Teaching Literacy through Social Studies under No Child Left Behind

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High stakes accountability has intensified the marginalization of social studies in public schools. A popular response to the dilemma between raising achievement in English Language Arts and preserving social studies is to integrate the two subjects. This qualitative case study analyzes instruction in a fifth grade urban classroom where the teacher used U.S. history lessons to teach literacy skills and strategies. I conducted weekly classroom observations over a semester; interviewed the teacher, students, and administrators; and collected pertinent documents. Although two-and-a-half hours were devoted to social studies each week, I found that lessons revolved around literacy training based on reading passages from the textbook. These lessons became increasingly routine, distancing students from history rather than supporting their understanding of it. The teacher’s practice was influenced by standardized testing and professional development. This case study serves as a cautionary tale about the unintended consequences that can result when literacy and social studies are combined with the goal of raising test scores.

Introduction

High stakes accountability has intensified the marginalization of social studies in public schools (Bisland, 2011). Quantitative studies based on surveys and interviews show that under No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB), the push to raise test scores in reading and math contribute to reduced instructional time for untested social studies (Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Rock et al., 2006; VanFossen, 2005). The “social studies squeeze” is especially apparent in lower performing schools with high proportions of minority students, where pressures to raise achievement are greatest (Au, 2007; Pace, 2008; Von Zastrow & Janc, 2004; Wills, 2006, 2007).

A popular response to the dilemma between raising achievement in English Language Arts, specifically, and preserving social studies is to combine these distinct goals. At the high school level, advocacy for academic literacy across the content areas preceded NCLB. Now, under high stakes accountability, the focus on teaching literacy within social studies (and science) throughout the K-
12 continuum has permeated policy messages delivered through curriculum materials, professional development, and administrative directives. Just one example of this trend is the Center for Civic Education's new proposal for a multi-million dollar grant to support week-long professional development institutes to “connect the We the People content and pedagogy with English language arts.” The purpose of these institutes is “to improve the content and pedagogy” of educators working with “high needs students” (email from Robert Leming).

This policy context raises questions about how the dual goals of raising achievement in English Language Arts and preserving social studies are understood and operationalized. Prior research on social studies teaching under NCLB has called for qualitative studies that investigate the quality of classroom practice (Burstein, Hutton, & Curtis, 2006). Few qualitative studies to date have examined what kind of teaching and learning is generated by taking on the goal of raising literacy achievement in social studies lessons (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008; Yeager & Pinder, 2006). This article addresses that gap by analyzing instruction in a 5th grade urban classroom where social studies lessons were used to teach literacy skills and strategies. It imports concepts from scholarship in literacy to make sense of teaching in this classroom.

The teacher I studied wholeheartedly embraced the idea that social studies should primarily serve to teach reading and writing, using the social studies textbook. This belief, and the approach it engendered, was shaped by two interrelated influences, professional development focused on teaching literacy strategies in history and school accountability under NCLB. Ms. Monroe was enthusiastic about her approach to social studies and expressed a commitment to her students’ academic success. But the study of U.S. history, the major focus of 5th grade social studies, was undermined by the infusion of literacy training. The study raises critical questions about social studies education and literacy instruction under NCLB.

Although a growing body of scholarship documents the impact of high stakes accountability on schooling (McNeil, 2000; Palmer & Rangel, 2011; Sloan, 2006; Valenzuela et al., 2007; Watanabe, 2007), “few studies show what actually happens inside classrooms—and to literacy activities in particular—when teacher and students are pressed by the mandates of NCLB” (Valli & Chambless, 2007, p. 57). Even more rare are studies that focus on social studies, and that include the perspectives of students on instruction influenced by high stakes accountability. My research does both by examining how a fifth grade teacher enacts literacy instruction in social studies and how students respond to it.
This case study is important because it serves as a cautionary tale about what can happen when literacy skills and strategies become the focus in social studies. I found that in this classroom, emphasis on literacy directed the teacher and students’ attention away from history and towards the completion of routine tasks that revolved around the textbook. Instruction focused more on lower level skills than on high level strategies; thus it did not support students’ understanding of content. Students were bored by social studies lessons; they generally cooperated with the teachers’ in-class demands and enjoyed group work, but were not substantively engaged with learning history. In the conclusion of this article I discuss implications of these findings for policy, research, and practice.

Research on Social Studies Under NCLB

Although a growing body of research reports a “social studies squeeze” under NCLB, very little research qualitatively analyzes the enactment of classroom lessons when teachers focus on literacy in social studies. Two qualitative studies that include observation and interview data yield mixed findings. Boyle-Baise et al.’s (2008) research in Indiana elementary schools finds that social studies has become a “by-product” of reading. Data were collected from thirteen teachers in six mainly white, lower to middle income schools all struggling to make AYP (Academic Yearly Progress). The authors found that in the early grades Reading First dominated, and teachers tried to address social studies through stories in their basal series. In grades 4-6, teachers used social studies textbooks and focused on reading comprehension. Teacher-centered lessons based on recitation used to reinforce comprehension skills pervaded classroom instruction. Integration of social studies with other subjects was haphazard rather than intentional. Teachers and principals explained that the sacrifice of social studies for reading was a consequence of the “rules of the game” under NCLB (p. 239). NCLB was experienced as a “driving force” and a “barrier” to teaching (p. 239).

In contrast to Boyle-Baise et al., Yeager and Pinder (2006) described and analyzed the ambitious practice of two history teachers in two Florida high schools. The authors explain that Florida history teachers have struggled with figuring out their role due to intense accountability pressures and the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), which does not include social studies. The two teachers studied by Yeager and Pinder decided to incorporate literacy skills and strategies into their history lessons with the dual purposes of helping to raise schools’ reading scores and meeting students’ academic needs. Isabel taught in a low performing, largely Latino school, with colleagues united around the goal of raising achievement, and provision of professional development centered on teaching literacy strategies. She highlighted these strategies during
history lessons, by asking students to summarize texts and utilizing a simplified version of reciprocal teaching that involved predicting, visualizing, clarifying, formulating questions, and summarizing. The teacher connected students to important historical content and current issues, but prioritized literacy to both raise test scores and address students’ educational needs.

