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KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL: INTEGRATING SOCIAL STUDIES AND WRITING
CONTENT FOR THIRD-GRADE STUDENTS

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2020

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview of this Chapter

Writing

By a Fourth-Grade Student, 2013

*Writing is
the best.
you have to do it
during a test.
Writing is
fun too.
Just like you*

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap? The desire to answer this burning question will guide the research and curriculum writing for this capstone project. Through this capstone project, I hope to gain greater knowledge of the academic needs of low-income students, explore the best practices for teaching social studies, vocabulary, and writing to elementary students, and apply this information to writing an integrated third-grade literacy unit.

In this chapter, my personal interest in the topic of integrating social studies content into literacy instruction will be highlighted and discussed. Following that, two of the most influential voices who have written about the need for high-quality social studies, science, and other

humanities content instruction for low-income students will be introduced. Next the personal implications of this work, the implications for other teachers, and those for the education field will be discussed. This chapter will conclude with a review of what has been discussed and a preview of what is to come.

Mummies and Student Engagement

My 2012-13 fourth-grade students loved the *Goosebumps* series by R. L. Stine. They begged for it as a read-aloud and as an end of day activity. This love grew exponentially when we began reading Stine's book, *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb*. While they were enraptured by the story, they also had a lot of questions about the setting and content. Where is Egypt? What is a pyramid and why was it built? What is a sarcophagus? This interest led the class to research ancient Egypt to find answers to their questions and then to write two informational essays on life in Ancient Egypt and King Tutankhamen.

One of the most profound take-aways from this unit was the student buy-in. This class attended a school in North Minneapolis where more than 90% of students qualified for free or reduced-price meals and only 10% would test proficient in reading according to the 2013 MCA (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d; Minnesota Department of Education, 2013). These students often struggled through writing instruction and with the assigned independent work. Those who struggled the most would act out to avoid it. However, during the units on ancient Egypt, the students were actively engaged. Even the lowest readers and writers were empowered to write about what they were learning and were excited to share with their peers.

Why were they so engaged? What empowered them to write and share? The students were interested in the topic and invested in learning more. They enjoyed exploring information about ancient Egypt and were motivated to find answers to their questions about this topic. The

change in their behavior appeared to be directly correlated to their interest in the topic and desire to learn more. When they were writing, they had specific content to write about that was important to or interested them. The more they learned about ancient Egypt, the more confidently they discussed and wrote about the topic.

The Knowledge Gap

During the summer of 2019, Natalie Wexler wrote an article entitled, “Elementary Education Has Gone Terribly Wrong.” With this article, Wexler was previewing her upcoming book, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s broken education system – And How to Fix it* (2019), by highlighting some of the key observations she had made while visiting a variety of elementary classrooms and discussing what she entitled, the Knowledge Gap. She explained that the Knowledge Gap was the gap in the information students from affluent households are exposed to and what their low-income peers have access to. She attributed low reading achievement, poor writing skills, and low student engagement to this gap in knowledge. While reading the article, I found myself agreeing with many of the points she was making and identifying many parallel experiences from teaching in a high-needs school.

The book previewed in Wexler’s 2019 article, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s broken education system – And How to Fix it*, was published in August of 2019. In this book, she made many compelling arguments for public schools to emphasize content in elementary school as well as skill-based instruction. She illustrated her key points with real-life examples from some of the classrooms she had observed. Again, I found myself connecting with these examples and relating them to my experiences in the classroom.

In her book (2019b), Wexler made many references to education scholar E.D. Hirsch Jr. who had published many books and articles discussing the necessity of content knowledge for

student academic success. *The Knowledge Deficit* (2006), one of Hirsch Jr.'s most notable texts, discussed the history of the Knowledge Gap in America, the importance of teaching academic content with skills instruction, and how to use instruction and assessment effectively to boost student achievement. Again, I found myself agreeing with almost everything I read in this book and reflecting on my time in a high-needs classroom.

Not only had E. D. Hirsch Jr. written several books and articles about the Knowledge Deficit and the need for more content in elementary classrooms, he also founded the CORE Knowledge Foundation. This foundation has published many content-specific units for elementary students, beginning in kindergarten, with the purpose of building student background knowledge. Many schools have adopted this curriculum school-wide and have found that it has enhanced student achievement and engagement (Wexler, 2019b). While this specific curriculum is an excellent example of integrating content into all areas of instruction, most teachers cannot choose a building-wide curriculum. This left me wondering what a teacher could do to close the Knowledge Gap.

How could I have incorporated more social studies, science, or humanities content into instruction? During the discussed school year, the school had adopted a building-wide reading and math curriculum, thus teacher-specific content integration was not allowed in those subject areas. In contrast, while there were many writing curricula available to teachers, this area of instruction was teacher driven and ripe for content integration. Therefore, I could have used my writing block to incorporate more social studies, science, and other humanities into my instruction.

The freedom to tailor writing instruction to the students' interests and needs was not unique to my classroom. Of teachers surveyed, up to 65% stated they did not have a commercial

curriculum for writing instruction (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Additionally, as Wexler (2019b) argued, for students to write well, they need something to write about. Integrating content into writing would not only be manageable for most teachers but also beneficial for improving student writing and content knowledge. By integrating domain-specific content into this area, teachers would have an additional opportunity to close the Knowledge Gap Wexler identified in her book.

Implications for Future Instruction

“Kids are clamoring for broccoli and spinach while adults insist on a steady diet of doughnuts”

(Wexler, 2019b, p.29)

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap? This question is the motivation behind the research for and writing of this capstone project. Through reviewing a variety of related literature and writing a curricular unit, I hope to answer this question to improve my knowledge of student needs, increase my repertoire of instructional techniques, and enhance my unit writing skills. This is an especially important area of research for me and my peers as it supports students and teachers in closing the Knowledge Gap (Hirsch J., 2006).

This capstone project is particularly pertinent as it offers an opportunity to build my knowledge of the importance of and best practices for teaching elementary social studies, vocabulary, and writing, which will support literacy growth and content knowledge for all students. Through this research and application of the research, I hope to grow as a curricular unit writer. This work will improve my overall literacy knowledge and instructional skill, which will support and improve student knowledge and skill.

This area of research is also important to my fellow teachers for improving students' knowledge, skill, and engagement. As Wexler (2019b) stated above, students are hungry for high-quality content within which they can learn and apply the target skills and strategies. By offering interesting content, teachers will see greater student engagement coupled with student academic gains. As both Wexler and I observed, students will begin to connect with the knowledge they are building and relate it to other areas of learning.

This work is meaningful for the field of education, as it applies to schools throughout the country and could be used in many classrooms that struggle with low student performance and engagement. The Knowledge Gap is a nationwide issue that is especially prominent in schools with large populations of low-performing students (Wexler, 2019). Both Hirsch Jr, (2006) and Wexler (2019b) argued that improving social studies, science, and other humanities content instruction for low-income students will improve overall literacy skills. If this is true, elementary teachers throughout the state and country should assess and improve content and vocabulary instruction to improve overall literacy growth.

Conclusion

Low-income students have the greatest need for high-quality public education. While much work has been done to set rigorous standards for elementary students in Minnesota, the need for greater background knowledge persists. The main objective of this research and project is to combine high-quality literacy instruction with rich and engaging historical content as an example unit that improves the academic skills and meets the knowledge needs of low-income learners.

This chapter highlighted the motivation for and interest in learning more about the Knowledge Gap and the need for more domain-specific content instruction in elementary

schools. It introduced two of the greatest advocates for more domain-specific content instruction in elementary schools: E. D. Hirsch Jr. and Natalie Wexler. It also outlined the implications of this work for myself, my fellow teachers, and the field of education.

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap?

Answering this research question will guide the remainder of this capstone project. In chapter two, scholarly literature about the Achievement Gap, the Opportunity Gap, and the Knowledge Gap will be explored. The need for high-quality social studies, vocabulary, and writing instruction and the best practices for these areas of elementary instruction will also be discussed and analyzed. Chapter three will outline the methods used to create a third-grade writing curriculum that incorporates social studies content and vocabulary instruction. This chapter will include the curriculum design, intended audience, relevant standards, instructional techniques, and student assessment. The final chapter, chapter four, will review what has been gained from this project, include reflection on how this will impact my future instruction, and will discuss what other educators can gain from this project.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

“For children to make substantial progress in reading, they must make early and substantial progress in knowledge,” (Hirsch Jr., 2006, p.11).

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap?

Students from all economic and racial backgrounds should have the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills they will need to survive in a global economy through public education. This building of general academic knowledge should begin in the earliest grades and be further developed throughout a student’s schooling.

