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# Recognizing the Power and Potential of Displayed Print in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom

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## Abstract

A classroom with rich print displayed around the room is important and beneficial for teachers and elementary students to strengthen students' social studies knowledge. This article describes a process that elementary teachers, or preservice teachers observing educators, can use to evaluate the types and uses of displayed print for social studies instruction. A self-reflection tool is included to support teachers as they seek to improve their use of displayed print. After completing a room scan, as detailed in the article, the tool can be used to assist with self-reflection on the origination of print, purpose of the print, representation of all students, variety of perspectives, and engagement with the print. The purpose is to use the information gained to inform and improve their practice in teaching social studies. While the specific content examples tie to primary grade social studies classrooms, the tool and suggestions outlined in the article can be applied at a variety of grade levels in the elementary school.

**Keywords:** displayed print, self-reflection tool, improving instruction, elementary social studies

As you enter your classroom, take a moment and look around. What type of print are students seeing in the classroom pertaining to social studies? Is the print on display print created by outside sources and brought into the classroom or is it student-created print? Now think about the purpose the print serves. Is the print an integral part of social studies lessons or is the purpose of the print to show visitors to the classroom what students are learning in social studies? Does the print represent all voices in the classroom and are various perspectives evident? Are students actively engaging with the print? Reflecting on these types of questions ensures that the print in the classroom plays a meaningful role in the development of social studies knowledge. The purpose of this article is to support teachers in evaluating the types and use of social studies print on display in their classrooms. Engaging in a reflective critique of the print on classroom walls can help teachers tap into the power and potential of displayed print to support students' social studies learning as teachers seek to improve their instructional practices.

## Rethinking Artificial Boundaries

Research shows that elementary teachers spend less time teaching social studies than the tested subjects of math and reading (Tyner & Kabourek, 2021). A report of research shows that first to fourth-grade students receive minimal social studies instruction (Cox et al, 2016). In fact, according to Huck (2020), even when elementary teachers have more control over the

content taught because their schools lack a scripted program, social studies continues to be devalued due to administrative preference for the teaching of other subjects. In fact, Diliberti et al.(2023) found through an analysis of a recent RAND report that this lack of support compared to math and reading includes less professional development, less assessment of teachers, and less often a curriculum is even purchased for social studies in the elementary classroom.

Often students from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not have the world experience that other students already possess or are gaining from experiences outside the home. This knowledge base is crucial for their understanding of their neighborhood and community. Therefore, it is key to engage all students daily with developing that social studies knowledge base. According to Wexler (2019), it is important to assist these students, at the youngest of ages, to start building this strong foundation of knowledge in a systematic way. It is imperative that the integrated instruction start in the youngest grades.

As Grossman (2023) at the Fordham Institute emphasizes, using time dedicated to the teaching of reading and integrating literacy instruction with social studies content can improve the social studies knowledge base of these young students. Grossman's (2023) findings support past research that also shows the teaching of social studies can have a significant impact on the improvement of literacy skills. In fact, a systematic review of research studies finds that developing content knowledge during ELA instruction can positively influence students' vocabulary and comprehension of content materials (Hwang et al., 2023). The artificial boundaries so often drawn between subjects such as reading and social studies must end.

### **A Look at the Environment**

Research emphasizes that the environment plays an important role with elementary students (Nyabando & Evanshen, 2022; Sunday, 2020). The materials, opportunities for social engagement, flexibility, and organization are important for learning. Both professional development and educational literature emphasize the importance of a print rich environment. In fact, research shows that surrounding young children with print positively influences early literacy growth (Axelrod et al., 2015; Neuman, 2004; Reutzler, 2015).

Therefore, as educators, it is important to look beyond traditional "text" such as social studies textbooks, which teachers often are dissatisfied with (Murray et al., 2022), and realize displayed print in the classroom can serve as an additional type of "text" and another opportunity to strengthen students' social studies knowledge and integrate social studies and literacy learning.

Often when walking through an elementary school classroom, it is not unusual to see some type of print related to social studies in the environment. Perhaps this print includes posters of national symbols, charts graphing student wants and needs which tie to economics, or maps of their neighborhood reinforcing the concept of place. However, to ensure the displayed print develops and extends social studies knowledge, it is necessary to closely examine that print and its use in the classroom. By examining, reflecting, and making

modifications on displayed print, educators can improve the social studies learning environment for students.