The second teacher, Suzanne, worked in a diverse yet mostly white school with declining test scores and a divided faculty, who either conformed to mindless test prep or disregarded the FCAT, and did not have professional development. Working independently, she focused on teaching critical thinking with rich content but also infused reading and writing skills such as vocabulary development, identifying points of view, and developing arguments on historical issues. Literacy skills were addressed so that students could read primary sources and historical documents and develop perspectives on important content. While Suzanne focused on disciplinary understanding and Isabel on literacy strategies, the study characterizes ambitious practice under NCLB as both preserving social studies and promoting achievement: “One way in which we have thought about ambitious history teaching in Florida is the inclusion of more and better content-specific reading and writing strategies in history classes” (Yeager & Pinder, 2006, p. 252).

Conceptual Framework: Strategy Instruction

Strategy instruction, which emerged from research on information processing during the cognitive revolution and became part of the thinking skills movement (Dole, Nokes, & Drits, 2011; Jones et al., 1987), continues to garner popularity (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Advocacy for strategy instruction and research on its implementation in classrooms grew during the 1980s and 1990s (Pressley & El-Dinary, 1993), and has reached new heights under NCLB: “It could be argued that the literature is currently saturated with research, articles, and books about cognitive strategies” (Dole et al., 2011, p. 347). However, scholars previously recognized that effective implementation is very challenging and requires extensive professional development (Pressley & El-Dinary, 1993).

While scholarship on strategy instruction is situated in the field of literacy, and a complete review lies outside the scope of this article, a consideration of major points and problems is necessary to understanding this case study. In fact, analysis of data required that I import conceptual lenses from outside social studies education research to illuminate Ms. Monroe’s social studies practice.

Various approaches to strategy instruction have been developed and evaluated for their effectiveness (Alexander, Graham, & Harris, 1998; Dole et al., 2011). Most center on reading comprehension. Many teachers do not implement a specific model but demonstrate to their classes key comprehension strategies, such as “inferencing, summarizing, predicting, clarifying,
questioning, visualizing, monitoring, synthesizing, evaluating, and connecting” (Fisher & Frey, 2008, p. 20). Additionally, teachers focus on vocabulary strategies to help readers figure out word meanings; text structures such as cause/effect, sequence, and problem/solution; and use of text features such as headings, graphics, and glossaries (p. 20). Writing strategies typically support the process of planning, composing, and revising (Pressley et al., 1989). For expository writing they include assessing one’s audience, organizing information, drafting, getting a peer to edit, revising based on feedback, and editing the final essay (p. 228).

While strategy instruction has become widespread through teacher training and practitioner resources (e.g. Harvey & Goudvis, 2007), implementation is challenging and potentially problematic due to its complexity and superficial understandings of it (Maniates & Pearson, 2008; Pressley & El-Dinary, 1993). One problem is over-emphasis on strategies and neglect of subject matter. Researchers have found that despite the larger purpose of reading, “it is difficult for many teachers to understand the necessity of keeping the content of the text at the forefront while teaching strategies” (Dole et al., 2011, p. 367). Fisher and Frey (2008) warn against the “curricularization” of strategies, in which they become the main focus rather than a means to understanding text (p. 16). Teachers and students may attend more to the format of academic tasks and outcomes to be tested than on actual learning (Anderson & Roit, 1993).

Another problem is confusion between the terms “strategies” and “skills,” often generated by basal readers that do not distinguish between them: “Reading strategies are deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader’s efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text. Reading skills are automatic actions that result in decoding and comprehension with speed, efficiency, and fluency” (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008, p. 368). The ultimate goal is that, over time, many strategies become automatic and integrated into students’ reading skills. Thus, strategies are needed only when a reader’s skills are not sufficient for effective performance. Afflerbach et al. note that the historical dominance of lower-level skill instruction in reading, which gave way to models such as whole language and balanced literacy that emphasize meaning-making of text, has come back in full force under NCLB.

Finally, teachers may view strategy instruction as a technical enterprise, which may reinforce deficit thinking. Bartolomé (1994a) warns against a “general tendency to reduce complex educational issues . . . to mere ‘magical’ methods and techniques designed to remediate perceived student cognitive and linguistic deficiencies” (p. 201). She reminds us that learning depends on responsive teaching that values and connects students’ prior knowledge to new information. Likewise, Maniates and Pearson (2008) argue that teachers need to
know how specific strategies fit into a theory of students’ development as readers. They present Kintsch’s (1998) theory of expert reading as the construction of a “situation model” in which the reader integrates prior knowledge and experience with information gained from a given text. Thus, teachers should teach students strategies that will help them be proactive in building situation models when they read.

Along with robust understanding among teachers about goals and methods of strategy instruction and how it fits into theories of teaching and learning, successful employment of strategies also depends on student motivation. Students must believe the goals of a reading task are meaningful, the strategies are useful, and the effort required to use them will be worthwhile (Dole et al., 2011). Importantly, the overall purpose of strategy instruction is for students to learn to monitor their learning activities; decide when, why, and how to choose appropriate strategies; and use them independently. It involves helping students think metacognitively about task demands and choose among alternative approaches to attain goals (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008, p. 368).

Methodology

This case study addresses the following research questions: 1. What happens to social studies lessons when they are used for literacy instruction? 2. How do students respond to these lessons? 3. What factors shape the teacher’s instruction?

Site and Sample

The case is part of a larger research project on the impact of NCLB on curriculum and teaching in social studies across diverse school contexts (Pace, 2011). During the 2007-2008 academic year I conducted qualitative research in five classrooms spanning grades four through seven, located in four schools and two urban districts. I examined the influence of high stakes accountability on social studies teaching when the subject is not tested by the state across contexts that varied by student demographics and performance status.

I recruited teachers enthusiastic about social studies through professional development networks. One research participant in a high performing school recommended I contact Ms. Monroe, who taught at a school that had “pulled itself out of Program Improvement.” Ms. Miller told me that Ms. Monroe, with help from Mr. Carver, a professional developer, did “labor intensive” work with “low level readers” using the social studies textbook.

When I contacted Ms. Monroe she was eager to be part of my study. She came across as an articulate, experienced teacher who loved her school, enjoyed a positive reputation, and participated as a recipient and provider in professional development within and outside her school. She had strong collegial
relationships and enjoyed the support of her principal. Ms. Monroe spoke enthusiastically about her aims, which focused on teaching reading and writing through history, and about her attempts to accomplish them.

