

The Social Studies Classroom: An Optimal Setting for Schools to Support Students At-Risk

By:

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December 2013

A thesis submitted to the
Department of Education and Human Development of the
State University of New York College at Brockport
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Education

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Introduction

Students at-risk have been defined as students who lack success in school and face the threat of dropping out. (Carter, 2012) Causes for this have been blamed on societal and student characteristics such as poverty (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). However, this attention often results in the thinking that schools have little effect on students' decisions to drop out. As suggested by Knesting (2008), schools need to be aware of their impact and identify ways they can make use of their influence to foster student success.

Taking a closer look at the at-risk population, Kaye (2004) describes these students as “unaware, disengaged, apathetic, or even angry because they feel powerless” (p. 211). Wehlage (1986) uses the term “at-risk” for students who have major personal or academic issues that make them more susceptible to dropping out. These students are often prone to facing truancy, disciplinary difficulties, low achievement, pregnancy, or substance abuse.

Students at-risk are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds and minority groups. (Carter, 2012) Spradlin and Parsons (2008) find that a poor student is twice more likely to be a low academic achiever than one who is not poor. Wehlage (1986) uncovers an uneven distribution of students who drop out in terms of geography, race and ethnicity. Students at-risk are disproportionately black and Hispanic as these racial groups are disproportionately poor. Many of these students are in the urban school setting, which report higher dropout rates than the national average. (Wehlage, 1986)

When it comes to actually understanding *why*, versus *what*, students are at-risk, there have been a variety of explanations. The typical approach has involved the sole attribution of the issue to student characteristics, such as their demographic traits. There is limited consideration of influences beyond this, such as the impact of schools. (Rieg, 2007)

Johnson, Burke, and Gielen (2012) argue that this trend in research becomes problematic as school violence gains increasing recognition and fault is often placed on the students alone. Instead of evaluating internal practices and influences, current school efforts often dwell on altering students' behaviors. Administrators issue stricter protocols of punishment or institute conflict management curriculum. (Johnson et al., 2012) Sander, Sharky, Olivarri, Tanigawa and Mauseth (2010) note that the emphasis placed on student traits is also used to address juvenile delinquency, which fails to see the problem on a more systemic level.

Instead of dismissing school responsibility by blaming student characteristics, Wehlage (1986) calls for educators to evaluate how schools may be facilitating failure or negative experiences for students. Carter (2012) indicates that such consideration is limited. There is little information about the effects of school services and the nurturing of a supportive environment on students' ability to remain in school. Mason and McMahon (2009) note the lack of information on the relationship between school interventions and students' academic success. Thus, as noted by Knesting (2008), the need to expand the perspective to include other influencing factors for students is crucial.

As Wehlage (1986) points out, the at-risk population is not decreasing. A growing number of children are becoming susceptible to dropping out of school. Even juvenile delinquency is becoming increasingly complex, with approximately one million youth in contact with the court system in the United States. (Sander et al., 2010) There is an increasing amount of minority, immigrant, and poor children entering school with a wide range of needs.

One purpose of this paper is to provide a synthesis of literature related to students at-risk and ways schools may play a role in their success. The review of the literature involves the examination of research on the impact of schools on this population. It looks at several common

themes involving the potential for schools to provide students with a 1) sense of belonging, 2) meaningful student-adult relationships, and 3) a supportive school climate. These components are some of many that are suggested to help meet students' needs and ultimately enable their success. (Knesting, 2008)

In addition, this review looks at the social studies classroom as a specific place for schools to provide students with a sense of belonging, positive relationships and a supportive environment. The significance of the social studies classroom is explored. Essential methods and materials needed to cultivate an inclusive environment are also examined.

Review of the Literature

Sense of Belonging

In their study on ways schools can support students at-risk, Knesting and Waldron (2006) observe a common theme: that a sense of belonging is critical. They claim that a sense of community can be significant for children and their success. Knesting (2008) suggests that schools have the potential to help students feel that they are integral members of the school community.

In order to feel like they belong, Knesting and Waldron (2006) found that students at-risk want to be heard and feel like they are a part of the dialogue that involves them. Knesting (2008) notes that there is minimal opportunity for students at-risk to be a part of important conversations. For example, teachers, administrators, school board members, and district superintendents are typically the ones involved in the dropout conversation. Knesting recommends that schools work toward actively seeking students out, inquiring after their experiences, asking why they want to drop out and how the school can help.

In the study by Johnson et al. (2012), students identify the significance of the classroom environment for building a sense of belonging. One that promotes school pride provides a commonality for all students. This camaraderie can encourage students to remain in school and can even prevent violence. Students who feel that they belong in class are more likely to refrain from delinquent behavior. (Sander et al., 2010) They are also apt to accept classroom rules and policy. (Knesting, 2008)

Additionally, Spradlin and Parsons (2008) suggest that schools can help with this sense of belonging by showing acceptance of the students' culture. Students who feel their culture is appreciated and understood are more successful than students who feel their culture is rejected.

Knesting (2008) concludes that schools have an impact on students at-risk by affecting whether or not they feel like they belong. A positive sense of belonging reduces hindrances and promotes success for students. Knesting also points out that a key contributor to this sense of belonging is meaningful student-adult relationships in school.

Meaningful Student-Adult Relationships

A common theme in most of the research and noted particularly by Caldarella, Adams, Valentine and Young (2009), is the importance of adult relationships for students. Both Caldarella et al. (2009) and Sander et al. (2010) find that some children today may have less parental support than in the past, lacking mentor relationships.

The study by Sander et al. (2010) reveals the potential for schools to help facilitate these relationships and complete the support gap. They highlight the value of mentorships between students and school staff. The study of a school counseling intervention program by Mason and McMahon (2009) also underlines the important presence of school counselors in these mentorships. The researchers find that educators can form positive student-adult relationships that have potential to impact students' academic achievement and general life skills.

Both Mason and McMahon (2009) and Carter (2012) cite the importance of student-adult relationships. Carter's study reveals that teachers who adopt a counselor role or at least embody similar counselor traits are considered effective by students. It is noted that these teachers offer students empathy, flexibility, and model interpersonal skills. They also develop relationships with parents. Students in the study find school staff's caring attitude and accessibility to be invaluable. (Carter, 2012)

When it comes to accessibility, Sander et al. (2010) learn that students may require everyday encounters with teachers who provide individual attention and genuine care. The students in the study's interviews express a need for teachers who take the time to explain homework, speak kindly and calmly with students, acknowledge student effort, and treat everyone fairly. (Sander et al., 2010)

Students benefit from a variety of encounters with their educators, like class discussions about students' future, personal conversations, and mere smiles and eye contact in between classes. (Knesting, 2008) Even brief conversations in the hallway can provide emotional support to students. (Knesting & Waldron, 2006)

According to Knesting (2008), along with this need for students to feel cared for and worth others' time, is the need to be understood. Spradlin and Parsons (2008) note that the diversity among today's student body lacks celebration and seems to be the cause of frustration, rash assumptions and exclusion. The extent of diversity among students has important implications for teachers as it requires intentional efforts of understanding.

