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Critical Inquiry into Moments of Historical Change: Fostering Broader Understandings of Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript explores the power of using inquiry in a second-grade classroom to make students' understanding of citizenship more complex. It describes an inquiry unit in which students studied primary sources, engaged with fiction and nonfiction children's literature, and participated in interdisciplinary learning to further understand the Civil Rights Movement and the Underground Railroad. Through their understanding of these powerful historic events they came to new conceptions of what it means to be a good citizen. The paper not only describes the unit and how it played out in the classroom it also explores the tensions between teacher directed and student directed inquiry, the ways in which teachers can, and often must integrate English Language Arts into their inquiry in order to find time for it, and the necessity of trusting both students and teachers in their ability to guide their own learning in community. In addition, it describes ways of discussing racism with young learners in both a historical and contemporary context.

KEYWORDS

Elementary social studies; inquiry; racism; citizenship

Introduction

This paper focuses on a class of second grade students who engaged in inquiry about ideas of good and bad citizenship through the Civil Rights Movement and the Underground Railroad. It highlights what is possible when students are trusted with their own learning. In the early elementary setting where literacy and math and the related testing have been pushing meaningful social studies and science work out, it is crucial we provide examples of powerful social studies learning. We need examples of inquiry based learning that integrates language arts and math, connects to students lives, challenges students with big questions, engages students' values and activates their minds (NCSS, 2017).

Social studies education has been languishing in elementary classrooms for many years now, particularly since the inception of No Child Left Behind (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010). Furthermore, when social studies is included, it is either literature or textbook based and focusing on the literacy goals of deciphering informational text (Boyle-Baise et al., 2008). In the standards driven

world of elementary school, inquiry is often considered too time consuming for teachers to consider. However, in the case examined here, the second-grade teacher was able to build literacy instruction into a social studies unit, centering inquiry, primary source work, history, questions of citizenship and issues of racism. The many forms that inquiry took in the lesson were particularly powerful and will be highlighted throughout the paper.

Inquiry

Inquiry not only fosters more powerful learning (NCSS, 2013) it also is a more democratic form of learning, one in which students are holders and creators of knowledge and teachers become learners with their students (Freire, 1970/2007). Critical citizens must be able to both question the information stream they receive and have the confidence of generating their own knowledge. This paper explores the role of inquiry in fostering that more critical knowledge. Using historical thinking tools like perspective taking and primary

source work, students in the class used the lens of the Civil Rights Movement and the Underground Railroad to broaden their ideas of citizenship.

With the support of NCSS's C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013), more and more writing has been done about inquiry in social studies, including in elementary school (McCall, 2017; Thacker et al., 2018; Whitlock & Brugar, 2017). Most of these articles are practitioner in nature, or focus primarily on the teacher's decision making and process. Thacker et al. (2018) described how a fifth-grade teacher employed her pedagogical content knowledge and the Inquiry Design Model from the C3 Framework in creating an inquiry about the economics of chocolate production and consumption. Ms. Williams, the teacher in this case study, used her English Language Arts (ELA) classroom time to focus on the inquiry and incorporated a plethora of graphic organizers and informational text reading strategies in her unit. She determined the questions and had a carefully scaffolded plan. Ms. Williams felt that she had to develop and direct the questions and inquiry in order to meet the multiple goals and standards she had for the interdisciplinary unit. This allowed for her to devote the time necessary for the inquiry, however, it took away from the inquiry being student initiated and driven.

Whitlock and Brugar (2017) explored the opportunities taken and not taken by a first and fifth grade teacher to foster greater social studies inquiry in their classrooms. They also acknowledge the many limitations that elementary teachers face in pursuing student-initiated inquiry in particular. In response, they offer ideas for ways in which the two teachers could have followed up on interesting questions that students asked using the C3 Framework or the small group inquiry model. Another recent article (McCall, 2017) offers developmentally appropriate ways for students to engage in all aspects of the C3 Framework as they think critically about where their toys and clothes come from and who makes them. Importantly, it provides ideas for action that students can take after they learn about this troubling knowledge.

Teaching about racism to young people

There is a common but misguided belief that young children are too young to talk about race and racism and that they are also somehow still unaware that race or racism exist. Research shows that this is not the case. By the age of three students can identify different races and by the age of five they are already attributing stereotypes to different racial groups (Hirschfeld, 2008). Therefore it is imperative that we address the topic of race early and often. The field of social studies has also been turning a critical eye on itself and exploring the ways in which social studies has been white supremacist in multiple ways (Chandler & Branscombe, 2015; Hawkman, 2018) and how we can address this at all grade levels.

