Listening to Our Students:

What Their Voices Tell Us About High School Social Studies Classrooms

Carmen Newstreet
Independent Study
Dr. Burnaford
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“... the honeymoon ends and there is a chorus of complaints about these books, how boring they are, how heavy, and why do they have to bring them to school every day? The English students say, Oh, Silas Marner’s a small book, but if they have to carry Giants in the Earth you need a big breakfast, it’s such a big book and it’s so boring. Will they have to carry it every day? Why can’t they leave it in the classroom closet? If you leave it in the closet how are you going to read it? Why can’t we read it in class? All the other teachers tell their classes, Okay, Henry, you read page nineteen, okay, Nancy, you read page twenty, an’ that’s how they finish the book and when they’re reading we can put our heads down an’ take a nap ha ha ha, just kidding, Mr. McCourt.” (McCourt, 245)

The scary thing is, that reading process might have occurred in my classroom. In the decade since the No Child Left Behind legislation was passed, there has been an acknowledged increase in the teaching of reading and mathematics in our schools. (McMurrer, 2008) Social studies teachers lament that their discipline has been shortchanged in this effort, that students are simply not being taught social studies. (O’Connor, 2007) Yet, nationwide, reading scores among elementary school students have been improving, but scores are flat among middle school students and slightly declining among high school seniors. (Rich, 2007) In my school, a portion of our annual budget is spent each year specifically to train content area teachers on reading strategy implementation. I became curious about what was happening within the high school social studies classroom to support reading in the content area.

The nation's high school graduation rate was 74.3% in 2004. Last year, the graduation rate average for our state was slightly lower, 72.4% (Postal, 2007). Clearly, there is a divide between the mandates of standardized testing and the needs of high school students. Additionally, students are bored by the presentation of social studies content. Textbook-bound, heavily language-based activities are uninteresting to students who struggle with language processing. Unfortunately, social studies teachers are the most text-bound of any discipline and perpetuate bad practice (Draper, 2005).
Consequently, across the nation, there has been a call for high school reform. In Florida, this results in an initiative called “High School Reform.” This program has four goals: 1. Increase the academic achievement levels of high school students; 2. Increase the percent of high school graduates; 3. Increase the percent of graduates who begin their postsecondary path to college or career while in a Florida high school; and 4. Change the culture of high school (High School Reform, 2007). In order to increase student academic achievement and graduation rates, students must gain better access to the requisite social studies curriculum.

One way to effect change within the profession is by ensuring teachers are qualified to teach the material. Increasingly, content area teachers are encouraged to pursue a reading endorsement, which may be added to their teaching certification. To acquire this endorsement, the teacher must take the equivalent of 300 hours of continued professional development, either through district in-service training or through college classes. Newly graduated teachers will be required to meet the first two reading competencies. (Approved Options for Obtaining Reading Certification, 2008) These classes represent instruction in six areas of competency: Foundations in Language and Cognition, Foundations in Research Based Practices, Foundations of Assessment, Foundations of Differentiation, Application of Differentiated Instruction, Demonstration of Accomplishment. (Reading Endorsement Competencies, 2008)

The national school reform policy has been well documented in primary schools, where great emphasis has been placed on school reading programs. At this level, there appears to be a gap between professional development on research-based knowledge and actual classroom practices. In addition to an explicit reading program, effective teachers
must focus on academics, keep students on task with clear learning goals, and monitor
student progress through questioning and feedback. Teacher high-level questioning and
performance as a writing coach are key indicators of effective teaching practice leading
to improved achievement in reading. Strong principal leadership and teacher-leaders
have worked as teams to lay the foundation for necessary change towards research-based
practice and reflective teaching, initiating successful school reform. (Taylor, 2005) For
high schools segregated into academic departments, this information is crucial.

Action Research is a process in which teachers examine their own educational
practice systematically using research techniques. It allows teachers the opportunity to
bring a fresh perspective to their classrooms, to critically analyze and reflect upon their
practice, and through such inquiry, to become better practitioners. (Burnaford, ed., 7-9)
Joseph Fischer stated it clearly when he wrote, “The central work of teacher action
research is to identify educational practices and to design ways of helping classrooms
and schools become democratic communities of quality learning and teaching.”
(Burnaford, ed., 30) The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)
recognizes the value of such reflection and encourages teachers to evaluate their own
practice, choosing a videotaped observation and analysis of student work for this
process. (NBPTS, 2008).

