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Impact on Student Learning
5th Grade Social Studies Lesson on African Trade Routes

I taught a Social Studies lesson on African trade routes to three classes, each with 25 or 26 students. The identified exceptional learners include one girl with hearing loss wearing a cochlear implant and an amplification set (class A) and one boy with a behavior disorder (class B). All students are fluent English speakers. Two are Latino and one is Indian (born in the subcontinent).

Engagement and Management

My lesson consisted of a class discussion followed by group work (checkerboard method). During the whole class part, my questions were interesting or provocative enough that several students always volunteered answers. More boys than girls volunteered to answer, and I admit to calling on more boys just to let them know I was watching them! Some students never volunteered any answers, but still looked engaged. Others looked completely unengaged.

During the group work, I discovered that some groups' unique assignments were more difficult and time-consuming than other groups' assignments, which means I had to manage the early finishers. I should have instructed them on what to do if they finished early. I did not encounter this problem during the checkerboard part of the group work. Since everyone had something different to share, the students participated more.

If I plan to organize lots of group activities in my future classroom, I will want to teach some basic procedures — procedures that for this 5th grade lesson would have eliminated some chaos and helplessness. I could hardly believe the number of questions the students asked about how to move from one group to the next. Even after the questions, they still struggled to organize themselves.

My cooperating teacher thought I put up with too much rude behavior. For the record, if this teacher has to ask students to quiet down more than once, he starts taking away recess time. I don't know if I can match his strictness with any credibility.

My teacher complimented my lesson design and thought it was age-appropriate and interesting in a variety of ways. He typically lectures and leads a whole class discussion when he teaches Social Studies, partly because he loses control of the class when the students misbehave too much when he tries to do something fun or out-of-the-ordinary.

Best Practices

I used props during the whole class discussion to hook the students and to add a visual and tactile dimension to my teaching. Most of my props were the equivalent of a 3D encyclopedia. However, I made sure that two objects were truly interactive. The students “physically and intellectually worked with the information contained in” the objects (Obenchain & Morris, 2011, p. 55). Students tasted the crackers (to explore a *lack* of salt), and they touched the salt residue in the glass cup (to experience salt after water has evaporated from salt water). These exercises helped bring to life a foreign time and place (11th century Africa) and also some principles of trade.

Research by Rodgers, Hawthorne, and Wheeler supports using trade books to teach economics in the classroom (2007). I read one fictional story aloud and guided the students in making text-to-world connections in terms of trade. I also assigned one of the groups to read a book, this time a nonfiction selection. Although the books did not use the vocabulary I wanted them to learn and use in the posttest, I made sure they matched terms with concepts in the fiction book (during whole class portion only; they were on their own with the nonfiction book during group work). The texts offered students a chance to see issues of trade as more than abstractions.

Adaptations

As for the students with identified special needs, I was so busy running all the groups that I forgot to ensure the student with a behavior disorder was engaged in the group work. I suppose I was happy enough that he wasn't impeding the discussion within his group. (I think he typed on his personal word processor the whole time.) Although I had prepared a short list of vocabulary words (mandated in IEP) for the student with a hearing disability, I forgot to give it to her. In the future, I cannot neglect my students with special needs the way I did during this teaching experience.

Assessment

Formal written assessments must inform my approach to instruction. In my lesson I directly addressed a misconception that emerged from their pretest (*interdependent* does not mean *independent*). As a class, we discussed relevant prefixes and suffixes. To engage the class football fans, I asked a student to define *interception* as an example of *inter-* prefix and apply it to the word *interdependent*. I also realized some weaknesses in my pretest (e.g., show African continent in context), which caused a redesign of the posttest.

The posttest results (see Figure 1) show that my lesson raised their scores significantly. Their combined score nearly doubled from pretest to posttest, even considering that the posttest questions were harder. Still, some students submitted nearly blank test papers, which concerns me in many ways. If I taught a follow-up lesson, I would find out why these students did not try to answer the posttest questions. I would also continue to draw out concepts of specialization and interdependence in remaining history lessons. I might try a different assessment format. To check students' deep and long-term learning, I might bring back my props in a month or two and find out how the class interprets them after further experience with themes of trade in subsequent history lessons.

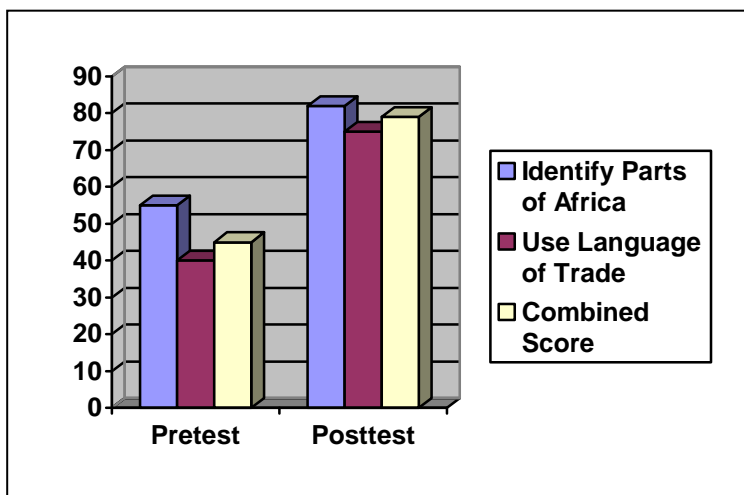


Figure 1

Conclusion

After this teaching experience, I decided to add “learn how to make assessment drive my instruction” to my list of student teaching goals. I came away puzzling over many issues of classroom management. More than anything, though, I felt gratified to see that I actually influenced a group of students; because of me, they learned much of what they were supposed to learn that day.

References

- Obenchain, K. M. & Morries, R.V. (2011). *Social studies strategies for K–8 classrooms*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Rodgers, Y.V., Hawthorne, S., & Wheeler, R.C. (2007). Teaching economics through children's literature in the primary grades. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(1), pp. 46-55.