The literature analyzed and discussed in this chapter is a guide to better understand the Knowledge Gap and how to support struggling students through integrating elementary social studies, writing, and vocabulary instruction. This chapter is organized into three sections — The Problem: The Achievement Gap, The Opportunity Gap, and The Knowledge Gap; The Solution: Teaching Social Studies Content, Vocabulary, and Writing; and The Application: The Best Practices for Social Studies, Vocabulary, and Writing Instruction. In the first section there is an analysis of literature on the Achievement Gap, the Opportunity Gap, and the Knowledge Gap to gain insight into what these issues are and the possible causes and solutions. The second section explores literature that highlights the need for and impact of high-quality, early elementary social studies, vocabulary, and writing instruction. In the third section, the best practices for elementary

social studies, vocabulary, and writing instruction and the integration of the three subjects into one instructional unit will be analyzed and discussed. The information gained from and analyzed in these sections will later be used to write a curriculum that supports closing the Knowledge Gap through integrating third-grade writing, social studies, and vocabulary instruction into one literacy unit.

The Problem: The Achievement Gap, The Opportunity Gap, and The Knowledge Gap

The Achievement Gap. The Achievement Gap is one of the most commonly discussed issues facing public education today. It is a gap in the test scores and graduation rates between affluent white students and low-income students of color (Wexler, 2019b). While this problem still affects many school districts throughout the country, it is not a new problem. The first comprehensive study of student achievement in America was done in 1966, led by James Coleman. Coleman found a large gap in student achievement between African American and White students. In 1970 the National Assessment of Educational Progress determined that African American and Hispanic students were performing on average four years behind their white peers (Chubb & Loveless, 2002).

“With limited knowledge, low income children will inevitably face equally limited job opportunities and equally limited social mobility” (Celano & Neuman, 2008, p 262). To improve the academic and economic future of students, teachers need to offer students rich content knowledge instruction. Chubb and Loveless (2002) argued that if schools were able to eliminate the achievement gap, it would improve social and economic opportunities for children in America. In his 2006 book *The Knowledge Deficit*, E. D. Hirsch Jr. asserted that students with high reading and math skills would be able to find work in a global economy while those who do not would have fewer opportunities. Additionally, Graham, Harris, and Santangelo (2015) found

that 90% of white-collar jobs and 80% of blue-collar jobs now require employees to have proficient writing skills. To improve outcomes for low-income students, it is the responsibility of public schools to equip them with the skills they will need to work in our modern world (Wexler, 2019b).

Low student achievement has been attributed to a variety of factors. After his initial survey of student achievement in America in 1966, James Coleman attributed low student performance to family background (Chubb & Loveless, 2002). Others have asserted that poor teacher training, friend groups, culture, discrimination, and types of schooling play a role in student achievement (Hirsch Jr., 2006; Chubb & Loveless, 2002). While these factors may impact student achievement, Wexler (2019b) argued that wealth and income highly correlate to and have implications for the educational achievement of students and their parents. For students living in poverty, certain risks have been identified that can impact student achievement (Gassman-Pines & Yoshikawa, 2006). These risks are, “income poverty, single parent family, maternal depressive symptoms, parenting stress, lack of maternal warmth, material hardships, food insufficiency, lack of parental employment, and welfare receipt” (Gassman-Pines & Yoshikawa, 2006, p 981). Gassman-Pines and Yoshikawa (2006) found that children who were exposed to or experienced more of these risks had more unfavorable outcomes such as low student achievement.

The Achievement Gap affects schools nationwide and is a chronic problem in Minnesota. According to the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment data from 2017-2018, only 40% of the students tested who qualify for free or reduced lunch were proficient in reading, while 72% of students who do not qualify were proficient in reading (Golden & Webster, 2019). The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis determined in a recent report on student achievement in Minnesota

that the Achievement Gap wasn't only present in students of color, but also in low-income white students when compared to their affluent peers (Grunewald & Nath, 2019). This astonishing gap between the performance of the state's affluent students and their peers from low-socioeconomic households should be a call to action. However, what should be done to close this gap in student achievement?

School districts and individual schools have tried a variety of supports to close the Achievement Gap and help students succeed. In Minnesota, districts can apply for Basic Skills Aid to support students who are struggling. In recent years, the Saint Paul School District has used these funds to hire ELL teachers, classroom aids, and math or reading specialists (Golden & Webster, 2019). While these additional school staff can be beneficial for improving student achievement, these supports have not closed the Achievement Gap in SPPS. According to the 2019 MCA, only 40.2% of students tested were proficient in reading in a district where 65.7% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019).

Nationally, the U.S. Government took on the challenge of closing the Achievement Gap by the passing of the No Child Left Behind Law on January 8, 2002. Under this law, students were required to be tested for proficiency in reading and math from grade three to grade eight with the goal of all students testing proficient in reading and math by 2013-14 (Klein, 2015). To meet this goal, schools were expected to meet the specified targets each year, known as their AYP (adequate yearly progress). This law also required that newly hired teachers and paraprofessionals who were employed to teach low-performing students were "highly qualified" and that those teachers would be dispersed evenly throughout schools that serve low-performing students (Klein, 2015).

While the No Child Left Behind Law was meant to improve student proficiency and academic success, some of the unintended results of this law have caused more harm than good. Districts were put under enormous pressure to improve student achievement and graduation rates quickly or face the loss of funding (Klein, 2015). For example, in 2017 more than 900 public high school students were matriculated in Washington D.C. despite not having met the district expectations for graduation (McGee, 2018). McGee (2018) highlighted that investigators found that “most DCPS high schools exhibited a culture of passing and graduating students,” (para. 4) without regard for academic and attendance expectations set by the DCPS. A recent report done by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis found that while the graduation rate for high school students in Minnesota is increasing, college readiness has declined (Grunewald & Nath, 2019). The report sounded the alarm that “Minnesota is graduating an increasing proportion of students who are unprepared for college,” (Grunewald & Nath, 2019, p. 3).

Another result of the No Child Left Behind law was the focus on teaching students skills that are easily assessed and improving their test taking strategies for the purpose of raising test scores. For elementary students, the goal was proficiency in math and reading as assessed by standardized tests. Wexler (2019b) highlighted that the data collected by these standardized tests came primarily from assessing student skill and not student knowledge. Thus, schools turned to skills-based curricula to boost test scores. Au (2007) found that 69.4% of studies analyzed showed a decline in the amount of content instruction offered to students. Though there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of skill-based curricula, schools turned to this style of instruction to boost test scores (Wexler, 2019b).

Schools also shifted their daily schedules to emphasize math and reading instruction. The National Center for Education Statistics found that in 2017-18 elementary school students were

given 540 minutes a week of English Language Arts instruction compared to only 170 minutes of Social Studies instruction (Spiegelman, 2019). When comparing the data collected on instruction in 1993-94 to 2003-04, students in the 2003-04 school year had the equivalent of 4 fewer weeks of social studies content instruction than those in elementary school in 1993-94 (Morton & Dalton, 2007). This loss of content instruction and emphasis on skills instruction is exacerbating the Achievement Gap instead of closing it (Hirsch Jr., 2006; Wexler, 2019b).

The Opportunity Gap. Scholars have begun using the phrase the Opportunity Gap instead of the Achievement Gap to shift the narrative of this academic disparity from the shoulders of the students who are tested, to the situations that they are in and resources that they lack. Patrick (2015) defined the Opportunity Gap as the gap “in exposure to resources in the form of classroom materials, books, field trips, technology, and experienced teachers.” (para. 4). Mooney (2018) further described this gap as the “circumstances in which people are born —such as their race, ethnicity, ZIP code, and socioeconomic status— [which] determine their opportunities in life,” (para. 2). Disparities in nutrition, health, safety, housing, and out-of-school educational experiences also play a role in the Opportunity Gap (Carter & Welner, 2013).

Within school walls, students of color often face disparities that further the Opportunity Gap. Hall Mark (2013) highlighted that often the most effective and experienced teachers work in schools that serve the highest performing and most affluent students. Additionally, in their survey of students of color and their educational outcomes, Carter and Welner (2013) noted that students of color were often enrolled in classes with lower-order academic content and expectations. Furthering educational disparities, students of color are more likely to be removed from the classroom for discipline when compared to their white peers (Hall Mark, 2013). This

form of discipline negatively impacts student achievement through substantial loss of academic instruction (Carter and Welner, 2013).

“The longer that lower-status groups have been denied equal access to opportunities, the more inequality has compounded the adverse effects on these groups,” (Carter & Welner, 2013, p. 1). Mooney (2018) argued that students from low-income households are not underperforming due to a lack of ability but in response to a lack of opportunity. Educators who work with low-income students must recognize the gaps in opportunity that are imposed on students and meet students where they are to build their knowledge and skill. Hall Mark (2013) asserted that students need to identify their teachers as someone who cares about them personally and their academic success. By building an appropriate rapport with students, educators can better assess student needs, identify student interests, and apply this information to instruction to better serve students.

Milner (2012) argued that the Opportunity Gap is present in all levels of education for both students and teachers, thus educators need to shift their focus from the gap that is measured by standardized tests to the underlying gaps in knowledge and resources. While educators cannot fill all of the gaps in opportunity for students, such as housing and food scarcity, they can create opportunities within the classroom to engage and empower students (Mooney, 2018). Carter and Welner (2013) suggested that educators and schools maintain high standards for all students, especially students of color. They also argued that schools should be preparing all students with the tools and the knowledge to be successful in college even if not all students will choose this route. By shifting our focus from student achievement based on standardized norms to a broader view of student achievement, we empower our culturally diverse students through highlighting

their strengths and meeting their needs as presented in the classroom, with the end goal of improving their future prospects (Milner, 2012).

