THE POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES OF INTEGRATED THEMATIC CURRICULUM FOR PRIMARY GRADES

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Section I:  
The Problem

Purpose of the Project

Integrating thematic units into the primary grades, and creating a project binder to connect all core subjects is the ultimate goal of this project. This mission will also show active teachers fascinating responses from the students, as well as easily becoming accustomed to the integrated thematic units. The unit touches all subjects and introduces one central theme that will enhance the students’ learning abilities. The chosen literature was selected for each grade level and matches the standards of topic. Every aspect in the student’s curriculum is recognizable through the integrated thematic units.

During the early stages of my teaching career, I witnessed Professional Learning Communities where the school adopted a “team teaching” approach. The concept was to master all core subjects and achieve higher standards among the students. “Team teaching” was supposed to be practiced by the teaching staff. However, I witnessed only a few teachers developing an integrated curriculum in their classrooms.

I was responsible to teach multiple subjects for the fifth and sixth grade levels. Every subject being taught is not integrated by content, which made it difficult for students to permanently absorb the information being taught, and ultimately enhance their knowledge. For example, in the beginning of the school term, the class was reading stories about “Weather,” but while teaching science, the focused topic was “Atoms” and “Compounds”. The separation between the two vital subjects left a huge learning gap for the students to comprehend what was being taught.
Importance of the Project

The reason to create an integrated thematic unit is to teach a theme to all core subjects, and help create an efficient connection of important information for the students. Teachers are responsible to educate the vastly huge amount of State Standards within a limited amount of time. The educational agenda does not give instructors wiggle room to ensure students fully comprehend the covered topics at the current rapid pace educators are forced to utilize. Therefore, it is important to help students find a way to discover all standards in a shorter time frame, and allow teachers to thoroughly educate the class, as well as give each student the chance to be successful. My goal is to promote absolute understanding among the students by the core connection of each subject being taught to one theme.

Teaching one theme to all core subjects at a time will give students an opportunity to comprehend and enhance their knowledge. For example, if a student is reading about “Tornadoes” in Language Arts, they should be able to graph how big and how often tornadoes occur in the Midwest during Math lessons. While studying the scientific nature of tornadoes, the students will be able to gain knowledge of exactly how a tornado forms, map the common locations tornadoes occur, as well as the effects a tornado has on communities through the teachings of Social Studies.
Section II: Literature Review

Abstract

Educators throughout the nation continue to research for new and exciting techniques to teach a variety of subjects to the young minds of the world. Efficiency, determination and exhilarating teaching tactics are the key elements to successful state test results and strong self-esteem amongst the students. Supporters of integrated thematic units know the importance for the students to make connections between subjects, and be able to retain the main idea of each lesson. Integrated thematic units also enhance motivation among the classroom, build critical thinking skills, and increase importance of the subjects to a higher level of interest. There are different ways integrated units can be used in the classroom. For example:

1) In a primary classroom with one educator teaching multiple subjects.

2) In a secondary classroom where teachers stay in close contact with other teachers to help the students and continue to teach by theme.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the positive attributes of an integrated thematic curriculum used in all primary grades, and how the program is best for a variety of students.
The Positive Attributes of an Integrated Thematic Curriculum for the Primary Grades

Introduction

Improving methods to educate the youthful minds of society is a continuous goal for educators. Creating and implementing new techniques to enhance teaching styles and incorporate an “all students” learning method is the main focus of the educational mission. Currently, students are taught subject by subject, covering a variety of topics creating a difficulty to fully comprehend and maintain the knowledge being taught. Therefore instigating integrated thematic curriculums as a way to connect each student into a central teaching style is the future for education.

Integrated curriculums were originally introduced in the 1930’s, but are being reintroduced into the teaching agendas. According to Sandra B. Loughran, “Among the most captivating and exciting classrooms are those where successful thematic work is in progress. In these settings, the ownership of learning is in the hands and minds of the students” (Loughran, 2005, p. 1). Scholars such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, Beane, agree with Loughran’s statement and argue for a stronger presence of stringent interdisciplinary classrooms.

"In education it is far more important to teach the child how to think than to communicate various bits of knowledge to him" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 175). James Beane, a strong advocate for the positive effects on children by teaching integrated curriculums states “when we are confronted in real life with a compelling problem or puzzling situation, we don’t ask which part is mathematics, which part is science, which part is history, and so on. Instead we draw on or seek out knowledge and skill from any and all sources that might be helpful” (Beane, 1991, p. 9). Integrated thematic curriculums are
beneficial for today’s educational system to enhance the student’s mind to think beyond the box.

