Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom: Teaching Social Justice Through the Lenses of Power and Oppression and Site-Based Experiences

Date: April 3, 2019
Time: 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Place: COE Technology Learning Center- Sigma Aldrich Room

Abstract
This joint study in the elementary school social studies setting enacted the explicit intention of facilitating student understanding of social justice. The first study was conducted in a second grade classroom to assess how exploring historical neighborhoods in St. Louis impacted students' understandings of diversity. Student writings, interviews, artwork, and adult interviews and surveys provided evidence of the impact the curriculum had on the school community and larger city. This study revealed that it is possible for young students to explore hard histories and present day social justice topics through the use of place-based learning and community partnerships. Their learning can then be transferred to their families and larger community. The second study was conducted in a fifth grade classroom to assess how a thematic unit about power and oppression impacted students' understandings of patterns in history. Student interviews and surveys showed that students who experienced a thematic curriculum about power and oppression saw social studies as more relevant to their lives and more interesting and engaging. Additionally, student assessments revealed that fifth graders were able to transfer their knowledge of power and oppression to a new context that they had not yet learned about. The two studies revealed that young students who experienced units intentionally focused on ideas of social justice became more empowered to engage in thoughtful dialogue and advocate for issues of injustice. The studies also revealed that teachers who have more freedom and autonomy to develop creative units of study were able to create more engaging and enriching learning experiences for students.

Defense of Dissertation Committee
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