What are these underlying academic needs? Which of these needs can individual teachers address through planning and instruction? The following section addresses these questions through discussion and analysis of literature on the Knowledge Gap.

The Knowledge Gap. “No degree of ‘skill’ will help if [a student] lacks the knowledge to understand it,” (Wexler, 2019b, p. 30). Unequal access to information is growing another gap that is fueling the Achievement Gap: The Knowledge Gap (Celano & Neuman, 2008). The Knowledge Gap is a gap in the general content knowledge that students from affluent families with educated parents are exposed to compared to that of their peers from low-socioeconomic households (Wexler, 2019b). With an emphasis on teaching skills to pass high-stakes tests and meet AYP, schools have allocated less time to teaching social studies, science, and other humanities (Morton & Dalton, 2007). This lack of content instruction is exacerbating the gap in general content knowledge for low-income students. Additionally, E.D. Hirsch Jr. (2006) found that schools with vague curricula and poor teacher training in the assigned curriculum add to the Knowledge Gap.

“To read with comprehension, students need to acquire broad knowledge” (Hirsch Jr & Hansel, 2013, p. 32). The ultimate goal of reading instruction is to train readers to make sense of what they are reading and gain something from it. In an effort to improve student test scores, reading instruction has become skills focused with read-alouds and instruction organized by skill, not by content or topic (Wexler, 2019b). E.D. Hirsch Jr. (2006) argued that children need broad general knowledge and strong vocabularies to become proficient readers. Without the proper background knowledge and vocabulary, students struggle to make sense of what they are

reading and gain information from texts (Hirsch, 2006). If vocabulary and content instruction begin early in elementary school, students will have a strong academic foundation and will continue to build on that knowledge throughout their schooling. This knowledge and vocabulary foundation will lead to exponential growth in both literacy skills and content knowledge (Hirsch, 2006).

While the importance of teaching social studies and science content may not seem as pressing at the elementary school level, lack of strong content instruction has implications for future student success (Wexler, 2019b). Wexler (2019b) highlighted that high school teachers are often confronted with giving students remedial instruction to fill the holes in their background knowledge so that they can successfully engage with high school level curricula. To address this problem, elementary schools need to close the Knowledge Gap early on to ensure students from all backgrounds can be successful in middle and high school.

E.D. Hirsch Jr. (2006) asserted that for students to be successful readers, they need background knowledge and vocabulary on specific topics in order to comprehend and synthesize new information. He adamantly refuted the idea that gaining general reading comprehension skills will transfer to all reading endeavors. One of the major studies that supports this claim is the “Effect of Prior Knowledge on Good and Poor Readers' Memory of Text” done by D. Recht and L. Leslie (1988). In this study, 624 seventh and eighth grade students were given a story about a baseball game to independently read and then were asked comprehension questions. Recht and Leslie found that students with strong background knowledge about baseball answered more questions accurately and thoroughly. Interestingly, they also found that both students with high reading ability and those with low reading ability performed similarly when they were equally familiar with the content. If we apply this concept as liberally as E.D. Hirsch Jr. did, it is

apparent that increasing the general knowledge of low-performing students and improving their vocabulary will increase their reading fluency and comprehension.

In order to close the Achievement Gap, schools need to close the Knowledge Gap. Elementary education must include both high-quality content and skills instruction. One way to offer both content and skills instruction simultaneously is to provide students integrated units where content knowledge and academic skills are taught together and used to support each other. These units would present students with authentic opportunities to build the content knowledge, vocabulary, and literacy skills required for gaining and properly using information from various texts. The remainder of this chapter will analyze literature that discusses why social studies, writing, and vocabulary instruction is key for elementary student academic growth and what should be included in the instruction of these content areas.

The Solution: Teaching Social Studies Content, Vocabulary, and Writing

Why should educators emphasize social studies, vocabulary, and writing instruction in early elementary school? This section aims to answer this question through analysis of literature discussing the importance of early exposure to high-quality social studies content, strong vocabulary teaching, and clear writing instruction.

Nationwide, the Common Core Standards were published in 2009 (Bigham, 2015). In 2010, Minnesota adopted a modified version of the Common Core Standards as their state-wide English Language Arts Standards (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). One of the biggest shifts from the previous standards to the Common Core was the emphasis on nonfiction text (Wexler, 2019b). While classrooms libraries are often dominated by narrative and fictional texts (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010), the Common Core encouraged using nonfiction during instruction at least 50% of the time (Wexler, 2019b). To properly meet the expectations of the

Common Core Standards, this shift from narrative-heavy instruction to expository instruction should begin as early as Kindergarten (Moss, 2005).

Teachers should offer content-specific, nonfiction units during literacy instruction to meet the goals for informational text usage at the elementary level. Moss (2005) articulated that early exposure to expository text laid the foundation for future success in reading and writing this genre. Additionally, Hirsch Jr. (2006) argued that cognitive science supports that students must have domain-specific background knowledge to read related texts fluently with comprehension. Thus, to improve student literacy skills, teachers should organize their read-alouds to immerse students in various topics with a duration lasting long enough for the knowledge and vocabulary to become familiar (Hirsch Jr., 2006). Building this general knowledge and vocabulary will also help students in independent reading, as it will fill in the gaps in their background knowledge that authors often assume their readers already have (Hirsch Jr., 2006). This is supported by the work of Benjamin Bloom and his famous instructional objectives known as Bloom's Taxonomy. Of the six objectives for student cognitive growth, knowledge is the first and most important (Woolfolk, 2010). Even after the revision of the taxonomy in 2001, "remembering" or knowledge was still found to be most important for student success and growth (Woolfolk, 2010).

Social Studies. Gosner (2018) described social studies content and instruction as "an opportunity for inquiry and exploration," (para. 11) where students can gain and authentically use general academic knowledge and vocabulary. However, Solomon (1987) noted that administrators and teachers often give social studies less instructional time and assign instruction in this content area to less ideal times of day. Wexler (2019b) outlined that this decision is often supported by two arguments; the first is that young children are only interested in subjects that

directly relate to their life and the second is that history and other social science are too abstract for them. In contrast, E.D. Hirsch Jr. (2006) asserted that young children are in fact capable of some abstract thinking when supported by access to high-quality instruction and content-specific information. Solomon stated that even civics instruction is relevant to elementary students, as young students are citizens of many groups within their school and their community.

While social studies instruction is beneficial for all students, it is crucial for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Wexler, 2019b). Celano and Neuman (2008) asserted that students from low-socioeconomic households need the most support acquiring content knowledge. Elementary educators must identify opportunities to fill these knowledge gaps through giving students access to high-quality social studies content. If not, Halvorsen et. al (2012) asserted that lack of social studies content is and will continue to be bad for student development and future civic health.

Many scholars agree that social studies instruction should begin in the primary grades. Hirsch Jr. (2006) argued that knowledge gained in the primary years lays a foundation for future schooling. Additionally, Moss (2005) highlighted the need for students to be introduced to more expository texts in the early grades to help students be prepared for future academics. This is especially important to primary level elementary educators as Jeong et. al. (2010) found that fourth graders were unprepared for the volume of informational texts in instruction and assessment in fourth-grade curricula. To better prepare students for the rigor of middle and high school, primary educators need to give students access to high-quality social studies content.

When domain-specific social studies content was integrated into literacy instruction, Halvorsen et. al. (2012) found that second-grade students made academic gains with both social studies content and literacy. Beyond content knowledge growth, Gosner (2018) maintained that

early social studies instruction led students to engage with challenging topics such as race, class, equity, and gender. Learning how to respectfully discuss difficult topics early in their schooling is beneficial for the students' school and future civic success (Gosner, 2018).

Solomon (1987) articulated that social studies instruction should offer students an opportunity to be exposed to engaging content and authentically practice thinking and reasoning skills. He also emphasized that social studies instruction should go beyond fact memorization. Students should analyze primary sources, read various genres such as informational texts and historical fiction, write about texts they have read, identify questions they have, and seek answers (Solomon, 1987; Moss, 2005; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007).

Students can authentically build and practice critical thinking skills through social studies instruction and exploration. Solomon (1987) highlighted that social studies content and instruction offers an opportunity for students to think through complex situations, evaluate variables, and make sense of what they have learned. Students can also explore topics with the support of technology. Moss (2005) pointed out that researching relevant social studies topics is an authentic opportunity for students to use technology to critically read sources online and evaluate them for relevance and validity.

Vocabulary. Boote (2006) found that students must know 90-95% of the words used in a text to be able to comprehend it while they are independently reading. However, she noted that by the end of second grade, average students had about 6,000 words in their vocabulary while students in the lowest quartile had only 4,000. To improve student reading and comprehension, schools need to also improve student vocabulary, especially for those performing at the lowest level. Even in an era of readily available technology, "just google it" is not a reliable mentality. Wexler (2019b) pointed out that words have multiple meanings and the context within a text

gives insight into the author's intended usage. Without a well-developed vocabulary, students struggle to make sense of what they are reading.

