

Gaining Effectiveness in the Self-Contained Classroom

by **Tina Gauthier**



Ms. Gauthier began her career as a teacher in juvenile detention facilities and community-day schools. With the belief that she could reduce the number of students in the penile system, she began teaching in a traditional public school setting. As an elementary school teacher, she has taught for over twenty years. In addition, she has continued to work with incarcerated juveniles and adults as well as operate a mentoring program.

Social studies instruction in the elementary classroom is under siege. The purpose of this article is to suggest some techniques that can help the multiple subject teacher more effectively provide social studies instruction to elementary students. As a rule, at the elementary level, classes are traditionally self-contained. Self-contained classrooms require all subject matter to be taught in only one setting. Within a self-contained class, the professional educator is required to teach the multiple subjects of reading, writing, grammar, mathematics, social science, and science. Some districts require teachers to provide physical education and visual and performing arts instruction as well. There is also a shift towards teaching Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Through SEL, educators prepare & train students to implement the tools necessary to successfully navigate social interactions and to manage every day emotional responses. Topics such as social awareness, setting goals, and taking responsibility for oneself are included in SEL instruction (Aperture Education, 2015). Many districts have also incorporated

some type of college and career program.

Obstacles to Effective Social Studies Instruction

Regardless of a teacher's desire to perform at her or his professional best in educating young minds, a multiple subject credential does not assure that the holder is an expert in all the aforementioned areas. Being an elementary school teacher can be a rewarding career: helping to foster the intellect and social awareness of other individuals is important to the future of our society. Yet, one must find a reasonable way to merge these various requirements within the time available in a school day. Unfortunately, mastering the use of limited time is not part of the training for a multiple subject credential. Teachers must figure a way to balance these areas as they maneuver through a six-hour workday. Proper time management is a necessity when juggling the rigors of educating students, conducting parent/teacher conferences, creating differentiated lesson plans, and attending conferences and

workshops. The prospect of mastering time management or becoming the guru of multi-tasking is an ambitious, but necessary, goal.

Teachers often find it difficult to implement arts, science, and social studies instruction. The latest data collected by the National Survey of Science and Math Education (a project funded by the National Science Foundation) indicate that teachers dedicate just 16 minutes a day in the typical K-3 classroom to social studies and just 19 minutes to science. It is hardly any better in grades 4-6, where the subjects together get an average of 45 minutes a day.

Methods to Improve Elementary Social Studies Instruction

The social studies curriculum is losing its place in the elementary instructional hierarchy. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (Schneider & Others, 1994). This goal aligns directly with the new requirement for SEL whose primary purpose is teaching critical social competencies necessary for academic and life success such as resiliency, self-management, and responsible decision-making skills. This also aligns to creating a positive and successful future for individual students, which in turn improves the chances of creating positive communities.

Hence, the classroom teacher with even the greatest amount of knowledge in varying areas can still benefit from support in maintaining a productive learning environment. Although educators may be the only adult resource in the classroom, they are not the sole available source of support. Students in the classroom can be a great asset to promoting greater productivity.

Moreover, teachers must come to the realization they are not super-heroes. The primary focus should be on what is done well and that success must be acknowledged. Next, observe any areas in need of improvement and seek assistance. Students can be great allies in pursuit of their own education. Delegate tasks to students: I find it most successful to use their natural traits. For example, I have had students who enjoyed the “I Survived!” series (fictional accounts of natural disasters & historical events told from the view of a child) by Lauren Tarshis. The students researched the facts from the events read and shared their knowledge with the class. This assisted in piquing the interest of other students who also are interested in debating the facts.

Admittedly, many teachers already delegate classroom tasks such as sharpening pencils, as well as collecting and distributing material. Students enjoy the added responsibility. However, students can take on significant roles in the classroom if teachers can become comfortable with their role as facilitator. Allow students to have more input in the education process. Permitting students to facilitate their own education also improves their behavior. This will counter time spent on refocusing negative behavior, which is the quickest and easiest way to harness more time to teach subject matter curricula. Training students as support staff is just one technique to improve classroom effectiveness.