Holmes et al. (2017) explored how a first-grade teacher was able to engage her students in these discussions with counterstories of resistance during both the slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. The use of counterstories of resistance is in many ways similar to some of the approaches that Ms. Harper¹ took in the unit under study here. However, the teacher in the Holmes et al article was not using an inquiry approach. As shared here, in the context of Ms. Harper's class, race and racism emerged in the inquiry along with ideas of citizenship in ways that both Ms. Harper prompted and the students prompted.

Context

This unit took place at Garfield, a public elementary school in a midwest university town. About 60% of the students who attend Garfield come from low income families and 65% of the students are white, while 17% are Black and the rest are Latino, Asian or of mixed race. About 20% of students have identified learning challenges. Over the past several years the school has been on a journey to center their instruction around inquiry. The decision to do this was made primarily by the teachers with the full support of the principal. The principal set up yearlong professional development in science inquiry instruction and social studies inquiry instruction. Most

of the professional development has been done by faculty at the area university and the social studies PD was centered around the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013). Garfield also hosts a yearly celebration of learning in which classrooms showcase their latest inquiry endeavors and during the course of the study, the school board toured the school as a model of good instruction in the district.

Ms. Harper, the classroom teacher, has been teaching for over a decade. She has her master's degree and had been incorporating inquiry in her classroom prior to the school's shift toward inquiry. However, she said the school's investment in inquiry solidified her commitment to inquiry and strengthened her teaching skills. During the time of the unit, Ms. Harper devoted about an hour of class time in the morning to the unit 3–4 days a week. Similar to Ms. Williams in Thacker et al. (2018), Ms. Harper maximizes the social studies inquiry time by using time devoted to English Language Arts (ELA). This was one of the few hours in the day during which all students were present as the many students with identified learning challenges were frequently pulled from class to work with resource teachers.

Teacher sparked, student driven

While Ms. Harper sparked this particular inquiry project, she was responsive to the students' ideas, questions, and input as it unfolded, allowing them to influence the project in big and small ways. Ms. Harper began the inquiry unit by asking students to brainstorm and document lists of what makes a good citizen and what makes a bad citizen. Students worked in groups of four or five for this task and identified such things as being nice, helpful, following rules and laws and making good choices. All five groups mentioned ideas about jail, breaking laws, getting arrested and criminals as identifiers of bad citizens. Noticing this heavy focus on following laws and going to jail, also knowing that some of her students had incarcerated family member, Ms. Harper decided to explore this aspect of citizenship more closely through the lens of various resistance movements.

The following class she selected pictures of people getting arrested, many from the Civil Rights Movement and also one of Susan B. Anthony being put on trial for attempting to vote. Students analyzed the photos in groups, documenting what they observed and what they wondered. Following this, Ms. Harper asked questions about who were the good citizens in the pictures and who were the bad. The next time they focused on the inquiry project, she brought the pictures back up and gave them further clues about the pictures. In this conversation, students began to realize the connection to the Civil Rights Movement and the Suffragist movement.

The next several classes involved exploration through children's literature, both fiction and nonfiction, further primary source photos, and other primary source documents for students to expand their learning. They regularly documented their thinking and learning throughout the process. The three books the class read together, all accompanied by further inquiry, were *Unspoken* (Cole, 2012), *The Youngest Marcher* (Levinson, 2017), and *Henry's Freedom Box* (Levine, 2007). Through each of these books, students connected to what they would or would not do in a similar situation and also thought about how people were breaking the law, and in one case going to jail, in order to create change for a fairer society.

While Ms. Harper had planned activities to broaden thinking with these books, she also followed the students' lead. For example, on the day when Ms. Harper read the book *Unspoken* to the students, they really started to wonder how people could signal to people escaping enslavement that a house was a part of the Underground Railroad and safe to stop at. Instead of continuing with what she had planned, Ms. Harper made a spontaneous decision to give students the opportunity to both brainstorm and document through words and pictures, different ways of signaling that a house is safe. Students generated ideas from hand signals to quilts with special patterns (inspired by the *Unspoken* book) to fence posts arranged a certain way.

Through this process the students had to consider the many challenges that both those who

Table 1. Students' Conceptions of good and bad citizens.

Good citizens	Bad citizens
If you go to jail it does not mean you did something bad. Back then if you did something bad to do with slavery that was good.	If you steal something you go to jail.
Someone who tries to make things fair.	Who do not help others.
Care about others.	Don't listen.
To have peace without hurting anyone.	Make the law unfair.
To help slavery end.	Doesn't care about others.
Dig their way to freedom.	Hurt others.
Henry Box Brown was a good citizen.	Tries to have peace but in a bad way.
Rosa Parks was a good citizen for not giving up her seat.	Don't do good things.

were a part of hosting people on the Underground Railroad and those traveling the Underground Railroad faced. They were reminded that those who sheltered people on the Underground Railroad were doing something illegal that they could be punished for, that the escaping enslaved people were putting their lives on the line and that all involved were surrounded by people who did not support what they were doing. This is important as we often frame the Underground Railroad as a heroic act that saves the image of white people during this time period and not as a criminal undertaking done by a very small number of people in the midst of a country that supported slavery or at the very least benefited from the free labor it provided.

