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Preserving Social Studies as Core Curricula in an Era of Common Core Reform

David W. Denton¹ & Cindy Sink²

Abstract

Education reform over the last two decades has changed perceptions of core curricula. Although social studies has traditionally been part of the core, emphasis on standards-based teaching and learning, along with elaborate accountability schemes, is causing unbalanced treatment of subjects. While the research literature indicates teachers are spending less time on social studies, perceptions about the subject are more complicated. Some educators accept the value of social studies knowledge and skills, while others see it as an auxiliary subject for supporting test achievement. Integration is one way elementary school teachers reconcile the need to focus on tested disciplines, while holding to traditional notions of the core curricula. Results from a case study involving elementary teachers show integration as the preferred method for teaching social studies. Participants, however, also indicated they were unable to achieve effective integration due to time constraints, limited training, and inadequate curricular resources. The trajectory of standards-based reform suggests educators will continue to encounter obstacles that impede integration. Systematic change that preserves the place of social studies as part of the core curricula is unlikely. Nevertheless, adoption of Common Core standards presents an opportunity for educators to reexamine the merits of social studies integration.

Keywords: case study, Common Core, core curricula, elementary, integration, social studies

Introduction

Traditionally, subject areas considered part of the core curricula have included English, mathematics, science, and social studies (Tyler, 2004). However, the reality of high-stakes testing since 2001 has elevated literacy and mathematics above other subjects. For example, the Center on Education Policy (2007) reports 62% of elementary schools have increased time for literacy and math, while simultaneously reducing time in non-tested subjects by up to 145 minutes per week. Research by Heafner and Fitchett (2012) corroborate this trend, indicating time for social studies has decreased in grades three through five, by up to 60 minutes per week. Nevertheless, despite evidence to the contrary, Holloway and Chiodo (2009) assert that social studies concepts are taught, just not in the “allotted portion of time” normally assigned to

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departmentalized planning (p. 237). Rather, according to Holloway and Chiodo, elementary school teachers are teaching social studies concepts by integrating them with reading, language arts, mathematics, and other disciplines. As an alternative to both perspectives, Houser (1995) and Bisland (2012) claim elementary teachers were neglecting social studies well before the era of standardized testing. Reasons cited by Houser and Bisland for diminished attention include pressure to cover other content, faulty teacher preparation, lack of administrative support, and dearth of content knowledge among elementary teachers.

Though diminished attention to social studies in elementary grades is lamentable, it could be argued the problem is a symptom of the way educators prioritize what students should learn, and to what level of precision. The history of education is full of examples showing how each new generation of educator contends with the question, *What knowledge is most worth learning?*, just as Herbert Spencer did in 1854. For Spencer, the answer was scientific knowledge. Yet if the content of standardized test items in the current era is any indication, the knowledge most worth learning today is subject matter required for mastering basic literacy and mathematics. Standardized tests reveal priorities about what matters. Students are tested in reading, writing, and math, suggesting *disintegration* of disciplines through assessment. It can be further argued that attempts to improve achievement through high-stakes testing has resulted in greater separation between subjects, contrary to principles of integration, which some suggest promote critical thinking skills such as transfer, error detection, and concept learning (Haskell, 2000; Thomas, 2007).

Shifting priorities through emphasis on test achievement has brought the place of social studies within the core curricula into question. It has also required creative solutions by elementary teachers for reconciling their beliefs about social studies and how to teach in a system that may neglect, dismiss, or marginalize non-tested disciplines. One way primary grade teachers manage this tension is through integration (Holloway & Chiodo, 2009; Pederson, 2007). However, integration means different things to different people, as indicated by the various definitions presented over the years (Czerniak, Weber, Sandmann, & Ahern, 1999).

Integration and Integrated Curricula

Banks (1993) defines integration as “the extent to which teachers use examples, data, and information from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate the key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline” (p. 25). Alternatively, Parker

(2005) defines integration as an “approach that purposefully draws together knowledge, perspectives, and methods of inquiry from more than one discipline to develop a more powerful understanding of a central idea, issue, person, or event” (pp. 452-453). Similarly, Badley (2009) defines integration as “curriculum or instruction that combines, draws upon or encourages students to see connections between the contents of two or more academic disciplines” (p. 115). Lastly, Beane (1995) defines integration as

not simply an organizational device requiring cosmetic changes or realignments in lesson plans across various subject areas... it is a way of thinking about what schools are for... about the uses of knowledge... curriculum integration is the search for self- and social meaning (p. 616).