Teachers may form grade level teams and departmentalize in order to take advantage of various teachers’ strengths. Individuals can work with the grade level team to develop strategies to help each other. Departmentalizing in elementary education involves a teacher of a self-contained classroom collaborating with one or more other teachers in order to instruct fewer content areas. This allows more time to invest in mastering knowledge of selected academic areas. Students have a different teacher for various

subject areas during different blocks of time (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). It also helps prepare students for secondary education. The advantage of this structure is that it allows students to learn content from someone with a stronger background in a particular subject area (Catledge-Howard, 2003). This option could also lessen one's preparation time requirements since there are fewer subjects to master.

The success of departmentalizing depends on many factors: each teachers' level of expertise in the area they are teaching, management of the time necessary to move between classes, and consistent behavioral expectation in each class. Researchers have indicated that a single and generalized (e.g., broad) set of approximately three to five rules is a sufficient and effective method for managing the classroom (Malone & Tietjens, 1998).

To begin, plan each subject area based on the content standards for your grade level. Although time is required to reteach concepts, it is imperative to cover the areas assigned to your grade level. Not doing so will create academic gaps for students during the educational process. Knowing the required standards well will also



help keep you on track. If your district has not established a pacing schedule for each subject, it is important to do so for yourself.

Assess students' academic skills early in the

school year and pre-assess academic knowledge throughout the year when time permits. This will assist in developing the time you will plan teaching each area. Combine (i.e. integrate) subject matter as much as possible. The area of language arts is always a good area for combining other subjects. With the standards in mind, use the social studies and science materials assessed to your grade level.

Enhance the experience for students by inviting community members with expertise in specific subject matter. This will help by bringing forth a different perspective on selected topics to your students. Even a general practitioner will send you to a specialist, so why assume you can do it all. Build your classroom library around informational text related to social studies areas for your grade level. Historical fiction books are a fun way to inspire the reluctant reader. In addition, consider buying some reading materials below and above grade level.

Incorporate the news into your class. Websites such as, History.com have a daily selection of history videos and articles related to historical events for the current date. Dogonews.com allows students to listen and read about current events, science, social studies, world events, and the environment. Time for Kids and Scholastic News has online and classroom magazines that can be purchased as a class set. Encourage your administrator to purchase Studies Weekly. Look over Great Websites for Kids where The Association for Library Service to Children has compiled websites related to social studies standards. To save time, one can assign activities for homework and create a news station in the classroom. Each day or week, allow students to briefly report what they have learned to the class. Incorporating student newscasters will save you time, but increase the knowledge of the students in the classroom.

Incorporate the *College, Career & Civic*

Life C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standard's Inquiry Arc. The *C3 Framework* is a guide for enhancing the rigor of K-12 civics, economics, geography, and history. Educators published the *C3 Framework* with the intent of sustaining our society through an awareness of a changing cultural and physical environment. In social studies, the four dimensions of informed inquiry are:

- Developing questions and planning inquiries
- Applying disciplinary concepts and tools
- Evaluating sources and using evidence
- Communicating conclusions and taking informed action.

These components provide advisement to educators on the concepts, skills, and disciplinary tools necessary to prepare students for college, career, and civic life. Social studies is an ideal discipline to encourage inquiry, as well as develop a thirst for knowledge. Once an individual is able to recognize, develop, and articulate powerful questions, they can begin to compose compelling solutions. Social studies education offers the opportunity to investigate with the assistance of the *C3 Framework*.

In summary, educators can increase their effectiveness in the self-contained classroom

without having to resort to extreme measures. Furthermore, the important subject of social studies does not have to take a back seat to other subjects. Even though class requirements such as STEM and SEL are increasing, there are several strategies available for teachers to improve their time management. Utilize your own students as a resource, whether it's allowing them to complete basic classroom tasks or lead discussions/debates on content they've been assigned to read, with you taking on the role of facilitator. Consider departmentalizing in order to take advantage of each teacher's strengths in certain subject matters, utilize the resources of professionals in your community by inviting them to expand on lessons taught from a real world perspective. Develop your classroom library in the area of social studies to compliment lesson plans. Utilize the Internet's vast array of available news to provide students with current events and opportunities for discussion. Finally, familiarize yourself with the *C3 Framework*. Either together or individually, the aforementioned strategies can help educators gain additional time to pursue their ultimate goal: successfully educate our youth.

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