

# Improving Access to Elementary School Social Studies Instruction

## *Strategies to Support Students With Learning Disabilities*

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*Social studies instruction in upper elementary school (Grades 3–5) is important for building foundational content knowledge to equip students for the secondary school curriculum. Due to numerous school initiatives and demands on the time of teachers, social studies instruction can play second fiddle to reading and mathematics instruction, which can impact outcomes for students with learning disabilities (LD). This article presents learning strategies, resources, and suggestions for promoting access to the social studies curriculum considering the realities of special educators' schedules.*

Although there are many initiatives and demands that influence how elementary school educators allocate instructional time, evidence suggests that students are receiving less instruction in social studies (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014). Currently, fewer than 20 states require an end-of-year assessment in social studies at the elementary level. Given the pressures of high-stakes testing in other subjects, teachers have reported spending more time on tested subjects (i.e., English language arts [ELA], mathematics), resulting in the sidelining of other subjects, such as social studies. For

example, Fitchett et al. (2014) found that social studies instruction has decreased by 48 minutes per week in Grades 3 through 5 in the past 10 years. In addition, students with disabilities, who are sometimes removed from social studies to receive remedial support in other subjects, may receive even less instruction in social studies (Rock et al., 2006). Thus, educators may have to seek alternative ways to provide students with access to historical content.

The National Assessment of Education Progress in History suggests that many students, particularly, students with disabilities, have difficulties in social studies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). On the most recent assessment, only 19% of fourth graders were proficient (54% basic, 24% below basic). Although those scores indicate an overall need for improvement, scores for students with disabilities suggest that even greater support is necessary for these students (7% proficient, 38% basic, 55% below basic). The performance of 12th graders reveals that many students exit high school with inadequate social studies content knowledge. For high school seniors, 53% of students in general education

were below basic, whereas 85% of students with disabilities scored below basic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Given the importance of participation in our communities and society, which can be supported through social studies and civics education, schools can work to improve social studies competencies to help students with content acquisition. However, the time crunch facing teachers reflects the need to provide social studies instruction within the realities of today's classrooms.

There are, however, different options special educators can explore for supporting access to social studies content knowledge and related skills, even given the realities of their time, schedules, and service delivery methods. These options can include infusing social studies content within ELA in co-taught classrooms, consultation (indirect support), or direct delivery (e.g., resource room, remedial reading time) models. Evidence-based strategies can be employed within these three conditions in order to (a) improve students' knowledge of historical content and (b) maximize instructional time to help students with LD gain important comprehension skills.

## Promoting Social Studies Access Within Co-Taught, Inclusive Settings

Barriers exist that make daily co-teaching during social studies challenging. Co-teaching within inclusive classrooms during ELA is more common and offers an option for increasing content access while targeting literacy skills.

*For the past 3 years, Mrs. James has served as a special educator for Grades 3 to 5 at Sunrise Elementary. Like many teachers, new initiatives, her student caseload, and other factors cause her schedule to change each year. Mrs. James and her general education fifth-grade co-teacher, Mr. Acosta, are aware that social studies is sometimes taught less often than other subjects. They know that by integrating social studies texts (e.g., articles, primary-source documents) that are directly aligned with the curriculum, they can provide content access and target reading comprehension to prepare students for content-area reading in middle school. However, these teachers are not sure how frequently to integrate social studies texts or evidence-based strategies within their existing station-based instruction.*

## Aligning Social Studies Texts With Grade-Level Curricula

Simply substituting the day's reading with an article about a historical event that is not directly aligned with the grade-level curriculum provides access to a historical topic, but these out-of-context readings do not promote content mastery to the degree that many topics require (Ferretti, MacArthur, & Okolo, 2001). Similarly, it is probably not realistic to integrate content-aligned text every day. Instead, text aligned with the curriculum can be integrated once or twice per week to provide meaningful access. By selecting texts that correspond with the curriculum, teachers can address both comprehension skill development and content acquisition. To identify text aligned with the curriculum, educators can use the following steps.

## By selecting texts that correspond with the curriculum, teachers can address both comprehension skill development and content acquisition.

### Step 1. Review the state social studies standards, district or school scope and sequence for social studies topics, and grade-level ELA standards.

The social studies standards and local pacing guide should provide an idea of which topics are appropriate for selection. For example, Mrs. James and Mr. Acosta found that early colonial America (e.g., early colonies, colonial life, occupations) was an upcoming topic for their fifth graders.