The way integrated curricula is conceived also varies. For example, Beane (1995) describes integrated curricula as design of learning activities around projects that depend on a variety of disciplines for addressing personally and socially meaningful problems. Alternatively, Hinde (2005) is less theoretical, describing integrated curricula with principles of effective practice, such as 1) activities aligned with lesson objectives, 2) lessons planned so they preserve the integrity of social studies content, 3) learning segments designed to account for prior knowledge and potential misconceptions, and 4) use of authentic knowledge and skills that transfer between disciplines. Czerniak et al. (1999) provide more detail, citing several professional organizations for a comprehensive conception of integrated curricula, but again a conception that exemplifies effective practice. According to Czerniak et al., integrated curricula 1) maintains content integrity while facilitating connections between disciplines, 2) fosters collaboration, 3) promotes democracy, 4) deploys multiple learning strategies, 5) respects diverse ideas, 6) uses a variety of sources including experimentation, 7) applies symbol systems for representing, and 8) uses different types of assessments.

Examples of integrated lessons and activities in elementary classrooms take many forms. Integration results as students or teachers select problems or controversial issues to resolve (Hinde, 2005). For example, grade three students investigate the effects of immigration on communities through biography, demographic analysis, and geography. Alternatively, traditional units may be revised around a theme (Wraga, 1993). For example, grade two students learn about their community by identifying recreational activities, their geographic location and distance from school, and paint pictures and write poems to symbolize what the activities mean to them.

Another variation on the theme approach is to merge disciplines so students construct their own generalizations about phenomenon (Parker, 2005), such as grade four students concluding that culture is shaped by environment. Another example, one that retains traditional subject divisions, is sequencing. Sequencing includes activities from different disciplines organized to show relationships. For example, a grade five class learning about continents and oceans in social studies, simultaneously studies oceanography during science, and reads *Island of the Blue Dolphins* in language arts (Hinde, 2005).

Effects of Integration on Student Learning

Educators at the elementary level identify integration as a way to improve learning (Bisland, 2012; Hinde, 2005) even though systematic empirical analyses showing the effects of integration are rare (Ellis & Fouts, 2001). Nevertheless, some research exists which continues to persuade educators of the positive effects of integration. For example, Vars (1997) summarized the effects of curriculum integration on student learning and concluded that it was equivalent, and often better, in comparison to conventional departmentalized programs. Ellis and Fouts (2001), however, cautioned that the analysis by Vars is more of a synthesis, rather than a critical evaluation of empirical evidence and they also suggest that too few studies exist for any kind of meaningful analysis. Hartzler (2000), however, conducted a meta-analysis of integrated curriculum programs and found they had a positive effect on student performance on state tests and program developed assessments. Hartzler proposed that teachers taking an integrated approach need not fear student failure or declining test scores. In summary, while systematic empirical research on the effects of curriculum integration is limited, integration as an approach to instructional design is routinely associated with higher-level thinking skills, unified sense of process, real-world application, heightened motivation, and depth of understanding (Ellis & Fouts, 2001; Vars, 1991).

However, integration in an era of common core reform may also be used as a diversionary phrase, satisfying traditional notions of the core curricula, but in reality freeing educators to focus their efforts on improving test achievement. While the use of integration for deflection may seem implausible, there is precedence for observing gaps between what teachers say they believe about instruction and what they actually practice in the classroom, and research suggests this is the case for some social studies educators. For example, Bailey, Shaw, and Hollifield (2006) found that primary teachers reported preferring inquiry-based instruction, but

the same teachers also reported using it infrequently. Similarly, Faulkner and Cook (2006) surveyed middle school teachers and found they reported using a wide array of instructional practices, while simultaneously indicating they relied mostly on discussion, lecture, and worksheets. Similar discrepancies between what teachers say they prefer and what they actually do have been found by Bolinger and Warren (2007) and Leming, Ellington and Schug (2006).

Elementary teachers who claim integration as a method for making time for social studies in an era of standards-based change are equally vulnerable to saying one thing and doing another. Some reasons for this are that effective integration requires comprehensive understanding of multiple subjects, with insight about how and when subjects relate, along with opportunities to plan integrated lessons. Integration is also contrary to typical subject matter divisions, which ease lesson planning and assessment, enabling teachers to handle objectives and activities as discrete elements. Even when integration is used, it may be superficial since teachers have to contend with pressure to raise and maintain test scores (Winstead, 2011). In addition, not unlike other educational interventions, professional training and curricular resources may be lacking, diminishing opportunities for teachers to integrate efficiently (Pederson, 2007).

