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# Effective Comprehension Strategies in the Social Studies Classroom

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**Effective Comprehension Strategies in the Social Studies Classroom**

by

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Study**

Social studies is a crucial subject for fostering student civic development and responsibility throughout elementary, middle, and secondary education. Not only does social studies seek to prepare students for active civic involvement in government and societal affairs, but it also gives them an in-depth awareness of local, state, national and world events. The ability to comprehend social studies concepts and themes will help make students successful beyond the classroom and throughout the rest of their life. Social studies education fosters student development through higher level thinking, and it creates effective, informed, and independent learners as students become informed and exposed to social issues that challenge their worldviews (Key, Bradley, & Bradley, 2010). This study investigates effective comprehension strategies to apply within a social studies classroom. Effective comprehension strategies applied to social studies curriculum will help prepare students to be successful citizens in the ever changing world around us.

As a social studies teacher in a mainstream classroom, I have come to know that the implementation of effective comprehension strategies is crucial in improving student achievement, ability, and confidence. A big part to doing this is ensuring that students are able to understand the content and concepts presented to them in various forms of social studies curriculum. In conducting this research, I looked at four comprehension strategies and the potential impact they have in a social studies classroom. The four comprehension strategies are:

1. Summarization
2. Vocabulary Development

3. Compare and Contrast

4. Guided Reading

Summarization is a powerful tool in building students' comprehension of new information and skills, especially in social studies curriculum in which so much emphasis is often placed on cause and effect as well as chronological order and reasoning. Summarization is defined as writing or telling the general idea and most important points of a selection (Brenner, 2009). Summarization proves to be a skill students often use in school or at home. I chose this strategy to research because of the multiple benefits I feel it can afford students when it comes to mastering social studies concepts in the classroom.

Vocabulary development is an essential skill students must capitalize on in understanding any form of curriculum. Developing vocabulary in a social studies classroom empowers students to strengthen their foundation of previously learned words and to connect ideas which then can be used as a backdrop for applying new words to different curriculum. The definition of vocabulary development is measuring one's understanding of words and concepts (Marzano & Pickering, 2005).

The comprehension strategy of comparing and contrasting has long reaching possibilities in helping students effectively comprehend social studies content. Defined as the ability to compare and contrast two or more people, places, events, or perspectives, comparing and contrasting can be very beneficial in helping students scaffold new information with existing information all while measuring comprehension advancements on any given subject (Hall, Kent, McCulley, Davis, & Wanzek, 2013).

The fourth comprehension strategy in my research is guided reading. Guided reading includes a focus on empowering students as they read a challenging or unfamiliar text and is defined as an opportunity for students to comprehend at a higher level by beginning to internalize and process information with the instructor acting as a guide rather than providing direct instruction (Fisher, 2008). Guided reading provides opportunities of both guided instruction and self-directed learning in an individual, small group, and large class setting.

I am choosing to research these four comprehension strategies because I feel they can and will greatly enhance students understanding, as well as prepare them to be well-informed citizens of our government and society. When students are empowered by social studies curricula they are gain the ability to take initiative in helping shape their decisions not only in their own lives, but also to impact society as a whole (Gosky & Winstead-Fry, 2007). Understanding the needs as well as the academic strengths and weaknesses of individual students is significant of teachers incorporating comprehension strategies in social studies classes. This understanding creates the opportunity for teachers to adapt teaching strategies that not only promote comprehension and content literacy but provide relevancy to real life situations and personal backgrounds reinforced by student's prior knowledge (Shriner, Clark, Nail, & Schlee, & Libler, 2010).

Each of these four comprehension strategies provide the opportunity to unfold new and powerful learning experiences for students when placed within the context of social studies curriculum. Strengthening student's ability to comprehend is an ongoing process that grows with time and evolves as strategies like these are implemented to meet the individual and collective needs of students in the classroom (Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons, & Fountas, 2005). This research

helps identify how these four comprehension strategies can be used within a social studies classroom as well as their short and long term impact on student learning.

### **Research Question**

How do the comprehension strategies of summarization, vocabulary development, comparing and contrasting, and guided reading enhance student comprehension within in a social studies classroom?

### **Definition of the Terms**

*Comprehension:* a measure of ones understanding of a passage or text.

*Content literacy:* understanding knowledge that relates to a specific subject area.

*Cooperative learning:* learning and growth that takes place cooperatively with other members of one's class, peer group, or learning community.

*Social studies:* the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.

*Learning strategies:* various methods of instruction offering variety in the way subject matter is presented and mastered.

*Prior knowledge:* recalling information previously learned and relating it to a new theory, idea, or characteristic in order to partake in higher order thinking and problem-solving.

*Mnemonic strategy:* a learning technique that relies on memory and word association recall.

*Scaffolding:* building comprehension and understanding by connection of meaning and application to new content.

*Literacy:* the ability to comprehend material presented in different formats.

*Vocabulary:* words that are understood or recognized by a person.

*Technology integration:* using forms of technology to supplement or enhance student learning in a classroom setting.

*Technology-based intervention:* specific teaching methods offered to improve students' literacy skills through a technological-based classroom tool or program.

*Pre-teaching:* strategically selected words that are targeted in student interaction prior to the upcoming lesson.

*Compare and contrast:* the ability to find the similarities and differences amongst two or more people, places, events, or perspectives.

*Guided reading:* is a practice in which the teacher assists students in navigating through the reading process. Reading is about more than just recognizing and reciting words on a page. Guided reading is an instructional approach that involves a teacher working with students who demonstrate similar reading and learning behaviors.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Effective Comprehension Strategies to Use in the Social Studies Classroom**

Comprehension is the measure of one's understanding of information, a passage, or text. Determining the instructional strategies that are effective for comprehension in the social studies classroom is essential to student learning. I have selected the following four comprehension strategies because of their characteristics that effectively help students comprehend and process new information in social studies. Not only are the following four strategies provide capable of providing effective results in student achievement but also offer variety, adaptability, and flexibility in lesson delivery. Summarization, vocabulary development, comparing and contrasting, and guided reading are essential elements in the formula to implement effective comprehension strategies in a social studies classroom. These four comprehension strategies may help students successfully acquire and process new information in a meaningful way relevant to their own individual lives.