After identifying appropriate social studies content, select suitable informational text reading standards for the grade level. Mrs. James and Mr. Acosta found that determining main ideas, summarizing, and comparing and contrasting were all grade-level state standards for fifth grade.

**Step 2. Obtain instructional-level readings that support the identified social studies content.** Although many teachers still depend primarily on textbooks (Gersten & Okolo, 2007), many alternate sources are available and work well when used within the context of ELA instruction. Table 1 provides a list of additional resources for social studies content. In addition, when appropriate, teachers may make accommodations or modifications for students with LD. Common changes can include copying text into a document to reduce complex language or to shorten the passage, providing audio support, or having reading partners. Finally, assigning alternative readings to different groups of students, depending on the extent of the reading needs in the class, may be necessary.

*Mrs. James and Mr. Acosta selected several short passages on colonialism to*

*use within their upcoming ELA instruction. Twice a week they use station teaching because it allows them to collaborate in a way that utilizes their expertise (Friend & Bursuck, 2002). They also identified several standards from the Common Core's informational text strand and know that they want to support students' ability to identify the main idea and compare and contrast concepts, but they do not know which specific strategies they can use within their station teaching.*

## Applying Evidence-Based Strategies Within a Station Teaching Framework

To plan for station teaching, teachers begin by determining the number and types of stations and coordinating the learning outcomes among the stations. For example, two teachers may employ three stations, with two stations directly led by teachers and one independent station at which students complete work without direct teacher guidance. Silent reading or use of audio texts can be employed at the independent station. After the station content and learning outcomes are determined, roles for each station are identified based on know-how and preference. For example, one teacher may have expertise with teaching writing, whereas the other teacher is very knowledgeable about comprehension strategies. Next, student groups are created. Groups can be heterogeneous or homogenous, depending upon the focus of instruction. For example, if several students require extra instruction with writing or targeted remedial reading instruction, ability-based grouping may work best as teachers can adjust materials for the different groups (Friend & Bursuck, 2002). Finally, after determining the activities, accountability can be planned.

*Mrs. James and Mr. Acosta decide to use two stations—one focused on comprehension strategies and the other on writing a response to material presented during the previous class. At*

**Table 1. Online Social Studies Text and Lesson Planning Resources**

Resource	Description
K12 Reader <a href="http://www.k12reader.com/">http://www.k12reader.com/</a>	Offers free reading informational text passages for Grades K–5, including social studies. Various topics are included such as immigration, westward expansion, and so on. Comprehension questions are also included.
Read Works <a href="http://www.readworks.org/">http://www.readworks.org/</a>	Provides leveled reading passages for Grades K–12. The passages are organized by content area and topic (e.g., third-grade social studies). The website is free by simply registering for an account.
Go Social Studies Go! <a href="http://www.gosocialstudiesgo.com/">http://www.gosocialstudiesgo.com/</a>	Provides readings for U.S. and world history that include pictures, videos, and interactive tours. This site is appropriate for Grades 3 to 5 and supports middle school readiness.
Smithsonian Online <a href="http://smithsonianeducation.org/index.html">http://smithsonianeducation.org/index.html</a>	Provides exciting resources including links for parents, teachers, and kids. This includes online “virtual tours” of Smithsonian museums and videos.
History Channel “Classroom” <a href="http://www.history.com/shows/classroom">http://www.history.com/shows/classroom</a>	Delivers an archive of resources including famous speeches, current events (elections), and classroom resources, such as detailed information on every state. Suggestions for planning social studies lessons are also provided.
Atlas for iPad Free	Provides information, such as maps on over 250 countries and locations throughout the world. This free application provides geographical information that can add valuable context to the topics and text.

*Station 1, Mrs. James will use informational texts on the early colonies. Across the next few weeks, Mrs. James will teach students the “Get the Gist” comprehension strategy to identify main ideas. She will also demonstrate how to complete a semantic feature analysis for comparing and contrasting concepts. Cognitive strategy training, such as Get the Gist and semantic feature analysis, are examples of research-based practices for students with LD in elementary school (Ciullo, Lo, Wanzek, & Reed, 2014). At Station 2, Mr. Acosta will have students write a paragraph about how life would be if the students lived during the early colonial period, based on an article previously read that describes the chores and responsibilities of children during this era.*

**Comprehension strategy instruction: Get the Gist.** Cognitive strategy instruction supports reading comprehension by helping students with LD identify key details and main ideas (Ciullo et al., 2014). A three-step

comprehension strategy called Get the Gist is associated with improving social studies text comprehension (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998; Swanson et al., 2014). Reading comprehension strategies should be taught to mastery so that students can apply these procedures independently during reading. Get the Gist includes three steps: (a) identify the most important *who* or *what* in a section of text, (b) identify two or three details about the *who* or *what*, and (c) put the information into a main idea sentence.