Obstacles to Effective Integration

Time is perhaps the most significant obstacle teachers at the elementary encounter as they attempt to teach social studies, while simultaneously attending to three other major subject areas (Bisland, 2012). There is no shortage of studies indicating issues with time. Along with findings reported by the Center on Education Policy (2007) and Heafner and Fitchett (2012), VanFossen (2005) provides further evidence social studies teaching is becoming increasingly marginalized across kindergarten to grade five. Similar to previous research, VanFossen cites lack of administrative support, lack of pressure to perform on a state-wide social studies assessment, and lack of clear understanding of the goals of social studies learning. Yet, a more troubling finding reported by VanFossen is less than one in three elementary teachers associated social studies with its foremost purpose, citizenship education.

While time is readily quantifiable, perceptions of the importance of social studies are more difficult to measure, but they are also indicative of the status of social studies as a diminished component of the core curricula. For example, Lintner (2006) surveyed elementary principals and found they ranked social studies sixth in importance, out of nine subjects, behind science and before physical education. Lintner also reported some principals valuing social

studies for its focus on other cultures and global citizenship, yet still more principals viewed social studies as a supplement for enhancing reading and writing. Similarly, Gibson (2012) found that some educators ranked reading, writing, and math above social studies, along with teachers reporting they struggled to understand the purpose of teaching social studies concepts, such as awareness of other cultures and citizenship. Vogler (2011) reported similar results, indicating that teachers integrated information such as historical facts, rather than concepts. One shared conclusion from this research is that effective social studies education requires more than just time. It requires continuous training and curricular resources to assist concept teaching through effective practices such as inquiry-based activities and reflective examination (Bisland, 2012). Not the least of these requirements is emphasis on the goals and mission of social studies, in particular citizenship education.

Integration to Preserve Social Studies as Part of the Core

Excluding significant changes to the trajectory of standards-based reform, one solution for managing non-tested subjects is to rely on the promise of content integration. However, as previously noted, empirical studies testing the effects of integration on student learning shows mixed results (Hinde, 2005). Nevertheless, Vars (1991) contends that students involved in integrative or interdisciplinary studies perform as well as students who approached curricula in traditional ways. Alternatively, Schug and Cross (1998) argue that keeping subjects separate and teaching through direct instruction has a greater impact on student achievement. Since results compiled by Vars and Schug and Cross more than a decade ago, research dealing with integration has increased. However, the literature is somewhat confined by the number of descriptive studies across a dispersed number of subjects, such as integrating social studies with technology (Maloy, Poirier, Smith, & Edwards, 2010); science (Singletary & Miller, 2009); mathematics (Kinniburgh & Bryd, 2008); visual arts (Lucey & Laney, 2009); and literacy (MacPhee & Whitecotton, 2011). One reason for the dearth of empirical studies is that integration is challenging to describe, hard to implement, and even more difficult to measure (Hinde, 2005).

Nevertheless, standards-based reform has fueled consistent interest in integrating social studies in an era of standardized testing and accountability. For example, searching the Educational Research Information Center database for peer reviewed articles using the terms *standards*, *integration*, and *social studies* produces more than 30 results. However, growth in the

literature dealing with Common Core reform and social studies appears to be relatively undeveloped. For example, searching the same database for *Common Core* and *integration* produces 10 results, but only a few of these studies deal with social studies. For example, Berson and Berson (2013) have written on the connection between social studies and Common Core by linking literacy skills with adoption of multiple perspectives. In addition, Kenna and Russell (2015) have investigated changes in secondary social studies teachers' instructional practices as a result of adopting Common Core standards. The articles by Berson and Berson and Kenna and Russell are likely the first of many which will make connections between Common Core and social studies knowledge and skills.