Lincoln Elementary was an improving school. It was racially/ethnically diverse, with approximately 43% of students identified as African American, 20% Asian, 16% Latino, 11% White, and 10% Other, 15% English Learners, and 42% receiving Free or Reduced Lunch. In 2003 the principal hired two consultants, later credited with helping to raise test scores, which rescued the school from Program Improvement status and sanctions imposed by the district and state. Ms. Monroe worked closely with Mr. Carver, who involved her in a professional development project on integrating literacy strategies and history. Over the years Ms. Monroe had become not only a teacher participant but also a presenter at conferences. Mr. Carver still worked with the Lincoln faculty once a month. He was a former teacher at the school who had started working as a consultant and was on the staff of a state sponsored professional development organization.

The principal at Lincoln, with whom Ms. Monroe had a long and close relationship, told me she herself had always been “test-conscious” and concerned about raising scores. She said that if the school had not made “significant growth . . . we would have been reconstituted by now.” The principal approved of what she perceived as “rigor” in Ms. Monroe’s strategy instruction and believed it should start in kindergarten. She also believed that “a really good teacher” would integrate social studies into the rest of the curriculum, due to the necessary focus on language arts and content standards “because . . . that is what drives the CST test.”

The school district was low income and well below the state average in test performance. Lincoln scored below the state average in 2001 and 2002, equal to it in 2003 and 2004, and higher in 2005 to 2007. Lincoln staff enjoyed greater autonomy and status than schools under sanctions as long as the school’s test scores met performance goals. Teachers were obligated to employ the mandated reading program adopted by the district several years before, but monitoring of instruction by district personnel was minimal.

**Data Collection**

Ms. Monroe taught social studies and language arts to two groups of fifth graders; her team teacher taught math and science. In Ms. Monroe’s classroom, social studies was scheduled for a seventy-five minute block twice a week, an unusually large proportion of time, even prior to NCLB (Van Fossen, 2005). I conducted thirteen observations during the spring semester (mid-January through May), each lasting about two hours, which included observation of a full social studies lesson with one class and Language Arts activities with the
other class, and informal conversation with students during recess and with the teacher during lunchtime. I attended a workshop on teaching literacy strategies through history conducted by Ms. Monroe and Mr. Carver at a state sponsored conference. I had an initial 75 minute long meeting and a formal 90-minute interview with Ms. Monroe. I also conducted individual interviews with five students, the principal, the district social studies coordinator, and the district’s assistant superintendent of instruction. Additionally I read textbook chapters, student work, teacher handouts from the class, and materials from the professional development organization where Mr. Carver worked and Ms. Monroe had attended institutes. Field notes were typed and took the form of running records. Audiotapes of several lessons and all interviews were transcribed.

Data Analysis
To analyze the case, I systematically read through field notes and interview transcripts multiple times to identify thematic codes and formulate relationships among themes. To characterize instructional enactments and trace how they evolved over time, I analyzed field notes on each lesson using Stodolsky’s (1988) codes for instructional formats, which include seatwork, recitation, and group work. I also identified which strategies and skills were actually being taught in lessons using Maniates and Pearson’s (2008) content analysis of the Open Court and Houghton Mifflin reading programs and Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris’s (2008) clarification of differences between skills and strategies.

I also compared the skills and strategies students practiced and the teaching techniques Ms. Monroe used with Massey and Heafner’s (2004) overview of teaching literacy strategies in social studies. The overview identifies various types of texts students should read in social studies classes: textbooks, primary and secondary sources, fiction, letters, and so on. It describes strategies appropriate for different phases of reading. The two pre-reading strategies are establishing the purpose and focus of reading a text and connecting to prior knowledge. During reading one strategy is analyzing text structures such as chronology, cause and effect, and description through features such as titles and subtitles as well as boldface vocabulary and key words. Another strategy used during reading is collecting information across texts. After reading comes reciprocal questioning, in which students formulate questions with answers found in the text and answer higher-level analytical questions posed by the teacher. The final strategy is synthesizing ideas and information across texts and creating summaries. The ultimate disciplinary goal is for students to be able to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize historical evidence concerning important complex issues.

To interpret students’ responses to instruction, I looked for evidence of
engagement and disengagement in my field notes. I analyzed student interview data to ascertain their views of social studies lessons, what they were learning about history, and the teacher’s instructional approach. To better understand factors that shaped the teacher’s instructional enactments. I coded teacher interview transcripts for evidence of influences such as educational goals, testing, and professional development experiences. I also analyzed data collected from sources of influence, including an interview with the principal of Lincoln Elementary, documents from the workshop Ms. Monroe co-presented with Mr. Carver, and other documents from the professional development organization with which Mr. Carver was affiliated.

I worked towards interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992) by triangulating among the different data sources, carefully checking for disconfirming evidence, and developing explanations to account for it (Erickson, 1986). Also, I tried out different analytic concepts to illuminate my findings. Earlier versions of my analysis, which drew upon social studies education research, were presented at conferences and sent out for review. The feedback I received pushed me to keep searching until I found stronger resonance with the research literature on literacy strategy instruction. I compared my findings with other case studies to draw comparisons and highlight the distinctive issues presented by my study.

Rationale for the Case Study and Limitations of the Research

A major purpose of qualitative research on teaching is to illuminate complex phenomena by examining particular cases in detail (Erickson, 1986). I chose to write this case study on Ms. Monroe’s teaching because it sheds light on important teaching issues reported in prior research. The impact of NCLB on instruction, in particular the emphasis on using social studies to teach literacy, was much more evident in Ms. Monroe’s classroom than in the others I studied. Additionally, the teacher’s enactment of literacy strategy instruction was supported by professional development but clearly reflected pitfalls discussed by scholars.