Teachers can have a positive impact by better understanding student behaviors, showing belief in their learners' ability to succeed, and accepting students as they are. (Knesting, 2008) According to Spradlin and Parsons (2008), to effectively support the wide range of students at-risk, there is a need for increased knowledge of diversity, cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication.

Educators can even work for changes that challenge discrimination of marginalized groups, which students at-risk are often a part of. Teachers can start by being aware of their own cultural values. This in turn helps them better understand and work with the cultural values of others, which students can sense and appreciate. (Spradlin & Parsons, 2008)

Furthermore, educators who have the ability to consider students' perspective play a significant role. (Knesting & Waldron, 2006) These teachers are ones who will not give up on students, even after past mistakes. It is argued that teachers who are accepting and nonjudgmental despite students' negative behaviors speak volumes to adolescents. (Sander et al., 2010)

At the same time, Knesting and Waldron (2006) claim that teachers who maintain high expectations, despite outside circumstances, empower their learners. It is suggested that students feel believed in as their educators push them to achieve their goals. (Knesting, 2008)

Teachers can have a positive impact on students by recognizing that their behavior is separate from their ultimate worth as a human. (Sander et al., 2010) As one student notes in an interview, "[T]he one thing [kids are] scared of the most...is love. You know they don't want to be soft, so I say [they need] just like tons of outpouring of [love]" (Sander et al., 2010, p. 302).

Spradlin and Parsons (2008) also advise teachers to be mindful of how student behaviors may not reflect a deficit or issue, but rather different values and beliefs. The classroom values may be held among students of the dominant-culture in the United States, but are not always the values and expectations of other groups of students. Educators must realize that their expectations are not everyone's standard.

Additionally, it is argued that students find support in teachers who are dependable and have control of their classroom, providing a safe haven. (Knesting & Waldron, 2006) In their study, Johnson et al. (2012) find that students at-risk identify student-teacher relationships as a factor in preventing or promoting school violence. They note that teachers who seem to prevent school violence are ones that take on both a nurturing and monitoring role, showing students they care about their success and aim to ensure students' safety. (Johnson et al., 2012)

Caldarella et al. (2009) determine that as these meaningful student-adult relationships are facilitated by the school, they have potential to contribute significant encouragement.

Additionally, these meaningful student-adult relationships can help foster an overall, supportive school climate for students at-risk. (Knesting, 2008)

Supportive School Climate

Along with a sense of belonging and meaningful, student-adult relationships, schools have the potential to contribute a supportive school climate for students at-risk. It is suggested that a caring school environment that respects and cares for students has a major effect on students' persistence in school. (Knesting & Waldron, 2006) In order to take more educational risks, Knesting (2008) learns that students need to feel secure in their surroundings.

The school environment includes the social and physical environment. Both have the potential to prevent and unintentionally promote school violence. (Johnson et al., 2012) It is claimed that the need for students to feel safe is pivotal for their success. (Knesting, 2008) In the study by Johnson et al. (2012), the students even indicate that general school safety is critical.

According to Knesting (2008), schools that overstress discipline and conformity can often hinder the development of a caring environment. (Knesting, 2008) Sander et al. (2010) find that resorting to involuntary transferring, suspension, and expulsion discipline policies undermine students and their engagement in school.

Sander et al. (2010) indicates that students who are already at-risk and have behavioral problems tend to respond to harsh school policies with an increase in the undesired behaviors, counter aggression, and negative reinforcement. These school actions can come across as insensitivity to their needs.

It is also worth noting that families are affected by the school climate. This is especially apparent for students with a history of juvenile delinquency. Sander et al. (2010) uncovers the negative connotations that can be associated with these students at-risk and their families. Many can find themselves socially isolated as schools inadvertently place judgment on them, assuming parents are uninvolved or uncaring. (Sander et al., 2010)

Carter (2012) asserts that teachers and schools need to work towards developing relationships with parents. Schools can provide parents with resources, serve as social and emotional support, and show respect by collaborating with them. (Sander et al., 2010)

In her study of an alternative school known for its success with students at-risk, Carter (2012) finds that an ideal school climate is organized around the students and has a “family” atmosphere. The school groups its student body into small clusters that enables counselors and teachers to provide more concentrated support. Knesting (2008) highlights the importance of educators not appearing too busy or burdened to be able to provide personal support to students. (Knesting, 2008)

Mason and McMahon (2009) find value in weekly meetings between school staff and students. Students can spend time sharing positive achievements and review grades, goals, and concerns. Similarly, Carter (2012) learns that students’ needs are better met with individual and small group attention. Faculty monitoring of students’ attendance and progress towards meeting graduation requirements is also suggested. Such support can help students improve their academic outcomes and reduce the likelihood of their retention. (Mason & McMahon, 2009)

When it comes to facilitating a supportive school climate, several studies call for schools to reevaluate their current systems. It is recommended that schools be open to adjusting policies to meet students’ individual needs. (Sander et al.) Muñoz, Chang and Ross (2012) suggest that

the schools assess their own role in the implementation of state and federal mandates, working to make required services most beneficial for students, for example.

As schools consider their implementation of various mandates, Joseph (2006) argues the need for teachers to be provided ways to fuel their frustration with mandated curricula. This can then help them channel their frustration into positive action of shaping the curricula. Joseph's study reveals that schools can support teachers by valuing the contributions of their unique expertise and creativity.

Finally, Rieg (2007) identifies the importance of all teachers to reevaluate their own strategies and methods. Educators identified as effective tend to make instructional and content changes, survey students' prior knowledge to stay informed, and change the classroom and activity organization as needed. (Joseph, 2006) As Muñoz et al. (2012) summarize, these efforts to reexamine the school environment help cultivate a supportive school climate that better serves the needs of students.

The Social Studies Classroom

It is shown that schools play an important role in the support and success of students at-risk. They have potential to equip students with a sense of belonging, positive relationships and a supportive environment. When it comes to embracing this potential, the social studies classroom is an optimal setting for schools to make an impact.

According to Soares and Wood (2010), the social studies classroom is especially ideal for celebrating students' differences and acknowledging their common humanity. It is a place to teach students about the past and learn from it to embark on the future.

Students at-risk are often confronted with challenges on multiple levels. Spradlin and Parsons (2008) even call out the raw reality of schools being “social microcosms that embody and implement the prejudice, oppression, and discrimination evident in larger society” (p. 12).

Wehlage (1986) highlights the opportunity schools have to counter these obstacles for students. Schools can send messages of acceptance and worth to students. Soares and Wood (2010) note that “[t]he social studies classroom is the perfect forum for students to find their true identity, because it fosters a climate where students can open their minds, think creatively, and be open to the possibility of social healing” (p. 491).

