

# When Retired and Practicing Teachers Collaborate: Enhancing Elementary Social Studies Instruction

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After I retired from university teaching in June, 2015, I spent the 2015–2016 school year volunteering in a fourth-grade classroom helping to teach Wisconsin history. In fact, before I made final retirement arrangements, I contacted a fourth-grade teacher and former student to ask if she was interested in my assistance with Wisconsin history. Her affirmative response led to a year of collaboration to enrich social studies instruction.

My volunteer work was similar to other retired teachers in the local school district who returned to mentor new teachers, volunteer in classrooms, and serve as substitute teachers. Classroom teachers should be aware that there are retired educators interested in collaborations to enrich social studies instruction and meet some of the challenges facing social studies education.

Veteran teachers struggled to include social studies in the curriculum<sup>1</sup> despite the emphasis on literacy and mathematics, but veteran, baby boomer generation teachers born between 1946 and 1964 are retiring. Half of the country's teachers are predicted to retire by 2019. One-third of new teachers are leaving teaching within five years,<sup>2</sup> before they have enough experience to become expert social studies teachers.

One-tenth of baby boomers in higher education are reluctant to retire due to economics (not having enough savings or carrying too much debt) and professional reasons (apprehensions about losing their sense of purpose).<sup>3</sup> For those higher education baby boomer faculty who can afford to retire, some resist retirement because they fear a loss of sense of self, and they desire to remain productive, contribute to their discipline, and continue the work they love.<sup>4</sup>

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future<sup>5</sup> suggests that schools create learning teams composed of new teachers, teacher mentors, and teacher retirees to provide powerful learning opportunities for students. This approach could be used to entice retired social studies educators to work collaboratively part-time with new and experienced teachers

in elementary schools to enhance social studies instruction. Novice and veteran teachers could receive the support and encouragement they need to remain in teaching and improve their social studies instruction. Retired social studies educators could remain active professionally, maintain their professional identity, continue to be productive, and contribute to the social studies field.

Ultimately, elementary students would benefit from additional resources, teacher expertise and attention, and more effective social studies instruction. Elementary students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) may especially profit from learning teams because 90 percent of these students receive social studies instruction in general education classrooms.<sup>6</sup> Classroom teachers may not always have the time and expertise to modify instruction for students with IEPs.

The purpose of this article is to describe the specific ways I contributed to more inquiry-oriented,<sup>7</sup> powerful<sup>8</sup> social studies instruction in an elementary classroom and to encourage practicing teachers to collaborate with retired educators from their school district or university to provide effective social studies instruction for students.

## Planning for Powerful Social Studies Instruction

I collaborated with a former student, Janet (a pseudonym), who was in her seventh year of teaching fourth-grade in a school district where 55.7 percent of students qualified for reduced or free meals, 18.9 percent had Individual Education Programs, and 6.4 percent were English learners. I volunteered two or three afternoons a week. Janet had only 150 minutes a week devoted to social studies, but occasionally integrated social studies content with literacy during the 700 minutes each week spent on reading and writing. I usually assisted with social studies and writing when they were scheduled during the afternoons.

Elementary teachers face the formidable responsibility of planning for many subjects, meeting standards, integrating

best teaching practices, and assessing student learning in each subject. Using inquiry and powerful social studies instruction both require considerable planning and instructional time. With limited time, elementary teachers may have their students read textbooks, complete worksheets, take tests, and listen.<sup>9</sup> When two educators collaborate and share expertise and resources, they could move to more active learning.

Janet often planned for her students to meet the social studies standards and learn about Wisconsin history through reading and listening to texts; viewing and discussing videos, photographs, and maps; and exploring websites. She planned for the fourth-graders to demonstrate their learning through completing tests, quizzes, and exit slips; labeling maps; discussing; and making presentations on what they learned. Janet's main professional goal for the year was to include more inquiry and critical thinking in her lessons, which would take more planning and instructional time.

I offered suggestions for additional inquiry activities as the year progressed, including the analysis of photographs, maps, and artifacts, and Janet was always open to these ideas. She was especially enthusiastic about activities I prepared which involved students actively in learning about Wisconsin history. For example, I created a role play in which students decided whether Wisconsin should become a state in 1836. I also assembled photographs for students to classify as examples of civic rights or responsibilities.