While the specific content examples in this article pertain specifically to the primary grades, the tool detailed in this article could easily be used at a variety of grade levels in order to impact social studies learning.

### **The Self-Reflection Tool**

The *Self-Reflection Tool for Analyzing Displayed Print in Social Studies* (see Appendix A) is designed to assist teachers with the examination of the print in the classroom. Print that is meant to be viewed by the students, as opposed to visitors from outside the classroom environment, and is semi-permanent in nature and won't be erased or taken down at the end of the class is the type of print that should be reviewed. The tool can be used by pre-service teachers observing in the social studies classroom or by elementary teachers who currently teach.

The purpose of the tool is to not only look at what is on display but to think about how the print impacts social studies instruction (see Appendix A). Then instructional decisions can be made regarding the print or its use in instruction to strengthen students' social studies learning. While merely displaying print will not increase social studies knowledge, the learning that occurs through the creation of the print, the reinforcement of the knowledge as students interact with the print, and the way the print is incorporated into instructional lessons, is key.

### **Getting Started**

The first step to examining the social studies print on display is to take a visual scan of your classroom or the classroom where you are observing. If desired, take a few snapshots on your cell phone or iPad of the various parts of the learning environment in order to document all the print that is there. Afterwards, print Appendix A and as you look at the images and list the examples of print in the classroom in the left-hand column of the chart. Next, determine the length of time the print has been on display in the next column. If a preservice teacher is completing this exercise, he or she may need to ask their host teacher for this information. Once those columns are complete, it is time to look more closely at the print and think about the role it plays in the teaching and learning of social studies.

### **Key Considerations**

There are five key considerations on which to reflect with each example of print listed on the tool. By considering these areas, it is possible to determine if the print displayed is enriching the social studies learning in the classroom. This involves taking a closer look and reflecting on each example of print on display. Here are key questions to ask when looking at the print on display:

- Where does the print originate?
- What is the purpose of the print?

Are all student voices represented?  
 Does the print demonstrate varied perspectives?  
 How are students engaging with the print?

### **Origination of Displayed Print**

There are two types of print found in a classroom: *local* and *imported* text (Maloch et al., 2004). Local text is created within the classroom environment while imported text is brought in from the outside. Any purchased print on display or even worksheets completed by students is imported because the print did not originate within the classroom setting. However, if teachers create charts that involve student voices while being primarily written by the teacher or if students create timelines, maps, diagrams, and essays, then the print is considered local print.

Imported print is often on display in the environment. School-provided maps and posters are often placed on the walls to reinforce learning. However, local print is often more meaningful to students than imported. Displaying quality student-created social studies projects develops a sense of community as students work to create their best product such as a group timeline or an individual political campaign display. Local print is valuable because students not only gain from the actual learning reinforced with its creation and the discussion or collaboration with peers who may have been part of the process, but there is a sense of pride in the fact that they are creators of the final product. Consider whether each type of print on display is local or imported. Note the origination of each piece in the third column of the chart.

If there is minimal local print on display, think about how to increase the amount of local print in the classroom. Consider tying local print to imported print already on display in the classroom. For example, take glossy purchased posters of famous people in history, and have students create a timeline with key points for one of the people to display. If a publisher-provided vocabulary list for a unit is visible, have students create a concept map in small groups on chart paper demonstrating the relationship between several of those words.

The goal for strengthening the social studies print on display is not to start over but to expand what is already visible in the classroom so that it is even more meaningful. While there is nothing wrong with imported print, it shouldn't be the only type of print students see in the classroom. Completing the origination column on the tool provided will only take minutes, but it is an important part of the reflection process. Looking at the "why" behind the print will take more time and thought.