The social studies classroom is a perfect setting for students at-risk to receive these powerful messages and gain valuable understanding. It is in this particular setting that students can begin to develop a sense of belonging, positive relationships with teachers and security within the school environment. Social studies opens the door for meaningful conversations that recognize and affirm all that students bring to the table. (Soares & Wood, 2010) These involved discussions not only help students make connections with one another, but they also offer students the chance to discover their own unique place in the world. (Knesting & Waldron, 2006)

Educators can help students feel valued and accepted, particularly in the social studies classroom, by acknowledging and affirming their students’ diversity. (Soares & Wood, 2010) Spradlin and Parsons (2008) point out the extent of diversity even within a student’s culture. For starters, they claim it is crucial for educators to stay away from making generalizations about their students’ culture, as there is so much variety. Acknowledging students’ differences and working with them accordingly is a way to celebrate students’ backgrounds and ensure equity.

Additional steps for helping students feel welcomed involve teachers being aware of their own differences, cultures and values. Educators need to also identify the effect their own beliefs

may have on the curriculum choices and classroom interactions. (Spradlin & Parsons, 2008)

Wehlage (1986) claims that it is imperative for teachers to select curriculum that is relevant to students, their backgrounds, interests and abilities. Especially for students at-risk, the content must be engaging and worth their attention and learning.

Along with this reflection, Wehlage (1986) calls for educators to question the institutional characteristics and strategies that can impact students. Spradlin and Parsons (2008) acknowledge that teachers can't fix all social inequities and issues in the world, but that they can influence what goes on in their classroom. It is important that teachers consider best practices and approaches for supporting their students. These considerations can go a long way, especially in the social studies classroom, empowering students and setting them up for success.

Key Methods and Materials

Since the social studies classroom is a valuable setting for supporting students at-risk, it is necessary to consider methods and materials that can enable its effectiveness. According to Wehlage (1986), traditional teaching efforts and curricula that often dominate in schools have proven insufficient, especially for students at-risk. He questions whether replication of such approaches will have any new impact on these students.

Wehlage (1986) advocates a renewed use of methods and materials in the classroom. For starters, much of the research calls for teaching methods that leave room for diverse thinking, relevant interactions and practical application of the curriculum. Soares and Wood (2010) argue that such efforts in the social studies classroom can ultimately empower students and set them up for success.

Open-Ended Instruction

For social studies instruction in particular, Grant and Vansledright (2005) suggest the importance of learning activities being connected with a big idea. This big idea includes a question or generalization that guides teachers in determining what to teach and the instructional approaches to be used. The big idea also engages students' thinking as they are exposed to multiple perspectives and interpretations.

An example of a big idea is "What is peace?" This question provides an open-ended context that can encourage students to consider multiple perspectives and interact with a wide variety of content. Grant and Vansledright (2005) claim that this approach enables teachers to transform static facts and concepts of history and social sciences, making it relevant and meaningful to the students at hand.

Over the years, more focus has been placed on students' conceptual understanding than their mere recall of factual information in the social studies classroom. Barton and Marks (2000) suggest that this approach offers children the chance to engage with the content and bring significant contributions to the table. They recommend teachers support these opportunities by allowing students to research their own information, rather than transmit empty facts to them.

Similar to the big idea, Martin-Kniep (2000) suggests the use of essential questions as a way to engage students with the social studies curriculum. An example of an essential question is "Are all cultures equally valuable" (p.2)? Essential questions guide teachers through the curriculum, also establishing the content as a work in progress. It is constantly evolving and students are on a never-ending journey of making new discoveries. This sends the message to students that the world is not just black and white, but that a wide range of ideas and perspectives are welcome. (Soares & Wood, 2010)

Opportunity for Discussions

The concept of the big idea and essential questions highlights the value of enriching students and their learning through discussions. Kaye (2004) claims that classroom discussions open students' minds. Prejudices and stereotypes are challenged and replaced with accurate knowledge, understanding and even shared appreciation. Knesting and Waldron (2006) find it especially important for students at-risk to have the opportunity to be heard and have a voice in classroom conversations.

As a teacher stated it in the study by Barton and Marks (2000), educators need to “shut up” and let students do more talking. Students need to be invited to question and investigate, also contributing their own reflections and insight. This helps children from all backgrounds to relate and inspires them to consider multiple perspectives. (Martin-Kniep, 2000)

Explorations of the World They Live in

Another common theme in the research is the potential for social studies to provide students with an understanding of how the world works and how they fit into that world. Soares and Wood (2010) claim that this is a major asset of the social studies classroom that can help shape students' identity and help them feel like they belong.

To facilitate this understanding of the world, Grant and Vansledright (2005) recommend transforming the social studies curriculum with the “threads approach.” This approach captures the curriculum into key social studies ideas that help students recognize various aspects of the world. These threads include geographic, political, economic, sociocultural and global outlooks. The “threads approach” allows students to explore the past and present of various topics through the different lenses.

Another way to support students' understanding of the world they live in is through the integration of service learning into the social studies curriculum. Kaye (2004) along with other researchers promotes the need for students to explore their world. This inquiry elicits their active participation. Service learning incorporates instruction with meaningful community service, whether it is in the classroom, school or greater community.

Kaye (2004) identifies service learning as a means for students to build significant connections with teachers and youth leaders. Service learning places these role models in the natural position of listening to students' concerns, valuing their voices and creating opportunities that empower. Such relationships between children and adults can serve as a critical foundation for students at-risk and their success. (Sander et al., 2010)

Service learning not only helps students better understand the world they live, but it also offers students ways to apply their learning and take action in the community. (Kaye, 2004) For example, students may become motivated to write a letter to advocate a change in policy, whether it is at the school level or beyond. A class may be motivated to initiate a collection drive, gathering supplies to distribute at a shelter.

This aspect of service learning promotes a deeper sense of belonging for students as they choose to actively participate in their world. (Kaye, 2004) This sense of belonging helps students feel valued. A positive identity can also be promoted, building students' confidence and commitment to remain in school. (Knesting 2008)

Incorporating Children's Literature

When it comes to the materials used in the social studies classroom, a common theme in the research is the promotion of children's literature. Owens and Nowell (2001) argue that

children's literature is a powerful tool for making social studies relevant to all students.

Literature can bring historical and social lessons to life and help students make personal connections to what they are learning.

Kaye (2004) encourages the use of fiction and non-fiction literature as well as picture books for students of all ages. She even compiled a library of books entitled *Social Change: Issues and Action Bookshelf* that spans a wide range of topics on individual to community-level issues. Owens and Nowell (2001) also emphasize the use of picture books in the social studies classroom. They recommend thoughtful selection of high-quality books that contain enriching content in order to engage students' learning.

