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Teaching Written Primary Sources to Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Despite deficits in reading ability, students with learning disabilities (LD) in reading are expected to apply skills in reading to text(s) across content areas. One such specific type of text that students with LD will likely encounter are written primary sources in social studies, and teachers need an array of strategies to support comprehension of these sources. This article equips general and special education teachers with information and necessary supports when teaching written primary sources in social studies to students with LD by detailing: (a) learning disabilities in reading from a theoretical context; (b) content literacy in social studies; (c) the importance of written primary sources; and (d) strategies to support students with LD in reading when encountering written primary sources during integrated social studies and English language arts instruction.

Keywords: learning disabilities, social studies, content literacy, written primary sources

Reading ability influences student achievement across content areas (Akbasli et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2014; Cruz Neri et al., 2021; Duncan et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2017), yet pervasive difficulties in reading affect as many as one in five students in elementary and secondary schools in the United States (Das, 2020). Learning disabilities (LD, henceforth) are a frequent cause of reading difficulty, and of the 7.5 million students with LD in the United States' educational system, 32% receive special education services under the eligibility of specific learning disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Reportedly, reading disabilities account for approximately 80% of LDs in school aged students (Dominguez & Carugno, 2023).

Despite deficits in reading ability, students with LD in reading are expected to apply reading skills to texts across content areas (Sejnost & Thiese, 2007). One such specific type of text in which students with LD will likely encounter are written primary sources in social studies (Bukowiecki, 2014). This article provides general and special education teachers, who are teaching grades ranging from upper-elementary to high school, with information and necessary supports when teaching written primary sources in social studies to students with LD by detailing: (a) learning disabilities in reading from a theoretical context; (b) content literacy in social studies; (c) the importance of written primary sources; and (d) strategies to support students with LD in reading when encountering written primary sources during integrated social studies and English language arts (ELA, henceforth) instruction.

Learning Disabilities in Reading

The simple view of reading theorizes that students with LD in reading have pervasive deficits in decoding (word recognition), language comprehension, or combined deficits in both decoding and language comprehension; all of which interfere with the ability to achieve reading comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Various models of reading (e.g., Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Joshi & Aaron, 2000; Kim, 2017; Scarborough, 2001) build on the simple view of reading by providing additional and bridging variables that contribute to skilled reading (e.g., self-regulation, morphological awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary), and students with LD in reading may have deficits in one or more of these areas, ultimately affecting decoding or language comprehension. It is important to note that reading comprehension is the product, or outcome, of proficiency in decoding and language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990), and instruction that supports reading comprehension for students with LD in reading targets deficits in either or bridging variables. It is also important to note that comprehension is not all or nothing. Reading comprehension ranges from limited, surface-level to contextualized, in-depth understanding of a text or multiple texts (Butterfuss et al., 2020).

Content Literacy in Social Studies

It is widely recognized that ELA and social studies have a reciprocal relationship (Anderson, 1985; Irvin et al., 1995; National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). This reciprocity is contextualized as content literacy, or the reliance upon foundational skills in reading and writing to advance knowledge acquisition in a content area such as social studies (McKenna & Robinson, 1990). Acquired social studies knowledge then further advances reading and writing ability (Hinde, 2005; Hirsch, 2003; Massey & Heafner, 2004). To this end, integration of ELA and social studies instruction is a research focus of both literacy and social studies researchers (e.g., Halvorsen et al., 2012; Heafner, 2018; Huck, 2019; Klingner et al., 1998; Swanson et al., 2016; Yearta, 2019).

In upper-elementary settings, allocated social studies instructional time, on average, tends to be much less than ELA (Tyner & Kabourek, 2021), and social studies content is more likely to be integrated into ELA instruction with the aim of building knowledge and teaching vocabulary (Hwang et al., 2023). In middle and high school settings, social studies courses often integrate literacy with a focus on relevant content-specific texts (Lawrence et al., 2019; Swanson et al., 2016). Across these settings, written primary sources are commonly incorporated into integrated social studies and ELA instruction (Bukowiecki, 2014; Langan & Lawrence, 2021), and teachers will need an array of strategies to support comprehension of these sources in students with LD (Barnes & Cartwright, 2024; Shifflet & Hunt, 2019; Witmer et al., 2017).