One acknowledged research method that may be employed for reflective
classroom teaching is the focus group discussion. The purpose of a focus group is the
gathering of information to ascertain student’s perceptions or thoughts about a particular
issue or classroom practice. As facilitator, the teacher must create a permissive
environment where students feel empowered to share their point of views. In order to be
an effective research technique for data collection, the discussion must be replicable, in order to identify trends and patterns within the study group. Date analysis following the focus group discussion will allow the teacher greater insight into classroom issues and practice. (Krueger, 2000) This element of teacher self-examination and reflection on practice based on documented research techniques is critical to improving student achievement and initiating effective school reform.

**Design of the Action Research Study**

To frame an answer to the research question, “How do high school social studies practices support reading strategy application according to the students?” I thought it best to go to the people who knew, our students. Inspired by this question, I videotaped and analyzed five 40-minute lesson segments of a focus group discussion that asked students to reflect on their reading experiences in the social studies classroom. Reviewing the collected data would reveal the reading classroom practices of social studies teachers in a variety of settings. I hoped to learn that students were learning social studies using a variety of text, and independently implementing reading strategies, taught to them by their teachers.

I facilitated the process by providing students with a short set of questions to focus the discussion, and an altered room arrangement (student desks were placed in a horseshoe shape) to enable discussion. To videotape my classes, I enlisted the assistance of two television and production students. They mounted the camera on a tri-pod at the base of the horseshoe. This enabled them to follow the discussion. I used three methods of analysis to examine this data. To document the video recording, I transcribed the verbal transactions, using numbered lines. To collect additional student feedback, I
assembled written answers to the discussion questions and a survey of student experiences. The analysis of these discussions provided me with interesting student feedback regarding reading instruction in the social studies classroom.

There are limits to what a researcher can learn when relying on student self-reporting. Wendy Baldwin (2000) discusses the inherent mistrust of this type of data. The data can be incorrect because of a conscious bias of the person who in reporting; this bias may occur intentionally or unintentionally. At the same time, she acknowledges that this data acquisition is essential to behavioral research. As such, this is a study about student perceptions of their classrooms and the learning that happens there. This is not a study that purports to detail teacher practice.

The high school where I teach serves a population of 2,331 students, and 38 percent qualify for the federally funded free/reduced price breakfast/lunch program. My classes are mostly senior students, ages sixteen to eighteen. The school student body is increasingly multicultural. My classes are approximately 41 percent Caucasian, 25 percent African American, 23 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian; 47 percent male and 53 percent female. Student reading capabilities range from a low of level one on the state standardized reading examination, to the maximum level score of five. I teach students who have been in this country for less than a year, and a number of National Merit Scholars.

**Implementing the Study with High School Students**

Prior to beginning each focus group discussion, I posted and reviewed discussion norms: one speaker at a time, make eye contact, and silence is acceptable. Students answered the following questions in preparation for the discussion:
1. Let’s begin with how you came to be a part of the Alternative Reading Methods project. What do you know about the project and what do you expect to do as a part of ARM? What do you hope to learn from being in the project?

2. How would you describe your social studies classroom? What types of reading do you enjoy? Why do you like it?

3. Some educators believe that learning to read is important; others argue that reading to learn is important. How would you describe the reading you do in social studies?

4. There is a huge difference between narrative (stories) and expository (factual explanations) text. What types of text do you read in your social studies classroom?

5. Round robin, or oral reading, is a practice that has been identified for use in the content-area classroom. Has your teacher used it? If so, how often? Do you like the practice? What are the relative benefits? Drawbacks?

6. Tell me about the reading method you would identify as the one you most frequently use in your social studies class. How often would you say you use that strategy in a week? Do you like using that method? How did you learn to use the strategy? What is your favorite method for reading social studies text?

7. Some teachers utilize learning strategies that accompany their text instruction. What types of strategies do you independently use? How did you learn to use the strategy? How often would you say you use that strategy in a week?

To analyze the data, I grouped student responses by their instructional level, as assigned by the school. The lowest level readers are “regular” students, intermediate readers are classified into “honors,” and the highest ability readers become Advanced Placement students. Taped discussions were conducted with one group of regular students, two groups of honors students, and two groups of Advanced Placement students; all students involved in the discussions were asked to complete the questionnaire and survey responses.

The Regular Kids – “You don’t get what you are reading.”