### Providing Hands-On Materials

Retired educators usually have the time and background to locate and prepare supplementary resources that classroom teachers may be unable to develop due to time constraints. When we focused on the curriculum theme **ⓐ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**,<sup>10</sup> we used a valuable collection of artifacts, a fur trade kit containing a beaver pelt, which Native people traded, and European trade goods, such as wool cloth, metal pots, glass beads, and pewter jewelry. The kit previously was available from the university library, but was moved to an educational agency outside of the local community. It took a little time to locate the fur trade kit and arrange for it to be lent to us. This resource was especially engaging for Janet's fourth-graders. As small groups handled the artifacts, we encouraged them to discuss why Native people wanted the European trade goods and why European fur traders wanted the animal pelts. One student reported that Native people wanted metal pots because they did not break as easily as the clay pots the Native people made themselves. When we asked students to elaborate on why clay pots were more breakable, a few explained the clay pots might break if they were put on a fire to cook food or if they were dropped, while the metal pots would not.

### Creating Visuals to Support Texts

Because a number of the fourth-graders had difficulty independently reading published texts, Janet sometimes projected written materials with a document camera for the class to view

while she read aloud and modeled reading strategies she wanted the students to develop. I created several visuals on my website to make the ideas accessible to all students.<sup>11</sup> One example was a set of maps of the United States, the upper Midwest, and Wisconsin. The students studied the maps while they hypothesized how early explorers might have traveled from the Atlantic Seaboard to the region that today we call Wisconsin, then from what today we call the "Bay of Green Bay" to the Mississippi River, and from there to the Gulf of Mexico. In this activity, the students learned about the geography and resources of the United States and met the curriculum theme **ⓑ PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENT**. Rather than modeling explorer's routes, we asked the fourth-graders to consider various paths early explorers might have traveled, including moving on land and water. The students examined maps and concluded that waterways were important in early exploration.

### Preparing Photographs for Analysis

When we discussed how immigrants changed Wisconsin (**ⓑ PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS**), we encouraged inquiry through the analysis of photographs. I created a set of images of several Wisconsin towns named after European cities or countries, different styles of homes made by Native people and Europeans who migrated or immigrated to Wisconsin, a few distinct religious structures, dancers and musicians from different ethnicities, and foods that originated in countries outside of the United States. The fourth-graders studied and discussed the photographs and offered their interpretations of changes that immigrants and Native migrants made to Wisconsin's environment. Students who had difficulty reading published texts were able to participate in the discussion because the photographs made the ideas accessible. A quiet fourth-grader, who seldom contributed to class discussions, offered: "They built streets. They built houses and other buildings."

### Creating Role Plays with Different Perspectives

Powerful social studies instruction involves students actively and helps them think about new ideas and different perspectives. We invited students to consider different views on whether Wisconsin should become a state in 1836 to meet the curriculum theme **Ⓒ POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**. I developed a role play with four different roles: European American male, Ho-Chunk male, European American female, and Menominee female. The roles offered different points of view on whether Wisconsin should become a state or remain a territory. Students were assigned roles, read the background information on their role (with assistance from teachers), and explained their perspective on statehood in small groups. Finally, the groups decided whether Wisconsin should remain a territory or become a state. A few fourth-graders declared, "But Wisconsin became a state!" and had difficulty participating in the role play to consider different perspectives. Nevertheless, they had the opportunity to hear conflicting views on statehood rather than assume everyone wanted Wisconsin to become a state in 1836.

## Developing More Accessible Texts

Social studies teaching must be meaningful for students, but some children struggle to find meaning in textbooks they cannot comprehend.<sup>12</sup> Janet had a number of Wisconsin history texts to use with the fourth-graders, but approximately one-fifth of the class could not read them independently. As a retired educator, I had the time and background to create several simplified texts embellished with pictures to communicate the most important ideas and concepts. For example, I created brief, illustrated reading materials about several topics to address the social studies curriculum standards. The topics included: (1) the first groups of people to live in the Wisconsin area; (2) the Menominee, a Native nation who originated and currently live in Wisconsin (photo); (3) the early industries of fur trade and lead mining; (4) causes of the Black Hawk War; and (5) hardships that immigrants experienced when they first moved to Wisconsin. Students who struggled with reading were able to access the ideas that other students constructed from published texts. When special education teachers worked with Janet's fourth-graders with IEPs, they used these materials.

## Co-Teaching for Student Engagement and Learning

Janet faced the challenge of meeting the needs of 28 fourth-graders in her classroom while encouraging them to learn important concepts and ideas from Wisconsin history. Three of her students were considered English learners and five students had IEPs. Special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers spent some time in Janet's classroom providing additional assistance to students needing instructional support. Nevertheless, it was difficult to engage all students in learning Wisconsin history.

We implemented several examples of co-teaching suggested by Marilyn Friend<sup>13</sup> to meet all students' needs. We used "team-

ing" to encourage rich discussions and student involvement. Janet and I asked questions to promote discussions; took turns leading inquiry-oriented, powerful instructional activities; and monitored student engagement and understanding. Sometimes one of us led the class discussion while the other recorded important ideas on graphic organizers for the class to view or copy. When one teacher could concentrate on promoting discussion, it was easier to encourage students to build on each other's contributions and elaborate on main ideas.