Written Primary Sources in Social Studies

Primary sources are "firsthand testimony or direct evidence concerning a topic or question under investigation" (Yale University, n.d.). Elaborating on this definition, primary sources in social studies provide firsthand access into otherwise unobtainable insights of knowledge. Significant historical developments often correspond with primary sources (e.g., the Magna Carta and the concept that even a king is not above the law; the Declaration of Independence and the founding of the United States of America), and these sources are commonly documented and presented in a written format such as newspapers, journals, letters, and transcripts (Cantor & Schneider, 1967). Nevertheless, text-based primary sources pose significant difficulty for struggling readers to read when the sources are written in an unfamiliar vernacular that represents a historical period and/ or contain complex syntax and vocabulary. Thus, precisely because of their dynamic nature, without accommodations and evidence-based practices, written primary sources and knowledge they are intended to cultivate may be inaccessible for students with LD in reading. The remaining sections of this article describe several strategies Teachers can draw upon when students with LD in reading are tasked with reading written primary sources in social studies. The Gettysburg Address (Library of Congress, 2014) is referenced throughout as an example primary source.

Plan to Teach and Read Multiple Sources

Instructional planning is an important precursor to providing instruction and intervention for students with LD (Vaughn & Schumm, 1994). When planning supports for students with LD, Teachers should preview the instructional unit and plan to teach and read multiple sources. It is common for several sources to coincide within an instructional unit, and reading of multiple sources supports comprehension of a greater topic, rather than a singular text (Butterfuss et al., 2020). For example, the Emancipation Proclamation is a historical development during the Civil War proclaiming the end of slavery in the United States. The Gettysburg Address is a historical development when the United States president, Abraham Lincoln, addressed the nation after a significant battle, often described as a turning point, of the Civil War. When students read the Emancipation Proclamation and a transcript of the Gettysburg Address as primary sources, they are accessing and synthesizing junctures of Civil War history firsthand from the words of Abraham Lincoln. Teachers should plan to systematically align teaching of multiple, relative primary sources to elicit comprehension with depth and breadth of a topic of study.

Simplify the Written Source to Instructional Level

Unlike most other texts that students interact with, written primary sources are not specially designed for the grade or instructional levels of students. Teachers can address this barrier by simplifying the source to the reading ability of a student (Betts, 1946). This creates an opportunity for a student to read the authentic intent of a primary source instead of solely reading or learning *about* the source or historical event (Wineburg & Martin, 2009). According to Burns

(2007; 2024), the instructional level of a text for a student when reading is when they can read 93-97% of words accurately. When students read texts at their instructional level, it grants them access to efficiently decode, which relieves the cognitive threshold allocated to word recognition and directs the cognitive threshold to comprehension (Crossley et al., 2012). A common, standardized measurement of a student's instructional level in reading is the Lexile scale (Lennon & Burdick, 2004). The Lexile Framework (Lennon & Burdick, 2004) uses a formula of word frequency and length of sentences to determine the complexity (readability) of a text. Students are also assigned a score based on their reading ability which aligns with Lexile scores of texts, and teachers can use these measures when simplifying a text.

Prior to making any adjustments to a written primary source, a teacher should check the Lexile score (https://hub.lexile.com) to see if simplification is necessary (Lexile & Quantile Hub, n.d.). If necessary, most texts can be simplified to an approximate student's instructional level, including primary sources in social studies. Another option to check the readability of the text is by presenting it to the students, asking them to read it, and measuring if they can accurately read at least ninety-three of the first one hundred words. If unable to read at least ninety-three of the first one hundred words, simplification is likely necessary. If the student can successfully read the source at or beyond the instructional level, alteration of the source is not necessary, and the original source should be the text of instruction.

Simplifying a written primary source to an appropriate instructional level of students requires alteration of syntax (sentence structure), length, and possibly the vocabulary considering the reading ability of the targeted students (Crossley et al., 2012). Wineburg & Martin (2009) suggest simplifying a primary source to around 200-300 word chunks for struggling readers to support sustained attention while concentrating on extracting information from the text. During the simplification process, teachers can intentionally select complex vocabulary to remain in the text for instruction while also ensuring that the entirety of the text is readable for the student. Teachers have some options when simplifying the text—ranging from artificial intelligence tools (Araújo & Aguiar, 2023) to an intuitive approach in which the teacher simplifies the text (Crossley et al., 2012). When a text is simplified, teachers can use the Lexile measurement tool (https://hub.lexile.com) to determine if the simplified text matches the student's Lexile level, or if further alterations need to be made. The original Gettysburg address scores in the 1410L-1600L instructional range, while the intuitively simplified (by the author) Gettysburg Address (see Figure 1) scored in the 810L-1000L instructional range.

Teachers should note that the overarching goal of simplifying a written primary source is to provide students with LD the opportunity to effectively decode the text. Although the simplified text may be accessible to students with LD while reading, it is important to introduce the original source alongside the simplified version. If a teacher deems it necessary, students can listen to the original source being read aloud by a teacher or recording. Listening to and discussing the original source prior to reading the simplified version could support activating background knowledge.