Qualitative research was conducted in a classroom and consisted of twenty-eight, eleven and twelve year old students. The students were placed into seven groups of four to participate in a cross-curricular unit of Science and Language Arts in an urban school located in Northern California. The students demonstrated high levels of interest and full active participation during the survey. “Analyses across participant structures indicate that students developed and increasingly provided explanations that coherently linked adaptations to environment, as they simultaneously practiced new biological terminology” (Ash, 2006, p. 10).

Instructors are learning integrating thematic units are becoming increasingly successful with students’ learning abilities. This is why it’s important to explain the positive attributes of the program design, as well as addressing the potential setbacks. Integrated thematic units can be more difficult and time consuming than teaching each subject independently. However, it is important for teachers to understand the benefits and long-term goals of implementing an integrated educational program. This literature review addresses the positive effects of an integrated thematic curriculum in the classroom.

**What is an Integrated Thematic Curriculum?**

Thematic units are integrating the core subjects grouped together into one central agenda to help students absorb vital information for longer periods of time; as learning is performance based. During the early 1900’s, integrated thematic curriculum was introduced into the classroom, and since the initiation of the program, the concept has
continuously been revised to better suit the needs of the students. The primary outcome remains the same; students are able to connect with materials, lead and actively participate in in-group discussions, as well as achieve a higher level of motivation across the board.

Jean Piaget and James Beane share similar opinions of integrated curriculums. Jean Piaget supports thematic teachings in his Cognitive Development Theory. “Humans cannot be "given" information which they immediately understand and use. Instead, humans must "construct" their own knowledge. They build their knowledge through experience” (http://viking.coe.uh.edu/~ichen/ebook/et-it/cognitiv.htm).

James Beane argues “integrated curriculum is a way to teach students that attempts to break down barriers between subjects and make learning more meaningful to students. The idea is to teach around themes, or "organizing centers" that students can identify with, such as "The Environment," "Life in School," or more traditional areas like "Myths and Legends" (Beane, 1977, p. 14).

“Thematic teaching can be defined as the process of integrating and linking multiple elements of a curriculum in an ongoing exploration of many different aspects of a topic or subject. It involves a constant interaction between teacher and students and their classroom environment” (Loughran, 2005, p. 1). While analyzing three different opinions from the well respected scholars, integrated thematic curriculum helps students become more involved in school work, teaches how to effectively solve problems, work together as a team, and prepares for real life dealings.

In this day and age, instructors are pressured to teach a larger amount of information in a short amount of time than in previous years. There are 180 standards to
be taught in 90 days to help ensure student’s successfulness during the state standardized testing at the end of the year. This leads teachers to move toward the idea of an integrated thematic curriculum in hopes of “killing two birds with one stone.”

“The movement towards integrated curriculum is a move away from memorization and recitation of isolated facts and figures to more meaningful concepts and the connections between concepts. The twenty-first century requirement for a flexible use of knowledge goes beyond a superficial understanding of multiple isolated events to insights developed by learning that is connected-or integrated” (Lake, 1994, p. 1).

Furthermore, thematic curriculums are commonly used in the upper primary grades to allow for a more productive “team-teaching” style. Kathy Lake gives her definition of “team-teaching” or “shared teaching,” which means “involves two disciplines focused on shared concepts, skills or attitudes” (Lake, 1994, p. 3). On this note, state standards are being taught more effectively and efficiently by combining the standards and core subjects with this thematic approach.

**Positive Effects of an Integrated Thematic Curriculum**

Finding and implementing exciting approaches to carry out tasks is a key element in successfully accomplishing goals. Integrated thematic curriculums have effectively enhanced the educational theme in classrooms across the nation. For example, students are able to verbally announce opinions on what is taught, rather than being told what to expect throughout the day. Motivation and willingness to participate in lesson plans created by the students builds a level of excitement to learn, and ultimately makes the school day worthwhile to absorb information and excited to succeed.
Beane, who is an advocate for integrated curriculums, supports the positive approaches of integrating subjects through one topic. “This system gives them a “voice in curriculum planning” and so they feel more connected to the curriculum, as opposed to a curriculum where the students are told what they will be learning and are passive participants” (Beane, 1991, p. 12).