Another form of co-teaching used was "one teach, one assist." During these lessons, Janet usually led whole-class activities while I moved around the classroom listening to partner or small-group discussions. Sometimes I asked inattentive students to contribute to the discussion and engage in the activities. When quiet students suggested ideas to their partner or small group, I encouraged them to explain their ideas to the whole class. When we wanted students to complete reading or writing activities independently or with a partner or small group, Janet explained directions to the entire class while I worked with fourth-graders who needed additional support to read or write.

Finally, we co-taught by using "parallel teaching." Each of us worked with a group of students to lead the same activity. If a special education or ESL teacher was available, this teacher might also work with a small group. Sometimes we read and discussed a section of a published or modified text so that we could monitor students' comprehension more carefully. At other times, we led an engaging social studies instructional activity in which students manipulated materials to learn about important ideas. In one activity addressing the social studies curriculum themes of **6 POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**, and **10 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**, we asked students to work with a partner to sort pictures into two groups, one illustrating civic rights and one showing civic responsibilities. In small groups,



www.menomineebgc.org

The Menominee (Omaeqnomenaewak, or "People of the Wild Rice") is a Native nation, a people who have survived for more than 10,000 years in the area of Wisconsin and upper Michigan ([www.menominee-nsn.gov](http://www.menominee-nsn.gov)). Today, the Menominee Woodland Boys & Girls Club (WBG) in Neopit, Wisconsin, has about 200 members who are 6 to 17 years old.

Traditional LaCrosse, singing and dancing, arts and crafts, and more are all part of the cultural programming, which is united by the Menominee language.

Visit [www.menomineebgc.org](http://www.menomineebgc.org).



it was easier for the fourth-graders to explain the reasons for their classification and their reactions to others' ideas and for us to check for understanding.

However, co-teaching also presented some challenges. Finding the time for planning and teaching was the main obstacle. We sometimes communicated by e-mail, consulted when students read silently after lunch, or met after school to plan the next lesson, but these occasions were limited. Special school events also reduced our instructional time. A number of lessons were abbreviated, which did not allow us to complete inquiry activities or develop discussions to encourage students' deeper thinking about topics.

### Collaboration Benefits Everyone

As elementary classroom teachers face the challenges of powerful social studies teaching, they should consider reaching out to retired social studies educators to collaborate in bringing additional resources to the classroom. Teachers may contact their school district administrators or local teacher organizations to identify the names of retired teachers, then contact those teachers to inquire about their interest in collaboration. As classroom teachers hear about current teachers' plans for retirement, they could ask about their interest in remaining involved in education through part-time volunteer teaching. Classroom teachers may also contact the education departments of local universities and identify the names of recently retired teacher educators who might be interested in collaborating to enrich social studies instruction in elementary classrooms.

When retired educators work with novice and veteran teachers to enrich social studies instruction, everyone benefits. Classroom teachers benefit from teaming with retired educators because they have someone with whom to plan and teach social studies, share resources, and discuss how to provide engaging lessons for all students. Veteran and new teachers can utilize more engaging teaching activities and modified reading materials. Janet noted the impact of our collaboration on her teaching. "You have pushed my practice as an educator! I needed to improve my instruction and you have provided the patience, guidance, and wisdom to allow me to do so." She also shared my activities and materials with other teachers in her school and school district to use in their classrooms.

Students benefit because their learning needs may be met by an additional teacher in the classroom who has the time to modify instructional materials, create powerful, inquiry-oriented teaching activities, and work with individual students who struggle to read and write. When students handle artifacts, analyze photographs and maps, and read modified texts (which make important ideas accessible and meet the standards), they are much more engaged in learning social studies content. Several of Janet's fourth-graders expressed their appreciation for my assistance in helping them learn about Wisconsin history.

"I really appreciate [appreciate] when you help us use some Native American tools that they used."

"Thank you for everything you've done for me! Without you, our [Wisconsin history] test scores wouldn't be as great!" "Learning about Wisconsin is awesome!" "I always love the things you teach us!"

Retired educators can also benefit from remaining professionally active and providing meaningful social studies instruction. It was very rewarding to team plan and teach with a veteran teacher and observe students' interest and learning from the instructional activities and modified reading materials I prepared. My first year of collaboration was so professionally fulfilling that I have continued to volunteer and develop additional instructional materials, inquiry activities, and authentic assessments for Janet's fourth-graders. Although my presence in Janet's classroom did not extend time for social studies, it enriched social studies instruction. 🌍

### Notes

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