### **Purpose of Print**

While there is often a variety of print in the elementary classroom, it is important to know why the print is on display. What purpose does each example of print on display serve to the social studies classroom community? Here are three possible reasons that print may be on display:

- *Expanding Academic Vocabulary* - Building academic and domain specific vocabulary is an important aspect of social studies. Often in the primary grades, terms such as citizen, natural resources, rights, community, and others are introduced to students. An understanding of these terms is needed for students to comprehend social studies text. Along with word walls, perhaps students create illustrations or key words to remember academic terms or maybe they brainstorm ideas on an ABC chart showing a vocabulary term that begins with each letter of the alphabet for the current topic of study. For example, if students are studying rural and urban environments, they may have an ABC map for the concept rural which they list animals for A, farms for F, and woods for W, etc.
- *Strengthening Mapping Skills*- Students must learn to navigate a variety of maps of their school, their neighborhood, and even their city. They learn that maps not only show visible items such as schools, roads, and libraries, but they may show invisible aspects such as boundaries. In order to interpret maps, young children need hands-on experience creating the maps, extended exposure and engagement with maps. Having maps, especially class created maps, as a form of displayed print in the classroom can serve to strengthen their mapping skills so that they can understand why maps are important for the world around them and how to gain information from them.
- *Recognizing National Symbols*- Even at the youngest grades, students learn that a symbol represents a concept. There are symbols that represent various holidays such as a heart for Valentine’s Day, symbols that are used in the key on a map, and even symbols that represent their country. Students in the United States are often taught and expected to know symbols for the United States of America and learn the words to The Pledge of Allegiance or to sing It’s a Grand Ole Flag. These national symbols might include among others the national flag, Mt. Rushmore, the white house, and the Statue of Liberty. Awareness helps to establish student identity as a citizen in the nation.

There are many possible purposes for print to be displayed in the social studies classroom, and these are just a few examples. As students write specific vocabulary terms, create a variety of maps, and draw symbols, they are not only increasing social studies knowledge, but they are developing literacy skills in a meaningful context.

### **Ensuring All Student Voices are Represented**

When teachers invite participation by all students, all voices will be represented regardless of ability or language. All students, regardless of developmental challenges or level of language acquisition, can add to the richness of quality print. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011), students with disabilities have difficulty with social studies and only 7% were proficient in the content. For this reason, it is important to incorporate local print in the primary grades as a way to assist students with learning

disabilities social studies background knowledge and knowledge of texts (Ciullo, 2015). By encouraging students to work in various heterogeneous groupings in the creation of print tied to social studies, it ensures that every student is seen and valued. Adaptation of groupings, scaffolding, and differentiating assessments are key (Johnson & Busby, 2015).

Given the diversity within schools, Seltzer (2022) advocates the importance of reexamining our beliefs regarding language-minoritized students. Instead of viewing their language development as a deficit, it is important to acknowledge that all students are writers and creators in our classrooms. Working together, whether students are creating models, reports, or other forms of print, can ensure that all language-minoritized students are represented in the creation of meaningful print in the classroom. It takes many years for second-language students to understand the complexities of academic language unique to content areas (Hakuta et al., 2000), and displaying quality, local print in the classroom, also increases second language learners' exposure to academic language.

Classroom print can take students from their current level of language development and cognitive level of functioning and strengthen their foundation of social studies vocabulary and concepts. Look at the fifth column from the left on the chart. Note if all students are represented in the displayed classroom print pertaining to social studies. Not only should all students be involved, but various perspectives should be evident within the print displayed.

### **Valuing Varied Perspectives**

With the growing diversity in classrooms, it is important to ensure that teaching is culturally responsive to the needs of students and their varying perspectives. How knowledge of ethnicity and culture ties into a culturally responsive curriculum is key (Gay, 2001). According to Bennett (2018), a culturally responsive print rich environment is one of five foundational aspects of culturally responsive teaching. While we want all students to experience academic success, Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes the importance of all students having cultural competence and being able to be their true selves.

A large question or thought can be posed to students and then placed on the wall to brainstorm suggestions. Consider using a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. as a graffiti wall and asking students to express how it makes them feel. Examine how age-appropriate news stories present information or how the classroom social studies text presents information. Are there other views that can be presented to make the text more valuable? Is there a problem in the community, that students can help solve? How might various groups in the community view the issue?