Stanton-Chapman et. al. (2004) found that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds have much less developed vocabularies. Students with limited vocabularies know fewer words and have a narrower knowledge of the words that they are familiar with (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Hoff (2013) noted that low-income students have lower language processing, language comprehension, and language production. Thus, schools must do more to support the vocabulary growth of low-performing students (Beck & McKeown, 2007).

Hoff (2013) found that the vocabulary gap is present as early as age three. She noted that at age three children from high socioeconomic households had around 1,000 words, while their peers from low socioeconomic households had half that. To combat this disparity in student vocabulary, Beck and McKeown (2007) argued that formal vocabulary instruction should begin in kindergarten. Filling these vocabulary gaps early will lead students to do more independent reading, which will lead to greater vocabulary exposure and acquisition (Wright, 2014). This is often explained as the Matthew Effect, which references the biblical idea that to those who have more, more will be given (Coyne et.al., 2019). Students who have strong vocabularies will be more successful at reading complex texts while students with limited vocabularies will struggle to decode and comprehend similar texts. By intentionally building student vocabulary, especially for students from low-socioeconomic households, teachers offer students access to more complex texts and greater content knowledge.

Embedding vocabulary instruction into content instruction offers students many opportunities to engage with new vocabulary. Giving more academic time and instruction to specific words greatly improves vocabulary retention (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Wexler

(2019b) added that the best way to teach vocabulary quickly is to teach the knowledge behind the word. Wright (2014) articulated that informational texts are rich with content vocabulary and authentic uses of these words. Therefore, teaching vocabulary within a content area using high-quality nonfiction texts can effectively build student vocabulary, supporting literacy and knowledge achievement for all students.

Writing. Graham et al. (2015) argued that the ability to write well is a desirable skill for most modern jobs. They also noted that the Common Core Standards expect mastery of writing skills. However, Cutler and Graham (2008) found that 65% of teachers surveyed did not have a standardized commercial writing curriculum for handwriting, writing, or spelling. They also asserted that poor writing ability is correlated with lower grades, lower college admission, and less civic engagement.

Though writing well is a key skill for academic success and useful for most modern jobs, it is often less emphasized in elementary schools. Cutler & Graham (2008) noted that the No Child Left Behind Law did not focus on writing in the early grades, which caused many schools to give it less instructional priority. However, early introduction to expository writing leads to better production in later graders (Moss, 2005; Hochman, n.d). Moss (2005) found that children exposed to and those who practiced nonfiction genres of writing in first grade were better informational writers. Additionally, Graham et. al. (2015) concluded that including more writing opportunities in daily instruction for first through sixth graders led to better reading ability.

The Common Core encourages students to write as much as possible with an emphasis on informational writing (Bigham, 2015). But to write well, Moss (2005) argued that students need something to write about. Integrating writing instruction and social studies content offers students the “how” to express themselves and the “what” to write about. Not only does it give

students something to write about, but Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson (2008) identified the positive impact on content retention when students were asked to write about what they had learned.

To improve student writing, teachers need to support students with clear, research-based writing instruction. An important part of writing instruction for elementary students is teaching the specific structure of the genre they are writing (Graham et al., 2012a). Teachers also need to offer students high-quality models of written text and teach the key vocabulary that is needed to write about a topic (Graham et. al., 2015). Students should be taught to think about the intended audience for their writing and modify their text to fit that audience (Dutro, Selland, & Bien, 2013). Another tool to build student confidence with writing in the primary grades is text transcription. Graham et al. (2012a) found that this can be used to improve handwriting and fluency.

Students need access to high-quality social studies, vocabulary, and writing instruction beginning in early elementary. Through integrated literacy units, students will have the opportunity to build a rich knowledge base, acquire more content vocabulary words, and have an authentic opportunity to practice their reading and writing skills. This foundation of content knowledge and writing skill will support their learning in later grades.

The Application: The Best Practices for Social Studies, Vocabulary, and Writing

Instruction

What does high-quality social studies, vocabulary, and writing instruction look like? This section will discuss the best practices for teaching elementary social studies content, highlighting target vocabulary, and the method for creating a well-organized essay. These best practices are informed by the research and writing of scholars in the field.

Social Studies. The National Council for Social Studies (2017) asserted that powerful social studies instruction is relevant, integrative across curriculum, value-based to support the common good, rigorous, and active. Students should engage in collecting meaningful information and applying it authentically in the classroom (National Council for Social Studies, 2017). Levstik and Barton (2000) argued that instruction should begin with students' prior knowledge. They also stated that social studies instruction should cover a range of perspectives, from the dominant voice to those that are less recorded. Teachers can better meet the needs of their diverse students by determining their student's interest, prior knowledge of a topic, and actively engaging them in the content. Highlighting lesser known perspectives offers inclusive instruction that encourages students from diverse backgrounds.

To build general domain knowledge, students must be immersed in a unit of study (Moss, 2005). Levstik and Barton (2000) argued that students need time to become familiar with a topic and practice using relevant information in discussion, writing, and other classroom activities. Students also need intentional exposure to content-specific vocabulary and opportunities to use that vocabulary orally and in writing (Hirsch Jr., 2006). Elementary teachers can immerse their students in a topic through daily instruction on the topic, read-alouds, intentional content vocabulary instruction, and opportunities to engage with the material through discussion or active learning. Students can then apply the information and vocabulary gained to discussing or writing about the assigned topic.

A popular model for social studies instruction is delivering inquiry-based units. In an inquiry-based unit, students are asked to come up with relevant questions about a topic and investigate to find the answers (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Levstik and Barton (2000) found that students were more motivated to learn about a topic if the topic interested them or was important

to them. Students who engage in units of inquiry are often immersed in a topic while researching to find the answer to their questions (Moss, 2005). This immersion in reading and writing about a topic leads students to build strong content knowledge of a topic, exposes them to content-specific vocabulary, and encourages active student engagement through answering their own burning questions.

One of the most important tools for social studies instruction is high-quality nonfiction texts. Jeong, et. al. (2010) contended that students in primary grades need greater access to informational texts. Students should have access to a variety of written genres within a content-specific social studies unit, such as trade books, magazines, newspapers, and appropriate internet articles (Moss, 2005). Solomon (1987) also identified that analyzing primary documents is a powerful instructional tool for students to build content knowledge and critical thinking skills. By acquiring and utilizing high-quality texts in instruction, teachers offer their students opportunities to gain greater knowledge of a topic and encounter authentically used key vocabulary. Teachers should also use digital sources to expose students to primary sources specific to a topic such as images of artifacts, audio recordings, or video clips.

Teachers can build student familiarity with and the ability to use informational texts during social studies instruction through read-alouds, guided reading, and small-group instruction (Moss, 2005). During read-alouds, teachers should model how to use an informational text and the text features that are present, such as captions and glossaries. Guided reading offers an additional opportunity for teachers to build student familiarity with informational texts by modeling how to use the text and offering immediate feedback as students begin reading an assigned passage (Moss, 2005). During small group instruction, Arfe´, Mason, & Fajardo (2018) suggested that teachers simplify the text structure or replace challenging words

found in independent or guided reading texts to support struggling readers while still immersing them in the chosen content. They also recommended supporting struggling readers by teaching them connecting words such as “while” and “when” to help students make accurate connections between facts.

Solomon (1987) suggested that elementary teachers act as a guide for students during social studies instruction to help them comprehend content information, solve specific problems, research assigned topics, communicate their findings with others orally or in writing, and practice making decisions and understanding the consequences of those decisions. To support student comprehension of a task, teachers should preview key knowledge that will be gained, discuss important vocabulary with students, and help students analyze the steps they will need to take to complete the assigned task (Solomon, 1987). Harvey and Goudvis (2007) asserted that students should be given specific problems to solve or questions to answer and should investigate these problems and questions to seek solutions. To communicate what they have learned, Solomon encouraged having students write short essays, participate in group discussions, create a dramatization of an event, or pretend to be a historical figure and write or speak from that figure’s perspective. Other active instructional strategies include having students make concept maps and timelines to organize content and engaging students in idea circles where small groups discuss what they have learned and their personal connections to a text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Moss, 2005).

In Minnesota, elementary students should be exposed to citizenship and government, economics, geography, and history beginning in kindergarten (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). The Minnesota Department of Education described social studies instruction in the primary grades as the “foundations of social studies” (MDE, 2011, p. 4). Upper elementary

is more specialized with an emphasis on the geography of North America in fourth grade and the history of North America in fifth grade (MDE, 2011). Through immersing primary students in a variety of domains within citizenship and government, economics, geography, and history, teachers lay a strong foundation for student success in the more specialized instruction of future grades.

Vocabulary. Boote (2006) argued that students need strong vocabularies to build their reading fluency and comprehension. Wright (2014) outlined five key strategies to building students' vocabulary during instruction. Teachers should integrate informational text across content areas. They need to explicitly teach target vocabulary and look for the vocabulary in action in graphics and text features (Wright, 2014). Students should have authentic activities to practice newly acquired vocabulary words (Wright, 2014). Additionally, teachers need to track student vocabulary growth through informal assessment and use that assessment to inform future instruction (Wright, 2014).