Get the Gist can be taught in 2 to 3 weeks (time varies depending on student needs). First, teachers introduce the strategy and explain its importance, which is to monitor understanding of main ideas. Second, examples are provided to demonstrate the strategy in action. Third, in subsequent days, guided practice occurs to facilitate practice with feedback. For example, teachers could pose probing questions, such as “Which detail—the length of the

voyage made by settlers or the wood used to make boats—is more important to this article about the exhausting journey of early settlers?” Finally, after guided practice with feedback on several passages, students may be ready for independent strategy use. Teachers continue to monitor the accuracy of main ideas to determine if follow-up instruction is needed.

*At Mrs. James’s station, students practice the Get the Gist strategy, reading a three-paragraph article written at a fourth-grade level, which is the instructional reading level for this group. The article is about farming in the three Colonial regions during the 1660s. The students take turns reading with a partner, and they complete Get the Gist. Several students complete this activity independently. Mrs. James provides prompts to a few students with LD as they move through the sequence (see Figure 1). Mrs. James helps students refine their ideas to ensure that they identify the details and main*

**Figure 1. Get the Gist Example**

Teacher: State the most important <i>who</i> or <i>what</i> from the section of text.
Student: The New England Colony.
Teacher: Identify important things about the important <i>who</i> or <i>what</i> .
Student: The weather was very cold and the people built ships and fished.
Teacher: Put this into a sentence of about 10 words.
Student: The weather made farming challenging so people chose other jobs like fishing.

Note. The examples used in this figure are adapted from Klingner and Vaughn (1998).

**Figure 2. Semantic Feature Analysis Chart for Elementary Social Studies Content**

	Land was used for farming “cash crops”	Tobacco and rice were common farm products	Many colonists worked in mills and factories	Largest slave population	Known as the “bread basket” of the colonies	Exported fish to other colonies
New England Colony	–	–	+	–	–	+
Middle Colony	+	–	+	–	+	–
Southern Colony	+	+	–	+	–	–

ideas. For example, Mrs. James might say, “First, let’s select two key details. Remember, the main idea is who or what was the focus of the section along with details. Let’s brainstorm ideas and then we will figure out which idea captures the message of this section.” After brainstorming and narrowing down details, the students create the following statement: “Fishing and shipbuilding were popular in New England because the weather and soil made farming hard.” This process is then repeated for each section of the text.

**Semantic feature analysis (SFA).** SFA is a research-based strategy that fosters strategic reading and highlights content (Bos & Anders, 1992; Dexter & Hughes, 2011). SFA graphic organizers are charts that display a grid to help students visualize how topics, people, or concepts are related. Figure 2 depicts similarities and differences between occupations in the New England, Middle, and Southern Colonies. An SFA chart addresses two key ELA expectations for informational text: (a) understanding relationships between two or more

people, events, or concepts (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R1.5.3) and (b) compare and contrast (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R1.5.5; National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Teachers develop SFA charts for students using two steps. First, concepts from the text to be analyzed are identified. For example, if the class is going to read an article summarizing facts about the colonial regions, the SFA could be developed in a computer document by making a grid with three rows (one for each colony) and columns that list attributes to be studied (e.g., colonies with tobacco farming). Second, students complete the chart by placing a “+” sign when there is a direct relationship between the concept and feature, such as the Middle Colonies producing bread. If the relationship is not present, then a “–” sign is written. When teaching students to complete the SFA, the same instructional principles (modeling, guided practice, and independent use with support as needed) are used until students reach mastery (Bos & Anders, 1992).

After reading several passages using the Get the Gist strategy, Mrs. James provides her students with the SFA chart on the New England, Middle, and Southern Colonies (Figure 2). Mrs. James and her students refer back to the text to locate information and then place a “+” symbol for information found in the text, such as land used for cash crops in the Southern Colonies, or a “–” symbol for topics not appropriate for the southern colonies. Identifying text details using the SFA strategy reinforces the required skill of using text to analyze or confirm concepts (National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The content the students are learning at Mrs. James’s station is complemented by the writing instruction provided by Mr. Acosta at his station. These stations allow Mr. Acosta and Mrs. James to focus on grade-level literacy skills while providing access to the social studies curriculum.