Are multiple viewpoints of historical events taken into consideration in the print? Are various voices on display so that students can see themselves in the print? Print should honor students of color lived experiences and elevate their communities' culture and language. Culturally responsive displayed print can assist with the development of social studies content for all students. As column six is completed on the chart, think about each type of social studies print on display and whether it represents various perspectives and is culturally responsive (see

Appendix A). Having print on display is great, but it is important to make sure that the print is part of the instructional process.

## **Engagement**

Finally, consider how students engage with the social studies print on display. While engagement may be the last column on the tool, it is by far not the least important. Simply displaying print will not ensure social studies growth in and of itself. Having it displayed will reinforce learning but engagement with the print is key to deepening and extending student knowledge. A study conducted with very young learners found that 95% of the print in the environment was not referenced (Gerde et al., 2015). Having print on display in the environment without meaningful student engagement, greatly limits the print's value and potential. Students need to not only interact with the creation of the print but also engage with it once it is a part of their learning environment.

Students need to develop the skills to think like social scientists (Hughes, 2022). They must learn to ask questions, gather information, and make decisions that will be beneficial to the community and enable them to be responsible citizens (Simon & Corr, 2022). The displayed print can easily be part of an inquiry rich learning environment. For example, if the students are learning about recycling and how it improves their community, employees from the sanitation company may visit and engage with the students about trash day and recycling so that students can ask the employees questions, learn about recycling, and determine for themselves if and why recycling is important for their community. Student-created questions can be put on a large sheet of paper on display. They may experience sorting trash items, look at diagrams of how garbage trucks work, and take a virtual or physical field trip to visit a recycling center after using a map to see where the materials go in their community.

As information is gathered, students can put additional important information on the displayed sheet of paper. Students then decide how to take informed action (Swan et al., 2018) and encourage others in their community to recycle. Perhaps students need to ask those in their community why they do or don't choose to recycle so that they can use that information to determine what to put on student-created posters encouraging those in the community to recycle. What did students learn from their interviews that might be used on the posters to persuade others to change their habits regarding materials thrown away? Perhaps the people students interviewed did not know what materials to recycle or how to recycle. The class can determine where it might be best to hang copies of the posters that are on display in the classroom. Students can also brainstorm important facts that can be shared on the morning announcements at their school. Another idea is to have Post It® notes available. The teacher or students (depending on the age or ability level) can list social studies concepts or terms related to recycling that are unclear to them. Read the notes aloud to the class and ask students if any of the displayed print might clarify the information. Allow students to stick the notes on the displayed print. There are many ways to engage students with the print on display.

Look at the last column in the chart (see Appendix A). When was the last time students engaged with the print? If unsure, leave the space blank. However, think about future ways students may develop their social studies knowledge through their direct engagement with the social studies print on display and modify instruction accordingly. Actively engaging students with the displayed print is key to the value it serves in the classroom. It will ensure that the students are building the knowledge and vocabulary that will enable them to continue to expand their social studies knowledge. If engagement is not occurring with the print, and future engagement is not feasible, then it is time for students to consider creating new print and replacing what is currently on display.

### **Taking the Next Steps**

Once the columns on the chart are complete, the real work begins. Knowing and reflecting on the print present is important, but what are the next steps? The next thing to do is to look at the data collected with the tool. Determine a couple of goals that can be developed regarding displayed print that will improve social studies instruction (see Appendix A). Perhaps it is determined that most of the print on display came from outside the classroom, so increasing the amount of local text is a goal. Maybe the text serves a purpose, but the students have not engaged with it much since its creation or for an extended period of time. A goal may be to find a specific way to get students to engage with the text through classroom instruction. After completion of the chart and listing two goals, it is time to make specific decisions on how instruction will change.

Goals need action items. On the second page of the tool (see Appendix B), there is a place to state specific actions. If a goal is to increase the amount of local text, what specific actions will be taken? What types of local print will be incorporated and how will it fit in with existing print? If it is evident that students need to engage more with print on display, how will that be achieved? What specific actions will you use to engage the students? Perhaps the print will be tied into a future social studies lesson. Which lessons will it tie to? Specifically state how the engagement will occur.