At the same time, case studies of individual settings are limited in their generalizability. Classroom life is complex, dynamic, and influenced by a myriad of influences. It is entirely possible that teachers with greater capability than Ms. Monroe, as described in other studies, may integrate literacy and social studies more successfully. I have been careful not to draw widespread conclusions and to provide enough contextual data so that readers may arrive at their own interpretations. Instead the case study informs the ongoing construction of a body of knowledge about social studies teaching in today’s classrooms and addresses issues that may be present in other settings.
Complexity of Instructional Enactments

In our initial meeting, Ms. Monroe communicated ambitious goals for students’ learning, and criticism of district-mandated curricula and testing. She talked about emphasizing the textbook but also developing “metacognition,” “critical thinking,” and “historical thinking.” She said students would be writing a five-paragraph essay on the meaning of the Declaration of Independence by the end of the year, which was “really empowering” for them. Ms. Monroe told me the district’s mandated reading program trained students to respond to rote questions, and consequently they had difficulty with thinking on a deep level. She struck me as a teacher determined to improve the quality of students’ learning while also preparing them for standardized tests and future academic success.

Observations presented me with conflicting data and told a complicated story. Instructional formats consisted of active student participation in small groups and reporting out to the whole group mixed with teacher-centered recitation. They often followed a pattern. Students were asked to talk about a reading passage they had read silently in their small groups for a few minutes. The teacher would call for group representatives to form a line across the back of the room and individually report what the group had discussed. She would intersperse several moments of recitation with these reports. This would be followed by a whole class activity or more group work, followed by more reports. In March there was a shift, and more time was spent in small groups led by group leaders.

Academic tasks involved recalling information from the textbook, identifying cause and effect, breaking down sentences into parts of speech, and forming topic sentences and finding supporting details from the text. Students also identified requirements of tasks and problems they had accomplishing them. They produced oral and written summaries of text. One procedure regularly practiced was “Key Words.” The class as a whole discussed each key word students as individuals or in small groups identified from a passage to vote on whether it actually addressed the teacher’s focus question. Key words were then used to form the basis of students’ writing about the passage. Ms. Monroe acknowledged that the process of listing and voting on key words was very time-consuming, but said it helped students write about expository text.

These tasks mapped onto important literacy skills and strategies outlined in the scholarship presented in this article. But my observations raised questions about whether literacy interfered with teaching and learning history. The following vignette, based on field notes, reflects the pattern of instructional formats, academic tasks, and skills and strategies practice I observed. The class is studying the settlement of North America by various European countries, and this particular lesson focuses on New France.
Classroom Vignette #1

January 18th—Ms. Monroe directs the class’s attention to the passage on New France they have just read in the textbook. She acknowledges they might have had trouble, and encourages students to “share those problems.” They will “report out” what they learned, after taking “two minutes to talk” in their groups. When Ms. Monroe cues them, each group sends a representative to stand at the back of the room, facing the front. The teacher prompts: “Lilly. What did your group talk about?” Lilly reads quietly from a piece of notebook paper. Ms. Monroe writes on the board up front: “Lived with Native Americans. Learned their language.” Lilly continues, and Ms. Monroe writes, “Founded Quebec.”

Holly reads from her paper: “Some stayed with the Hurons to trade. Most went back to Europe.” Ms. Monroe interjects to ask whether students found reasons why the French settlements weren’t permanent, and directs the class to the topic of fur. She pulls down a world map, and a short period of recitation ensues.

Ms. M: If they’re taking furs from what is now Canada what are they doing to the resources? Five hands. Take a stab.
Student: Killing animals?
Ms. M: What does that mean for the environment?
Student: The population is down.
Ms. M: The beaver population is dropping. Have you talked about this in Mr. Wolf’s (math/science teacher) class? Not yet. What happens when the animal population drops?
Student: It starts to get extinct.
Ms. M: Fur trading changed what?
Student: The number of animals.
The teacher draws a line of attached boxes and plays a hangman type of game; hands are up and waving and students guess letters first and finally the word, “environment.”
Ms. M: As the environment changes for the Native Americans, what is France getting?
Student: Land.
Ms. M: No.
Student: Fur.
Ms. M: Sales in fur. They’re building their economy far away.
The next student, John, reads intently from his notes. The teacher writes a few items on the board and asks, “Is that copied from the text?” John admits it is, and Ms. M queries, “Why am I asking?” Someone volunteers that they need to use fifth grade language. Ms. M says, “Yea, why?” John responds, “So you know what I’m thinking.” Ms. M tells him to put the paper down and asks, “What’d you learn about this?” John stumbles and the teacher reinforces the point that the fur trade is hurting the environment.

After all six students have taken their turns, Ms. Monroe asks who can read the Focus Question from their reference binders. John reads, “Explain the conflict that existed between the French, Dutch and Native Americans as a result of the Europeans’ efforts to control North America.” Ms. Monroe instructs the class, in their groups, to summarize what they now know about French settlement in North America, and then think about how that helps them answer the focus question.

Finally Ms. Monroe calls for another reporting out session. The first two students read brief summaries and say there isn’t enough information in the text to answer the Focus Question. Other students read summaries of why the French did not stay in North America. It is time to stop. (Field notes, 1/18/2008)

The structure of the lesson consists of small group discussion on a one page textbook passage, reporting out facts gleaned from the reading mixed with recitation about the fur trade’s effect on the environment, more small group discussion about how the text answers a focus question, and another round of reports. Instructional formats vary and students actively participate. Ms. Monroe encourages metacognition when she tells students to publicly share their reading difficulties and explain why they should use “5th grade language.” Her recitation questions prompt cause and effect thinking. Answering the focus question about conflict among European countries and Native American tribes requires analysis. The main goal of this lesson is apparently to extract main ideas from the reading passage and relate them to a big idea.

Yet the development of historical knowledge is limited. The same information is repeated several times. Ms. Monroe raises a vital issue about the fur trade’s impact on the environment, but the hangman game—while fun for students—slows down the pacing of the lesson and takes time away from content. The focus question is meant to help students access historical significance from the text, but is recalled midway through the lesson, is not phrased as a question, and is so broad and complex that the reading passage does not answer it. The lesson ends without a conclusion about what is significant
about the reading passage or the settlement of New France. The rich, critical issue of inter-group conflict generated by the European presence in North America is left unexplored. Most lessons I observed were similar to the previous one in their emphasis on practicing skills and strategies through tasks using the textbook.

Ms. Monroe seemed deeply invested in her students’ success. She told me that she wanted her students to be prepared for middle school and do well on standardized tests. Additionally, she wanted to show that her teaching methods worked. Yet it appeared her approach did not sufficiently engage students in learning, and tension emerged as students began to resist increasing academic demands.