Incorporating children's literature into the social studies classroom is a way for educators to meet students where they are at and build onto what is already known. (Owens & Nowell, 2001) Barton and Marks (2000) argue that it is imperative to build on students' prior knowledge in order to effectively develop their understanding in social studies. Teachers need to inform their instruction accordingly; using what is relevant to students' background knowledge.

Children's literature in the social studies classroom can offer students context and prompt them to think critically of their world. (Owens & Nowell, 2001) According to Kaye (2004), books can provide students with unique perspectives on historical events, the world today and ways to work for change. Ultimately, this can increase students' awareness of the world around them. It can even grow their appreciation for diverse stories and viewpoints, helping them to feel that their own story is of value and has a place to belong.

Applying Critical Literacy

Along with children's literature, incorporating a critical literacy perspective into the social studies classroom can be especially beneficial for students. A critical literacy approach in this setting is one that challenges students to be critical thinkers as they read and respond to social studies materials. Soares and Wood (2010) explain that key practices of critical literacy involve "examining multiple perspectives, finding an authentic voice, recognizing social barriers, finding one's identity and the call to service" (p. 488).

With critical literacy, students are encouraged to question presented truths and sources in the content. They become aware of how texts are constructed and how people are influenced by it. They see how texts can have multiple interpretations and provoke various perspectives to be considered. Students can also begin to question the author's intent, also asking who is not represented or heard in a text. (Soares & Wood, 2010)

Kaye (2004) highlights numerous opportunities for educators to apply critical literacy to their social studies lessons. For example, teachers can have students respond to social commentary in the media. They can compare articles or political cartoons centered on a similar issue, like immigration, and identify the perceptions represented in each.

A critical literacy approach is particularly important for students at-risk who often view what they are being taught as something they too are expected to support. Without this perspective, students can feel alienated or forced into a certain way of thinking, even when a text does not accurately represent what they consider to be true. (Wehlage, 1986)

Critical literacy allows all students to have a voice in the social studies classroom. It enables them to cultivate their own understanding about a topic or issue. (Soares & Wood, 2010) This approach prevents students from interpreting the message of a text as one fully adopted by

their teachers or school. Critical literacy gives students the freedom to think differently and not feel like they will be rejected for it. (Wehlage, 1986)

Soares and Wood (2010) also illustrate how critical literacy prompts students to respond to societal problems, enabling them to confront the status quo. Students contribute their own understanding and experiences through critical literacy, as it opens the door for significant participation and contribution in reading and discussion. Their authentic interactions with the social studies content can also motivate them to take action.

Finally, critical literacy exposes students to the power of language. It helps them discover that language can be used to communicate messages and bring about positive change. Incorporating critical literacy into the social studies classroom can ultimately empower students. They are engaged in higher-level thinking that helps them better understand the world and their place in it. With an increased understanding, students grow in confidence and are able to accept more ownership of their learning. (Soares & Wood, 2010)

Summary of the Review

This synthesis of the literature examines ways in which schools play a role in the success of students at-risk. It is shown that schools have the potential to equip students with a sense of belonging, meaningful student-adult relationships and a supportive school climate. These contributions are argued to help meet the needs of students at-risk and support their ultimate success in school.

The review considers the social studies classroom as a specific place for schools to provide students with a sense of belonging, positive relationships and a supportive environment. It proves to be a significant setting for students to be empowered and have many of their needs addressed.

Particular methods and materials that help establish the social studies classroom as a prime setting for students at-risk are explored. It is discovered that instruction that is open-ended, involves students in discussions and provides students with the opportunity to explore their world is essential. The use of children's literature and the application of a critical literacy perspective also strengthen the impact of the social studies classroom.

The research exposes the fact that more than just individual characteristics are attributed to students' success or failure. The assumption that schools have little to no impact is made null. As Knesting (2008) argues, it is imperative that schools become aware of their impact and accept responsibility for their role in supporting students at-risk.

Moving Beyond the Literature

Moving forward from this review of the literature, I am encouraged to see the extent of potential schools have to support the at-risk population. It is interesting to see that schools can make a difference in students' lives by providing them with a sense of belonging, meaningful relationships and an overall supportive environment. I am intrigued by the finding that the social studies classroom is a particular setting that can make many of these contributions.

It is apparent that the social studies classroom is an optimal place for schools to have an impact on their students, especially for the at-risk population. Often times, teachers may be unaware of their potential to utilize the social studies setting to support their students and address unmet needs. There may be a variety of approaches and materials that can aid educators in maximizing their social studies instruction.

For the original component of this thesis, I will research available materials on a certain social studies topic: the Underground Railroad. I will look for recommended approaches, lesson activities and resources on the Underground Railroad that have the potential to enhance the learning experience for all students, especially students at-risk.

Based on my findings, I plan to compile a living, supplementary resource that includes a wide range of ideas for effectively teaching about the Underground Railroad. This resource will offer approaches, activities, and materials that can help reach *all* students.

I will incorporate and expand on any helpful lesson ideas and resources that I come across in my research. I will also point out any gaps and offer other approaches and activities that address these shortcomings and enhance the learning experience for students. Ultimately, this resource is meant to help teachers maximize the potential for the social studies classroom to

support students – even in terms of their sense of belonging, meaningful relationships and a supportive environment.

This resource will be contained in a VoiceThread presentation. VoiceThread is a web-based application where presentations can be created and shared with a broad, online audience. VoiceThread enables the audience to collaborate with one another and the presenter. Conversations can take place around the presentation as people can add comments with text, a recorded voice message on their computers or telephones and even a web cam video.

This VoiceThread presentation prevents the supplemental resource from becoming static. People can engage in the research and build on it with one another. There is a lot of potential with this presentation method. Who knows what more could come out of this!?! Educators can make valuable contributions to the resource, furthering the benefits of this evolving tool. Ultimately, this resource can inform educators and schools, inspiring them to make the most of the social studies classroom to support their students' success.