In addition to these specific books that the students read as a class, they used a collection of informational texts on the Civil Rights Movement and the Underground Railroad that Ms. Harper had out and available for them. At times Ms. Harper asked them to engage in these books with assignments involving research and understanding informational texts. However, students also engaged with these texts spontaneously, often gravitating toward them first thing in the morning to discuss their latest thoughts on how change was made, by whom, and at what risk.

Nuancing ideas of good citizenship

As stated above, the inquiry unit started with students exploring the idea of good and bad citizenship, and one of the prominent themes related to the idea of good citizens was always following the law. Through their exploration and inquiry into the Civil Rights Movement, including looking at photographs of Martin Luther King Jr and Rosa Parks being arrested, and through reading the

book *The Youngest Marcher* (Levinson, 2017) students reconsidered this idea. While there was initially some resistance to the idea of marching if it would result in arrest, students quickly started making connections to the changes that needed to be made in the face of segregation and the very real ways they benefit from those changes, including their friendships in the multi-racial classroom.

At the end of the unit, students revisited the good citizen/bad citizen activity. After their inquiry and research into the topic, they listed names and groups of people as well as significant changes in the actual traits. Table 1 is the end of unit brainstorm list of one group that in many ways represents the others.

Students were still grappling with ideas of going to jail for different purposes and the different things that could mean. They also were able to acknowledge and identify that some laws are unfair and that you can have peace that is not fair. Finally, they used the people they learned about to make sense of their new ideas of good and bad citizenship. This was a much more nuanced understanding of citizenship than was seen in the initial lists the students generated.

Discussing racism

This unit also provided an important opportunity for the class to openly discuss racism. As noted above, on the second day of the unit Ms. Harper passed out big envelopes with pictures inside to groups of four students. In addition, students were given big sheets of paper that said, "I Observe..." on one side of a T-chart, and "I Wonder..." on the other side. One group had a picture of a white man wearing what appears to be a police uniform holding a Black man by the belt. The first observation the students wrote

down was that the picture had “no color” (it was black and white). The second observation was that a “Black guy stole something.” I happened to be working with this group and asked the student if he could observe that the Black man had stolen something. At first, he insisted that the Black man had diamonds in his hand. I pointed out that you could not see the Black man’s hands (the photo is taken from behind the two men). After further discussion, the students in the group crossed out the observation and moved it to the wonder side. Another group also looking at a picture of a “Black guy getting arrested” made an observation that it was a “robber and a police.”

The initial assumption that these were pictures of a robber getting arrested were powerful. They reflected the stereotype of the dangerous Black man, the criminalization of Black men that is baked into the systemic racism in the United States. Already these second-grade students had absorbed the distorted media portrayal of Black and Brown bodies so that even though they could not see the Black man’s hands they could see the diamonds he had supposedly stolen. I am not suggesting that these second graders were racist people, simply that they were already a product of a racist society. This observation also highlights the importance of discussing race with people as young as seven or eight as these assumptions are already being formed.

As the unit continued, Ms. Harper shared some clues with the students. Slowly the students started making connections between the pictures they had looked at and what they had learned the previous year. One student said, “I think there used to be a law that Black skins and white skins couldn’t be together.” Another piped up with, “is that Martin Luther King? We learned about him last year!” As the unit continued, Ms. Harper kept asking questions like, why is this person getting arrested? Is it good that they did the thing that got them arrested? If this person went to jail, are they still a good citizen?

After discussing and learning more about why Martin Luther King Jr. and so many others had been arrested for marching, Ms. Harper asked, “should Martin Luther King Jr. and all those other people have marched, even if they got

arrested?” Suddenly Josh, a White student, popped up and said, “Yes, because if they hadn’t marched and gotten arrested, Micah and I couldn’t be in school together, we couldn’t be friends!” As he said this he reached out toward Micah, a Black student who was close with many students in the class. In response Micah reached back toward Josh and also, reaching out to another White friend adding, “and I couldn’t be friends with Elijah either!” Students were starting to make connections between what citizens had done during the Civil Rights Movement and their current context.