**Student Responses to Instruction**

Although students generally cooperated during lessons, they expressed ambivalence towards them. When Ms. Monroe introduced me to the class, she gave examples of questions I might want to explore: “Do we get to do social studies? Is it your favorite subject?” The students vehemently responded, “No!” Ms. Monroe took it in stride, and suggested I might see a “metamorphosis.”

During interviews students politely told me that in their view, social studies alternated between boring and interesting. When I asked what was interesting, they all referred to one lesson, a Town Hall Meeting in which the teacher let students direct their own debate between Loyalists and Patriots, as explained later in the article.

Tanisha said that breaking down the reading to help everyone understand it was helpful but boring. When I asked how she would describe Ms. Monroe’s social studies teaching, she said:

Like, she would have the packet and . . . we’ll read the passage and then after like the sentences that we didn’t get or something, she would break it down for us and tell us like what does it mean . . . we might break it down in our groups together, just see what it means and after one person from each group comes up, and there’s six groups and they would say what they think. . . . if we’re writing a paragraph of something, we would come up [with] sentences about like what to write.

Tanisha’s description indicates that instruction revolved around breaking down passages copied from the textbook, presenting translations of them from the small groups, and generating sentences for writing paragraphs about the text.

Holly expressed a more positive view; she said she liked the way Ms. Monroe taught because she gave them reading packets for homework that were
helpful, but she also volunteered that she didn’t always understand the reading, or the key words identified during class. She also expressed appreciation for learning how to write a paragraph “about the colonies and stuff.” When I asked what she was learning in social studies, she replied: We’re studying the colonies and like umm, well it’s more like the significance of the British and the colonists, like Parliament, and right now, we’re studying like the acts that they did, like the Stamp Act and the Townsend Act and yeah, and well . . .”  
Before I had a chance to ask, she characterized the teacher’s approach:

. . . what Ms. Monroe does is she gives us blank sheets of paper, and we fold it in threes, and what we do is we write Topic Sentence in the first box, and the second box is our Evidence box, and then our third box is the Conclusion, and . . . first, we come up with the topic sentence in our groups, and then we go to the front of the room and say the sentence that we came up with, and then Ms. Monroe, well, we all kind of pick which one we like the best, and then she helps with the evidence, even though we haven’t done that yet, and then the conclusion . . .

Holly’s summary indicates her internalization of Ms. Monroe’s approach. In contrast, Crystal’s description of Ms. Monroe’s social studies teaching was spare: “We write notes, we write paragraphs together. We had Town Hall meetings.”

Ahmed’s explanation included more about classroom talk and strategies:

We read a passage, and then we talk about it like in groups . . . and see like, we have different opinions, and then we go to the back of the wall, and like she gives us a question, and like the group answers it, and then we go back there, and sometimes we just read the passage, write notes about it, and we also do . . . we use key words to help us answer the focus question, and that’s it.

Ahmed seemed to understand students’ translations of textbook facts as opinions. His comments center on different instructional formats and a particular literacy strategy. Kyle explained why social studies was boring: Social studies isn’t my favorite subject, because it involves a lot of going through books and reading and re-reading and writing . . . so it’s not really my favorite subject.” He said he had learned that “social studies writing is very very hard. . . Well not, no, it’s not really hard, but it just takes a really, really long time to do. You can’t just read
information and write it down. You have to go through a giant process that takes about two or three weeks. . . . It’s really mind-boggling just writing over and over and over.

Kyle’s characterization speaks to the repetitive nature of reading and writing tasks that were not challenging yet were mentally taxing and time-consuming. Pearson and Dole (1987) warn, “We have to consider the possibility that all the attention we are asking students to pay to their use of skills and strategies and to their monitoring of these strategies may turn relatively simple and intuitively obvious tasks into introspective nightmares” (p. 162).

Across interviews, students’ comments highlight the instructional emphasis on reading and writing; their descriptions of social studies teaching all center on literacy skills and strategies. Specifically, they focus on procedural tasks for reading, speaking, and writing divorced from content. They note the varied instructional formats, but accounts of classroom activity and academic work for the most part suggest tedium.

Students seemed to enjoy opportunities to talk and work with their peers. But Ms. Monroe also relied on extrinsic incentives to motivate students to fulfill their obligations. She used a system involving accumulation of points for coming to class prepared, completing tasks, and turning in homework assignments. This led to rewards such as homework passes, positive phone calls to parents, dropping the lowest assignment grade, publicly presented awards, and high grades on report cards. Notes regarding points, rewards, and grades earned by individual students were publicly displayed on the white board at the front of the classroom. The teacher regularly made references to these rewards and warned against sanctions such as losing an award or getting low grades. She also used reprimands to persuade students they needed to act like sixth graders and prepare themselves for middle school, where teachers would not be flexible.

Students’ cooperation notwithstanding, tension over homework became evident during my fourth observation at the end of February. In the first group, nine out of thirty students had not done it; in the second group, it was nineteen out of twenty-nine. Ms. Monroe called on each student with an increasingly stern tone, holding individuals accountable. At the end of the second period, she threatened to take back homework passes and other rewards. After class Ms. Monroe told me that the mandated reading program was so drill-based with rote questions that it had discouraged students from doing work that asked them to think.

Over the next two weeks, it became increasingly evident that students were not meeting the teacher’s expectations. Ms. Monroe had begun a project on life in the colonies. She had decided to host a public event where students would display exhibits of their learning to their parents and other community members. However, the academic work involved, while demanding of students’ time,
replicated traditional reading and writing tasks. Each small group team was responsible for a reading packet, copied from the textbook, on a particular topic, such as trade, government, religion, social customs, or relationships with Native Americans. They had to write an essay about how their topic changed in the thirteen colonies over time.

Along with the usual incentives to encourage students’ efforts, Ms. Monroe had told her classes that they were responsible for teaching each other about their topics, and if they did not do a thorough job they would be letting down thirty other students. But many of them did not complete assignments. After a few weeks, Ms. Monroe discontinued the project; she explained to me that students’ work was unsatisfactory and taking too long to complete. In addition to abandoning the project she decided to teach a new reading strategy to address the difficulties she confronted.