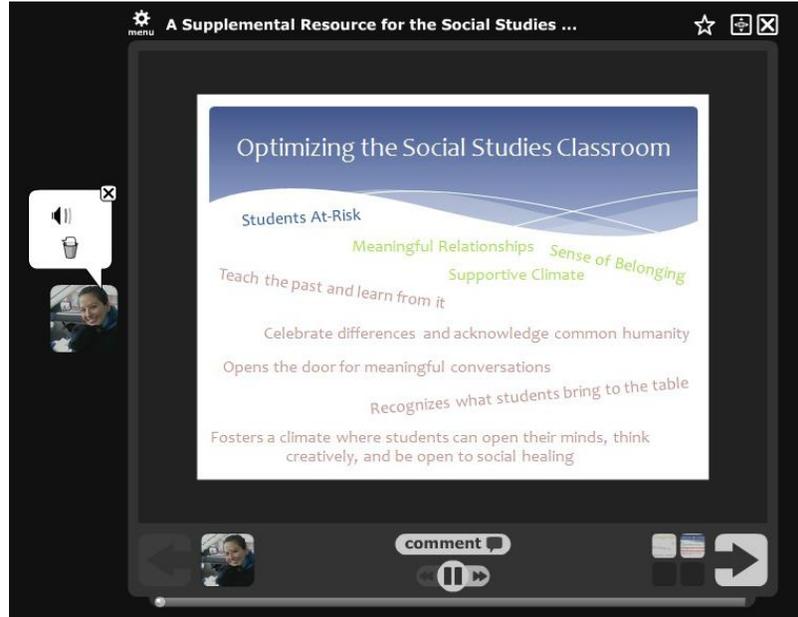
Original Component

When researching various materials and resources for teaching the Underground Railroad, I came across a lot of engaging lesson ideas that give students the chance to explore the Underground Railroad. I mainly explored online resources, beginning with a Google search and networking from there.

In my research, however, I found that although there are numerous sources of great information and teaching ideas, there is a lack of emphasis on connecting it back to *all* students in a meaningful way. A lot of the materials offer learning activities that help students gain a basic understanding of the Underground Railroad, presenting facts and narratives about it. Nevertheless, there is so much potential for educators to take it a step further and support students in thinking critically about the world they live in and their place in it.

As I document this research and the ways in which I extended my findings and incorporated my own ideas, I reference the VoiceThread that I developed along the way. The link to the VoiceThread in its entirety is provided at the conclusion. This not only captures what I came across in my research, but it also illustrates what I did with the information – how I compensated for some of the gaps or elaborated on high-quality materials or ideas.

Slide One: Optimizing the Social Studies Classroom

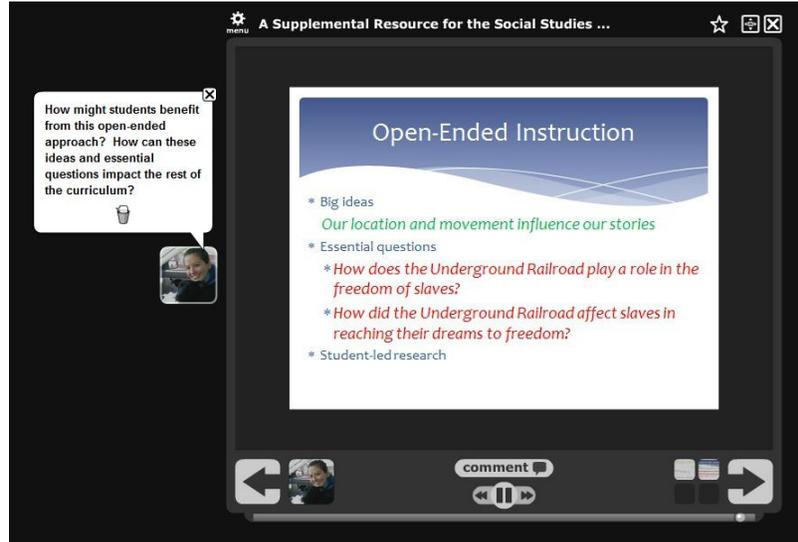


For the first slide of the VoiceThread presentation, the overall purpose of the presentation is stated. It is explained that the presentation serves as a supplemental resource for teachers. The resource offers various ideas they can use to optimize the social studies classroom.

I then explain the main points and findings of my research, first giving background on students at-risk and working to uncover the actual impact schools can have on this population. I highlight the discovery that schools have the potential to promote students' sense of belonging, meaningful student-adult relationships and a supportive school climate. I then make a case for the social studies classroom being an optimal place for schools to have an impact, looping it back to the purpose of the resource.

One key feature of this resource is that it is constantly evolving. I explain this in the first slide, explaining that this resource also serves as a platform for collaboration. The viewers are encouraged to respond throughout the VoiceThread, contributing their own ideas, asking and responding to questions.

Slide Two: Open-Ended Instruction



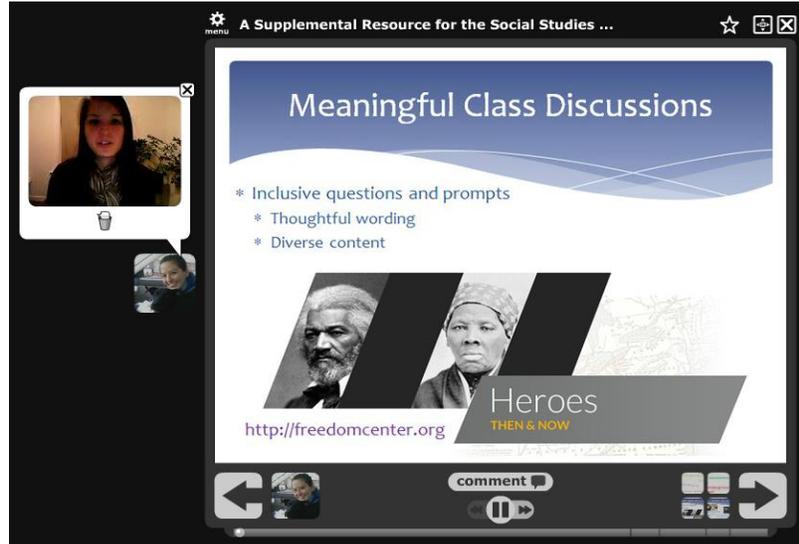
The second slide begins to showcase more of my research. I discuss the discovery of just how valuable open-ended instruction can be for students at-risk, as it invites conversation, engages and welcomes their diverse thinking.

I also explain the specific topic of the Underground Railroad that I chose to research when looking for current application of these ideas out in the education field. With this, I identify big ideas and essential questions as helpful ways to leave instruction open-ended.

I provide an example of one of the essential questions I found on the Underground Railroad. I offer ways to enhance the question, bringing attention to the way careful wording of these questions can make them more inclusive and ultimately open-ended for students. At the end of the slide, I invite the audience to comment and offer up their own examples of big ideas and essential questions.

Finally, I bring up the valuable approach of giving students the chance to lead their own research. I explain how student-led research can encourage students to take a more active role in their learning and empower them to uncover their own truths.

Slide Three: Meaningful Class Discussions



In the third slide, I underscore the value of meaningful class discussions in the social studies classroom, as found in my research. I explain how class discussions can open students' minds. Prejudices and stereotypes can be challenged and replaced with a more accurate understanding. The particular benefits for students at-risk are also mentioned, such as giving them the opportunity to be heard and have a voice in the classroom that makes them feel welcomed and accepted for who they are.

Several discussion and writing prompts on the Underground Railroad are also shared and expanded on. I make the case for these prompts to be thoughtful and open, carefully worded to avoid excluding certain students. The need to present students with diverse content that consists of a wide variety of people and perspectives is also considered.