Analysis of this 40-minute videotape segment revealed that nine of the sixteen regular students (56%) contributed to the conversation. Many of them echoed Brooke’s sentiment as to why they wanted to participate in the conversation, “I want to learn, like,
other reading methods. And not only, like, how we learn, but also you learn. So when you teach other classes, so they will know . . . like, so you make it easier for them.” I was curious as to how these students, classified at the lowest reading ability, would characterize their time spent in the social studies classroom. Jerome spoke for the group when he said, “In the social studies class we usually just read from the textbook and just do work from the textbook. That’s it. Or group projects. We just recently did group projects in the eleventh grade. It’s like, he will give us a topic and we just write about the topic, do posters. I haven’t really learned nothing that can help me with the future.”

Fifteen of the students (94%) completed the written survey, and 69% of them indicated that they read their textbooks in almost every to every class period.

The majority of these students experience has been in the discipline of history; in this state, two of the three required credits for graduation are United States History and World History. Research indicates that textbooks occupy an integral place in the history classroom. Textbooks and teachers are considered the classroom authorities, and are oftentimes the only reference for both students and teachers. (Sewall, 2000) When Jerome talked about his middle school World Geography class he recalled, “ . . . every single day we did the same thing, but it was a different chapter. Like you would walk in, basically you had a book at home. You could do a month’s work at home and then just chill in the classroom. Because he did the same thing every single day and you basically never heard him talk. Because the only time he ever did, was like to say, ‘take out your text book . . . we are having a test . . . or, today this is what we are going to do.’ But it was always the same thing every single day.”
Yet these same students reported that they wanted to read different text in the social studies classroom. Julynca espoused, “I like reading narrative because it’s like a person tells a story about an event, and you could understand it better because you understand – you get to understand the person who is telling the story and how they are going through the feelings. But in expository, they just list facts, facts, facts and statistics and stuff like that. And we just mostly write expository then . . .”

According to these students, the practice of “popcorn reading,” where one student begins reading orally and then someone else takes over after a paragraph, section, or page, ended in middle school. But as McCourt’s students said in ‘Tis, Tavon said, “. . . when you are reading and then you popcorn to somebody else, they are not paying attention, then it’s all messed up. . . . A lot of people are sleeping while people are reading, and when you popcorn into them, they get in trouble because they are not on the right . . .”

All of the student’s textbooks contain questions at the end of chapter sections, and chapter reviews. These exercises form the basis of high school teachers reading support. Half of the student surveys reported answering these comprehension questions in almost every class. “You read a certain section, and based on that section, instead of, or you might do a little section assessment at the end, a little five or six questions based on the whole section. And then maybe like you read three or four sections and do like the chapter assessment, which will be a number of like 25 questions with a whole bunch of vocabulary words.” Julynca elaborated, “Sometimes you don’t even read. You skim through, and if you see the same section, you go, ‘there it goes.’ You don’t get what you are reading. These students reflect the Matthew Effect in reading: proficient readers
become more proficient and less proficient readers fall further behind their normally
developing peers. (Rasinski, 2004)

The Honors Kids - “. . . I read to pass tests.”

My first focus group discussion had gone well, and I expected that little would
change in my next focus group discussions. The regular kids reports supported what I
have read concerning social studies classroom instruction, and I hypothesized that the
remaining conversations would reflect the same practices. These honors students have
higher reported standardized reading scores. Roughly half of them participated in these
discourses, 24 out of 50 students. Roberto, an English Speaker of Other Languages,
wrote, “Most of my current and former teachers have used this round-robin technique. I
find it very helpful since it not only makes the students better participate in reading, but
also helps with speech skills, which are very important to social studies.” Alyssa
disagreed, “The only time I pay attention (round robin reading) is when I have to read.
When everybody else is reading, it’s like boring and stuff. The spotlight is on you, so you
have to make sure you read your paragraph rally good.” Bob elaborated, “When people
read out loud, I try to read along with them, but I tend to read ahead. So when I get
called on . . .”

Travis revealed that most learning was accomplished using textbooks, “We
basically have to read and take down notes. It’s more independent in high school . . . in
high school they give you lectures, and in middle school they throw a book at you and tell
you read it.” While the regular students report doing most of their reading during class
time, these students appear to accomplish most of their text reading at home, and
independently. Class activities were devoted to lecture. Nikki explained that the reading
was supported with worksheets, “... massive amounts of worksheets, and they would hope that we got it. But if you didn’t do the worksheet, they it didn’t matter, so ...” 

Middle school is definitely much harder in terms of social studies, but the difference is they actually made you do the work, whereas high school, they give lectures.” Monique admitted, “Sometimes I will outline the text that I am reading. I learned how to do this in middle school, but I do not think I was taught how to do it properly. We use this strategy regularly.”