New Strategy Increases Routinization of Social Studies

In preparation for the project essays, students had been practicing the formulation of main ideas as “thesis statements” and finding “evidence” or supporting details from the textbook passage to substantiate them, as Holly explained in her interview. Ms. Monroe explained to me that the summaries students had written were very poor; she could not diagnose the problem but decided they needed a strategy to aid their comprehension. She starting having students in their groups break down individual sentences from the text by identifying the following parts of speech: Preposition/Time Marker, Subject, Action, Who’s Getting the Action.

Additionally, to address the problems of missed assignments and low quality work, she devised a solution that would hold students accountable and provide assistance. She delegated authority to team leaders, responsible for making sure team members did their class work and homework, understood tasks and the subject matter, and behaved appropriately during lessons. The teacher and students I interviewed explained to me that leaders were chosen because of their academic performance and their ability to help others do the work. They maintained their position with the same group unless the teacher decided changes were needed.

The following vignette shows how one group functioned in breaking down the text. This ethnically diverse group, composed of two girls and three boys, accomplished the assigned task with minimal conflict under the leadership of an especially capable student, but without any thought about history.

Classroom Vignette #2

April 17—Ms. Monroe has put a chart for identifying parts of a sentence on each table:
Each group is assigned a passage from Lesson 2: “Colonists Speak Out” (Porter, 2007, p. 326). They will break down each sentence and present their work tomorrow. I join the group working on “The Stamp Act.”

The first sentence of their passage is: “After the French and Indian War ended, the British Parliament reviewed its budget, or plan for spending money” (p. 327). Led by Kyle, the group immediately starts to fill out the chart with a non-erasable marker as they read each part of the sentence, which creates confusion. “French and Indian War” goes under Subject and “ended” under Action. They start to put “British Parliament” under Who’s Getting the Action but Kyle says it goes under Subject and moves “French and Indian War” under Prep/Time Marker, using an arrow. Without hesitating he says “reviewed” goes under action and “its budget” goes under getting action. Kyle continues to confidently direct the group: “Put a line under it [the sentence].” He says they should write a conclusion but decides to move on to the second sentence. Maisha gently prompts John, who seems distracted, to pay attention.

The second sentence reads, "The British leader George Grenville said that Parliament needed more money to pay off the costs of the war" (p. 327). The students put “British leader George Grenville” under Subject, and “said” under Action. The entire phrase “that Parliament . . . war” is written under Who’s Getting the Action. No one questions the ambiguous fit between the sentence and elements of the chart, or the purpose of the activity.

Kyle calls John, who is now sprawled out on the hardtop, over to the porch, and he obeys. Ahmed suggests that Kyle have them each take a turn, and then determine whether he/she is correct. Kyle agrees, and the group slowly proceeds sentence by sentence. Kyle excuses himself to ask Ms. M a question, comes back, and says they’ll divide into two groups. He announces who will be in each group, and politely asks “OK?” There’s a bit of negotiation for gender homogeneity, but Kyle decides to help out the girls. He directs John and Ahmed to the 2nd paragraph, while he and the girls will do the 3rd paragraph.

Kyle now realizes they should read the whole sentence before filling in the chart. Ahmed asks him where tax should go, from the sentence: “The Stamp Act placed a tax on paper documents in the
The scenario shows students' harmonious yet labored collaboration in completing a tedious assignment. Kyle is a model manager. He seems to be the only one in the group who really understands how to break down the sentences. The task is purely procedural; the aim is to get it done quickly. There is no discussion of either content or students’ confusion regarding parts of speech. Except for John, who needs a bit of prodding, the students are motivated; no one questions the purpose of their work. However, talk about history is non-existent.

Given that the new strategy of deconstructing sentences further distanced students from meaningful engagement in learning about history, I wanted to know what motivated them to complete tasks assigned by the teacher and cooperate with their team leader. I asked my interviewees how they interpreted the system of delegated authority. Ahmed explained how the teams served the teacher's agenda and students’ interests:

A: And now we have team captains. They like . . . control like the table, and then they help us figure out stuff that we don’t know as much, like you could ask them a question, and if they don’t understand, they could ask the teacher . . . before we used to do this, people never really turned their homework as much, but now like, they don’t want [to let] the group down so they, they like -- “Yeah, I’m gonna do it.”

JP: Really, that’s interesting. What, why do you think people don’t wanna let the group down?

A: Well, it’s like, sometimes, we get an award . . . to be the one hundred percent, or to be the highest score in the class.

JP: Like what kind of reward?

A: Floating A. Like if you got something bad, she would like try get it as up as she can like to, let’s say if you got a F, she might give you like a C or a B . . . and like another one is homework pass, and sometimes she uses that as a book report.
According to Ahmed, the team system addressed the problem of homework completion by motivating students through competition and incentives. Crystal’s response added an additional factor in students’ acceptance of team leaders. JP: Why do you think it works? Why do kids listen to other kids? C: Cause they want to help us pass Social Studies. Like, cause the team leaders has a better understanding than the regular groups.

Her comment suggested that granting authority to more capable peers was beneficial for less capable students. Although they were burdened with extra responsibility, which a few team leaders told me was sometimes challenging, they enjoyed having higher status. Kyle said: “It gives you a sense of, like you’re kind of the top dog, or you’re not really the top dog, but it makes you feel like - oh, look, the teacher thinks that I really get this, and that I can help other people, and so it makes you feel better about yourself just like [good] grades.” This admission revealed the complexity of motivational factors operating as students collaborated on tiresome academic tasks.

At the same time, student motivation seemed to remain an ongoing issue. Tanisha told me that sometimes it was difficult to get her group to focus on their work, and had to ask the teacher to send misbehaving students to the “clown table.” In early May, in response to complaints of boredom with history, Ms. Monroe allowed students to hold their own “Town Meeting,” in which they debated whether the British or Patriots were justified in their actions. She took a completely passive role, and the debate became a shouting match, but the students apparently had fun. It was as if they used it as an opportunity to vent energy that had been pent up during lessons focused on tedious exercises that lacked significance for many of them.