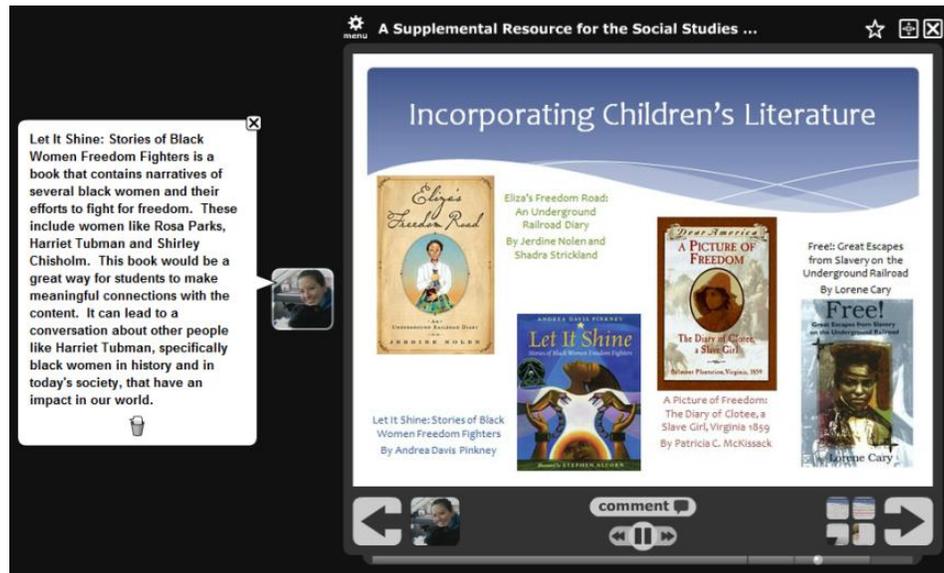
Slide Four: Explorations of the World



The fourth slide illustrates the potential for the social studies classroom to be a place where students explore the world they live in. I discuss how this can help shape students' identities and give them a sense of belonging. I show application of this by providing service learning ideas and ways teachers can work with their community. When it comes to teaching about the Underground Railroad, I provide ways educators can bring it to life and make it relevant and meaningful for students.

I describe a service learning project I came across related to the Underground Railroad that was done at the collegiate level. I suggest ways this approach can be adapted for younger ages. I also bring to light the presence of local groups and resources that teachers can collaborate with to enhance their instruction. It is noted that although not all viewers are from the Rochester, New York area, the list of places and people within this community shows the extent of local resources that may be out there for teachers to take advantage of.

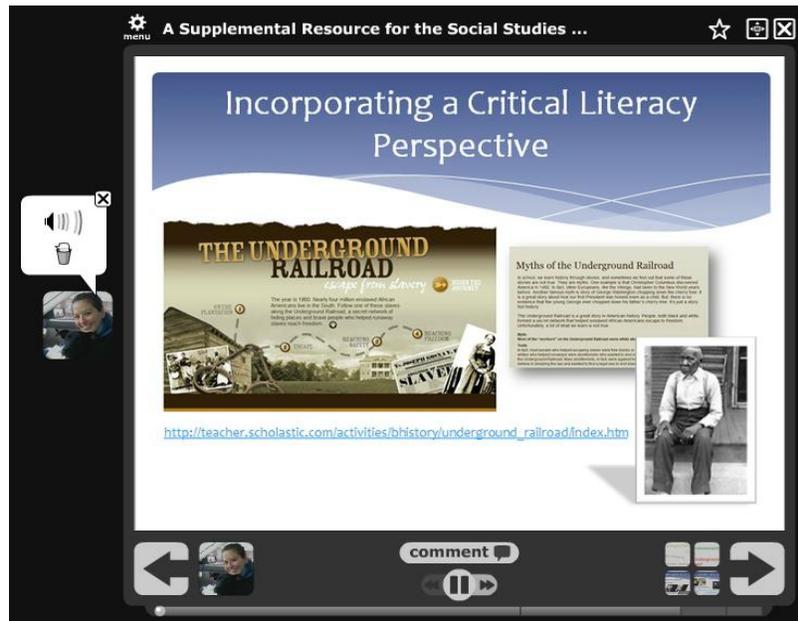
Slide Five: Incorporating Children's Literature



The fifth slide takes a look at the importance of bringing children's literature into the social studies classroom, including fiction, non-fiction and picture books. I explain that children's literature can provide relevancy for students and help them make connections between the social studies content and their own lives. Children's literature can also bring in unique perspectives for students to learn from and relate to.

Four particular books on the Underground Railroad that I came across in my original research are presented. With this, the need for a wide variety of literature is emphasized. Children benefit from exposure to books written by a diverse group of authors, as well as ones that contain a variety of characters and perspectives. A brief summary of the books are provided, capturing their significance and potential contributions to the social studies classroom.

Slide Six: Incorporating a Critical Literacy Perspective



In the sixth slide, I discuss the benefits of incorporating a critical literacy perspective into the social studies classroom. Doing this gives students the chance to consider multiple perspectives and question presented truths and sources within the social studies content. I suggest that it gives students the freedom to think differently and not feel like they will be alienated for not agreeing with every idea or perspective.

I also highlight a particular online source on the Underground Railroad that can be used to tie in a critical literacy perspective. I suggest a few lesson ideas that can be used in conjunction with this website to get teachers thinking about ways they can usher in this valuable perspective.

Slide Seven: Conclusion



The final slide concludes the presentation. I summarize how even small changes and additions to the social studies classroom can have a big impact. The purpose of the presentation as a supplemental resource is again stated. I remind the viewers that these are just some of many ideas for expanding students' minds and exposing them to the diversity around them. These suggestions can enable students to learn beyond what is written in the textbook.

Finally, I explain that although my research was specifically geared for students at-risk, these ideas are meant to help educators reach all students. After thanking the viewers for their time, I invite them to share any additional ideas or insight they may have. I end with the visualization provided by the picture on this slide. There are so many possibilities for our students and our teaching, and we still have so much to learn, but every step we take counts and can make a significant difference.