The brief analysis of literature covering obstacles to integration and potential for integration to promote social studies within elementary classrooms shows levels of underlying complexity. Some of these complexities include allocation of time, prioritization of tested subjects, and training and resources for teaching integrated lessons. In addition, adoption of Common Core standards in many states has added another layer of uncertainty. While studies exist showing the trajectory of social studies in an era of standards-based change, there are few studies investigating integration as a way to reinvigorate social studies education. Additional information is needed for reexamining integration as a possible strategy for maintaining, or even improving, the place of social studies as part of the core curricula. The study that follows attempts to address a few of these gaps by reexamining time devoted to social studies instruction, perceptions of integration as an approach to social studies instruction, curricula used for integration, and available resources and training for planning and deploying integrated lessons. Although information was gathered using case study procedures, focused on a convenience sample of participants, results provide helpful points of departure for further investigation.

Methods and Results

The study was divided into exploratory and confirmatory phases, according to procedures outlined by Creswell and Clark (2007), with the purpose of validating trends found in current literature, along with identifying new questions for investigation. The exploratory phase included a convenience sample of 11 student teachers earning endorsements in elementary education. Student teachers observed their mentor teachers for several weeks, and responded to open-ended

questions about the amount of instruction occurring in social studies and other subjects, and also the type of curricula mentor teachers used for social studies instruction.

Results of the exploratory phase indicated student teachers observing between 0 and 90 minutes of social studies instruction per week, with an average of 60 minutes. These results confirm findings from other studies on the subject of time dedicated to social studies instruction (see Bisland, 2012; McGuire, 2007; National Council for the Social Studies, 2008; Pederson, 2007). Another result was absence of dedicated social studies curricula for social studies instruction. Rather, three students observed use of social skills and literacy curricula, and what they identified as integration of social studies concepts. For example, one student teacher reported the mentor had just started using *WorldScapes*, a literacy program including various types of texts (Hand to Mind, 2013) for teaching social studies. Two other student teachers observed mentors using *Second Step* and *Steps to Respect*, curricula for teaching social emotional knowledge and skills (Committee for Children, 2012). The majority of observations made by student teachers, however, indicated their mentors were not teaching social studies, or that mentors were integrating social studies with other subjects.

Information gathered from student teachers about how their mentors handled social studies in the exploratory phase prompted questions around integration. Specifically, whether elementary teachers in the convenience sample taught social studies through integration, the kinds of curricula used for integration, and whether teachers had access to resources and training for effective integration.

Data was collected from 14 elementary school teachers using a survey with 14 items, scaled from 1 – strongly agree to 5 – strongly disagree, and two open-ended questions. A different group of 14 student teachers, separate from the exploratory phase, requested that their mentor teachers complete the survey over the course of several weeks. Participating mentors who completed the survey worked in five districts around a large metropolitan area. Schools where teachers were employed ranged from 550 to 270 students, with varying rates of socio-economic status as indicated by receipt of free or reduced price meals between 88 and 10 percent.

Similar to results found in the exploratory phase, participating teachers identified integration as their preferred method for teaching social studies content ($M = 1.50$). Participants also reported possessing knowledge and skills required for integration ($M = 1.64$) and that students were being instructed in social studies-specific concepts as well as fields such as

economics and geography ($M = 1.97$). Teachers were neutral ($M = 3.50$) when asked whether they had enough time to plan integrated lessons and also indicated they would like to learn more strategies for integrating social studies with tested subjects ($M = 2.43$). On a similar item, teachers indicated they spent more time teaching basic skills in comparison to social studies subject matter ($M = 2.29$). Teachers were somewhat positive when asked if they would spend more time on social studies if they were provided additional training ($M = 2.67$). However, teachers were somewhat neutral when asked if they would spend more time on social studies if their district showed more leadership in the area of social studies instruction ($M = 2.86$). Figure 1 summarizes results from the survey.

