

Opportunity Costs of Planning with Mandated Assessments:

A Case Study of Fourth Grade Social Studies

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Abstract

This single case study contributes to research on mandated state assessments in social studies. The State of Delaware has assessed state social studies standards since 2000. The results from the assessment remain relatively flat, in spite of the publication of results for each school in local newspapers. Currently there is no accountability associated with the assessment. The researcher presents data from interviews and observations of a fourth grade teacher of a struggling school whose students score above average, not only for similar demographically defined schools, but for all schools. This study provides insight into how a fourth grade teacher maintains her reputation as an exemplary teacher while prioritizing, modifying, and balancing the recommended curriculum under narrow time constraints. The researcher draws conclusions from the findings and provides recommendations for future study.

Keywords: elementary social studies, case study, mandatory state assessment, Delaware

type of questions, but because the assessment is administered electronically, students are not exposure to the same format. Jessica identified the review package as one that she does not heavily modify.

While it is encouraging that the students are exposed to the concepts and content of fourth grade social studies, there is concern about whether students will recognize the concepts when presented in a different format.

Conclusions

From this study, four themes emerged: time, collaboration, reputation, and alignment to standards. Of those themes, time was the most prevalent and the one theme that cannot be easily controlled by the classroom teacher. School schedules are set by the administrators of each school. There was a strict adherence to the schedule, which in turn insured that social studies was taught at Armstrong Elementary School unlike previous findings where social studies time was substituted for additional time in mathematics, (Thorton & Houser, 1996). The time allotted to social studies at Armstrong was reduced by 33 percent from the previous year. Should the state mandated social studies test be used in school and district accountability in the 2015-2016 school year, this could change. In fact, accountability was a driving force behind all elements of planning curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Teachers should be afforded the opportunity to prioritize and modify instructional units. Grant and VanSledright (2014) offered advice on how to choose what social studies subject-matter to teach. These actions should not be done in isolation, but through collaborative efforts. Unfortunately very little collaboration about social studies between school grade-level teachers was evident in this study. Unexpectedly, collaboration did occur across school boundaries. As a veteran teacher, Jessica Williamson had opportunity to work with teachers from other schools in the district and communicate with them about social studies planning. Although there is a

district social studies council that meets on a regular basis, it is recommended that teachers in this group be afforded time to collaborate with peers on an unstructured basis to encourage building bonds across the district.

Maintaining a solid reputation is closely related to the standards and state assessment. Currently the state assessment is the only common assessment of social studies in the state elementary system and only administered in fourth grade. Assessment scores are made public for both districts and schools (including charter schools). Teachers' individual class and student scores are not made public. Student scores are made available to classroom teachers, administrators, and parents; and class scores are only available to district teachers and district administrators. This reporting method is not likely to change with a new accountability system. To Jessica, her reputation, as rated by the assessment scores was important and was reflected in her conscientious adherence to state standards and curriculum units.

The tradeoff that accompanies an accountability system that includes social studies does not have to include the autonomy to plan and implement social studies. Without a change in the time allotted for teaching and planning social studies, greater opportunity costs may occur. Although Libresco (2014) found that teachers welcomed an assessment that measured critical thinking skills, teachers may feel pressure to assess students in ways that mimic the state assessment. Lost would be opportunities to make connections to other subjects, group projects, and teaching to the larger concepts of the social studies. In conclusion, this study will serve to illuminate an alternative to 'teaching to the test', as Jessica Williamson found a balance between planning with limited time, adapting resources that best suited her students, and upholding her reputation as one of the 'best'.

Future Studies

While this single case study was focused on one exemplary teacher's practice, it can serve as an example for conducting similar studies using participants who are elementary teachers facing a mandatory social studies assessments. Davis (1997) called for additional case studies in order to "add significantly to the understanding of education" (p.5). It is quite likely that other participants will have alternative methods to strategically combat the issues of time, standards, content, and assessment. Those alternative strategies should be shared and expanded so that social studies can accomplish its main goal of creating effective citizens who not only have knowledge, but can apply that knowledge in order to investigate, analyze, and evaluate current and past events. As Jessica Williamson said to her students, "This is a little world in here and we're trying to teach you all these things so that when you become an adult you can function in society and make good choices". Her way is unique and difficult to strictly replicate, but it works for her and her students. From this study, educators will find new and useful strategies to explore, adapt, and implement; making them their own. These new practices should be communicated, evaluated, revised, and reflected upon; but most of all, these new practices should be shared.

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