#### **Summarization**

Summarization is the process in which students take larger selections of text or material and reduce them to the bare essentials, identifying the main points of the text and the crucial details necessary for supporting them. Summarization supports comprehension growth by helping students determine the relative importance of ideas and organize the connections between the ideas as they go (Brenner, 2009). Friend (2000) noted that when using summarization for a content area reading it should consist of four defining features: "(a) it is short, (b) it tells what is most important to the author, (c) it is written 'in your own words,' and (d) it states the information you need to study" (p. 320). Using these four defining features

summarization transforms learning into a method of idea exploration and gives students the ability to break down content and ideas both inside and out of the classroom into manageable, small, succinct segments.

The three part generalization that Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) suggested is a powerful method to help students find success when summarizing a text. The first generalization is that to effectively summarize something students must delete some information, substitute some information, and keep some information. Deleting information when summarizing is essential because it forces the student to identify which information is not central to the overall meaning of the text. Using substitution when summarizing allows the student to either generalize or specify particular terms within the text for greater application to the overall meaning or contribution it gives to the passage. After deleting and substituting certain pieces of the text what remains for students then will be information that they will keep, this is information that has been identified as crucial or essential in understanding the key message or points within the passage (Marzano et al., 2001).

The second generalization of summarization made by Marzano et al. (2001) stated that to “effectively delete, substitute, and keep information, students must analyze the information at a fairly deep level” (p. 31). This second generalization focuses on the fact that students need to be able to comprehend the information being read at an appropriate level of application to the context in which it is being applied. Connecting the importance of major and minor details and ideas in a passage, and identifying which one can be helpful in understanding the main point of the passage is an analytical skill students will benefit from in order to be more successful in using summarization. Empowering students with the skills needed to effectively analyze

information is best done by repeatedly modeling it as well as giving them ample time to practice it (Friend, 2000).

The third and final generalization offered by Marzano et al. (2001) is that when students are aware of the explicit structure of information they are summarizing it is beneficial to them in analyzing the information. Identifying and exploring various structures of educational text and passages can be a highly effective way in which a teacher can better equip their students to effectively summarize information. When a student has an idea of what to expect before reading a selection and is familiar with how the text is laid out their minds will already be equipped with what to be looking for, what pieces of the information could be the most relevant, and where information the author considers most useful may be placed. This precursor to successfully summarizing a passage or text starts with a meaningful introduction by the teacher as well as exposure to many different writing styles and formats that students may see based on their current curriculum standards and grade level. When the teacher takes time to practice identifying various writing techniques with their students, either individually or collectively as a class, it helps them to recognize varying viewpoints, facts, and the author's personal views. Being aware of how certain information is presented and the structure of the writing is a key element in fostering effective summarization skills with students (Marzano et al., 2001).

Summarization is a comprehension learning strategy that has many advantages when applied to student learning in the classroom. For some students the use of summarization can often be intimidating or misleading with the intent of how it is applied to learning; however, when empowered with the right comprehension techniques students can reap great gains in both short and long term information retention (Brenner, 2009). The use of summarization takes

students to a higher level of understanding key information and allows them to actively process it in an applicable way rather than just receiving it passively (Wormeli, 2005).

A key advantage that makes summarization a powerful strategy is the connections that are formed as student's group ideas that they pull from the reading into interrelated hierarchical networks or schemata. Friend (2000) pointed out that the use of summarization provides cognitive shopping bags for students to group ideas into schemata and labels the schemata and the relationships among them. This grouping limits the information students now have to remember versus countless lines of information or text that can seem very unmanageable and overwhelming. Grouping ideas into cognitive shopping bags reaffirms the point that summarization is based upon drawing connections and forming relationships among the information in a way that allows students to breaks down larger ideas, focus on key details. Students are able to recognize key words and phrases because they are identified by the teacher prior to the lesson in either a pre-assessment to the new unit or they are labeled as essential vocabulary in students unit study guide or learning target that takes them through the key objectives and essential learner outcomes (Friend, 2000).

Summarization also has cognitive theory support through the use and application of the primacy-recency effect. The primacy-recency effect essentially says that we remember best what we experience first in a lesson, and we remember second best what we experience last (Wormeli, 2005). Summarization can be a powerful comprehension tool when coupled with the primacy-recency effect. Wormeli (2005) pointed out that "by structuring lessons to embrace the primacy-recency effect, we teachers can change what our students will remember" (p. 3). By changing what students remember Wormeli (2005) also argued that the last portion of a class is

critical, and ideally is a time that should be set aside for reflection and summarization so students have time to reflect and process what they have learned. It is this time for expanded knowledge and processing that makes summarization powerful in students retaining information and applying it in meaningful ways.

A valuable trend that is being seen in many educational settings is that summarization is no longer just a practice being used at the end of a lesson but rather throughout the various stages in lesson delivery. Summarization can be used for pre-assessment activities in which students responses can then be used to alter or change the teacher's instruction to better meet the needs of the students. Summarization can be used in the midst of lesson delivery to act as a comprehension check for understanding for both the students and teacher, and of course it can be used at the end of a lesson so students may process and make sense of that has been learned and how it can be applied to both prior knowledge and future scenarios (Wormeli, 2005).

### **Vocabulary**

In this century, we have seen an explosion of knowledge accompanied by an explosion of new words. Developing vocabulary is not simply a matter of listing 10 or 20 words and their definitions on the board each Monday morning and administering a vocabulary quiz every Friday. A powerful step that a teacher can take to build vocabulary is to provide students with a variety of instructional experiences. In a social studies classroom, vocabulary instruction should be considered a support tool for each lesson and a means to provide authentic interactions with social studies concepts (Alexander-Shea, 2011).