Ms. Harper kept pushing. They had learned the term “segregation” and understood what it meant. Ms. Harper asked, why do you think segregation existed? A few ideas were floated, maybe Black and white people didn’t want to be with each other? Ms. Harper pointed out that according to *The Youngest Marcher*, it was White people excluding Black people from certain stores and spaces. One student brought up the idea of people being racist in the past. Several students nodded in agreement. After reading about how segregation in Birmingham ended after the children’s march, Ms. Harper asked the students what they thought it was like for Black people and for White people to no longer be separated, to be in stores and lunch counters together. Students thought that it might have been hard. They said the law could not change what White people thought or believed. They said that some White people probably were not ok with segregation ending. Ms. Harper asked if they thought all White people were ok with it now, and the students solemnly responded that no, they were not, there were still White people who did not like Black people. The students also believed that they would be different, that the problem was with their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. This was a powerful conversation and one that the second graders needed to have. Ms. Harper was able to get to this conversation by asking powerful questions and listening to her students’ responses.

In addition to this more interpersonal aspect of racism, through the historical inquiry students took an unflinching look at how racism was structured into society through both slavery and

segregation laws. While most of the focus was on the resistance and activism that changed these laws, the students had to have some understanding of why resistance and activism was necessary. For example, in the book *Henry's Freedom Box* there are explicit descriptions of how enslaved families were torn apart including when Henry was taken from his mother and then later when Henry's owner sold Henry's wife and children to another master. These descriptions were hard but necessary to hear and provided important context for why Henry would spend over 24 hours in a wooden box as he, with the help of abolitionists, mailed himself to freedom. Similarly, *The Youngest Marcher* describes the segregation laws to give context to Audrey Fey Hendrick's decision to march and intentionally get arrested at the age of nine. While these truths are all difficult, it is important that students understand racism and its roots as something more than interpersonal, but something that was written into law. As social studies educators it is imperative that we understand and teach about racism beyond the interpersonal and beyond white-washed versions of the past. It is equally important that we teach about resistance, resilience and activism of those enslaved and oppressed.

Discussion

There are many tensions to negotiate given the constraints and opportunities afforded by time and student interest. While Ms. Harper was committed to inquiry, she still had to navigate the tension of meeting her own goals in regard to the social studies curriculum and her ELA curriculum, as well as following the students' interests. This meant that Ms. Harper was not able to get to everything she had planned or thought of. Yet, her students took her in unplanned directions that were just as powerful. Flexibility with curriculum and trust in both teachers and students is crucial in creating the space for teachers and students to navigate this shared inquiry-based learning experience.

Another crucial component to the success of this unit was the community Ms. Harper and her second graders had already established. This unit started in January, so the students had already

had several months together in a classroom where students' voices and questions were valued. They had already developed the confidence to speak up and the ability to ask good questions. Throughout the unit Ms. Harper never diminished a student question, no matter how arbitrary or strange, although she did focus on some questions over others. Ms. Harper knew her students well, the community they had built and that they would be able to take on this challenging topic.

There were many ways in which Ms. Harper made this an integrated unit both within the social studies disciplines and branching into ELA and math. For example, when reading *Henry's Freedom Box* she recreated a box that was similar in size to the crate Henry mailed himself in. Students used nonstandard measures to estimate the size of the box. In response to their many curiosities about the Underground Railroad, students were given the opportunity to map various routes that formerly enslaved people could take. Students also thought about how laws are made and changed and of course used history and historical inquiry in their investigations. During the inquiry, students were constantly engaging with reading, writing, spelling and vocabulary expansion. For example, students frequently documented their thinking with words, giving them an abundance of writing opportunities. Students also identified characteristics of Civil Rights leaders referencing informational texts and primary sources. In addition, they used informational texts about the Underground Railroad and the Civil Rights Movement to complete worksheets focusing on informational texts while also furthering their understanding of important movements and people.

Although they were not able to get to it, Ms. Harper had visions of exploring the music of the Civil Rights Movement as well as music associated with the Underground Railroad. While the students created at least one small class timeline, this unit was brimming over with opportunities to create more. Some students did work to communicate their learning to each other, like a student who made a poster with several of the leaders they had studied with drawings and brief descriptions to help everyone in the class keep track. However, more opportunities to

communicate their learning and act upon it could have taken place. Students could have looked at contemporary laws that they saw to be unfair and written letters or taken other action to change those laws. They could have learned about current movements for justice and how to join those movements. They could have created books to share with other classes in their building. They could have shared with others the power and importance of the friendships in their classroom that cross racial and ethnic lines to show others the importance of creating and maintaining fair and integrated schools.

Taking the time and energy to do deep inquiry with young learners fosters important pathways of learning and investigating that they will benefit from throughout their education and lives as citizens. However, teachers and students must be trusted to direct their own learning. Despite Garfield's acclaimed success with inquiry, the district is pushing the school to adopt a scripted phonics and math curriculum. Ms. Harper is already concerned about the time this will take away from the inquiry work that she loves doing with the students. We both believe that the students learn more in every subject area when the curriculum is meaningful and pertinent to their interests and lives. They will benefit from these powerful learning experiences that open up new ways of thinking and learning. The rest of us will benefit from it too.

Note

1. The names of teachers, students, and the school have all been changed.

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