**Utilizing content-aligned videos to introduce or reinforce concepts.** In addition to using text to provide social studies content, teachers may seek

**Table 2. Examples for Making General Education Social Studies Accessible to Students With Learning Disabilities**

Instructional detail questions	Enhancing content
What is the next topic to be covered in general education social studies?	Review content to better understand what may be needed to increase content access.
In what ways will the information be presented?	<p>Provide the general educator with ideas to enhance understanding such as templates for note-taking and graphic organizers.</p> <p>Teachers may also choose to discuss instructional procedures for making text comprehensible such as a detailed preview of vocabulary, text, and supporting background knowledge via videos, digital images, or maps.</p>
What assessment practices are used?	<p>Modify assessments if necessary based on student needs and their individualized education programs. For example, the special educator can shorten quizzes and the teachers discuss the plan for providing assessment accommodations (e.g., extra time, shortened essays).</p>

other procedures supported by research to enhance the curriculum. The use of videos that portray content aligned with the curriculum can be integrated to support the development of background knowledge and improve retention of content (Gersten, Baker, Smith-Johnson, Dimino, & Peterson, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2009). Research suggests two options for utilizing videos during social studies. First, short videos (3–5 minutes) can be shown to introduce new content by supporting background knowledge (e.g., settlers on the Mayflower) or to reinforce text reading (Vaughn et al., 2009). Second, lengthier videos, such as documentaries or historical reenactments, can be divided into segments (e.g., 6–10 minutes) and shown on different days based on the appropriate sequence of the events or topics (Gersten et al., 2006). For example, if a video contained three aspects of colonial life—geography, occupations, and the role of women and children—these topics could be shown on different days to align with the content presented that day or the text.

Two considerations are recommended for using videos during social studies. First, the videos should be from a reliable source (see Table 1)

and previewed to ensure that the content is aligned with the curriculum. Second, guided questions should be developed to promote active learning before, during (by using stopping points), and after the video (Gersten et al., 2006). Thus, the occasional use of content-aligned videos supports the attainment of social studies content and can be used for applying comprehension strategies, such as providing details to support responses, to build background knowledge or to enhance text reading.

*Mrs. James shows students at her station a 5-minute video on Jamestown. During the video, she asks questions, such as “The children in this video wake up at 5 a.m. to farm. What jobs were they doing on their farm?” and “How would farming in Jamestown differ from farming in other colonial regions?” After watching the video, the students complete a brief writing activity to the prompt, “If I lived in Jamestown, I would spend my days . . . .”*

**Promoting Social Studies Access With Indirect Support**

Although some students with LD receive direct support from a special educator via co-teaching during social

studies instruction, some special educators provide support through consultation with general educators. There are several ways to increase access to social studies content for students with disabilities when a special educator cannot provide direct support. For example, Mrs. James is unable to provide co-teaching support during social studies for several fourth-grade students on her caseload. Table 2 provides a list of ideas for how teachers can support social studies instruction for these students.

**There are several ways to increase access to social studies content for students with disabilities when a special educator cannot provide direct support.**

*To plan for indirect support, Mrs. James meets with the general educator responsible for fourth-grade social studies instruction. She wants to learn about upcoming topics and activities to determine which strategies for support she will employ. By asking questions, such as the examples provided in Figure*

**Figure 3. An Upper-Elementary Social Studies Note-Taking Template**

Important people or groups

1. \_\_\_\_\_

• ----- (Describe importance)

2. \_\_\_\_\_

• -----

Events

1. \_\_\_\_\_ (Event title)

• ----- (Describe what happened)

2. \_\_\_\_\_

• -----

3. \_\_\_\_\_

• -----

Summarize the most important information in 2-3 sentences.

-----

-----

Parts or ideas that are still are confusing to me.

-----

-----

Note. This template can be adapted or expanded for additional space and content needs.