Vocabulary-based comprehension strategies allow students to enhance as well as reinforce their understanding of social studies. Strong vocabulary comprehension skills are

essential because without those students cannot fully partake in the perpetual cycle of learning that takes place as they make literacy based connections to the material in front of them. As students partake in social studies classes they rely heavily on the material presented to them in the text book. It is estimated that social studies text books account for 85-90% of the curriculum delivery (Alexander-Shea, 2011). Strong vocabulary comprehension skills will greatly increase understanding and mastery of the curriculum in a social studies classroom.

Why does vocabulary development and instruction have such a profound effect on student comprehension in any given academic content? The answer is clear, according to Marzano and Pickering (2005), as they asserted that student's knowledge of any topic is encapsulated in the terms they know that are relevant to the topic at hand. The more students understand the terms, the easier it is for them to understand information they may read or hear about the topic. Much of students understanding of vocabulary in a given content area is impacted by the background knowledge they have coming into certain content areas. The difference in each student's background knowledge is sometimes referred to as prior knowledge and may vary depending on their academic background and past experiences. It is important to activate student background knowledge to give concepts deeper meaning and application.

Activation of prior knowledge is an effective tool in building vocabulary comprehension because it provides students with an opportunity to connect information and content that they already are familiar with to new concepts and ideas. Alexander-Shea (2011) validated this connection by stressing that as "those connections are forged; comprehension of new materials becomes an easier task for students, increasing their ability to learn in more profound ways"

(p. 97). The activities used to help student access prior knowledge and connect it to new information are often effective, simple, and time efficient. One prior knowledge teaching strategy that promotes the activation of prior vocabulary knowledge is called mind streams. Mind streaming gives students in groups of two the opportunity to talk about anything familiar relating to the given topic for one minute each. After the 1 minute is up paired students summarize the other's familiarities pertaining to the given topic. This creates a stream of discussion between students and the class thus helping them discover how their background knowledge relates to the new concept being presented.

Preteaching vocabulary involves targeting specific student interaction with words or phrases from the upcoming lesson or unit (Berg & Wehby, 2013). Introducing vocabulary prior to lesson delivery, otherwise referred to as pre-teaching, allows students to have a working awareness of the words and allows for easier comprehension of new vocabulary as it is presented. Pre-teaching vocabulary empowers students to build sufficient understandings of the words and create meaningful connections as well as applications to the social studies curriculum (Steele, 2007). Pre-teaching vocabulary is critical to students' success in the social studies classroom and effectively encourages a comprehensive understanding of the various social studies topics that are incorporated throughout all levels of education (Alexander-Shea, 2011).

Supporting vocabulary comprehension in a social studies classroom with the use of an electronic pop-up dictionary was the focus of research completed by Gosky and Winstead-Fry (2007). The pop-up dictionary tool is an online resource that allows students instant access to definitions of words within the context the online social studies text. The authors of the study tested the effectiveness of three different reading comprehension strategies; the first was using a

traditional text-based reading method, the second was using an online text, and the third was using an online text with a pop-up dictionary. The results of their study supported their hypothesis that comprehension was higher for students who used the pop-up dictionary strategy because they would be able to check the meaning of the words that they did not know in an immediate and convenient way. In looking at this vocabulary reinforcing intervention and the research it shows a strong correlation between students who took advantage of the pop-up dictionary tool receiving higher scores than those that did not use the pop-up tool (Gosky & Winstead-Fry, 2007).

An effective vocabulary development teaching tool that has been shown to help students better comprehend social studies content is mnemonic strategies. Memory enhancing or mnemonic strategies refer to a “specific reconstruction of target content intended to tie new information more closely to the learners’ existing knowledge base and therefore, facilitate retrieval” (Fontana, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2007, p. 346). Commonly identified mnemonic strategies include keyword strategies, peg words, and letter strategies. A keyword strategy is when students use each letter of one target word to describe the meaning, or a defining characteristic of that particular key word. Letter strategies present themselves as the most popular in vocabulary development through the method of employing acronyms and acrostics to enhance the recall of lists of information or words. Peg words is a vocabulary enhancing teaching strategy that uses key letters in a word and links it to a number that is relevant to its meaning or application. Mnemonic strategies promote vocabulary development by creating an opportunity for students to form a systematic order or relevancy of key content specific vocabulary terms (Fontana et al., 2007).

An engaging approach to vocabulary development and instruction is the F.R.I.E.N.D.S. model aimed at increasing student understanding in vocabulary. According to Dashiell and DeBruin-Parecki (2014), the F.R.I.E.N.D.S. model is designed to help teachers bridge the vocabulary gap for students who are most at risk of falling behind or are in indeed behind in vocabulary development. Each of the core components of the F.R.I.E.N.D.S. model support acquisition, sustainment, and acceleration of vocabulary skills and are aimed at assisting students in strengthening their ability to use words in meaningful ways. The seven components of the F.R.I.E.N.D.S. model are as follows:

1. **Fostering quality teacher and child conversations**
2. **Robust and motivational instruction,**
3. **Interactive storybook reading**
4. **Engaging and literacy-rich environments**
5. **Numerous opportunities to practice new vocabulary**
6. **Direct and explicit instruction**
7. **Sophisticated and rare words**

Each of the seven F.R.I.E.N.D.S. model components lends itself to meaningful vocabulary development for students. Fostering quality teacher and child conversations allows open discussion to take place about vocabulary as well as meaningful application in both the classroom and in students' personal experiences. Robust and motivational instruction focuses on engaging students within the curriculum by including personal interests and instruction that challenges students to ask deep meaningful questions. Interactive story book reading engages students in a cooperative learning environment in which students freely process new words and

their meanings out loud with their peers. Focusing on engaging students in a literacy-rich learning environment is essential to supporting vocabulary development because of the exposure and confidence students receive from their surroundings. Not only does students' vocabulary development benefit from being placed in a literacy rich environment, but also from numerous opportunities to practice the new vocabulary they are experiencing. Through direct instruction students effectively practice and apply their vocabulary while receiving feedback and one on one help from the teacher. The implementation and usage of sophisticated and rare words is another key component students can take advantage of when applying the F.R.I.E.N.D.S. model to vocabulary development. Whether these sophisticated and rare words are identified by the teacher for a certain lesson or are seen in a class reading they can be powerful learning opportunities for students (Dashiell & DeBruin-Parecki, 2014).