Influences on Instruction

A variety of interacting influences drive teachers’ classroom practice (Grant, 1996). Albeit a teacher’s own capabilities are fundamental, interviews with Ms. Monroe informed my understanding of three inter-related factors – instructional goals, testing, and professional development – that shaped her approach to social studies. She had come to Lincoln as a teacher eight years before, which was after the onset of the state accountability system that preceded NCLB. But she had student taught with the principal, and then worked at other schools as a special education teacher.

Instructional Goals
Ms. Monroe told me she used history to teach students expository reading and writing strategies. She critiqued urban districts for tending to focus on narrative reading and writing, and said her district was “missing the mark on the equity issue” by not focusing on “the structure of reading and writing” in expository texts. The teacher claimed that she was meeting the objectives of English Language Development by providing “explicit” instruction in “breaking down the text,” strategies such as “key words,” and “analytic skills in writing.” Interestingly, she framed her main goal of implementing literacy strategy instruction as linked with NCLB’s rhetoric of achieving educational equity for all students (Metz, 2008).

Another goal was teaching students to “think like historians” and know “how to construct a historical argument.” When I asked what she meant, she responded a bit tentatively: “Well, to me, it means that you take an event and you think about, ‘Why was that important?’ and that in some way, they can describe the significance of the event.” I asked for an example and she used the Declaration of Independence:

Well, for example . . . minimally, that they could see that the colonists were angry, and that they did something about it. Now to add on to that, they could understand that the colonists were angry at having laws passed where they had no say by a government that really was at that point so separate and foreign to the colonists. Uh and then to take that further, a kid that’s really able to do some thinking with it would be able to see . . . one of the outcomes of this anger was the Declaration of Independence, and that that document expresses the anger that the colonists felt . . .

Ms. Monroe seemed to understand historical thinking and argument in terms of literacy skills such as stating the main ideas from the textbook, explaining cause and effect, and narrating a sequence of events.

Additional goals included teaching “metacognition” and “critical thinking” about the kinds of texts students were reading and what they were being asked to do on tests and assignments, for example, how to identify a cause and effect question and “make their T chart.” She said she was “pretty opposed” to standardized tests, but realized “the kids have to take them.” Along with raising test scores she also wanted to send on students ready to succeed at the next level:

Yeah, I want them to do well on those tests. . . . but what really is more satisfying to me is having the middle school teacher say, “Well, your kids were really prepared.” Or having the kids come back and say,
"Well, when they talked about this kind of paragraph, we knew about evidence and supporting evidence.

She believed that teaching expository reading and writing strategies and skills was fundamental to preparing students for middle school and beyond.

Testing

Ms. Monroe expressed ambivalence about standardized testing, but her school and district were committed to raising achievement. She verbalized frustration with the district’s benchmark testing; she said it did not inform her understanding of students’ learning and speculated that other teachers were inappropriately modeling their practice on standardized tests. Nonetheless on February 1st when I observed students taking one, Ms. Monroe used it to practice reading skills and strategies by asking questions while they worked on the reading passage about George Washington. She asked students to predict: “When we read a biography what do we expect to find out?” She also asked an inference question about why it was significant that Washington was the first President. A recitation that addressed this second question ensued. The teacher spoke with students about what the test questions were asking them to do and reminded them to figure out word meanings using context. She continued to scaffold subsequent parts of the benchmark test. At the end she empathized with students, acknowledging that the district was overly focused on testing, yet tried to motivate them by warning that if they did not do well they would have to “take strategic reading at middle school next year.” She said, “This is your ticket to an elective,” and added that students should give her their “best effort.” The teacher used the mid-year test to reinforce the skills and strategies she was teaching. Notwithstanding Ms. Monroe’s criticism of test-driven instruction, this observation indicated the overlap between the content of her instruction and what was required by the standardized tests.

The year after my study when I checked test scores in the fourth and fifth grades at Lincoln between 2004 and 2010, I noticed that the fourth grade reading scores were almost always higher than the fifth grade scores, which indicated that students’ achievement decreased slightly from one grade to the next. It is possible that Ms. Monroe felt pressure to compete with her fourth grade colleagues in raising achievement, but this is just conjecture. During my interview with the principal she clearly conveyed her longstanding concern with test scores, and claimed that Lincoln’s placement in Program Improvement had been an error. She expressed gratitude for the consultants that helped faculty raise achievement and strengthen the school’s standing. The principal also congratulated Ms. Monroe on her efforts, recognizing in particular her demands
for student participation during social studies lessons and preparation for middle school.

**Professional Development**

Ms. Monroe’s experiences with professional development, and especially those with Mr. Carver, seemed to have the biggest influence on her instructional goals and methods. She spoke about four different experiences as being very helpful. One was training in a new classroom management system. Another was two days of G.L.A.D. training (Guided Language Acquisition Development). Having representatives of small groups report to the class from a line across the back of the room and breaking down sentences were adapted from G.L.A.D. Ms. Monroe also participated in a Teaching American History grant, and said that a lesson study experience was especially enlightening. But the dominant influence on her practice was clearly her work with Mr. Carver and his program, which revolved around teaching literacy strategies through history.

A particularly powerful theme that emerged from a summer institute she did with Mr. Carver was the relationship between literacy and equity. She told me that seeing other teachers’ examples of written analysis produced by suburban students “really opened her eyes.” She complained about the personal narrative emphasis of a popular writing program: “What do they think? Every poor kid has to write about their neighborhood, because they don’t have anything else to say? When these guys out in the suburbs are looking at reading a piece of history and analyzing it. Who’s going to get into college?” Ms. Monroe told me her concerns were reinforced by conversations with high school and college teachers she met at another institute, who said their students came academically unprepared from elementary and middle school. This input reinforced the importance of her culminating assignment, the five-paragraph essay on the Declaration of Independence.