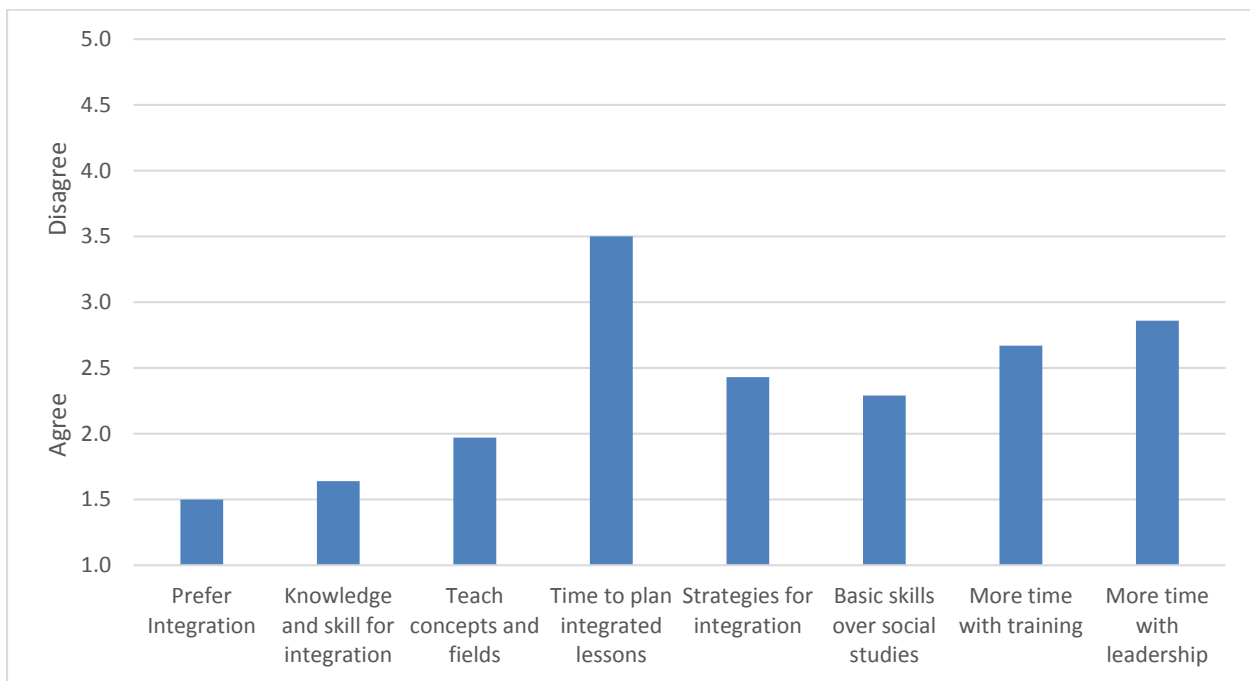


Figure 1. Survey results from fourteen elementary school teaches about their use of integration for teaching social studies.

On open-ended responses, teachers indicated some cohesiveness with the kind of curricula used for teaching social studies. Five teachers reported using *Storypath*, an integrative approach based on storytelling (Interact, 2013), while four others indicated using a textbook, and three reported using *Social Studies Alive*. One teacher reported using integration and another teacher simply reported *other*. Unlike results from the exploratory phase, no teachers reported using *Second Steps* or *Steps to Respect* as substitutes for social studies curricula. Teachers indicated variation in school support in terms of integration. For example, one teacher wrote, “There are no resources or curricula to teach social studies in my district - I try to integrate it

whenever I can.” Similarly, another participant wrote, “District standards and guidelines are totally unsupported by materials or professional development.”

Discussion

Use of integration. Results from both phases of the study suggest participating elementary teachers identified integration as the primary method used for teaching social studies content. Similarly, teachers reported having sufficient knowledge and skill for deploying integrative pedagogy. However, these claims were contradicted by results showing a lack of time for planning integrated lessons and the need for more integration strategies. Likewise, teachers inferred the importance of social studies by reporting that they taught related concepts and knowledge, but at the same time teachers reported that basic skills were somewhat more important. Similar to studies by Bailey, Shaw, and Hollifield (2006) and Faulkner and Cook (2006), participating teachers reported contradictory information, perhaps because they were both expressing their beliefs about social studies, but also reporting the reality of how they focus their time on tested subjects.

Curricula used for integration. Participating teachers reported using a wide variety of curricula for integrating social studies, including social skills curricula, literacy curricula, and traditional textbooks. Other teachers reported using project-based curricula, or reported no curricula at all. According to Hinde (2005), there is little consensus about what an integrated curriculum looks like, and results of this study concur with the variability that comes with integration. However, whether history, geography, anthropology, economics, or other fields were included as part of participating teachers’ efforts of integration were unclear. There was no evidence that “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” was occurring (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.). Rather, results seemed to validate findings by Bailey, Shaw, and Hollifield (2006), who reported that “teachers would teach social studies when, or if, they got around to it” (p. 22).