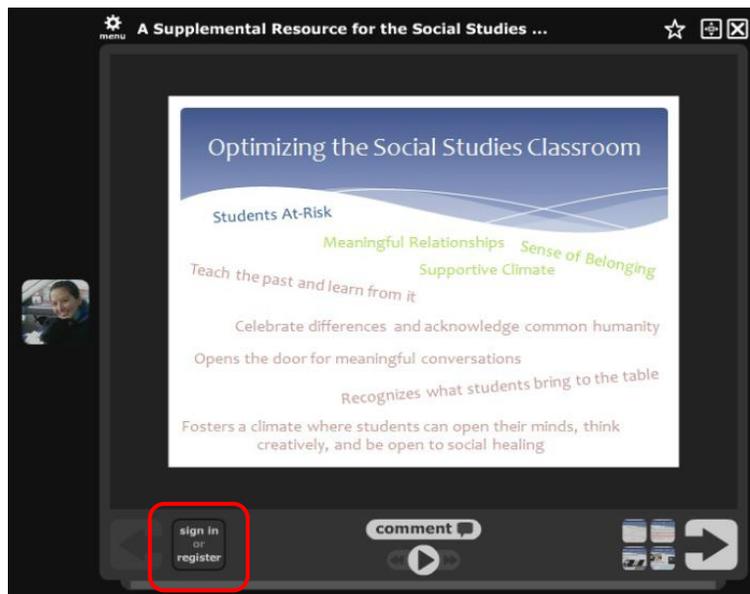
Conclusion

Navigating the Supplemental Resource

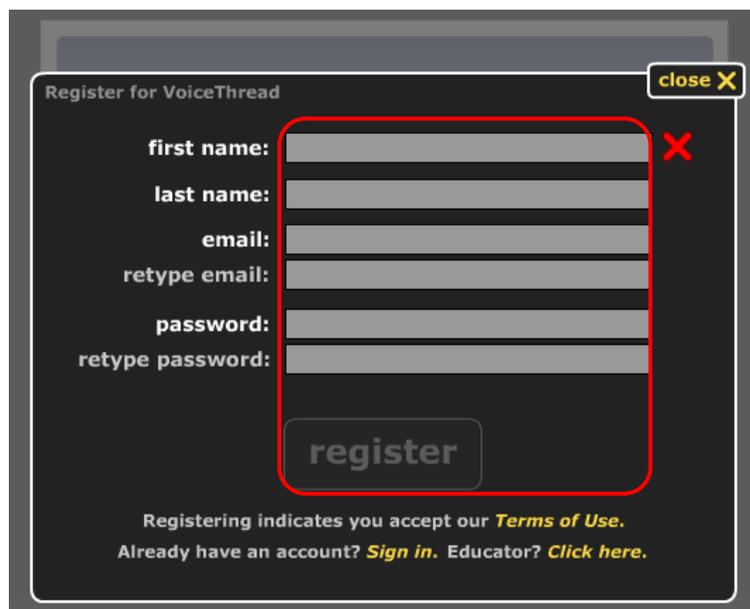
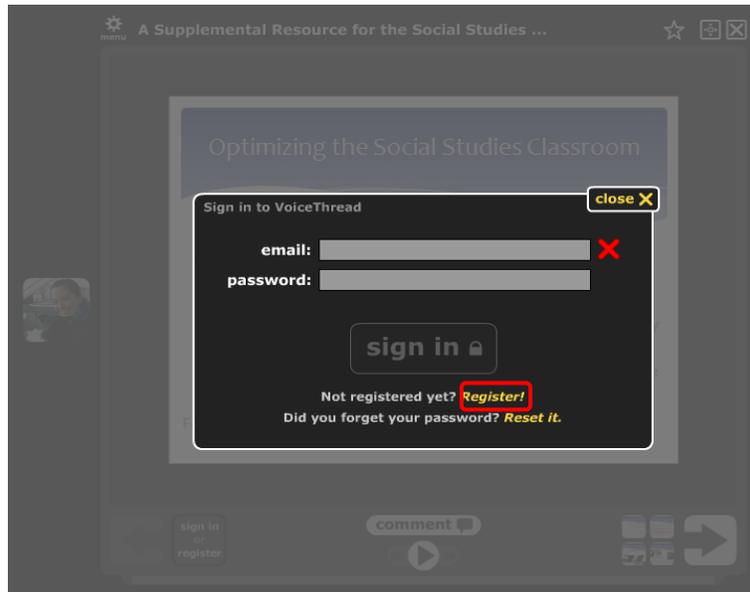
To conclude, below is the path to the full VoiceThread presentation:

<https://voicethread.com/share/4295539/>

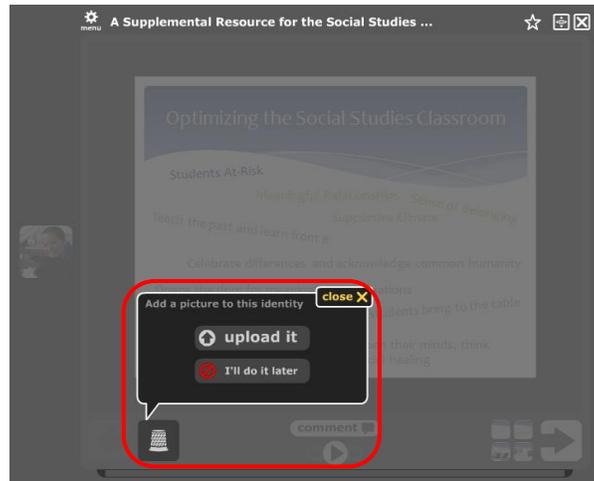
This presentation can be accessed by anyone through this link. However, in order for people to comment on any of the slides and provide feedback, they need to create an account. This process is quick and easy. The first step is clicking on the “sign in or register” button as seen below, outlined in red.



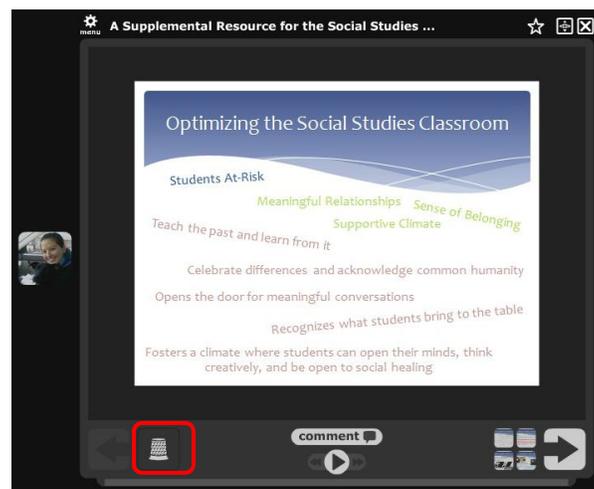
A pop-up appears and requires people to either login or register. New users would click “Register!” This then brings up a registration pop-up, where users would fill in the required information, name, email and password, to create an account.



After registering, VoiceThread creates a new account or “identity.” A pop-up immediately appears where users can choose to upload a picture to distinguish their account. They can also choose to keep the default image.