These students largely do not independently employ the many different reading note strategies they have been taught by various teachers. Mimi said, “I just read it. I mean, ... I know some people like use different strategies, like taking notes and stuff, but when I take notes, like reading and then like stopping to write something, it throws all my concentration off. I think if we read it and discuss it as a group afterwards, it helps me learn better.” Sean noted, “In social studies, I read to learn. However, I cannot remember every bit of detail I read after I take a test. So I guess, you could say, I read to pass tests.”

These discussions revealed that classroom practice of textbook reading dominated, and teacher-centered instruction remained the same as in the regular classroom. However, these higher-level reading students reported that they were responsible for reading more, and independently, at home. These focus group discussions support the research that indicates low achieving readers spend less time practicing this vital skill. Because they do not practice the skill, they continue to fall further behind, the Matthew Effect in operation. Perhaps because the better readers are able to read more efficiently earlier, independent textbook reading is demanded of them,
from the middle school years through high school, and lecture becomes the dominant classroom activity. Most interesting to note is that average to above average readers, in general, appear to skim read the text, and use few independent active reading strategies.

The “AP” Kids - “Can we just talk?”

I expected a different outcome with the Advanced Placement student focus group discussions, because these 51 kids are the best performing students in our school. All of them have state standardized test scores at the highest levels of achievement, and 100% of them are college bound. This is further demonstrated by the fact that many of them are enrolled in more than one advanced placement course during their senior year of high school. Fully 94% of them participated in this project. What they reveal are very different reading experiences than the other two groups.

Nirvana started the conversation rolling with a simple question, “Can we just talk?” When she was assured that there would be no judgment or repercussion, she opened up. “I just remember extensive reading, and that’s basically what I did for the most part... reading on my own, the textbook.” Students reported that their teachers through lecture or note packets that accompanied the reading supported independent, silent, text-based reading. Heather wrote, “The reading method we most often use in my in class is the independent reading method. We use this method constantly. I like using this method because I can read on my own, at my own pace, and the lessons and notes in class reinforce what I’ve read. I learned to use this strategy in elementary school.” Katie elaborated, “The most common form of reading in our social studies class is when we read at home. Every night we must read certain pages to keep on track for a test and history. I hate reading at home because I always forget and much rather watch T.V. than
read my textbook. Yet at the same time I wouldn’t want to read during class and take away from our activities.” Gary and Simon reported going above and beyond the assigned text reading, “I independently use AP Cliff Note books and the internet to enhance what I learn in class and read in the class ordained text book. . . . I keep the AP Sparkchart in my bathroom!”

These students reported that they prefer to experience lectures prior to reading to establish some background knowledge. Lauren summarized, “I like lectures because I do much better when I am actually being taught something by a person where you can actually ask a question if you don’t understand something. And with the book, you know, if you read something, you are confused; there is really nothing that can be done about it. Because like the book can’t explain it to you. So a teacher can explain something.” The textbooks were assessed as “. . . mundane, and it’s lengthy. So I could pay attention for about 10 minutes, and then I am still reading. But not like I am not absorbing the information. I am just reading.” Chelsea wrote, “The reading that I do in social studies is loaded with non-stop facts, dates, peoples names, accomplishments, and it can be hard to digest it all sometimes.” The was agreement around the room when Victoria added, “I find the best way for me to learn is just to read the book, because that’s where the information is. And I read it, and I guess I comprehend the majority of it. I find I just don’t have time to take notes. I just have time to read. So I read it and I deal with it. I learn it.” Heather posited, “Some strategies that I use to accompany the text are mnemonics for remembering and notes from the reading. I learned the strategy of using mnemonics in elementary before I was old enough to know the word. I learned the
method of taking notes while reading when I was in middle school. I use those strategies almost every day of the week."

These students reported that they had been reading the text silently since elementary school, literally amassing years of practice at this skill. For them, having a learning activity that follows the reading firmed up the concepts taught. Lauren again chimed in, “At the end it lets people get, like, hands on, actually show that they comprehend what they are talking about. Whereas, with everything else, you can really not have a clue . . . you can read the textbook and still not know what’s going on. The teacher could give notes, but the activity, like, kind of cements . . . to make sure that you understood what you read. But there’s no way to do the activity without having first gotten the information. So it’s kind of got to go in that order.”