Training and resources for integration. Participants narrowly indicated they would spend more time on social studies if they had additional training. Their enthusiasm for district leadership in the area of social studies instruction was even more neutral. However, participants did not indicate outright dismissal of social studies or integrative pedagogy. The contrary seemed to be true. Participants identified integration as their preferred method and they also validated the importance of social studies. Nevertheless, there was no evidence to suggest teachers were

engaged in the kinds of activities called for by Gibson (2012), Lintner (2006), and Vogler (2011) necessary for sustaining an integrated approach to content, such as concept teaching, inquiry, and reflective analysis.

Conclusion

Standards-based reorganization and accountability schemes measured by test achievement show little sign of abating. Even if educational leaders abandon reform activities implemented over the last decade, the momentum behind these efforts is sure to prohibit balanced treatment of subjects. The precarious state of education budgets and consequences associated with low test scores are exerting additional pressure that discourage reapportioning time and resources to subjects like social studies. Standards-based reorganization and accountability activities are changing the way educators think about core curricula. The latest example of this is adoption of Common Core standards, which are for literacy and mathematics learning, rather than acquisition of social science knowledge and skills. Nevertheless, some standards clearly overlap with social studies concepts. For instance, Common Core requires students be able to cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary sources or distinguish fact from opinion to make a reasoned judgment. The overall emphasis, however, is clearly focused on improving achievement associated with literacy and mathematics.

At the same time, most educators at the elementary level embrace the use of integration as a way to reconcile the value of social studies content with the necessity of test achievement. However, results from this study suggest the sample of teachers claim integration as their preferred method for social studies instruction, but struggle to achieve effective implementation.

Claiming integration as a solution for teaching social studies content without discussing issues of time, training, or curricular resources, or the pressure exerted by high-stakes testing, is disingenuous. Circumstances suggest additional compromise, even though many advocates of social studies teaching and learning are sure to see additional concessions as untenable. Alternatively, there are others who already recognize the need for a pragmatic approach. Adoption of Common Core standards presents the next opportunity for practical solutions. It is also an opportunity for educators and researchers to reexamine the merits of integration, and the necessity to address implementation. Although small in comparison to what is needed, Table 1 shows some examples for promoting this work. Nevertheless, expecting a few examples will

cause educators to invest significant time and resources toward integration is optimistic, but any strategy that preserves social studies as part of the core curricula is certainly worth considering.

Table 1. Integration of Social Studies Content with Common Core standards

Common Core Literacy Standard	Social Studies Content	Integrative Learning Activity
Provide a concluding statement or section related to information	Summarize major ideas in a conclusion statement	Work in pairs to summarize two ideas from Lee's Resolution of 1776 claiming America's independence from Britain
Distinguish the literal and nonliteral meanings of words and phrases in context	Recognize instances in which more than one interpretation of factual material is valid	Listen to MLK's <i>I Have a Dream</i> speech and then interpret two phrases
Read grade-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression	Understand and analyze causal factors in major events in history	Study and analyze poetry, such as <i>Western Wagons</i> , by Rosemary and Stephen Vincent Benét, then recite a portion of the poem
Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations	Understand that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events	Read historical fiction such as <i>Crispin</i> , <i>Catherine</i> , <i>Called Birdy</i> , or <i>Robin's Country</i> and compare and contrast perspectives
Identify the reasons and evidence a speaker provides to support particular points	Identify a situation in which a decision is required	Listen to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's speech declaring war on Japan in 1941 and then discuss three supporting details

Report on a topic or text or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes	Understand and apply reasoning skills to conduct research, deliberate, form and evaluate positions	Study and collect data on a local school issue, such as playground equipment or lunch room; share a presentation of results
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Common Core Math Standard	Social Studies Content	Integrative Learning Activity
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Draw a picture graph or a bar graph to represent a data set with up to four categories	Understand that members of a community make choices among products and services that have costs and benefits	Conduct a survey of four common products, such as paper towels or pizza, and represent results in a graph
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Generate data by measuring lengths using rulers marked with halves and fourths of an inch	Understand and apply how maps and globes are used to display regions	Determine efficient and scenic routes between school and a local store or park
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Represent real world and mathematical problems by graphing points in the first quadrant of the coordinate plane	Construct and use maps to show and analyze information about European settlement in the Americas	Use a coordinate plane and geographic coordinates to analyze and compare early American settlements, such as Savannah, Williamsburg, and New York
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Summarize numerical data sets in relation to their context	Understand the geographic factors that influence the movement of groups of people in the past or present	Infer geographic influences from statistics of immigrant populations in the U.S. from 1860s to 1960s
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