### **Comparing and Contrasting**

One of the most essential comprehension strategies for enhancing the understanding of social studies content is identifying similarities and differences through comparing and contrasting. Marzano et al. (2001) maintained that often the most effective way to help students compare and contrast topics and ideas is to simply present the ideas in a straight forward, direct approach. The instructional benefit when using this direct approach according to Marzano et al. is that it creates an opportunity for authentic discussion and student inquiry in the classroom.

A key to applying Marzano et al.'s (2001) direct approach to the using the compare and contrast strategy is understanding that in order to create better authentic discussion and student inquiry explicit instruction and meaningful teacher modeling is crucial (Dreher & Gray, 2009). Often students will fail to fully understand the purpose and value of comparing and contrasting

something given to them as a school task because they simply do not comprehend what it is they are exactly supposed to do. If students do not understand that they are being asked to recognize the similarities and differences between two or more things they are going to struggle profusely and with student confusion will come frustration. It is for this reason that making sure students are familiar with this type of structure prior to them being asked to use it is so important. A simple compare and contrast model shown by Dreher and Gray (2009) is for teachers to demonstrate the strategy collectively to the whole group, then provide students with an opportunity for guided practice, and finally allow students to practice the strategy on their own followed by time for a constructive peer or teacher review .

Atwell (2007) offered added support to the importance of modeling the compare and contrast comprehension strategy to students in an academic reading setting. Atwell placed a great deal of emphasis on taking time to teach students how to read the books and articles they will be seeing and using in a social studies class by breaking the process of comparing and contrasting down into a series of steps that will allow greater meaning to be created by students as they read. The first step Atwell teaches is to read a selection twice, the first time to get a general overview then the second time with a pen or pencil in hand to mark what seems to matter the most. The second step in the process is then showing students the teachers own highlighting and notes so that a direct discussion can happen as to why they felt those were the most essential details that would help us in comparing and contrasting key ideas in the selection. The third and final step offered by Atwell is to identify the range of connections and distractions that pop up as students read the text. Identifying the connections and distractions throughout a text or selection is a useful skill because it essentially helps students identify key similarities and differences and

how they are related to other main ideas or themes in the reading. When put into place in a social studies classroom the three step process of identifying and modeling the compare and contrast reading strategy is an empowering tool for greater student comprehension (Atwell, 2007).

The use of comparative thinking is the foundation on which the compare and contrast comprehension strategy is based. Without the ability of students to make comparisons, both big and small, in which they can set one object or idea against another the very idea of learning something new is impossible (Silver, 2010). Asking students to compare and contrast events, ideas, or people using comparative analysis will lead to great gains in student's comprehension of new material as well as meaningful connections to prior knowledge and understanding (Marzano et al., 2001). When applied effectively the compare and contrast comprehension strategy can achieve great gains in teaching and learning for both the teacher and the student.

In his work, Silver (2010) identified that using the compare and contrast method can help teachers achieve five distinct instructional goals. These goals include strengthening student's memories, developing higher-order thinking skills, increasing students vocabulary comprehension, enhancing student's writing in the content areas, and developing students' habits of mind. Each of the five instructional goals offered by Silver are valuable and have great potential to help students understand the essential learner outcomes when using the compare and contrast strategy. Developing students' habits of mind is identified as potentially the most impactful in fostering student comprehension. The core habits of mind skills that comparing and contrasting builds within students are thinking flexibly, striving for accuracy, applying past knowledge to new situations, and communicating ideas with clarity and precision (Silver, 2010).

Comparing two or more key pieces of information in any content area or learning environment is a key element in measuring students understanding of the curriculum. When students use the compare and contrast comprehension strategy they are processing the meaning of a new word or idea by comparing its meaning and application to real life situations, previously acquired knowledge, or familiarities they recognize from a past event or situation. The important thing when using comparing and contrasting as an effective comprehension strategy in social studies is to know that it aides students in identifying key characteristics of certain materials that then can be used to identify similarities and differences within the specific subject matter (Dreher & Gray, 2009).

What happens when students struggle in identifying key similarities and differences when using the compare and contrast strategy? Silver (2010) offered four key principles to keep in mind when applying the compare and contrast strategy to learning and offers reasoning for each. Principle one: students need to know the purpose and the content of what they are reading, this includes giving them a chance to become familiar with the items or ideas before comparing as well as understanding what to look for when describing the items or ideas. Principle two: thoughts need time and shape, quality comparing and contrasting needs time, encouragement, and a workable structure in order for students to gain a true understanding of the material. Principle three: students must make a meaningful comparison or effectively contrast the information in order to help them draw their own conclusions and connect meaning to the information. Finally principle four: students need to put their learning to work by applying the knowledge they gained in a synthesis type task that pulls together the new information they have acquired and apply it to the creation of a new product or idea.

The use of graphic organizers has often been credited with helping students better utilize the compare and contrast comprehension strategy, especially in a social studies setting. Not only do social studies texts often lend themselves to comparing and contrasting content they also describe causes and effects and allude to various trends and themes. Graphic organizers use various arrangements of lines, arrows, and text boxes to represent the relationship among concepts discussed in the text and can provide students with a meaningful framework for relating prior knowledge to new concepts, ideas, people, and places. Using graphic organizers when teaching and practicing comparing and contrasting is an effective way to enhance student comprehension (Hall et al., 2013).