3, Mrs. James learned that (a) the next topic is state geography, (b) the class will read several pages of the textbook as a whole group, (c) the class will take notes listing five or six key facts from the text, and (d) a 10-item multiple-choice quiz will be given to assess content. Mrs. James also learns that the general educator employs prereading strategies, including previewing headings, pictures, and definitions, because text previews in

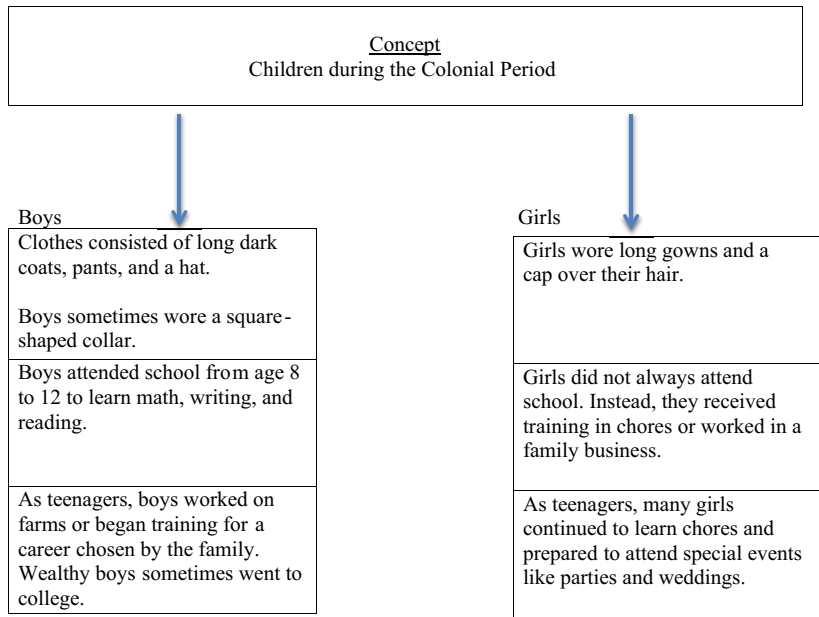
social studies can enhance comprehension (e.g., Simmons et al., 2010). To support note taking, Mrs. James creates a note-taking template (see Figure 3) that students can use to take notes to support access to the information. The general educator decided to use this template with all students in the class because it supports organization and initial note-taking skills. This template can also be used as a study guide.

Depending on the severity of the literacy needs of the students, teachers may consider providing notes that are already completed or a graphic organizer (Swanson et al., 2014).

**Promoting Social Studies Access With Direct Support**

Finally, some special educators may be able to play a more direct role in

**Figure 4. Sample Concept Map**



improving the social studies content knowledge of students with LD (i.e., during resource room or pullout instruction). Similar to the delivery of social studies instruction during ELA co-teaching, incorporating social studies text during reading intervention time can address important reading expectations and enhance content learning necessary to prepare students for the reading and content demands of middle school. An evidence-based strategy that can be employed during direct delivery is concept mapping (Dexter & Hughes, 2011). Note that each evidence-based strategy discussed in this article can be applied across settings—co-taught, indirect, and direct.

Concept maps are graphic organizers that visually portray details around a big topic (in social studies, topics can include people, events, or broad concepts, like democracy) into categories to illustrate different aspects of the topic (Dexter & Hughes, 2011). For example, the concept of the Mayflower Compact (an agreement signed by English colonists on the Mayflower ship that planned their government once they arrived in North America) would be placed in the center. From this concept, three lines connecting to other boxes are drawn

for details, such as who signed the compact, why, and the impact. Teachers could use this example to demonstrate the purpose and function of the concept map, which would be used during or subsequent to reading, then provide guided support until students are proficient, and eventually, students will perform this independently or with a partner.

To create a concept map, teachers list the main concept to be studied at the top or center of the page. Next, lines are inserted that connect the concept to other boxes that will include key details about the concept, such as in Figure 4. This tool enhances details about a topic and helps students view connections and facts (Dexter &

Hughes, 2011; Swanson et al., 2014). Concept maps can be used during reading to fill in information as it appears in the text or after reading.

*In her resource room, Mrs. James works with a small group of students with disabilities. Prior to reading a one-page article about the life of children in the New England Colonies, Mrs. James and the students discuss the picture in the article (a boy carrying a bucket). Next, they preview subtitles and she asks students what they know about the topic (providing extra content, such as showing students a map and pictures on the computer). While reading, Mrs. James scaffolds the Get the Gist strategy. After reading, students complete the concept map. In these early stages of instruction, Mrs. James provides additional support as students complete each section. Later, however, she will have students complete the concept map independently as a check of their reading comprehension and mastery of the strategy.*

### Final Thoughts

Social studies is an important subject that influences citizenship, teaches about key events and figures, and integrates literacy skills. Many students with LD find social studies difficult in secondary school for reasons including text readability and background knowledge that some students lack if not provided in elementary school. By working within the realities of their positions, special educators play a role



in equipping students for the middle school content and reading expectations by supporting students with LD in the elementary grades.

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