Activate and Build Background Knowledge

Background knowledge is any world knowledge that a reader evokes during the process of reading—including prior knowledge from one's schema as well as learned concepts / facts, vocabulary, and text structures (Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1978; Smith et al., 2021; Barnes & Cartwright, 2024). Research has shown that students with and without LD comprehend texts better when background knowledge is activated and built upon during reading instruction **(**Carr & Thompson, 1996; Elbro & Buch-Iversen, 2013; Smith et al., 2021). Furthermore, prior knowledge of a topic facilitates storing new information into memory by forming connections with existing ideas and information (Shing & Brod, 2016).

Figure 1

Original and Simplified Gettysburg Address

Original	**Simplified**
Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.	Eighty-seven years ago, the United States was founded on **liberty** and the idea that all men are created equal. Our country is now engaged in a great **civil** war which tests if the United States can continue as a country. We meet on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to **dedicate** a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who died, so that that nation might live. The brave men who fought here are the reason we are here today. We can never forget what they did here, but the work is **unfinished**. It is for us to remember the cause in which the men were fighting for. It is for us to be here dedicated to the to the great task remaining before us. Through honoring the dead, we take increased **devotion** to that cause. The cause that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Note. Gettysburg Address retrieved and adapted from Library of Congress (2014).

Teachers can intentionally activate and build upon background knowledge when teaching written primary sources through asking questions, eliciting a discussion on an upcoming reading, and teaching salient vocabulary (Barnes & Cartwright, 2024). For example, when teaching a unit that includes the Battle of Gettysburg and Gettysburg Address (Library of Congress, 2014), teachers can activate students' background knowledge and vocabulary relating to the American Civil War including the Union and Confederacy, Abraham Lincoln, Emancipation Proclamation, key events and battles, and other concepts within the relevant social studies unit. Additionally, teaching specially selected vocabulary will support building vocabulary knowledge which contributes to comprehension of the text and topic.

Pre-teach and Reference Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is a vital component for comprehension of texts and overall reading ability (National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgesen et al., 2007). Historical texts may include unknown and complex vocabulary which are specific to the topic and domain of study (Beck et al., 2002; Cummins, 2015). Pre-teaching selected vocabulary of a text is a method to support reading comprehension by preparing a student for encountering specific words that a teacher deems challenging to read (i.e., multisyllabic and/or irregular) yet essential for understanding the text (Carney, 1984).

Teachers should preview the text (i.e., primary source) and select three to five words to teach prior to reading of the text (Beck et al., 2002). As part of pre-teaching vocabulary, teachers can also explicitly teach derivational and inflectional morphemes that are part of selected complex vocabulary words from the text (Beck et al., 2002). For example, in Table 1, words with derivational morphemes include *unfinished*, *government*, and *devotion*.

Table 1

Selected Vocabulary from the Gettysburg Address

Words without Derivational Morphemes	Words with Derivational Morphemes
liberty	unfinished = un + finished
civil	government = govern + ment
	devotion = devote + ion

Note. '-ed' in 'unfinished' is an inflectional morpheme that changes the tense of 'finish' to past tense and can be reviewed during instruction if necessary.

When teaching the meanings of these words, teachers should emphasize the meaning of the base word (e.g., finish means 'bringing to an end' or 'complete') while teaching that the derivational morpheme (e.g., un) has a unique meaning within the word, and this morpheme alters the meaning of the base word (e.g., unfinished = 'not yet complete'). Furthermore, selected words and associated derivational morphemes should be referenced and reviewed during reading and instruction pertaining to the source and overarching topic.

Repeated Reading

Repeated reading is a reading intervention in which a student orally reads a passage more than once with the goal of increasing reading fluency (Samuels, 1979). The underpinning theory behind repeated readings is that multiple exposures to a text increases word reading accuracy and automaticity, which are key contributing characteristics of reading fluency (Logan, 1997). When accuracy and automaticity of word recognition are present, mental concentration is then allocated to comprehension of a text (Laberge & Samuels, 1979). In a meta-analysis of repeated reading studies which included studies of upper-elementary, middle and high school students, Therrien

(2004) reported initial effectiveness on reading fluency and comprehension for students with and without LD when a passage was read twice and compounding effects on specific passage fluency and comprehension with three and four exposures. If a teacher deems necessary and has time for more readings, considering the stamina of the student, six readings have shown even greater immediate effects of fluency (Ardoin et al., 2009). Further variations of repeated reading could include listening to audio-recorded versions of the text and oral readings by the teacher (Therrien, 2004).