In applying the compare and contrast comprehension strategy to the classroom, two types of graphic organizers are illustrated by Marzano et al. (2001) as effective tools to enhance the impact it can have on student understanding. The first is the Venn Diagram and the second is the comparison matrix. A Venn Diagram is a graphic organizer that allows students to identify the defining characteristics of two separate people, places or events but also requires students to identify similarities among the being compared (Appendix A). In a comparison matrix students are comparing two people, places or events by again highlighting the defining characteristics of each as well as identifying similarities shared by both (Appendix B). Both the Venn diagram and the comparison matrix are powerful comprehension tools because they require students to organize the contents similarities and differences in a structured, organized, and detailed pattern.

### **Guided Reading**

Guided reading is a comprehension strategy that offers promising results for students in gaining greater comprehension in social studies curriculum and enables teachers to provide very

effective support for students' literacy learning (Biddulph, 2002). Ultimately guided reading is defined as a practice in which the teacher assists students in navigating the reading process. This navigation consists of the teacher making a conscious effort to help students better understand what it is they are reading and empowering them to become independent engaged readers that are capable of thinking within the text they are reading (Scharer et al., 2005).

Guided reading is often best utilized as small group instruction with students grouped with others who read at similar instructional levels. Instruction is easily managed in small groups and the teacher is able to give individual attention to the group members (Steele, 2007). The goal of guided reading is for the teacher to support each reader's ability to comprehend at a higher level by empowering students with the skills to frame questions and make high order connections within the material (Fisher, 2008). Working in a small group allows the teacher to observe individual students closer and work one-on-one with them to make informed observations and provide specific teaching, including facilitating conversation about the text among group members to increase understanding. The teacher meets students where they are, moving them along so they can progress with confidence.

In order to better understand how guided reading is an effective comprehension strategy, it is first important to understand what it means for a student to be a reader. In their work Scharer et al. (2005) defined a reader as "a literate person who experiences the power and joy of comprehending" (p. 24). This definition captures the essence of guided reading well as it reinforces the idea that guided reading is meant to help students cultivate valuable meaning as they read various texts and become empowered through successfully comprehending the information they are reading.

The process of applying the guided reading comprehension strategy to an academic content area, such as social studies, first involves the teacher selecting a text that is appropriate for the target group of students they are working with, usually this selection is based on students' similar reading ability. Applying an effective introduction to the text is the next step, by talking to the students about relevant experiences they may have had or prior knowledge that they can connect to the text helps foster student interest in the reading. Upon reading the text, either independently or aloud, the teacher then provides sensitive support for the students to talk and think their way through the text processing the meaning and application it has based on its content and overarching themes. It is in this stage of the process that students are encouraged to talk, think, and read their way to constructing meaning with the guidance and processing assistance of the teacher (Biddulph, 2002).

A primary role of the teacher during guided reading is to scaffold literacy learning. Acting as a guide or navigator to students as they read in a small group setting the teacher works to create an atmosphere that fosters the development of critical literacy building skills. Such critical literacy building skills include exposing students to changing small group dynamics, fostering social interaction, creating cognitive stimuli, and giving students the opportunity to form and justify their own personal opinions (Scharer et al., 2005). Essentially what makes guided reading such an effective comprehension strategy is not only the teacher's ability help build a bridge between what students know and what is new but also the shared responsibility between the student and teacher in learning how to ask higher level questions thus leading the student into more of a self-directed learning role (Fisher, 2008).

A key benefit that guided reading can have on students is that it creates opportunities for constructive dialogue that may not only increase reading literacy skills but thinking skills as well. Two key thinking strategies that are enhanced through the use of guided reading are perspective and imagery thinking strategies. Whitehead (2002) asserted that perspective thinking strategies enable students to comprehend texts from multiple social and physical perspectives. The ability to deliberately identify a type of perspective within text benefits students as they evaluate the reading and apply meaning to it in an appropriate context. Whitehead identified five types of perspective thinking strategies that are most commonly recognized and strengthened among students in a guided reading setting; they are: talk-perspective thinking, cultural perspective thinking, gender-perspective thinking, economic-perspective thinking, and age-perspective thinking. Each of the five perspective thinking strategies empowers students to identify the point of view, or perspective, that a text is written in and provide supportive evidence as to why they feel it best fits into the perspective they chose (Whitehead, 2002). The ability of students to identify and defend their choice of perspective thinking within a text is developed through practice and examples of texts and supporting reading resources.

The second type of thinking strategy that is fostered by effective guided reading is imagery. Imagery thinking strategies revolve around the idea that language is not exclusively verbal and is indeed capable of creating useful images for students to better comprehend what they read. Cognitively speaking, imagery thinking strategies are explained best by dual-coding. According to Whitehead (2002), dual-coding is what allows students to form and process “rich, accurate, and unpredictable information in the form of mental images when recalling texts”

(p. 35). There are three forms of imagery thinking strategies that evoke visual images within students as they read; they are still-imagery thinking, moving-imagery thinking, and melting-imagery. Images that do not move or are in a picture like state within students minds are considered still-imagery. Moving-imagery are images that come alive with motion in student's imagination as they read a text or passage. Melting-imagery is a combination of both moving and still images that tend to flow together in students minds and imaginations throughout a story, passage or activity (Whitehead, 2002).