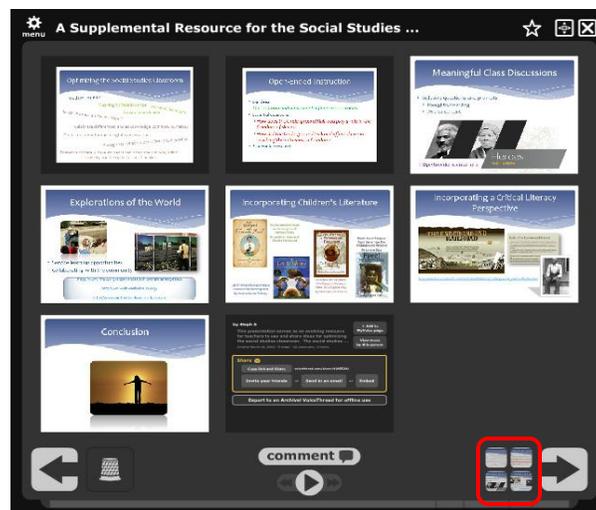
Once the account has been created, users will see that they have the ability to comment on the presentation. Their account’s picture or default image also appears at the bottom of the screen.



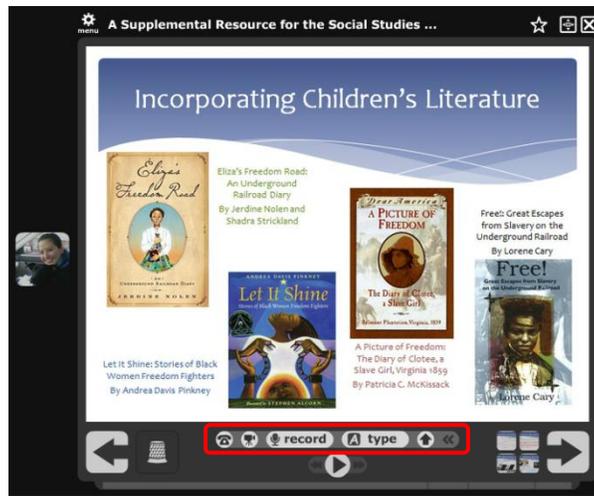
To view the presentation linearly, users can click on the play button at the bottom center of the screen. This will take them through all slides and comments made by the author. It also allows users to view the comments made by others who respond and provide their own feedback. To navigate to other slides at any time, users can click on the left and right arrows.



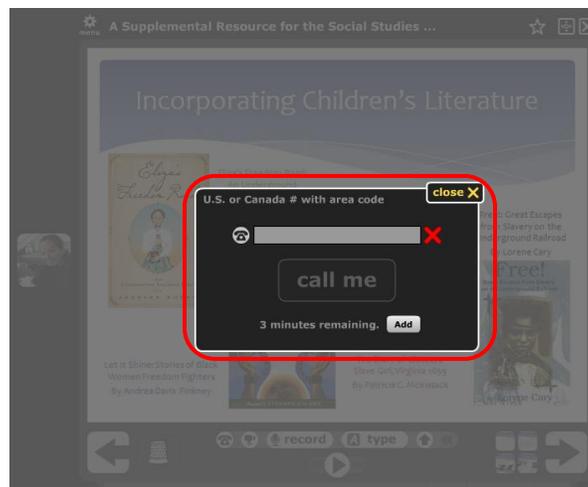
If users want to navigate to a slide somewhere else in the presentation, they can click the image of slides at the bottom of the screen, which takes them to a slide sorter where they can manually click on their slide of choice.



To actually comment on a slide, users simply click the “comment” button at the bottom, which opens up a comment bar that offers several ways people can leave feedback.



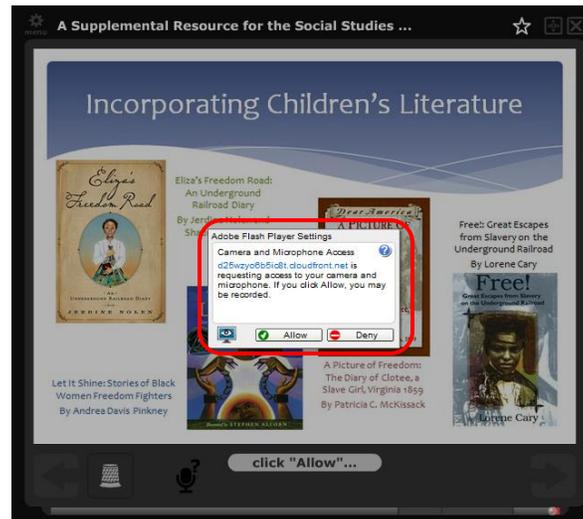
The first option for leaving a comment is through the use of a phone. When users press the phone icon, they get a pop-up that has them type in their phone number. VoiceThread then calls the number and lets users leave a message. Once recorded, the message then becomes part of the presentation. This is especially useful for people who do not have a microphone or a camera on their devices.



The next option is to leave a comment with a webcam recording. When users click on the video camera icon, they need to allow access to their camera. Once allowed, a countdown occurs and people can leave a video message that will appear on the presentation.



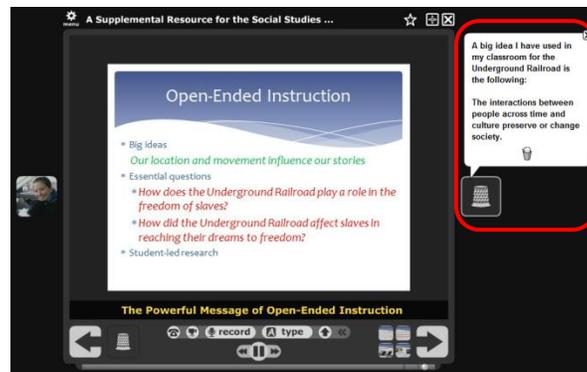
Another option is to leave an audio recording. This works similar to the webcam, and requires users to allow access to their microphone. Participants need to click on the "record" button that has an image of a microphone. They can then record their voice and their message will be saved in the presentation.



The final way to leave a comment is through a typed message. After hitting the “type” button, users can simply type a comment in the textbox and hit “save.”



Whenever people add a comment to a slide, it attaches to the end of the slide, playing the comment for all to view, as seen below. It appears near the account's picture or icon to indicate where the comment originates.



Final Words

This VoiceThread presentation provides teachers with a unique, supplemental resource for their social studies classroom. It serves as a platform for educators to collaborate with one another, engaging them in the research and inviting them to share their own ideas and expertise. It is an evolving tool that is enriched by audience participation.

This resource will be shared through various networks. The link will be passed along to colleagues, friends and acquaintances in the education field who can then share it with additional people. I will also make it public on the actual VoiceThread website, as well as post it on my Facebook page. Additionally, I plan to contact some of my former professors who may be interested in leveraging this resource for their classes. This includes professors from the College at Brockport as well as Houghton College.

I plan to monitor and maintain this VoiceThread presentation, responding to people's comments and questions as appropriate. VoiceThread sends out emails to notify a new comment has been added, which will help ensure a more timely response. I am excited to see what other educators have to contribute to this conversation. Hopefully this resource can inform educators and schools, inspiring them to make the most of the social studies classroom. May they soon discover just how much their effort in this can support their students' success.

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