Hirsch Jr. (2006) found that the biggest contributor to vocabulary growth is printed works. Additionally, Wright (2014) highlighted that informational texts are key to this vocabulary growth because they are rich with domain-specific words and offer many opportunities for students to encounter new vocabulary. Teachers can support the expansion of student vocabulary for both high and low-performing students through reading high-quality texts aloud to students (Hirsch Jr., 2006; Moss, 2005). Reading higher-level nonfiction texts aloud gives all students access to the vocabulary they may not come across in their leveled independent reading texts and models the appropriate use of these words in context (Hirsch, 2006). This also helps students understand newly introduced content vocabulary and retain these targeted terms (Hirsch Jr., 2006).

Teaching vocabulary using direct instruction is effective in accelerating student vocabulary growth (Coyne et. al., 2019). To do this, Beck and McKeown (2007) encouraged assigning instructional time to explain words using familiar terms or examples. They also suggested giving students multiple opportunities to hear the word used in context. Teachers should model using key vocabulary appropriately in discussion, building sentences with the target vocabulary, and connecting the target vocabulary to other relevant words or ideas (Coyne et.al., 2019).

Coyne et.al. (2019) found that whole-group vocabulary instruction is helpful for all students and that offering struggling students additional vocabulary intervention can improve low-performing student vocabulary. During small-group intervention, teachers should offer additional exposure to target vocabulary, model how to use these terms in speech and writing, and offer students opportunities to use the vocabulary orally and in writing (Coyne et.al., 2019). Additionally, teachers should have students practice identifying examples of the terms being used correctly and incorrectly (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Coyne et.al., 2019). This task encourages students to define the word, determine its appropriate usage, and explain why it was inappropriately used in some of the examples (Beck & McKeown, 2007). These steps lead to greater student vocabulary retention through deeper knowledge of the target vocabulary and its appropriate uses.

Wright (2014) encouraged teachers to record student vocabulary usage to inform future instruction and guide class discussion. This can be done through tracking student vocabulary usage during group discussions, having targeted one-on-one discussions with a student, and/or reviewing student writing on a topic that requires domain-specific vocabulary (Coyne et.al., 2019). Teachers can use this informal data to guide whole-group and small-group instruction and

intervention. By doing this, Wright asserted that teachers would support student vocabulary growth, which leads to more fluent student reading and improved comprehension. Wright also argued that the more time students spend reading directly correlates to the more vocabulary acquired, and thus the Mathew Effect on exponential vocabulary and reading growth continues.

Writing. According to the Common Core Standards, students starting in the primary grades should be encouraged to write frequently, in various styles, and for differing purposes (Bigham, 2015). To build student confidence with responding to questions or naming their thoughts, Hirsch Jr. (2006) suggested offering frequent opportunities for students age four to seven to practice talking about a specific topic and listening to their peers. To improve student writing, Hoff (2013) asserted that grammar should also be introduced in the early grades to support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who need more formal instruction in the English language and its usage. Providing these tools early in elementary school is crucial for student success in later writing endeavors especially for students from low-socioeconomic households.

Graham et al. (2015) suggested that the role of the teacher during writing instruction is to show joy in writing, share students' work, create a positive culture during writing instruction, set high expectations, adapt assignments to students interests, engage students with thoughtful exercises, and guide students to the answers they are looking for. Students should be given opportunities to set goals and assess whether they are meeting the specified goals (Graham et. al., 2012b). Teachers should also offer personalized feedback during the writing process to encourage students and offer suggestions for improvements or next steps (Graham et. al., 2015).

Bangert-Drowns et al. (2008) argued that formal writing activities need to be broken down into more manageable steps for students. They found that assigning long writing essays

was overwhelming for struggling students and led to lower student output and academic gains. When teachers break assignments into clear, manageable steps, students have more opportunity to successfully complete the task at hand without getting overwhelmed (Wexler, 2019b). This break down of tasks leads to improved student engagement, higher student confidence in writing, and additional opportunities for students to review the content knowledge they are writing about (Wexler, 2019b).

One way to break down writing assignments is to explicitly teach students to use the writing process and offer frequent opportunities to use it (Graham et. al., 2012b; Graham et. al., 2015). The writing process includes planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing student writing. Graham et. al., (2012b) suggested that students should begin the writing process by using various prewriting strategies such as brainstorming background knowledge, writing questions, finding information, and organizing ideas with graphic organizers. An example of a prewriting support for informative writing is a K-W-L chart where students fill in what they K (know)-W (want to know)-L (learned) (Graham et. al., 2012a). This specific structure guides students to seek out the information that is most interesting or relevant to their writing.

Graham et. al. (2012b) asserted that during the drafting phase of the writing process, teachers must explicitly teach the structure of the genre they are asking students to write. Providing good models of a specific genre is also beneficial for student writing (Graham et. al., 2015). Graham et. al. (2012a) found that acronyms remind students of what should be included and can be helpful for student writing within a specific genre. An example of this is T.R.E.E. which stands for “**T**ell what they believe. (State a topic sentence.) • **P**rovide three or more **R**easons. (Why do I believe this?) • **E**nd it. (Wrap it up right.) • **E**xamine. (Do I have all my parts?)” (Graham et. al., 2012a, p. 26). Employing acronyms like this or other memory devices in

writing instruction allows students to easily identify the parts of a genre and self-assess their work for accuracy and completion.

To improve the clarity of student writing, students need specific grammar instruction. Hochman (n.d.) argued that grammar should be taught in the context of student writing. Thus, the revision phase of the writing process is an excellent time to teach or review the mechanics of writing with students. Students can apply what they are learning to a piece of their own writing or a peer's work. By editing their peer's work, students have the opportunity to identify and discuss the targeted elements of grammar, which leads to greater understanding and fluency with these elements.

While breaking down the writing process helps low-performing students succeed in writing (Wexler, 2019b), Graham et. al (2012a) suggested that teaching students how to improve their sentences will improve their overall writing. They also determined that teaching students sentence framing will help students organize their ideas and use vocabulary appropriately. Struggling students can build their confidence in writing well-organized sentences by filling in sentence frames with relevant information (Graham et. al., 2012a). Teaching students sentence expanding techniques can improve students' sentences by leading students to create more detailed and better-developed sentences (Graham et. al., 2012a). Saddler (2006) found that explicitly teaching students how to combine sentences accurately made their writing clearer with fewer punctuation errors.

Dutro et. al. (2013) argued that writing is a social activity. Students should work together throughout the writing process and are an excellent resource for each other in the two most important parts of the process; pre-writing and revision (Hochman, n.d.). They can share information and resources, discuss the information they have gathered, and share the questions

they are trying to answer during the prewriting phase. Students should also work together to review and revise each other's work (Graham et. al., 2012b). This will improve both their peer's writing through having another editor sharing feedback and improve their own writing through practice identifying and naming grammatical errors.

Effective writing instruction creates a positive, supportive, and enjoyable environment where students can acquire and practice specific skills and strategies (Graham et. al., 2015). One of the best ways to encourage students is to publish their work and celebrate what they have accomplished (Graham et. al., 2015). This also gives students an opportunity to show what they have mastered during a specific writing unit and offers teachers an opportunity to formally assess student writing.

Technology is an important tool for informational writing instruction, research, and student writing. Cutler and Graham (2008) argued that technology should be an integral part of instruction. Teachers can find digital examples of primary sources, videos that enhance content knowledge, and websites that support the content being taught. Moss (2005) asserted that students need to be taught how to find information on appropriate search engines and to critically evaluate online sources. Additionally, students can use word processing programs to publish their work which is especially beneficial for students who struggle with handwriting.

Content Integration. To improve student general knowledge, vocabulary, and writing ability, students need high-quality, content integrated units. Solomon (1987) found that literacy skills are strengthened when used in the context of academic content. By combing social studies content and writing instruction, students will improve the quality of their writing and their background knowledge, both of which can be applied to future independent reading or study

(Arfe' et. al., 2018). Students will also make vocabulary gains through the study of domain-specific informational texts and writing about these topics (Jeong et. al., 2010).

Teachers who have integrated instruction have experienced the positive results. The teachers studied by Halvorsen et. al. (2012) found that students who were exposed to social studies content made more text-to-self connections without explicit instruction. Teachers also noted a decline in negative student behavior due to more student engagement with the content (Wexler, 2019b). Halvorsen et. al. noted that second-grade students made gains in reading, writing, and social studies when they were presented with an integrated unit.

Cervetti et. al. (2012) found that the important areas of student learning with content integrated units were reading comprehension, vocabulary growth, knowledge building, and expository writing. This supports the goals of the Common Core Standards by offering elementary students increased access to informational texts and additional opportunities to write in this genre (Bigham, 2015). To assess student growth throughout an integrated unit, teachers should use informal assessment to track student gains and inform instruction. Cervetti et.al. argued that formal assessment should be done through an open-ended writing assignment that is assessed by a rubric. They identified that teachers should assess student writing for a strong introduction and conclusion, use of evidence, appropriate use of vocabulary, specific content, and appropriate use of grammar.

