning. However, many classroom texts are not set up to implement such a strategy, and teachers often complain that appropriate materials either do not exist, or that there is not sufficient time to search for them. While time may be an issue, there are, in fact, appropriate materials available. *Linking the Language* is one resource that has developed lessons that list trade books, both fiction and nonfiction, as specific resources for science and social studies content, and for the development of literacy skills. *Literacy Connections*, another organization that provides information on reading techniques, makes the case for use of “big books,” to be read and discussed in dedicated reading time, to improve literacy skills and teach content at the same time. (<http://www.literacyconnections.com/reading-comprehension-through-integration-content-areas>)

Test scores, including assessments in science recently mandated by the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, reveal that students are struggling in the areas of science and social studies. In the current and changing world of assessment, tests in all grades now focus more on thinking and comprehension than recall. Providing students with a solid foundation in the primary grades through an integrated curriculum can support students’ success in understanding abstract concepts. A threaded, or linked, curriculum enlarges the big ideas and links thinking skills, graphic organizers, learning styles and modalities, study skills, social skills, and reflection throughout the disciplines. Such an approach takes learning to the synthesis level, which is essential for understanding.