



Want to Improve Reading Comprehension? Keep Science and Social Studies in the Elementary Schools

by Stacey Bruton



It is a familiar scenario and solution. The pressure is felt to improve reading skills to score higher on standardized tests. Elementary teachers can't extend the school day, so they borrow time from a content area which doesn't have a state assessment or one not as often. Social studies and science take a backseat. Even though this move seems logical with the best intentions, the results are counterproductive. Since the 1990s, the amount of instructional time in science and social studies has decreased over 90 minutes per week. It is often the first place teachers look to "pull" students from if they need interventions. Unfortunately, by cutting these courses, the opportunities for developing content vocabulary and knowledge about real life is also reduced.

Why teach social studies and science? Social studies classes provide content knowledge, but most importantly, students learn the foundation for why it is necessary to contribute to society as a good citizen. Science activities are a way to capture the interest of students with fun, hands-

on, and minds-on lessons. Learning activities related to science and social studies help students develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills while connecting concepts to their world.

Support for the Key Shifts in English/Language Arts Standards Many states have revised their English/Language Arts Standards in recent years and have outlined **key shifts** from past standards. Continuing to schedule regular science and social studies classes allows opportunities to teach needed skills. The **background knowledge** gained from social studies and science provides the context to understand new and **complex text** for greater comprehension. Reading about science is no replacement for phenomenon or inquiry, but it can help build the knowledge base for “doing” science. Plus, **citing textual evidence from informational text** helps provide pieces necessary for accurate analysis of an investigation.

Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension English/Language Arts Standards require students to use domain-specific words in their writing and while speaking. Science and social studies classes provide opportunities for students to learn word meanings, read and hear them applied correctly in context, and use the words for communicating. Students receiving explicit instruction over the meanings of affixes and root words benefits the current class, but that knowledge is utilized by the students to become stronger readers in all classes. Vocabulary acquisition improves the comprehension of complex literary and informational text.

Student Engagement A significant, well-documented reason to keep regularly scheduled science and social studies classes, is that students love the activities these topics provide! The natural fit for collaboration and project-based learning allows students opportunities for implicit learning, developing good work habits, and applying what they learn to their lives. Learning while having fun is impactful in many ways!

Teachers are well aware of the importance of reading on grade level by the 3rd grade. If this doesn't happen, opportunities to be successful in the future will be more of a challenge. Capturing every moment available for learning is critical. If you are interested in utilizing an integrated approach to teach more than one content area at the same time, download CLI's FREE Civic Education Resource, Life, Liberty, Law. This resource is aligned to National Standards in Social Studies but also references ELA, Math, Science, Fine Arts, and Social/Emotional Learning Standards. Get yours at cliweb.org/resources-2.