After the actions have been taken, and a reasonable amount of time has passed, it is time to determine if there is any evidence that the actions chosen led to desired student growth. Just making goals or taking actions doesn't always guarantee results. Perhaps it is determined that there needs to be more local text created, and hands-on activities are planned and implemented that enable students to create the print and engage with it on an ongoing basis. Maybe students are showing a stronger depth of understanding through classroom discussions. Is new academic vocabulary being used that previously confused the students? Did the actions achieve the results desired or are there other actions that may be tried?

The tool is designed to help teachers reflect not only on the print displayed but also to reflect on how social studies instruction may be modified to take advantage of the value of print on display through the implementation of changes to instruction. Expanding learning opportunities for students is a primary goal. As the data is analyzed and reflected on and

decisions made for future social studies instruction, growth in knowledge should be experienced.

A teacher who used the tool for the first time to reflect on the social studies print in her elementary classroom, realized that while she had maps to develop geographical knowledge, a timeline to reinforce chronological order that encircled her classroom walls, and social hierarchy posters, all the print on display was imported. The print displayed would better serve the students' needs through the inclusion of more locally created print. In addition, she expressed a need to tie together the social hierarchy posters and the timeline more explicitly by having her students write from the perspective of various social classes (e.g., sharecroppers and slaves). By adding their writings to the local print on display, students will experience various perspectives and grow in their content understanding of social studies. After making changes, the teacher will want to keep track of her room scans, goals, and changes made, so that she can see the professional growth she is making.

### **Moving Forward**

Depending on the classroom, room scans might be done monthly. That time frame ensures that print is regularly being reexamined for its current value in strengthening social studies knowledge. While all environment print won't be removed at the end of each month, there may be modifications to the print already present to increase its value as a learning tool. For example, a word wall of social studies terms might be created during a unit of study in one month, but when the next scan is conducted in the next month, the teacher may determine that the wall is not retaining its value in its current form. The teacher may decide to replace the word wall or modify it for the students to increase their engagement with the terms.

As previously discussed, it is easy to incorporate the language arts across social studies, and it is important to value social studies learning as much as any other content area. The print for social studies is a great way for students to develop their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Spies (2022), makes that connection in an InquirEd/NCSS webinar which focuses on the importance of integrated instruction through hands-on activities for her young students. The depth of learning they develop regarding questioning, labeling, and decision making prepares the students for future learning. The students realize that the decisions they make will impact others in their community.

In summary, analyzing displayed print by scanning the classroom is a powerful activity for preservice teachers during their field experiences as well as seasoned elementary teachers wishing to improve the utility of student-created print in the social studies. Collaborating with other educators will allow for the sharing of ideas and is a way to gain insight into what others are doing in their classrooms. It will also provide additional sets of eyes as learning environments are being discussed.

### In Conclusion

Displayed print is an easy and inexpensive way to support elementary students' social studies learning. While print is often on display in classrooms, little attention is given to the power and potential it can play in developing social studies knowledge. The elementary grades are the perfect time to begin using print in the classroom to strengthen social studies knowledge through quality literacy activities. Elementary teachers are often knowledgeable about effective disciplinary literacy strategies which can help students to develop social studies knowledge, while teachers at older grades are often content specialists (Curtis & Green, 2021). Make the most of the environment and the print on display related to social studies content. Remember, a print rich environment is never finalized. A print rich classroom requires continuous reflection and modification to ensure that it continues to play a key role in the development of social studies knowledge with all students.

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**Appendix A**

**Self-Reflection Tool for Analyzing Displayed Print in Social Studies**

Date of Classroom Scan \_\_\_\_\_ Classroom Location \_\_\_\_\_

| Print on Display<br>(Name or Description) | Dates on Display | Origination<br>(local or imported) | Purpose | Representation of All Students | Varied Perspectives | Engagement<br>(How did students Engage with the print?) |
|---|------------------|------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------|---------------------|---|
|   |                  |                                    |         |                                |                     |   |
|   |                  |                                    |         |                                |                     |   |
|   |                  |                                    |         |                                |                     |   |
|   |                  |                                    |         |                                |                     |   |
|   |                  |                                    |         |                                |                     |   |
|   |                  |                                    |         |                                |                     |   |
|   |                  |                                    |         |                                |                     |   |

Goal 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Goal 2: \_\_\_\_\_