Applying interactive read-aloud activities for students to take part in is an effective way to apply and strengthen student's ability to comprehend what they are reading. Taking part in an interactive read-aloud is an efficient way for students to expand their vocabulary as well as to share and understand new texts. An interactive read-aloud is a large group activity in which the teacher begins reading a text and students take turns reading out loud to the class. Not only does an interactive read-aloud create a community learning atmosphere among students but it provides them with a massive infusion of comprehensible written language creating opportunities to expand their vocabulary. The interactive read-aloud is a supportive guided reading strategy that can be applied to both small and large group settings and ultimately supports the goal of guided reading in that it helps students strengthen their reading ability by modeling positive group support and creating engaging discussion among their peers (Scharer et al., 2005).

Students today represent a wide variety of abilities, learning styles, interests, and academic motivations. Student differences are what help make cooperative learning a highly effective guided reading strategy in social studies classrooms. Cooperative learning creates opportunities for all students to become engaged in learning through the multi-facet approach it

takes on curriculum presentation, mastery and engagement (Hendrix, 1999). According to Nagel (2008), cooperative learning is effective because it promotes academic achievement, increases retention, and greatly improves both communication as well as self-esteem through peer teaching and learning as well as modeling by both the teacher and students. These characteristics that cooperative learning promotes go hand in hand when nurturing the guided reading small group goals of creating student community and engagement.

The impact cooperative learning can have on student achievement when applied within the context of guided reading is great because of the improvements it fosters in the areas of long-term retention, intrinsic motivation, time on task, and critical thinking (Nagel, 2008). There are two key factors that make cooperative learning a powerful guided reading tool in teaching social studies. The first is that it decreases the emphasis on competition students feel when working in a small learning community or regular classroom setting. Competitiveness can be a good academic attribute but can also hinder student's ability to fully process and apply the curriculum. The second academic factor that cooperative learning empowers students with is accountability. Students are responsible in a cooperative group setting for completing their portion of the task and success for everyone relies on each group member pulling their weight collectively to meet the desired objective as well as collectively share their perspectives and ideas (Scheuerell, 2010).

### **Chapter 3: Conclusions and Recommendation**

While researching the comprehension strategies of summarization, vocabulary development, comparing and contrasting, and guided reading, I believe the research supports that each can be effective in varying capacities when it comes to the potential impact they can have on enhancing student comprehension in a social studies classroom. In applying these strategies to teaching in my social studies classroom I anticipate successful results and am also realistic to the point that the effectiveness of each may vary based on individual classes, learners and how they are implemented. The following recommendations and proposed applications are designed to help students better learn, process, and appreciate social studies content and apply it in meaningful ways to their own individual lives.

#### **Primacy-Recency Effect**

In researching the comprehension strategy of summarization a key application I recommend is the use of the primacy-recency effect when structuring lesson plans in a social studies classroom. The benefit to following the primacy-recency effect when structuring a social studies lesson plan revolves around the fact that students remember best what they experience first in a lesson and they remember second best what they experience last. The primacy-recency effect enhances the use of summarization by exposing students to the main ideas and major themes of a lesson within the first 10 minutes and then returns to those main ideas and major themes again at the end of the lesson. Essentially the primacy-recency effect models the process of summarization to students and essentially changes what students remember from a lesson or activity. After reviewing the research and the potential impact the primacy-recency effect can

have on students' ability to use the summarization strategy, I recommend it to be a solid comprehension tool for comprehension growth in social studies curriculum.

One less effective aspect of using the primacy-regency effect, especially in a high school setting, is that students may not fully appreciate or absorb some of the supporting details that are critical in making meaningful connections within a lesson. If students are only focused on the first and the last thing they hear or experience in a lesson does that mean they will not benefit from anything in between? This is a question that I see as a potential problem with the primacy-regency effect, if teachers do not stress how the supporting details or defining characteristics in a lesson complement and pertain to the main ideas I see students potentially missing out on useful information that will make summarization more meaningful.

### **Pre-Assessment**

Another effective application for summarization in a social studies classroom that I would recommend is using the strategy of pre-assessment before beginning a new lesson or unit of study. By using summarization as a form of pre-assessment to gauge what my students already know prior to starting a lesson I, as the teacher, can then use that information to guide my instruction throughout the lesson. Using summarization as a form of pre-assessment promises, in my opinion, to be potentially valuable in that it will allow the teacher to address students' misconceptions as well as make meaningful connections to the prior knowledge students have coming in to that particular topic or text. Applying a summarization pre-assessment activity to students in a US History course prior to talking about the causes of the Great Depression could not only help the teacher identify what student's already know on the subject but could serve also as a safety net allowing the teacher to identify common

misunderstandings students may have before getting father into the lesson. Pre-assessment strategies are also going to look differently depending on what grade level and subject is being taught in the realm of social studies curricula. I would recommend a more hands on form of pre-assessment for students who are identified as English as a second language learners. In some instances students who are learning English may not have the ability to describe what they know and understand accurately in writing but could give a more accurate account of their depth of understanding through a visual or by demonstration.

### **Activating Prior Knowledge**

Upon researching the power that effective vocabulary development can have on student comprehension I have found there to be some potentially solid applications in a social studies classroom. The first recommendation I would make in applying vocabulary development in a social studies classroom is to use vocabulary to activate student's prior knowledge. Prior knowledge could be activated best by using a teaching strategy called mind streams. I recommend the mind streams strategy because it focuses on activating student's prior knowledge on a certain subject or topic and makes it easier for students to make meaningful connections from the familiar material to that of the unfamiliar material they encounter in social studies.

In using the mind streams strategy students work in pairs and are given 1 minute to talk freely about anything familiar that can relate to the new topic or subject being discussed. After 1 minute is up, the students then summarize their partner's comments thus creating dialogue on how what they already know can potentially pertain to the new topic at hand. I also feel the mind streams teaching activity is well suited for a social studies setting because it promotes a number elements that can help students be more successful in comprehension of new material,

such essential elements include the ability to work in a small group, summarization of key ideas, building effective listening skills, and being able to engage in hands on discussion with peers in a structured setting. The minds stream vocabulary pre-teaching strategy I feel carries great potential for increasing comprehension in social studies because it encompasses a variety of skills and applies them to one particular teaching activity that can strengthen students' abilities in not just vocabulary development but in other evolving learning strategies as well.

