

Social Studies, Meaning-Making, --- and Accelerated Reading Gains



Educators know that reading is critical for academic success in school (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). However, not all educators agree on the best way to promote reading gains among varying populations of students (Seidenberg, Borken-hagen, & Kearns, 2020).

According to Tim Shannahan (2022), while phonics are important, “Comparable amounts of time should be devoted to the other important components of reading comprehension, writing, and the ability to read text fluently” (para. 28).

Skills practice alone does not consistently yield expected gains. For example, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute reported that, “Contrary to the practices of many schools, time spent on ELA—the subject that would appear most relevant to the outcome we’re measuring—is not associated with reading improvement” (Tyner & Kabourek, 2020, p. 24).

These findings appear to be counterintuitive. After all, education experts have amassed a vast body of research on best practices that are effective. John Hattie and his colleagues have documented many of them in his Visible Learning work that provides an ongoing meta-analysis of thousands of research studies internationally about which learning practices have the greatest effect size. Publications by experts such as Tim Shanahan, Marilyn Adams, Fisher and Frey, David Pearson, Nell Duke, and others have contributed decades of research to reading strategies and skills that could be magnified.

The National Council for the Social Studies (2017) augmented these studies as they explored the thinking of foundational pedagogical theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky:

“Children and adolescents are not empty vessels into which we pour our adult ideas and knowledge. Decades of research on how young people learn have repeatedly reinforced the view of students as active sense makers, who rely heavily on language to mediate their worlds and who are deeply enmeshed in investigating their social worlds in search of better ways to navigate it.” (p. 84)

When we look at the goal of reading as meaning-making, perhaps it is not extraordinary to consider meaning-making as the path to reading. When skills are contextualized in meaning, learning accelerates. If the substance from which to make meaning—to navigate the world and our place in it—is necessary to grow successful readers, research by the Fordham Institute becomes highly relevant. This research finds that the *content* is critical for students to grow both as meaning-makers and readers. Of all possible content to read, social studies has the highest outcomes of any other subject.

As the Fordham Institute found:

“Devoting more instructional time to social studies is associated with increased reading ability over the course of five years of elementary school. This is true for all but the most affluent students. Female and

low-income students, as well as those from non-English-speaking families, are especially likely to benefit. On the other hand, increased instructional time in math, non-core, science, and — crucially—ELA is generally not associated with more reading improvement.” (Tyner & Kabourek, 2020, p. 24)

Thus ELA strategies and skills become tools, and tools need material and substance to be used. Social studies content is uniquely situated to be engaging and relevant. Even further, it gives students valuable practice using reading strategies to encounter, unpack, and even wrestle with the content. Combining content with reading strategies ultimately adds to a student’s existing schema, thereby increasing background knowledge and reading skills. The ideas inherent in social studies provide the material through which students can negotiate the world and their place in it.

When educators pair reading and social studies, students who need the most gain the most. Learners of English grow even more than their native-English-speaking peers, according to research (Tyner & Kabourek, 2020). When students received an additional thirty minutes a day of social studies instruction, non-native English speakers grew as readers by 25%, while native English speakers grew by 12%. Both are significant when juxtaposed with the same increase in ELA instruction, which yielded only 7% growth for English learners and 3% growth for native English speakers (p. 28).

For English learners, context is critical. As Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013)

have noted, “It is important for students to understand the relationship between words and the broader context; the word has to make sense within the context and the words bring meaning to context” (p. 152). Social studies topics offer that meaningful context that readers can connect to. That context, along with multiple scaffolds such as rich images, annotation tools, read-aloud text with sync highlighting, etc. are found in Studies Weekly, and designed to build strong reading skills for both monolingual and multilingual students.

Another point of learning that Studies Weekly provides is an embedded inquiry process. By using overarching questions, students focus their learning. Jeffery Wilhem (2007) argues that “[w]ithout purpose, significant learning is difficult if not impossible to achieve” (p. 8). He explains that the inquiry process, as outlined by the C3 Framework (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017), helps students focus their learning around the purpose of larger questions.

Using compelling questions to focus reading and connect new learning to an existing schema aligns with research, conducted by Zhang and Duke (2008), about what good readers do:

“Often from the minute they look at the text, they are making predictions about it, drawing on a range of prior knowledge about text, the content, and so on. As they read, they revisit these predictions and make new ones. They are “selectively attentive” with the text. [...] They work to paraphrase and summarize what they are

reading. They ask themselves questions, create mental images, and make a broad range of inferences [...]. They critique and evaluate the text itself, often having strong, affective responses to the text." (pp. 130-131)

In addition, social studies provides the stories through which students connect themselves to historical events. They learn about history as it is passed down; they recognize the significance of events they

are reading about through the elements of story and connecting text to self (Combs & Beach, 1994).

Reading is an important part of school, without a doubt. Therefore, by focusing on reading social studies content through engaging, scaffolded programs such as Studies Weekly, students have rich content that is ripe for connections. While students are engaged in making meaning,

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