The conference presentation delivered by Ms. Monroe and Mr. Carver that I attended in March distilled the instruction I observed in the classroom. The handout they distributed stated the premise of their approach – that improving student achievement was accomplished through disciplinary knowledge and discipline-specific literacy skills. It outlined the steps in planning a unit on the causes of the American Revolution and identified the reading and writing strategies students would practice, planning backwards from the final essay on the Declaration of Independence that would conclude the unit. The emphasis on deconstructing text and constructing written responses to specified questions using key words paralleled the lessons I observed. Historical analysis consisted of identifying a chain of events related by cause and effect. A flyer about Mr. Carver’s professional development organization clearly stated that its goal was to develop literacy and content knowledge “as measured by” state tests.
Discussion and Implications

With its varied instructional formats, prevalence of small group work, and notable student participation, Ms. Monroe’s lessons seemed to hold greater potential for meaningful instruction than those described by Boyle-Baise et al. (2008). Relative to other fourth and fifth grade classrooms, Ms. Monroe devoted a substantial amount of time to social studies (Pace, 2008, 2011). Additionally, the teacher employed tools and techniques that addressed expository writing as well as reading. However, her approach revealed pitfalls identified by strategy instruction scholars over the last three decades.

First, emphasis on literacy instruction directed students’ attention away from learning history and towards the completion of tasks that reproduced a simplified version of textbook knowledge. The almost exclusive use of the history textbook reinforced a narrow conception of history that revolved around simple cause and effect relationships. Attention to text features was occasional, and graphics that enriched the text were avoided because the teacher viewed them as a distraction. Students did not do research using multiple sources, recommended for fifth graders (Stodolsky, 1988). The essay at the end of the semester on the Declaration of Independence that required synthesis of information was evaluated on the basis of a rubric that specified the content for each paragraph; it consisted of thirty-three items. It steered students towards creating a formulaic response rather than making sense of the political relationships, issues, and events that led to the founding of the United States. Thus, the study of history was made routine.

Second, despite the academic heterogeneity of the class, instruction focused less on strategies and more on skills that inappropriately lowered the cognitive level of academic work (Doyle, 1981; Stodolsky, 1988), especially as the semester progressed. Students did not learn to select and use strategies independently and when having difficulty, but followed them as rote procedures. Reading and writing devolved into technical tasks instead of meaning-making endeavors.

Third, instruction did not support students’ understanding. Strategies were not organized into pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading activities as explained by Massey and Heafner (2004). Lessons often did not start with a clear purpose, and connections between important concepts and students’ prior knowledge were not consistently made. Therefore students were not assisted in building a situation model (Kintsch, 1998), which would engage them in the co-production of historical knowledge and deepen their understanding of the text (Wills, 2006, 2007).

Fourth, students were bored by social studies. The tasks and assignments lacked intrinsic value. They were not challenged to think about important issues
on a deeper level or perform in ways that tapped their intellectual abilities and interests. Although they found academic work laborious, students demonstrated procedural cooperation with their peers and the teacher in class, but not substantive engagement with learning. Perhaps students did feel better prepared for middle school. As Kyle, “It’s a lot of talking, writing . . . she’s preparing us for middle school, where the teacher will talk, and you take notes the whole time, so I think it’s helpful.” Albeit a potentially accurate statement, this is a sad commentary on the state of secondary education.

Although it documents just one example of teaching practice, this case study shows that social studies may be undermined even when instructional time is devoted to it and professional development aimed at raising achievement purports to support it. The implications of this research are especially critical because it resonates with other studies. Despite the rhetoric of NCLB, educational opportunities among schools remain unequal (Metz, 2008). For example, studies show that economically disadvantaged and minority students receive inferior citizenship education compared to their affluent and white peers (Hess, 2008; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). The increased marginalization of social studies under NCLB intensifies that problem (Pace, 2008). In my larger study, I found that in Ms. Monroe’s classroom, located in the lowest income school serving the largest proportion of minority students, concerns about testing and literacy intruded upon the study of history more than in the other classrooms I observed (Pace, 2011). Although these concerns seemed appropriate in Yeager and Pinder’s (2006) study of history teaching in low performing schools, they did not result in high quality instruction for Ms. Monroe’s students. In fact, this case reinforces Bartolomé’s (1994b) warning against turning strategy instruction into a “methods fetish” that perpetuates a drive towards deficit remediation instead of responsive teaching.

My findings also underscore the need for improved professional development so that potential problems of strategy instruction can be avoided. I am not arguing that integrating literacy instruction in social studies is doomed to failure. But it must not undermine subject matter. Teachers need long-term assistance to develop deeper understanding of educational purposes and theories that underlie strategy instruction models. Teachers’ growth requires opportunities to observe effective classroom implementation of robust models and receive coaching within their own classroom. Additionally, teacher education programs need to attend more to social studies content and practice for their elementary school candidates (Bolick, Adams, & Wilcos, 2008: Russell, 2009).

Social studies education needs a revival. It is common knowledge, and reflected in recent NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores, that Americans’ knowledge of history and civics is at a low level. In synch with
high stakes accountability in states where history does not count (Grant, 2006),
the most well-resourced and widespread educational reforms often leave out
social studies (e.g. Supovitz, 2006). A recent Education Week article, “Experts
say social studies are ‘left behind’” (Sparks, 2011), conveys the concerns
expressed by scholars at a National Research Council meeting about the neglect
of social studies by both NCLB and the Common Core State Standards
Initiative. An additional concern is current state standards in “social and
behavioral topics” that require only basic skills such as memorization rather than
high-level skills such as evaluation and connection making (p. 11).

Ironically, content knowledge is essential for reading comprehension
(Kintsch, 1998); thus, narrowing the curriculum may actually defeat the purpose
of emphasizing literacy. We need qualitative research that closely examines
different approaches to social studies teaching that appropriately balances
history and literacy instruction. There is not yet adequate analysis of how this
works, particularly in elementary school classrooms, in the current context of
high stakes accountability. Research must attend to the experiences and
perspectives of students, which are of utmost importance yet often neglected in
discussions of teaching and educational policy.

My findings lend support to prior research that examines problematic
consequences of gearing instruction towards standardized test preparation
(McNeil, 2000; Valli & Chambliss, 2007; Watanabe, 2007). Ironically, it is
questionable that Ms. Monroe did effectively prepare her students for the tests.
Although testing of elementary school social studies in some states may result in
more instructional time for the subject, it does not necessarily generate more
powerful teaching and learning (Grant, 2001; Lintner, 2006). Governor of
California Jerry Brown has “launched an extraordinary broadside against the
current national obsession with testing that continues to dominate school reform
efforts across the state and nation” (Freedberg, 2011). If improving public
education is truly the aim of reform, policymakers must pay more attention to
studies that show the failure of high stakes testing to do so.

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