### **Pop-up Dictionary**

Providing students the use of an electronic pop-up dictionary is another recommendation I make in enhancing students vocabulary comprehension in a social studies classroom. I feel this tool is an effective way to aid students in comprehending unfamiliar or confusing words or texts and helps incorporate the use of technology within the social studies classroom. The electronic pop up dictionary can be easily downloaded on to a set of classroom computers or even student's personal devices to use both inside and outside of the classroom. Another reason I highly recommend this strategy is that it is extremely time efficient as well as very user friendly for practically all students in any given social studies classroom to use. One of the only drawbacks to the use of a pop up dictionary could be limited access to technology resources that some students or schools may have. Without the use of reliable internet and an accessible computer lab this electronic pop-up dictionary may be very difficult to utilize for some social studies classrooms.

### **Mnemonic Strategies**

The use of a mnemonic strategy is something I would recommend using in a social studies classroom, especially in a middle or high school level class. Using mnemonic strategies

to enhance student's vocabulary comprehension has a large potential for lasting definition retention and application. As mnemonic strategies create opportunities for students to apply a systematic order of meaning and form a key patterns of relevancy to certain vocabulary, I highly recommend using and applying the letter strategy above all else in social studies. To use letter strategies effectively requires the student to know the words that associate with the letters. For example, to recall the names of the Great Lakes the student would remember HOMES (H-Huron; O-Ontario; M-Michigan; E-Erie; S-Superior). It is important for the student to know the H stands for Huron, O stands for Ontario, and so on; otherwise, the strategy will have no meaning. I have applied this specific strategy to my own social studies classroom already and found that student success in mastering key vocabulary words can be credited to introducing them to the letter strategy and teaching them how to create and apply their own mnemonic strategies for other content related vocabulary.

I have witnessed my own students create their own mnemonic strategies in class without being asked or directed to do so. In following their intuition my students have shown me over the past school year how creative and individualized mnemonic strategies can be as well as the power they hold in vocabulary comprehension. A powerful application I would recommend to either middle or high school social studies teachers is to demonstrate a few quality examples of mnemonic strategies and then turn students loose to create their own. When students have had the opportunity to work individually then go around the room and have them share their own with the class, in doing so you will be able to learn a lot about each student's learning personality, strengths, and weaknesses.

## **Graphic Organizers**

In reading the research on the compare and contrast comprehension strategy and having applied it occasionally in my own social studies classroom, I recommend it as an effective strategy that has the power to help students apply meaning to the material they are reading and discussing. I feel the most effective way to utilize the compare and contrast comprehension strategy in a social studies classroom is through using graphic organizers. When students use a graphic organizer, I feel there are two in particular that lend themselves to social studies content making them powerful tools in applying understanding to two or more different people, places, or situations. The first graphic organizer I recommend is the Venn Diagram. The Venn Diagram is a simple and easily laid out visual that I feel is neither intimidating nor overbearing to social studies students, especially those in the middle school grades.

A key benefit I have found in applying the Venn Diagram to a social studies classroom is that it can almost be used and applied to any subject, time period, and event that is covered in social studies curriculum. As the Venn Diagram asks students to compare and contrast similarities and differences between two or more people, places, or things, I feel it is a powerful comprehension tool for social studies content because it arouses in students a natural inquiry as to how these people, places, and events are connected or what it is that sets them apart. The Venn Diagram is most powerful to students when it has been modeled effectively and I recommend to other social studies teachers that they need to build extra time into a lesson for modeling the Venn Diagram format and discussing how students can then apply what they have gathered from the organizer.

A second graphic organizer that promotes the effective use of comparing and contrasting in a social studies classroom is comparison matrix. The comparison matrix is similar to the Venn Diagram in that it compares and contrasts two or more different things. The key difference is that the comparison matrix simply lays the information out in a more visually neat or segregated pattern. A simple example of the comparison matrix layout would be a table that was two columns wide by six columns deep. This simple table could be used by students to compare the differences in government structure between the United States and Soviet Union in the Cold War. The comparison matrix uses a more traditional layout of columns and rows thus, in my opinion, allowing for more detail for the students. Depending on the age and ability level of the students in social studies one of the organizers might be more effective for one group over the other. My recommendation would be to use the Venn Diagram with younger students that have a more general capability of comparing multiple perspectives and apply the comparison matrix to an older group of social studies students who can use it to go deeper into comparing the similarities and differences of not just two pieces of data, but rather maybe even three or four.

### **Small Groups**

Guided reading, as the research has shown, has many applications to a social studies classroom when enhancing student comprehension. The most effective guided reading component that I recommend for increasing student comprehension is utilizing learning by placing students in a small group setting. Working in small groups has many advantages when it comes to enhancing student comprehension. Based on the research I have read I feel small group learning is helpful in a social studies setting because it creates a hands on environment for the teacher to act as a guide through a text helping students navigate more personally through the

content. I also recommend using small groups while focusing on guided reading for students who require special accommodations in a social studies classroom because it allows more time to work on individual goal setting as well as reaching individual learner objectives.

I do not recommend allowing students to choose their own small groups. By allowing students to pick their own small groups my experiences have taught me that more distractions take place as well as less productivity by some students. This is can be a double edged knife for some students as well. If students are nervous or shy to work with students they do not know very well they may be more likely to disengage themselves from the activity thus reducing the information they are taking in. On the other side, working with a pre-arranged group can give some students the opportunity to make new friends, benefit from new peer learning opportunities and help match them with students who have similar learning strengths. Overall, despite the extra time it may take for the teacher to pre-arrange students into small groups the benefits in student comprehension are well worth it.

