Reflective Questions from a First Year Social Studies Teacher

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Whitney was in her first year teaching fourth grade after a brief span of being a para-professional. In a very small school that year she found a mentor across the hall and in her disciplinary community to be an important part of her initial classroom success (Zimmerman, 2003). The teacher of the same grade next door or the teacher down the hall with some experience could be a formal mentor selected by the school administration or an informal mentorship between two like-minded people. Conversations between peers helped inform her judgment. Judgments were transferred by her into decisions about classroom practices. Classroom practices that required technology were a frequent topic of conversation including internet access, needs, and instructional preferences.

Pre-service teachers with field experiences in technology, such as Whitney, had an advantage over pre-service peers without experience as they developed educational experiences for their students in their first year, but both groups made decisions on how to use media in their first year of elementary social studies instruction (Alexander & Kjellstrom, 2014). In the scope of her career the decisions she made set a course for her next few years, and these issues informed what she as a professional educator did during that year and into the future. As a first year teacher in a new school she was creating everything for the first time in her professional life. Whitney realized, "As I came to the end of my first year I realized how many decisions I had made."

Questions and Decisions

By the end of the first school year Whitney raised significant questions about her practice of social studies. While her students, parents, and administrators were all satisfied with her first year as a teacher, she wanted to continue to explore and grow as a professional. She explored the influence of other educators through theory and practice as written in peer-reviewed journals, raised additional points about her practice, and based on her interests and the needs of her students she made decisions on what she would try next year.

Question I: How did I follow the interests of my students and make sure my students explored a rich curriculum?

Students brought interests to the classroom, and she helped them expand their interests into similar areas. Starting with student proficiencies and interests provided a platform for future exploration, and matching students with their interests was an important part of getting students to achieve in social studies (NCSS, 2013). Harnessing students' interests in concert with standards was a difficult and rewarding task for her. One way to accomplish the task was to examine problems through inquiry. The C3 Framework provided an inquiry strategy, and it suggested that students should identify questions for exploration. Involving students in question identification helped them to develop ownership of the investigation they were about to commence. The students owned the question and their self-efficacy lead them to motivation about the exploration.

Whitney embraced an open-ended and creative approach to teaching social studies. With administrative support she rejected the scripted teaching and standardized daily planning that was required of all teachers and all students in the neighboring schools (Foley, 2013, Wills & Sandholtz, 2009, Spencer, 2009). Teacher professionalism in social studies was minimized by

high stakes testing. The mind numbing disconnect between teaching for a test and the contrast of learning as a citizen of the world was exacerbated by the factory model of education. She felt this approach deskilled teachers making them unthinking robots and created a boring unimaginative curriculum for students to memorize.

A more successful practice was the use of iconic representations which were important to students who were struggling to learn content and concepts (van Oers, 1997, Voss & Frauenknecht, 1996). Whitney asked her students to create iconic representations of shelter, food, and clothing from history at a particular time period connected to a particular ethnic group from 1820. The students described their interpretation through a written explanation of what materials where used and what the people represented needed to do to manipulate materials into useable products. The students modeled what they visualized, and then they described what they had done to explain what they learned. Angie (2016) said, "… It was fun because we got to research on our Chromebooks and then write. . . it gave us a chance to experiment and build things . . . ." The reflection on their work was as important as the iconic representation itself. The students articulated what they learned through the process of creating a three dimensional model of ideas they had only seen displayed in two dimensional images.

> *Decisions for next year: The students in my classroom came from varying economic circumstances, with different parental involvement, and differences in access to technology. My focus was to put more emphasis on how involved the students were in their own learning. Retelling and explaining projects to the class or an audience made their experience more meaningful. I loved to create hands on activities that connected with other subjects. -- Whitney*

Question 2: How did my educational materials spark the interests of my students to research important questions?

Teachers used currency to create understanding about history and economics. Colonial currency helped students to learn about events surrounding the Constitution (Potter, 2014). The students read the iconography of the money itself to communicate ideas about the time. The context of the times helped students to understand why the people decided they needed a new framework of government rather than continuing to attempt to modify the Articles of Confederation. Carter (2016) said, "I thought it was fun to have all the information on our computers. . ." The lack of a common currency and the practices of the individual states to print their own money made commerce difficult in the young republic.

Just as students critically examined the currency they looked at other sources when they examined questions. Students worked with short or long term research topics. Inquiry on topics such as this helped students to understand the past and how they related to the present (Brugar, Halvorsen, & Hernandez, 2014). The teacher capitalized on the natural curiosity of the students. Students created compelling and supporting questions. Students identified questions, linked concepts and skills from civics, economics, geography, and history, and evaluated sources before making decisions and taking action (Croddy & Levine, 2014). Students were expected to use evidence. An inquiry provided an opportunity for students to communicate conclusions about an issue or problem in society. The conclusion of inquiry frequently generated additional questions for future inquiry projects.

In the first year Whitney's students were fascinated by currency, and they based their research investigations on the iconography found on currency. The students researched topics related to civics, economics, geography, and history from around the world. The students used

materials they found on the internet to support their investigations. In the second school year an electronic field trip experience engaged students with video and computer based experiences about places, people, and events in celebration of Indiana's Bicentennial (Ball State University). From this experience students launch research in a variety of different directions as the state celebrates its two hundredth birthday. Students raise questions based on the video components or the computer experiences.