Content integration is an opportunity for teachers to fill the gaps in school-specific curriculum. Huck (2019) found that the teachers studied were interested in offering students more content instruction but were bound by the schedule set by their building. These teachers turned to integrating content into other areas of instruction (Huck, 2019). This gave their students

opportunities to explore social studies content while honoring their pre-determined school schedule (Huck, 2019).

To help students make substantial academic gains, teachers must use research-based best practices to inform their planning, instruction, and assessment. By utilizing these tools routinely in social studies, vocabulary, and writing instruction, students will have the opportunity to build their knowledge while authentically practicing their writing skills. This will positively influence student growth in literacy and lead students to academic growth in other classes and areas of study.

Conclusion

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap? This chapter began by defining and discussing the Achievement Gap, the Opportunity Gap, and the Knowledge Gap. It then explored the need for more rigorous and thorough instruction in elementary social studies, vocabulary, and writing. This was followed by discussion of the best practices for social studies, vocabulary, and writing instruction. This chapter concluded by reviewing literature that supports integrating these three content areas to support closing the Knowledge Gap.

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap? After reviewing the research presented in this chapter, it is clear that offering students an integrated writing and social studies unit where content vocabulary is explicitly taught will build student knowledge of the topic, present a variety opportunities for students to write about this topic, help students improve their overall writing skills, and give students opportunities to

authentically use content vocabulary. To further explore this theory, the knowledge gained through this research will be applied to writing a high-quality, integrated writing unit in which students will explore a historical topic, master content vocabulary, and have various opportunities to write about what they are learning.

The following chapter will explore the methods and tools used for creating an integrated third-grade social studies and writing unit. This chapter will discuss the framework for this curriculum and the intended participants and setting. It will also include the standards addressed, unit objectives, instructional strategies, student assessment, and needed materials.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap? To answer this question, a writing curriculum that integrates historical content, key vocabulary instruction, and opinion writing will be created. By integrating high-quality content and instruction, students will have the opportunity to gain general knowledge on a specific topic, acquire key content vocabulary, and build confidence with an explicitly taught genre of writing. This chapter will outline the curriculum design framework, project timeline, project purpose, intended participants, standards, unit objectives, strategies, student assessment, supporting materials, and assessment of the effectiveness of this unit.

Curriculum Design

The framework for this curriculum is based on The Understanding by Design® framework (UbD™ framework). This backwards planning model focuses on identifying student outcomes first, determining the evidence of learning that will need to be gathered, and planning instruction and assessment based on these goals (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). This framework encourages purposeful and intentional instruction that is directly related to having students make significant academic gains. Students will be guided to acquire knowledge, make meaning of it, and then use the information gained authentically during large-group discussions, small group activities, and independent work time.

The UbD™ framework is an ideal model for this curricular unit as it allows for intentional planning and modification throughout the implementation of the curriculum. By identifying the summative assessment at the beginning of the process, each weekly theme and daily lesson is written to support students in proficiently meeting or exceeding the expectations of the summative project. As prescribed by the UbD™ framework, various informal assessments will be included throughout the unit to identify evidence of learning and inform instruction with regards to the target content, key vocabulary, and identified writing goals.

Project Timeline

This curriculum will be developed during the Spring of 2020 using the research reviewed in chapter two and will be published in May of 2020. To develop this curriculum, a specific grade that the unit is intended for will be selected, a genre of writing will be chosen, and a historical topic to be studied will be selected. Next, relevant state standards will be identified and reviewed. The desired student outcome for the unit will then be determined and an assessment and grading tool to determine student proficiency will be written. Then, a unit overview with goals for what should be taught or accomplished each week will be created. Following this, what should be taught each day of the unit, how the content will be delivered, and the materials needed will be determined. Finally, any necessary supplemental materials and a list of resources referenced throughout the unit will be created.

Project Purpose

This curriculum project has a dual purpose as both a functional unit and as a model unit. Classroom teachers could implement this unit as written and have their current third-grade class research and write about ancient Greece. Teachers could also use this unit as a model and incorporate other social studies or science topics into this framework. As a model, week one

would be the introduction to the unit where teachers would give students various reading and writing assignments to familiarize them with the topic while highlighting and posting key vocabulary words and their definitions. Teachers would use week two to focus on one specific sub-topic and guide students through writing a mini essay on this subtopic. The purpose of week two is to allow students to practice the writing style that they will produce independently in the following weeks. These activities could be done in small groups, allowing the teacher to further support lower-performing students through small-group instruction and peer support. Weeks three through five is intended for students to independently work through the writing process by researching their assigned topic, organizing their ideas, writing their essay, editing their work, and publishing their assignment.

Participants and Setting

The intended participants and setting for this curriculum are a third-grade class with twenty to thirty students of various reading levels, socioeconomic status, background knowledge, and writing ability. The curriculum offers opportunities for whole-group instruction to meet the needs of all learners and small-group instruction to meet the varying needs within a classroom. Students will be asked to work independently, in pairs or small groups, and as a large group. While the target audience for this curriculum would be struggling students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, all students will benefit from the content and skill instruction. To support low-performing students, suggestions for scaffolded activities and interventions will be included in the daily lessons where they apply.

This curriculum is intended to be given by the classroom teacher during the writing portion of the literacy block. It will include five weeks of instruction with daily lessons that will last approximately forty-five minutes. These lessons are intended to be delivered daily to provide

immersion in the content and writing assignments. It can be given at any point within the school year, however, teachers will benefit from knowing their students' writing abilities and general interests prior to beginning the unit.

Standards

This curriculum will address a variety of English Language Arts and Social Studies Minnesota State Standards. The primary standards listed below will be used to guide the planning and instruction of the unit. They will also inform the summative assessment of this unit.

MN Writing Standard 3.6.1.1 Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons. a. Introduce the topic or text they are writing about, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure that lists reasons. b. Provide reasons that support the opinion. c. Use linking words and phrases (e.g., because, therefore, since, for example) to connect opinion and reasons. d. Provide a concluding statement or section

MN Writing 3.6.7.7 Conduct short research projects that build knowledge about a topic.

MN Writing Standard 3.6.5.5 With guidance and support from peers and adults, use a writing process to develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, drafting, revising, and editing. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grade 3 on page 41-42.)

MN History Sub-strand 3: Standard 7 The emergence of domestication and agriculture facilitated the development of complex societies and caused far-reaching social and cultural effects. (Early Civilizations and the Emergence of Pastoral Peoples: 8000 BCE—2000 BCE)

MN History Sub-strand 3: Standard 8 The development of interregional systems of communication and trade facilitated new forms of social organization and new belief systems. (Classical Traditions, Belief Systems and Giant Empires: 2000 BCE— 600 CE)

Listed below are the secondary standards that will be addressed through class instruction or lesson assignments during the unit. While they will not be the focus of the entire unit, they will be given instruction time.

MN Social Studies 3.1.1.1.1 Democratic government depends on informed and engaged citizens who exhibit civic skills and values, practice civic discourse, vote and participate in elections.

MN Social Studies 3.4.2.5.1 History is made by individuals acting alone and collectively to address problems in their communities, state, nation, and world.

MN Social Studies 3.4.1.1.1. and 3.4.1.1.2 Historians generally construct chronological narratives to characterize eras and explain past events and change over time.

MN Writing 3.6.10.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

MN Writing Standard 3.6.8.8 Recall information from experiences or gather information from print and digital sources; take brief notes on sources and sort evidence into provided categories.

MN Writing 3.6.6.6 With guidance and support from adults, use technology to produce and publish writing (using keyboarding skills) as well as to interact and collaborate with others.

MN Speaking Standards 3.8.1.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partners on grade 3 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. a. Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation and other information known about the topic to explore ideas under discussion. b. Follow agreed-upon

rules for discussions (e.g., gaining the floor in respectful ways, listening to others with care, speaking one at a time about the topics and texts under discussion). c. Ask questions to check understanding of information presented, stay on topic, and link their comments to the remarks of others. d. Explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion. e. Cooperate and compromise as appropriate for productive group discussion. f. Follow multi-step oral directions.

MN Speaking Standards 3.8.4.4 Report on a topic or text and avoid plagiarism by identifying sources, tell a story, or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.

MN Reading 3.2.2.2 Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.

MN Reading 3.2.7.7 Use information gained from illustrations (e.g., maps, photographs) and the words in a text to demonstrate understanding of the text (e.g., where, when, why, and how key events occur).

Unit Objectives

The objectives for this unit of study reflect the goals of building content knowledge, improving student vocabulary, and developing student writing using the writing process. Students will gain knowledge and insight into the daily life, government, and notable contributions of ancient Greece. Students will identify, learn, and appropriately use content-specific vocabulary in discussion and writing assignments. As a summative assessment, students will produce a clear, well-supported opinion piece.