In the case of primary sources, rereading a written source will catalyze increased fluency which improves the ability to comprehend the source. Moreover, written primary sources are often seminal works in history that warrant rereading which aids in better understanding and contextualization. Bickford et al. (2020) incorporated repeated readings of primary and secondary sources as part of a fourth grade social studies inquiry, and overall, reported students having a greater ability to comprehend and synthesize information from the sources into written compositions. To implement repeated reading, a teacher presents a written primary source on a student's instructional level and then begins the procedure of having them consecutively read it multiple times (and multiple occasions if applicable). Students may also reread the source after engaging in other instructional activities, such as creating a graphic organizer.

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers are visually organized representations of information (Darch & Eaves, 1986). Kim and colleagues (2004) synthesized twenty-one studies with 848 students with LD across elementary, middle, and high school settings and found that overall, graphic organizers supported reading comprehension of a specific text. In a meta-analysis, Dexter and Hughes (2011) reported similar results affecting reading comprehension while emphasizing that graphic organizers are another modality in which students with LD can access information from text. Furthermore, Darch and Carnine (1986) reported greater comprehension in students with LD in grades 4 and 6 who used graphic organizers when studying content-specific informational concepts in science and social studies. Doyle (1999) reported greater gains in comprehension when students with LD used graphic organizers to help organize information from informational text readings in a secondary social studies class. Ciullo et al. (2015) studied the effects of using graphic organizers alongside explicit instruction during upper-elementary social studies instruction and found that students with LD made strong gains in comprehension of the content. Overall, graphic organizers (e.g., Figure 2) can be introduced by teachers to help students organize information from the primary source. Once completed, the student should utilize the organizer as a reference point throughout instruction or during discussions in small groups.

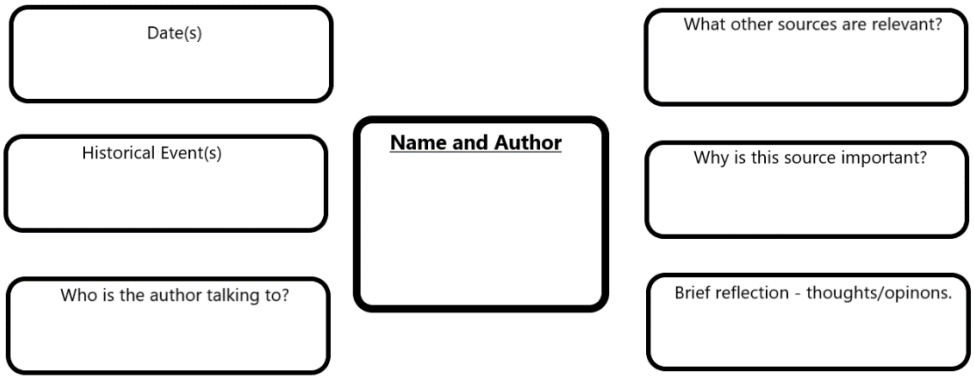
Facilitate Discussions in Heterogenous Pairs/Small Groups

To further elicit comprehension of a written primary source, teachers can facilitate discussions in heterogenous groupings or pairs. Research has shown that small group settings produce favorable academic outcomes for students with LD (Elbaum et al., 1999; Keel & Gast,

1992; Vaughn et al., 2001). Because primary sources are likely situated in rich historical context requiring at least some background knowledge, ongoing discussions in small groups or pairs support a pool of shared knowledge among the students. Studies have shown that facilitating discussions using small group strategies improves comprehension of social studies texts for students with LD (e.g., Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Lederer, 2000). Teachers can provide students with prompts and questions to further analyze and discuss the written primary source at hand.

Figure 2

Example Graphic Organizer for a Primary Source



Conclusion

Due to a dynamic range of complexity, written primary sources may be inaccessible for students with LD in reading without accommodation and evidence-based practices. This article explored strategies teachers can employ when students with LD are tasked with analyzing and reading written primary sources in integrated social studies and ELA instruction across upper-elementary, middle, and high school classroom settings. Teachers should consider using these strategies sequentially for deep reading of a seminal primary source. For example, a teacher could implement the following instructional sequence:

1. plan for the instructional unit and primary source(s);
2. simplify the source(s) if necessary;
3. activate background knowledge including pre-teaching of vocabulary;
4. repeatedly read the source on instructional level;
5. have student(s) create a graphic organizer;
6. facilitate discussions in pairs or small groups.

In closing, the described strategies are useful strategies to support reading comprehension of any text, but specifically, using these strategies when teaching written primary sources have the potential to simultaneously support acquisition of knowledge in social studies while providing reading intervention. Thus, the goal of using these strategies when teaching written primary sources to students with LD in reading is twofold: (a) support comprehension of the

primary source and social studies topic at hand; and (b) build skills and knowledge in support of overall reading ability.

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