> *Decisions for next year: I liked to use websites to enhance my lessons. This summer I attended webinars that increased my knowledge of other sites that will allowed my students to explore places and details of the subject matter we were discussing in class. I felt that these types of websites reinforced lessons that I taught. Also having people who were experts in their field come to the school was valuable. Bringing in people from the community and artifacts was important for the children. -- Whitney*

> *Question 3: How did my technology allow my students to gather the knowledge of most social worth?*

The knowledge of most social worth reflects the content and the values a society was most dependent on the students knowing. The knowledge of most social worth was also dependent upon the skills the students had and dispositions they demonstrated. Carter (2016) said, "… We got to do it on the smart board, and when it read to us it had voices. . . [and] it had lots of options." There were so many things students learned that it was important for them to focus on the most important aspects for life in their community: a multicultural rapidly changing democracy that interacted in a global context. The natural curiosity of the students when exploring in a one to one environment opens doors for exploration in elementary social studies (Hayes & Greaves, 2013). The opportunity for students to create knowledge existed when they

used technology to investigate rather than parroting memorized knowledge. Teachers needed to use technology wisely to encourage students to conduct inquiry experiences.

Students engaged in elementary social studies also used primary sources such as artifacts, photos, or documents (Britt & Howe, 2014, Levstik, Henderson, & Lee 2014, Campbell, 2011). They examined conflicts between groups of people on the frontier when they were examining westward expansion. Whitney helped students learn to research by providing the students with an armature on which to build the research process. She provided the students with sources, present them with a research question, present a mystery to them, and provide them with clues. The students created a hypothesis, presented it to an audience, and evaluated if they were correct in their thinking. The students' job with primary sources was to problem solve and communicate.

In the process of historical thinking students examined evidence and created new understandings from the material (Austin & Thompson, 2014, Boyle-Baise, Bernens-Kinkead, Coake, Loudermilk, Lukasik, & Podany, 2011, Kirchner, Helm, Pierce, & Galloway 2011, von Heyking, 2004). First the students determined the scope of the search and what they hoped to locate. Next the students examined why the document was created, who created it, and they examined the document for obvious bias. The students searched for context to learn more about the time when the document was created, and this search for context required they organize primary sources to find what they were looking for. The student reflected upon their biases in reading the document. The student compared a variety of sources from the same time to understand the document that was under consideration.

Whitney's students used one to one technology for their social studies inquiries, and they used their individual computers to conduct research. The students accessed large numbers of primary sources to support their ideas about historical thinking. They developed arguments that

they defended or refuted by building a case using evidence found in the primary sources. The students used document based questions in the classroom to further develop their skills of analysis.

Decisions for next year: I liked my students to select an amendment to research. I liked them to write about what their amendment said, what it meant, and what was happening in history around the time it was written. Some students wrote first person letters to relatives as a person living in that time period. Some students created stories involving people who were affected by the amendment. Some students wrote a play. Each child had a chance to write about their amendment and present their original piece to the class. -- Whitney

Question 4: How did my students foster creativity and examine multiple perspectives?

Students learned to examine multiple perspectives as they learned to be creative through drama to become responsible citizens. The students practiced thoughtful social studies through civic practice. They engaged in multiple aspects of drama and role play as they investigated social studies where the drama was used to develop values and dispositions (Johnson & Thomas, 2009, Morris, 2000). Students learned to make informed decisions to promote the community, and how they related to their community. Students learned to care about others from the experience as well as to learn about multiple points of view. From interpersonal experience and communal learning the students also learned how people improved the community.

Whitney's students explored narrative by selecting a famous Hoosier to investigate and then created a character based on their research. The students engaged in creative role playing as each student described their accomplishments in history. Ian (2016) said, ". . . I like[d] talking about people [and]. . . participating with my friends." They learned about the other characters

they encountered through this process and learned at a variety of different times Hoosiers have improved their community. Each student met other characters and learned what they had contributed to the community in civics or history. The national contributions of Hoosiers was also examined as the students engaged in role-playing their characters.

> *Decisions for next year: I liked how the famous Hoosier project worked because it forced the students to put themselves in the shoes of someone else. I want to utilize this idea in other units next year. When we did our Native American early civilizations unit, I thought it was valuable to also have them present their homes as a person from their civilization. When they learned about cultures other than their own, especially since Mays Community Academy is located in a rural community, it was important for these students to appreciate how other people felt, lived, and experienced events. – Whitney*

> *Question 5: How did I assess students in social studies?*

Student assessment included project-based learning, and document based questions did not stifle teaching and learning. The inclusion of big ideas and of children's literature helped to make assessment meaningful. Project-based learning resulted in statistically significant concept achievement and motivation for students who got to participate (Barnes, 2013, Diffily 2002, Ilter, 2014, Libresco 2007, Whitlock & Fox 2014). Students asked questions and constructed meaning and received opportunities for critical thinking. Teachers modeled different strategies to be used, and students selected topics for exploration. Students who engaged in inquiry found meaning and reached performance behaviors.

Whitney's students created project-based learning in their classroom when students created projects about the primary candidates. The students created criteria on why they would vote for a candidate and how their candidate interacted with the media. The pros and cons of the

primary candidate was the most difficult part for her students. [Insert Photo 1, 2, & 3 here] The students wanted to only talk about the positives of their favorite candidate and negative aspects of their opponents. They did not want to talk about the negative aspects of their candidate and the positive aspects of their opponents.

> *Decisions for next year: Mays Community Academy was a school centered on Place Based Learning. I wanted my class to take a hard look at issues that were happening in our area and determine real ways to improve them. Rural communities had unique issues that were unlike those of big cities. We worked on ways to fix actual problems we saw. – Whitney*

Conclusion

In making second year teaching decisions Whitney said, "I will continue to reject standardized lessons and scripted teaching to improve the community through one to one technology and project-based learning." She continued with, "I will continue to augment classroom through role play, iconic experiences, primary sources, and research for historical thinking." As she helped her students discover knowledge of the most social worth she both looks forward to the next year and backward to see how she might improve her pedagogy.

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