If these goals are met, students will have a foundational understanding of life in ancient Greece and the contributions of the ancient Greeks. Students will improve their writing through engagement with the writing process, which can be applied to future writing assignments in a

variety of content areas. Students will also gain familiarity with content-specific vocabulary that they will encounter again in both their formal education and personal reading. This familiarity with content vocabulary will improve students' reading and comprehension of similar content-specific texts later in their educational career.

Assessment

As a result of this unit, students will produce a well-supported opinion piece. This piece will be graded using a rubric that assesses the content, vocabulary, organization, support of their opinion, and grammar/mechanics of the piece. This summative assessment will inform the teacher of student growth with respect to the objectives of the unit. A sample rubric can be found below.

Figure 1

Sample Rubric

Category	1	2	3
Content	Used no content from the assigned reading and note taking assignment	Included 1-2 facts from the assigned reading and note taking assignment	Used 3+ facts or ideas from the assigned reading and note taking assignment
Vocabulary	Used no content specific vocabulary. Only general terminology used	Used 1- 2 content vocabulary words correctly Attempted to use content vocabulary but used some incorrectly	Accurately used 2+ content specific words
Organization	Ordered ideas randomly in writing	Some ideas grouped together, some randomly interspersed	Ideas organized coherently in order making reading and comprehension of the writing clear
Support of Opinion	Opinion stated with no supporting statements	Opinion supported by 1-2 claims Some claims included are accurate while some are unrelated	Opinion well supported by 3+ claims that are related to the opinion
Mechanics	Many spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors Missing indentation, proper sentence structure	Some spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors (five or fewer) Some well written sentences	Few spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors Well structured paragraph including proper indentation and sentence structures

Students will also be informally assessed throughout the unit. Student vocabulary used during discussions and writing assignments should be tracked by the teacher. Student content knowledge will be informally assessed in group discussions, small-group activities, and individual conferences. The teacher will use prior knowledge of student ability and demeanor to group students for small-group instruction. This fluid grouping can change based on informal assessment throughout the unit.

Strategies

Instruction, assessment, and student work will be divided between whole-group, small-group, and independent activities. Students will meet daily for whole-group instruction. This will be a time to introduce content, model strategies, share information, and celebrate student accomplishments. While the amount of time in whole-group instruction will vary depending on the lesson, it is an important time to build joy and excitement for this content and for the writing process (Graham et al., 2015).

Dutro et al. (2013) describe writing as a social experience. Students will work together in a variety of small groups to improve their acquisition of knowledge and skill. Small-group instruction led by the classroom teacher will be used to address specific student needs such as vocabulary intervention, grammar support, and collecting information for their formal writing. Small groups will also be formed to gather information about specific subtopics, share their writing among peers, and offer constructive peer feedback.

Students will have a variety of opportunities to work independently. They will be given informal writing check-ins and prompts. They will be asked to gather information on a topic, formulate an opinion, and write their ideas in a cohesive essay. Students will use technology to research their topics and to type their final essay.

The teacher will be the guide through this process. During whole group instruction they will read higher-level texts, ask questions to activate student knowledge and interest, model gathering information and writing about the information, and celebrate student accomplishments. During small-group instruction, the teacher will meet with various groups of students to address more specific academic needs, to encourage students as they work together, and to address issues that arise. The teacher can use the independent writing periods to model actively engaging in writing or conference with students to informally assess them and give feedback on their project.

Materials

Students will need access to readable, student-friendly nonfiction texts about ancient Greece. These texts will be read during whole-group instruction, in small groups, and as individuals. They should cover a variety of topics such as daily life, democracy in ancient Greece, art, pottery, warriors, the Olympics, and Greek Myths. Students should also have access to primary resources, such as images of sculptures or pottery and the meaning or significance of them. A list of quality student texts will be included in the written curriculum. Students may also benefit from using student-appropriate search engines or online encyclopedias to learn more about their assigned topic.

To complete daily assignments, students will use either a designated writing notebook or copies of the supplemental materials and tools for writing (pencil, pen, etc.). Additionally, lessons may include specific, printable templates (graphic organizers, sample pottery, activity cards, etc.) which can be found within the curriculum. Students would benefit from having access to a media or technology lab where they can research their topic and type their final essay.

Assessment of Effectiveness

After creating this curriculum, this unit's effectiveness in exemplifying the best practices named in chapter two will be determined through reflection and analysis of the written unit. Does this curriculum immerse students in the historical content? Is the vocabulary frequently highlighted and discussed? Is the genre of writing explicitly taught and exemplified? Does the length of the unit allow for mastery of the content and writing style at a third-grade level? These guiding questions will be used to assess the unit and make modifications if issues arise.

Those who utilize this curriculum should also assess its effectiveness. Is the historical content taught thoroughly and logically? Are students discussing and appropriately using the highlighted vocabulary? Can students identify and exemplify the assigned genre of writing? Does the sequence of lessons allow for enough work time, or is there too much work time for students? As teachers use this curriculum, they can modify the duration of certain lessons to meet the needs of their students. If they are noticing gaps in vocabulary acquisition, they can reinforce the key terms by repeating the included targeted vocabulary activities. To further immerse their students in the historical content, they can use the acquired nonfiction texts as read-alouds during reading instruction.

This project's effectiveness as a model curriculum should be assessed on whether another unit with the same structure could be written using a different social studies or science topic, and/or a different genre of writing. Could another social studies or science topic be thoroughly covered by introducing it in week one, researching a sub-topic as a group in week two, and independently researching another subtopic in the remaining three weeks? Would this five-week unit structure adequately cover another genre of writing with opportunities for it to be modeled

for and practiced by the students? If this format works for a variety of topics and genres, it would be a highly successful model for teachers to use for future writing instruction.

Conclusion

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap? This chapter highlighted the curriculum design framework, project timeline, project purpose, intended participants, standards, unit objectives, strategies, assessment, supporting materials, and assessment of the effectiveness of this unit. The following chapter will conclude this research and project. This chapter will include a reflection on the project purpose, the major learnings, and a summary of the literature review. It will also contain a discussion of the implications, limitations, future research, and benefit to educators. A final concluding paragraph will summarize the major gains from this capstone project and the future application of this work.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Overview of this Chapter

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap? My interest in answering this question has guided the research on this topic, analysis and discussion of the literature, and the creation of an integrated third-grade writing curriculum. Through this research and writing, I have gained a wealth of insight and tools for improving my instruction and curriculum writing.

In this chapter, the project's purpose, major learnings, impactful literature, the implications and limitations, future research, and the benefits to other educators will be discussed. It will conclude with a review of what has been addressed in chapter four and a summary of what has been gained from the entire capstone process of research, analysis, writing, and curriculum creation.

Project Purpose

This project had a dual purpose of being both a high-quality integrated writing unit and a model for future integrated units. The first goal was to write a complete, high-quality third-grade writing curriculum that included vocabulary instruction, historical content focused on ancient Greece, and daily writing lessons created using research-based best practices. By doing this, the information gained through the academic literature that was reviewed in chapter two was put into practice.

This curriculum was also written to serve as a model for future units. Educators can follow the five-week plan as written, beginning with an introduction to the content week, followed by a group essay week that highlights one major subtopic of the chosen content and the genre of writing that has been chosen, and ending with three weeks of individual student research, writing, and publishing. By emulating this model, teachers can integrate a variety of social studies and science topics into their writing instruction, giving students access to interesting and empowering content.

Major Learnings

Through the research for and the creation of this project, I have gained many insights and tools that have improved my teaching, built my curriculum development skills, and spurred my desire to continue learning and growing as an educator. Three major learnings stand out as important take-aways from this project. The first major learning is how integrating content into literacy is important for building student knowledge and engagement. Another major learning identified is that vocabulary instruction is key to improving student reading ability. Finally, the last key insight gained from this project is that writing should be a social act for students. They should engage with each other's work and ideas throughout the writing process, not only in the editing phase.

In the 2012-13 school year, I saw a glimpse of the impact of integrating social studies, science, or other informational content into literacy. The students were hungry for the social studies content presented and more engaged in the academic work. Through the research for this project, it is evident that this student interest and engagement was not unique to my class. It is clear that integrating content into literacy instruction will offer teachers the opportunity to build student knowledge through presenting interesting content and improve student skill through

intentional, thorough literacy instruction. Students are also more likely to engage in the writing process when given content to write about. This is especially important when working with students who have traditionally struggled in writing and often avoid doing the assigned work during that instructional block.

Vocabulary instruction is key to building better student readers and writers. Through the research and writing of this project, the positive impact of intentionally teaching key vocabulary is evident in elementary instruction. By regularly highlighting key content vocabulary, educators support struggling readers to access information in nonfiction texts and digital media. Offering students many opportunities to engage with key vocabulary in discussion and writing builds familiarity with the vocabulary and the ability to authentically use these terms in other academic or personal experiences. Teaching content vocabulary is especially impactful for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who may not encounter these key content terms outside of the classroom.