These students were able to read proficiently at an early age, and their reading proficiency was rewarded. While they had to read independently, they quickly (as early as elementary school) became more adept at utilizing active reading strategies like note taking and the creation of pneumonic devices. The students appeared to report that their ability to read and comprehend text independently (usually as a homework assignment) meant they were more exposed to greater variety of learning activities in the classroom. These activities served to further cement concepts read and lectured upon; in other classrooms, this time was spent reading. All in all, their learning experiences were vastly different from their same age peers. Ironic that higher-level learners, who perhaps require fewer supporting activities to establish learning, are the ones most exposed to them.
“. . . you can read the textbook and still not know what’s going on.”

These discussions demonstrated the different reading and learning styles that are apparent in my varied classrooms. I hoped to learn that after four-plus years of reading staff development, teachers had been able to implement a greater variety of reading instruction, and that students were using independently using teacher-taught reading strategies. One hundred percent of the teachers at my school have received training on reading methods over the last four years. These in-service workshops have been provided by the district, and by lead teachers within the school. They have been documented successfully in two programs, Project CRISS and Marzano’s Classroom Instruction that Works. Project CRISS – Creating Independence Through Student-Owned Strategies focuses on the teaching of active reading strategies to better engage students with the text. It teaches the students to activate prior knowledge before reading using strategies like the K-W-L chart, or brainstorming. During reading, students are taught different structures for note taking, such as selectively underlining or text highlighting, or taking notes using charts or timelines. After reading, students are taught to process the reading to increase comprehension, using one-sentence summaries or concept maps.

Robert J. Marzano’s Classroom Instruction that Works places more emphasis on teacher classroom practice. He identifies a 1997 study by Wright, Horn, and Sanders that indicates the significant impact of teacher practice on student achievement. As such, his work identifies nine categories of instructional strategies that enhance student achievement in all content areas. These strategies are: identifying similarities and differences; summarizing and note taking; reinforcing effort and providing recognition;
homework and practice; nonlinguistic representations; cooperative learning; setting objectives and providing feedback; generating and testing hypothesis; and questions, cues, and advance organizers. Marzano cited as a study limitation the need to further study these strategies when used with specific populations in specific content areas. All in all, what works for one group of children may not be appropriate for another.

In focus group discussions with my students, even the highest-level learners admitted difficulty in synthesizing text. The discussions made apparent the differing levels of work ethic and the ability to read and comprehend text independently. Literally, none of the initial students completed the homework on which the discussion was to be based; how could a teacher then depend on them to read independently as homework? The majority of the Honors students completed the assignment. However, their honesty was laudable, as they admitted to skim reading the textbook for the answers to worksheets. The AP students did not experience vast amounts of worksheets, but they were able to take advantage of deeper learning activities because of their prior reading to form and build background knowledge for concept application.

This small study confirms that the majority of social studies instruction, at any level, is still largely text-based. Students either were incapable of, or simply chose not to, applying active reading strategies that might have helped them in their retention of reading based knowledge. It would seem that the answer to productive social studies instruction lay within the textbook.
“How do high school social studies practices support reading strategy application according to the students?”

This study was thought provoking for me. As teachers, we tend to live in the cocoon of our classrooms. I had participated in the many reading staff development opportunities offered at my school, and I constantly reinforce the use of active reading strategies in my classroom. As a Nationally Board Certified teacher of high school seniors, currently working on my reading endorsement, I believed that other teachers were successful implementing the use of reading strategies in their classrooms, and that many students were independently using these strategies. What I learned is that administrators and teacher leaders have ardently promoted these techniques at my school, to a population that is listening, but not hearing them. Even if teachers are teaching active reading strategies, the students are not independently utilizing them. This brings into question further use of taxpayer dollars to support such professional staff development.

Most crucial in successful reading instruction is the time a child spends independently practicing this skill. We are entrenched in a technologic age where students will need to rely on different types of literacy’s. For social studies teachers and educational policy makers who are attempting to prepare tomorrow’s citizens, it becomes increasingly important that students learn to read effectively and are able to read to learn. This skill takes practice, and that necessary practice may be available in many different forms within the social studies classroom. Students can and should be exposed to a variety of text, outside of the standard textbook. In this discipline, they may read
newspaper text, historical narratives, rich primary documents – the array is vast and needs to be tapped for our students.

For future research, it would be interesting to note if this small-scale study is reflective of a larger pattern. Additionally, assuming the textbook provides the basis for social studies instruction, administrators and teachers would be wise to discover which types of textbook are most effective in promoting student learning.
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