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A Comprehensive Look of Social Studies Instruction

Seeking Effective Strategies

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The importance of social studies instruction cannot be underestimated as it prepares future citizens and leads them to independent lives. Scruggs, Mastropieri and Okolo (2008) stated that social studies instruction is mainly to prepare students for making decisions that can improve the society in which they live. They explained that social studies is more than learning the facts. Moreover, students can apply problem solving skills to authentic situations and to explore new questions. Scruggs, Mastropieri, Berkeley and Graetz (2010) further stated that students can assimilate the knowledge and apply it to their own educational aspirations, and become more informed and productive learners.

However, there are issues in social studies instruction that cause problems for educators and students. Social studies is different from other subjects in that it is a strand of many disciplines and there is no rigorous format like that in math and language. The textbooks and teaching materials are often too multidisciplinary and may not embrace to all perspectives. As Coyne, Kame'enui, and Carnine (2011) noted, social studies instruction consists of a loose confederation of disciplines and the relative weight given to different disciplines might not be properly assigned. Besides, Coyne et al. (2011) noted that schools now face the challenge of educating a diverse student population and educators are more likely to educate students with different cognitive abilities. Further, difficulty in learning could be compounded when students with mild disabilities move to secondary school levels where more abstract concepts and wider scope in social studies could be challenging (Scruggs et al., 2010).

Besides acknowledging the importance of social studies learning for students

and explaining the necessities of implementing effective instructional strategies, this paper advocates the implementation of a series of effective instructional strategies so that more students will benefit from social studies instruction. First, this paper explains the possible barriers of instruction efficiency in social studies. Effective approaches, including application of universal design for learning, mnemonics, learning strategies, graphic organizers, and controversial discussion, are then reviewed to address learning problems in social studies. Thirdly, informal assessments such as portfolio, critical tools of preparing students in taking state wide assessment and tools of learning executive skills such as self-management, are discussed. Finally, this paper acknowledges the importance of effective instructional strategies in social studies and encourages educators to embrace student with different learning needs in social studies. Assessments are also emphasized to be incorporated in the instruction process to continually monitor students' performance and progress.

Possible Factors Affecting Social Studies Instruction

As social studies is imperative to offer the foundational knowledge and perspectives for future citizens in making decisions, one needs to make sure the instructional materials are comprehensive and overarching enough. However, in part due to its loose confederation, social studies does not receive as much attention as mathematics, language, and science. Polloway, Patton, and Serna, (2012) revealed that social studies instruction is “one of the least emphasized areas” (p.1). As a result, textbooks might be easily ill-structurally designed and ignored to include different students' abilities. Students are from many different cultures, and sometimes their

values or customs may differ significantly (Lerner & Johns, 2007). The challenge of the instruction should include all cultural perspectives as well as explain the differences. For example, Meyer (2011) shared a director's observation that "the Curriculum Center is full of bias and misrepresentations of native People. My children's favorite books reflecting their Native culture are not available in the Curriculum Center" (p.23). Meyer (2011) implied that accurate materials are not provided by social studies curriculum. Multiple perspectives should be considered when instructing social studies as something may not be a problem from a different perspective. Scuggs et al. (2008) stated that "the study of history is particularly limited by textbook based instruction. Historical understanding demands that learners have access to the multiple perspectives and sources that speak to historical event or issue. Historians must consider divergent points of view or other accounts of history will be incomplete and their conclusions will be misleading."(p.9)

Educators should provide good interpretations of the textbook's content as limited social studies instruction might be available to students. Due to perspectives and values of teachers, especially beginning teachers, they may relay some incorrect messages to students. Hawe, Browne, and Siteine (2010) included three types of strategies some social studies teachers have adopted. They are strategic compliance, internalized adjustment and redefinition. Hawe et al. (2010) noted that because new teachers want to be accepted by their coworkers and supervisors, they tend to engage in strategic compliance and adjust themselves to the administration ideas.

Students with reading and learning disabilities find social studies learning

especially difficult as social studies instruction is considerably driven by reading and the cognitive capabilities of students. Scruggs et al (2008) noted students with disabilities always struggle to read the text. There are more abstract concepts and principles than other subjects in social studies. For example, social studies learning require rich experiences to understand these principles exhibited in government and economic systems. Scruggs et al. (2008) stated that learning can be even challenging for students with disabilities for their constrained background knowledge and cognitive development compared to their peers.

Instructional Strategies

At this time, students with disabilities are expected to perform as well, academically, as their peers do in academic performance. The demanding social studies curriculum makes their learning more challenging. Scruggs et al. (2010) revealed that implementing effective strategies is particularly critical as students are exposed to general education curriculum and are supposed to take high-stakes tests. Researchers have developed effective strategies to assist students in learning social studies. The following sections reviewed a series of social studies instruction strategies including universal design for learning, graphic organizers, mnemonics, learning strategies, and controversial issues discussing.