### **Imagery**

The use of imagery in enhancing guided reading in social studies is an effective strategy I recommend using in all levels of social studies curriculum. What I find most valuable and applicable to using imagery as a way to enhance student comprehension in social studies is that it demonstrates to students that language is not exclusively verbal and it can act as an alternative when helping students comprehend the meaning of words. Out of the three types of imagery thinking strategies I found in my research, still-imagery, moving-imagery, and visual-imagery, I recommend that moving-imagery is often the most influential in evoking images and ideas in students as they read a social studies text or passage. I support the use of moving-imagery

thinking strategies because they have the ability to help students comprehend social studies content in a realistic, real-life, living and breathing format. I strongly feel the more real and relevant social studies curriculum can feel to students the more powerful it is in impacting what they remember and how they will apply it to their own lives today.

The ability of students to visualize what they are reading and then apply that visualization to what a certain word, text, or passage means I feel can become an effective way to enhance their learning experience through guided reading and that is why I highly recommend it as a powerful comprehension tool. Whether visualizing something they read in a text in US History, World Geography, or US Government, students can better apply what they are reading when they have meaningful images in their heads. I have found however that students' ability to visualize something as they read and comprehend its meaning can be limited based on a lack of prior knowledge. As a safety net to help students build a foundation of understanding on a certain topic or subject I recommend implementing pre-assessments or various checks for understanding prior to using visualization to gauge students relative grasp on the subject.

A potential negative aspect I see with using imagery to evoke meaning and application to vocabulary is that not all students may respond the same to visual learning. Whenever you have a diverse group of learners there will always be differences in how some students learn best, and for some students they do not always respond well to visual learning. Providing written descriptions and directions should be a key component to include when delivering a lesson that involves the use of imagery. One aspect that can help those students who do not respond well to visual learning would be to always again provide a solid teacher example and then take the time to explain to the class why it is an effective example providing a basis for students to build on.

## **Read-Aloud Activities**

The use of guided read-aloud activities is an effective comprehension strategy that I recommend be used in social studies classrooms at every grade level. By reading aloud in a small or large group setting students are exposed to content related vocabulary as groups of learners and in doing so are also able to hear and share answers to common misconceptions that they may have. Interactive read-aloud activities are also supportive when reading supplemental content in higher level social studies classes such as in Advanced Placement American History because it allows students and the teacher to dissect a particular piece of the text and apply it collectively to a specific piece of information that is either has been previously learned or may be completely new to students. The interactive read-aloud is a technique I have used in my higher level social studies classroom and I have found it to be extremely effective in building student confidence as well as content comprehension.

As I have researched each of the four comprehension strategies and how they can apply to a social studies classroom I have gained great insight as to the power each can have on student learning. I greatly value all that each of these four comprehension strategies have to offer and appreciate how they enhance the learning experience students can have when they are applied to a social studies setting. Each of these four strategies often have multiple components that contribute to their effectiveness when it comes to enhancing student comprehension and it is indeed these multiple components that make each one unique and distinct. When approaching each of the four comprehension strategies that I have identified and researched with an open mind and willingness to try something new for the sake of increased student comprehension in a social studies classroom genuine academic learning will indeed take each and every day.

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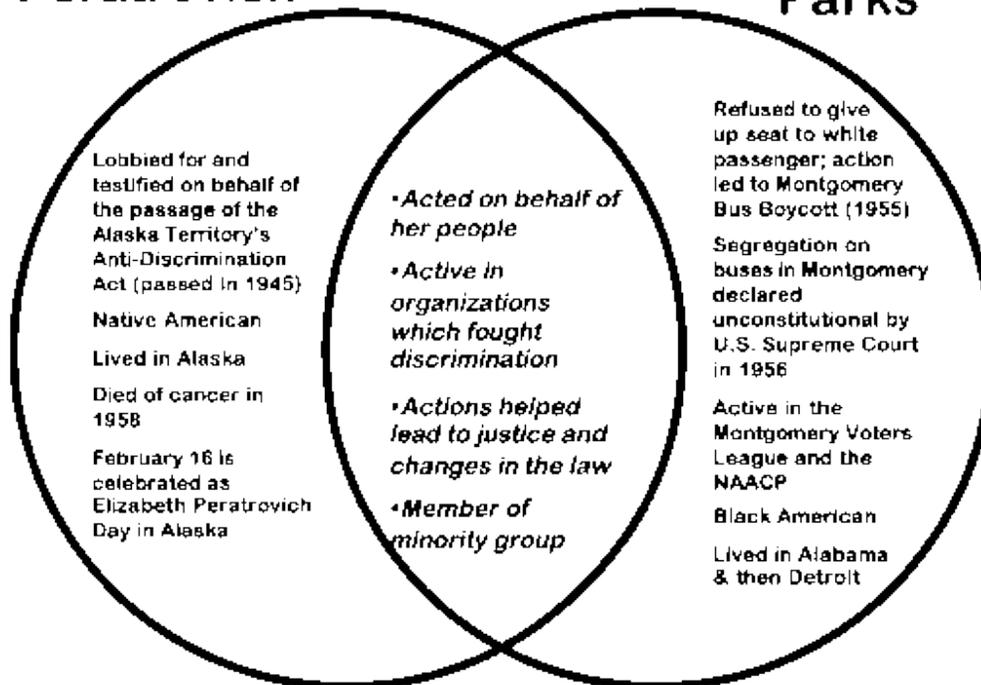
## Appendix A

## Venn Diagram

Comparing Two Civil Rights Leaders

**Elizabeth  
Peratrovich**

**Rosa  
Parks**



**Appendix B**  
**Comparison Matrix**

*MAJOR RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD*

<b>Religion</b>	<b>Country where it Began</b>	<b>"Founder" of religion</b>	<b>Some Beliefs</b>
<b>Judaism</b>			
<b>Christianity</b>			
<b>Islam or Muslim</b>			
<b>Hinduism</b>			