The third major learning from this research and project is that writing is a social activity. In my previous writing instruction, students shared their work with each other primarily in the editing and publishing phase. However, the research reviewed in chapter two clearly highlighted the importance of having students share their work with their peers throughout the writing process. Whether students are sharing their ideas early on during their research or editing each other's work for grammatical errors, students can support each other by offering a new perspective on their peer's writing. Having students discuss their writing in every stage of the writing process gives students an opportunity to put their ideas into words and gather immediate feedback. This is especially important for students who struggle with formulating sentences and putting their thoughts into writing. When given the opportunity to share their thoughts aloud,

students can put those ideas into functional sentences that can later be written down. Teachers also play a key role in the success of their students' writing through conferencing with individual students to offer guidance, meeting with small groups to provide additional instruction, and offering meaningful encouragement to writers throughout the process.

Summary of the Literature Review

The Knowledge Gap. While many scholarly articles were reviewed and analyzed for this project, the research began with two books: *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System – And How to Fix it* by Natalie Wexler (2019b) and *The Knowledge Deficit* by E.D. Hirsch Jr. (2006). These two books were formative in understanding the Knowledge Gap, the need for high-quality content to be taught in elementary classrooms, and the impact teachers can have on building student knowledge. Hirsch Jr. (2006) argued that for students to be strong readers, they need a broad range of relevant background knowledge and content vocabulary. Without these two key components of knowledge, students will struggle to read texts on specific academic topics (Hirsch Jr., 2006). Wexler (2019b) acknowledged that elementary students need access to strong content instruction to be prepared for later learning. These authors named issues that I had experienced in my own classroom and motivated me to look for ways to close the Knowledge Gap.

Social Studies. Halvorsen et. al. (2012) emphasized that elementary students need social studies content for their development and future civic health. They also found that when students were offered social studies content integrated into literacy instruction, they made gains in both domains (Halvorsen et. al., 2012). Solomon (1987) asserted that social studies instruction should be active and inquiry based where students are given engaging content and opportunities to practice their thinking and reasoning skills. These articles and the others discussed in chapter two

led me to understand the importance of exposing young elementary students to social studies content and allowing them to explore and write about what they are learning.

What is the best way to introduce students to social studies topics and engage them in learning? Moss (2005) argued that students need to be immersed in a topic to gain general knowledge of it. She also encouraged building student knowledge through informational texts both in read-alouds and small-group instruction. To engage students, Harvey and Goudvis (2007) suggested guiding students through inquiry-based units where they seek to answer burning questions through research and discussion. Solomon (1987) highlighted the importance of having students discuss what they are learning with their peers and use this knowledge in activities such as dramatizations or creative writing. These research-based best practices and the others discussed in chapter two influenced the activities and writing assignments included in the curriculum written for this project.

Vocabulary. In an era of the “just google it” mentality, vocabulary instruction is critical for student literacy. Wexler (2019b) noted that words have multiple meanings and the context in which the words are used provides key information to determine their intended meanings. Additionally, Coyne et. al. (2019) explained the “Matthew Effect” as it relates to student vocabulary where students who have rich vocabularies can read more complex texts and thus gain more vocabulary. In contrast, students with limited vocabularies struggle to read and comprehend basic texts. Many scholars highlighted the need for intentional vocabulary instruction and the notable impact it can have on improving student reading comprehension.

Beck and Mckeown (2007) argued that students who were offered explicit vocabulary instruction had greater retention. They also suggested that teachers offer students opportunities to identify if a key vocabulary word is used correctly or incorrectly within a sentence or passage

and have them explain their reasoning (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Hirsch Jr. (2006) identified the biggest contributor to vocabulary growth as printed works and asserted that reading higher-level texts aloud offers students access to content vocabulary terms in context. To determine student fluency with key vocabulary words, Wright (2014) suggested tracking student vocabulary usage in discussion and writing. These key insights influenced the vocabulary activities and instruction throughout the curriculum written for this project.

Writing. Bigham (2015) identified that the Common Core standards expect students starting in the primary grades to write frequently, in various styles, and for differing purposes. The ability to write well is key to most modern careers (Graham et. al, 2015). Moss (2005) asserted that early exposure to informational and expository writing improves student writing. These key assertions and those discussed in chapter two emphasized the importance of high-quality writing instruction.

Graham et. al. (2012b) suggested breaking down large writing assignments by teaching and engaging students in the writing process. They also highlighted the importance of explicitly teaching students the genre they are expected to write (Graham et. al., 2012b). Teaching grammar within the context of student writing was suggested by Hochman (n.d.). Dutro et. al. (2013) asserted that writing is a social activity. They argued that having students utilize their peers as resources throughout the writing process would enhance student writing (Dutro et. al., 2013). These best practices and others noted in chapter two were applied to the planned activities within the curriculum created for this capstone project. They informed both the overall structure of the curriculum and the daily writing activities.

Implications and Limitations

Implications. One major implications of this work is that teaching social studies, science, and other humanities to elementary students is key to providing all students with a well-rounded education and building student literacy skills. Teachers should know the state standards well enough to pair together standards from various content areas that compliment and support each other. By integrating units with specific standards as guidelines, teachers will improve the depth of learning and quality of instruction. To further student knowledge growth, teachers should inform parents of the topics being taught in class and offer parents resources to continue this learning at home.

Principals and other school administrators need to value these content areas for elementary students and support teachers as they teach these subjects. Teachers should be offered professional development on integrating these subjects into their classroom teaching if they are currently not being addressed. Districts need to invest in diverse school libraries that offer a wealth of nonfiction texts at various reading levels so that students have access to high-quality informational texts on a broad range of topics. Finally, schools need to be equipped with the technology that allows students to access age-appropriate digital content and word processing programs.

Limitations. When assessing the curriculum written for this capstone project, two possible resource limitations were identified. To properly engage with the curriculum, students need a wealth of nonfiction, topic-specific texts. While these are readily available in a metropolitan area via the school's library and the local public library, teachers without access to enough content-specific texts would need to find a viable alternative so that all students still can engage with the content through some form of written text.

To deliver this unit, students need access to the worksheets and graphics found within the curriculum. While these tools are incredibly helpful for teachers to implement the curriculum, they can also be a burden if a school has limited printer access or copies. Alternatives such as displaying the assignment on a screen or having students copy the information into their writing notebook could be employed to lessen the printing burden. However, some assignments will still need to be printed to deliver the curriculum.

Future Research and Projects

As previously mentioned, this project was written with the dual intention of being used as written or being a model for future writing units. To further this exemplar unit, the best practices for adult education would be identified for the purpose of creating a professional development presentation for elementary teachers on integrating social studies or science content and explicit vocabulary instruction into elementary writing instruction. Additionally, a written guide that would walk educators through building an integrated unit and offer a range of supporting activities for small group instruction and individual student accommodations would be created.

Another avenue of further research would be to create a standardized way of assessing students that is not based solely on academic skill but would also assess general academic knowledge. As previously mentioned in chapter two, schools modified instructional time and focus as a result of funding tied to standardized test scores. If there was a more holistic way to assess students that did not rely solely on skills-based testing, I believe schools and districts would have a better understanding of student abilities, student needs, teacher strengths, and school-specific needs. This would lead to a better use of district funds and more targeted instruction for all students.

Benefit to Educators

This project will be shared with other educators through publication on Hamline University's Digital Commons Archive and through personal discussions with fellow educators. When published on Hamline University's Digital Commons Archive, educators from around the world will have access to the research, written discussion, and created curriculum. I have and will continue to share the findings from this research and the curriculum that has been created with the educators I regularly engage with. This has been a formative project that will influence my future teaching and curriculum writing. It will also impact the way I discuss the Knowledge Gap, content integration, and supporting struggling students with my peers.

This project benefits the profession by offering a high-quality integrated unit that can be used as written or as a model for future units. Other educators can use this curriculum to improve student knowledge and can apply the model to future units. This research highlights the positive impact of content integration in elementary school literacy units. Other educators can use this research to integrate their literacy instruction and experience the benefits of more engaged student writers who produce better writing pieces. Through encouraging educators to incorporate vocabulary instruction into their classroom routine, teachers will begin building better readers and writers who can access more complicated texts.

Conclusion

How does integrating social studies content into third-grade writing improve historical knowledge, student writing, and vocabulary for the purpose of closing the Knowledge Gap? In this chapter the outcomes of this capstone research and project were highlighted. The project purpose, major learnings, impactful literature, implications and limitations, future research and

projects, and benefits to other educators were discussed. This chapter will end with a formal conclusion to the research for, analysis, and writing of this capstone project.

Elementary students deserve a high-quality education that will prepare them for success in their academic studies and future career. As educators, it is our role to give students access to the skills and knowledge that they will need to achieve success. Through this capstone research and project writing, it is clear that integrating social studies content into third-grade writing with an emphasis on vocabulary instruction will improve student knowledge and skill. Through this integration, students will have greater access to high-quality content, key domain-specific vocabulary, and explicit, genre-specific writing instruction that will lead to greater student engagement and academic success. This work has impacted the way I view writing instruction and emphasized the importance of teaching elementary students social studies and science content. The information and skills gained through this research and project will be used to improve my future teaching and curriculum writing with the goal of empowering all students to succeed through rich content and engaging writing assignments.

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