Students have different strengths and weakness thus they tend to learn differently. Universal design is a critical instructional strategy as lessons are packaged to maximize the success of a variety of students. It offers a wide range of opportunities for students to access learning experiences. “The usage of the concept of

universal design for learning (UDL) and the technology available to adjust instruction and materials rather than expecting students to adjust to the material provides a foundation for equal educational opportunities for all students” (Delaware State Department of Education, 2008, p. 7). An example of a program consistent with UDL principles is the Virtual History Museum (VHM), which offers a great platform for students to explore. Scruggs et al. (2008) indicated that VHM is a metaphor of museum where teachers play the role of curator to put exhibits for students to explore. Students would be fully involved in the learning process by interacting in this museum. VHM is especially beneficial for students with reading and learning disabilities as there is not much text to comprehend and it transforms abstract content in to concrete knowledge displayed in a dimensional space. Multiple senses are available including text, images, sounds, and music. Scruggs et al. (2008) noted that VHM is unique in that it has built-in support for students with reading and learning disabilities.

The use of graphic organizers is also consistent with the principles of universal design for learning. According to The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2011), UDL can be multiple means of representation to offer learners many opportunities to access information and knowledge. Graphic organizers are favored in social studies to enhance the teaching content and display relationships among instructional content. Dye (2000) noted that if students are to become successful in content-area classes, present information must be presented in a manner that is clear and organized. Graphic organizers include Venn diagrams, semantic webs,

genealogical trees, and frames (Dye, 2000). Graphic organizers are helpful as they link the new information to preexisting knowledge. Dye (2000) noted that our way of organizing information is like to store the knowledge in a scaffold-like hierarchy. Students with disabilities find it hard for them to process information and put them in the hierarchy. Organizers help students to organize the relationship among different layers of knowledge and help build this hierarchy in their minds. Jitendra and Gajria (2011) noted that graphic organizers can be designed to represent different text structure patterns. They noted that “a web or hierarchical concept map can be used for a descriptive text structure, a flow chart for a cause-effect text structure, and a Venn diagram for a compare-contrast text structure.”(p. 2) Graphic organizers assist students with disabilities in their cognitive thinking by read an organized schema the graphic organizers displays, which further assist students understand deep and complex reading materials. Jitendra and Gajria (2011) also stated that story maps and study guides promote inferential thinking and direct students’ attention to critical information in social studies. The graphic in Figure 1 organizer shows how information can be organized to facilitate in understanding the social studies content.

Factual information is extremely important in social studies. Mnemonics is evidence-based instruction that is beneficial for students with learning disabilities. They are devices for helping students remember information through associating the devices with the targeted information (Brigham & Brigham, 2001). Common mnemonic tools are acronyms, acrostics, peg words, and key words. Mnemonics are effective and especially effective for students with disabilities in memorizing social

studies facts and vocabulary. Mnemonic instruction relies on both verbal and imagery components to support recall. Teachers transform target content to link it to familiar proxies. For example, Scruggs et al. (2010) noted the acronym HOMES is used to represent the five Great Lakes in the US, Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie and Superior. Students would remember the five lakes by linking them to the word HOMES. Brigham and Brigham (2001) noted that keywords mnemonics are particularly well suited to factual recall tasks, and it prompted to focus on factual material. For example, Marshak (2011) noted that mnemonics are intended to be used when students have difficulties to recall. Scruggs et al (2010) reported that “a social studies teacher found students with learning disabilities scored 37% correct on the traditionally presented content and 75% on mnemonically presented information.”(p.82)

Learning strategies raises the efficiency of the learning process in social studies. Students are regulating their own learning process through using learning strategies. One of the learning theories is “Information Processing Theory”, which perceives learning as a mental process. The information processing theory explains the learning process as receiving stimulant, attaching meaning to it, storing it, remembering it to be used, and turning it into behavior (Caliskan, 2011). This theory states that it is essential that individuals direct their own learning, and facilitate the learning process. Learning strategies is helpful for students to learn concepts in social studies and help them to become self-instructed students. Scruggs et al. (2008) noted that students can use learning strategies such as POW (pick my idea, organize ideas in to a writing plan,

write and say more) to write biographies or newspaper articles in a history class. The learning strategy, K-W-L, can be used to introduce the instruction content or to conclude what students have learned. Instructional Strategies Online (2011) introduces that it provides “a structure for recalling what students already know about a topic, noting what students want to know, and finally listing what has been learned and is yet to be learned.” Caliskan and Sunbul (2011) concluded that implementing strategy teaching had a significant effect on students’ awareness of learning strategies. During the process of using these strategies, students would increase their metacognitive skills which consequently will increase learning achievement in social studies.

As students are more likely to generalize by taking part in societal functions, experiencing the content in ways close to that of the real world would help students generalize. Discussing current issues would be helpful, especially when teachers make students participate in debating controversial ones. Sharp (2009) noted that teaching controversial issues is important to students’ citizenship development and can motivate students when studying social studies.

Informal Assessment

Assessment is a critical part of social studies instruction for educators to plan programs and monitor students’ progress. As students with disabilities are now involved in district and state assessment, a number of informal assessments could help teachers know students better and correspondingly design interventions.

Olson, Platt and Dieker (2008) stated that “different types of informal

assessments tie closely to local and state assessment tools". (p. 96). Informal assessments such as portfolio, self-evaluation questionnaire, think-alouds, and interviews are used in social studies instruction (Polloway et al., 2012). For example, Polloway et al. stated that portfolio assessments reflect students' performance by exhibiting the accumulation of student products. Portfolios can facilitate students in social studies learning as they self-direct the assessments. Olson et al. (2008) noted that portfolios are considered to be authentic. Different from other tests, students need to reflect, assess and advocate by themselves. Olson et al. (2008) noted that all levels of students can use them to learn to reflect and advocate for themselves. Self-evaluation questionnaires require students to evaluate their performance in social studies activities; Think-alouds asks students to verbally explain the process of solving a problem or performing an activity; interviews are directed by teachers to inquire students in analyzing students' thoughts (Polloway et al., 2012).

These informal tests are good in training students' meta-cognitive skills and closely related to real process of learning. These assessments will not only help educators assess students' performance, but also help educators learn what their students think and like. Polloway et al. (2012) also noted that interviews can determine a student's interest and attitudes. However, in order to successfully implement these assessments, teachers need to introduce certain techniques of assessments to students and implement them in a friendly and positive manner. Olson et al. (2008) further indicated that establishing rapport and a secure environment is important so students can risk being wrong without penalty.

Discussion

Social studies is critical in forming future citizen's ideology, in preparing them foundational knowledge to solve practical problems, and in formulating a comprehensive perspective about the current issues. Therefore, the requirements for social studies textbooks and social studies teachers are demanding.

Textbooks should be accepting to all students' cultures as possible. Educators should be aware of tending to students from different backgrounds and cultures, as well as students with disabilities. Making a survey of their students' background is also important before instructing. It is helpful if teachers are prepared to understand cultural diversity and get a sense of how their students are thinking, which would help educators understand how to interact with their students. Tan (2011) noted that "in-depth understanding will eliminate guesswork and unrealistic expectations and in the process promote tolerance and acceptance of diversity in ways of knowing." (p.559). It is especially important in social studies instruction as it tangles with different values and perspectives. What is more, teachers may motivate students' interest beginning from their cultural preference. As the difficulties would be compounded when the students have learning disabilities, teachers should consider all these factors.

Due to its uniqueness from other subjects, students may find it is hard to determine the standard answers to social studies questions. A comprehensive perspective will also help teachers to interpret the textbooks and effectively guide and track students' way of thinking. The use of graphic organizers could enhance the

content and facilitate students in understanding complex issues and in inferential thinking. Mnemonics and learning strategies are regarded to be effective in teaching students in social studies, especially for those with mild disabilities. As social studies is so much related to the real world, discussing the current controversial issues could motivate students to research and train students' cognitive thinking. As social studies is of great importance and challenging to learn especially for those with foreign culture background and those with mild disabilities, implementing strategies in their teaching practices will greatly facilitate students' learning experiences. Properly incorporating informal assessment would assist teachers' educating goals.

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43-46.

Figure 1 Concept Diagram

The diagram is a template for a concept map. On the left is a vertical box labeled 'Key Words'. At the top is a box labeled 'CONVEY CONCEPT'. Below this are three columns: 'Always Present' (with solid horizontal lines), 'Sometimes Present' (with wavy horizontal lines), and 'Never Present' (with dashed horizontal lines). Under 'Always Present' is a section labeled 'Examples:' with four solid ovals. Under 'Never Present' is a section labeled 'Nonexamples:' with four dashed ovals. At the bottom are two boxes: 'RELATE TO ANOTHER CONCEPT' and 'RELEVANT GENERALIZATION'.

Curriculum Corner Resources for Georgetown ISD teachers. (2011). *Instructional strategies for social studies*. Retrieved from <http://www.georgetownisd.org/ccorner/socstudies/InstructionalStrategiesforSocialStudies.asp>