Educators using this type of program have seen positive results from utilizing the tools of integrated thematic curriculums. Professors Eve Hochwald and Rosemarie Kopacsi developed a qualitative and quantitative research project to examine the impact of an integrated curriculum, known as “New Beginnings.” The project initiates the curriculum, professional development, and student outcomes in the first year (Hochwald & Kopacsi, 1998, p. 1).

The State of New Jersey had 930 active participants consisting of 16 teachers and their students, from 16 different schools utilizing the steps of “New Beginnings,” as well as teaching important subjects independently by traditional means. A controlled group of 500 kindergarteners were taught using the current single subject method, while 430 kindergarteners were educated through the steps of New Beginnings. The focus was to “reduce the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers, and to continue the trend that schools pursue efforts to develop innovative early childhood models with developmentally appropriate performance expectations and more active child initiated early learning experiences” (Hochwald & Kopacsi, 1998, p. 4).

In reading, New Beginnings demonstrated a mean of 89.2% of tested items correct, while the controlled group averaged 83.1%, resulting in a significant difference of 6.1%. Math tests showed a difference of 6.3% comparing results of students taught by
New Beginnings at 88.1% questions answered correctly, to students educated by convectional means resulting in 81.8% items correct (Hochwald & Kopacsi, 1998, p. 16).

Based on the results of the survey, teachers were asked to comment on the effectiveness New Beginnings had on the “professional development; on teaching goals and methods; on assessment of student learning; and benefits on the students” (Hochwald & Kopacsi, 1998, p. 13). According to the educators involved in the project, New Beginnings was a great success. A teacher commented “this year, the learning has come from the children; my classroom is more student-centered. I’ve become more of a facilitator. I do little direct instruction” (Hochwald & Kopacsi, 1998, p. 14).

Overall students’ outcome improved and was proven by test scores, classroom observations and feedback given by the teachers. “The group of New Beginnings definitely outperformed the control group of students in reading and math” (Hochwald & Kopacsi, 1998, p. 16).

Mark Buechler, a respected reporter surveyed 3 elementary schools within the State of Indiana. Qualitative data was collected to explore the positive effects thematic instruction has on students and teachers. The information was collected through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and telephone consultations with a total of 44 principals and superintendents, as well as 809 parent surveys within the Indiana School District. The goal of the research was to evaluate both the implementation and the public’s reception of the first-two years Connecting Learning Assures Successful Students (CLASS), a cooperative learning program within 62 elementary schools in the State of Indiana (Buechler, 1993, p. 1).
“CLASS is a combination of cooperative learning, social skills development, and thematic instruction” (Buechler, 1993, p. 2). Analyzing the findings of collected surveys and interviews for CLASS has a huge impact among the schools that are using the program educational model. Buechler dictates the surveys collected, “78% of the teachers surveyed agreed that CLASS had greatly increased students’ motivation to learn, while 47% agreed that CLASS had greatly increased students’ academic performance” (Buechler, 1993, p. 5). Not only did CLASS have a positive effect on students but it placed a great aspiration upon teachers as well. “For one thing, teachers, with decades of experience, said they felt rejuvenated by CLASS. As one put it, “It’s nice to be excited about something new after twenty-one years of teaching” (Buechler, 1993, p. 5).

Sharing support for the thematic curriculums, Bill Boyle and Joanna Bragg conducted a qualitative research study demonstrating the positive outcomes of educating students through a thematic approach. The analyzed data was collected from 1996 to 2007 from “school sampling and Monitoring Curriculum and Assessment (2005–7) research projects. Although this article focuses on primary school data, the survey comprised an annual curriculum survey of schools and settings across all phases, foundation, primary and secondary within schools in the United Kingdom” (Boyle & Bragg, 2008, p. 8).

The primary focus was the longitudinal study and the styles of teaching courses separately verses the combining subjects. Schools in the United Kingdom taught children by combining subjects, and decided to adjust the educational agenda to teach the necessary subjects independently. During the first six years of the project, there was an increase of learning in Language Arts by only 1.1% within the first two years. While figures revealed a 2.3% increase during the third and forth years. Finally, by the fifth and
sixth year there was no significant increase within Language Arts, but the test scores remained the same. After six years of teaching one-subject at a time, “86% of the teachers asserted time constraints were a problem, while 14% stated that a combination of subjects would be needed to cover more content” (Boyle, B., 2008; Bragg, J., 2008, p. 12).

Starting in 2002, half of the schools being observed reverted back to teaching by combining the subjects. Teachers immediately felt relieved and less pressured to squeeze the agenda’s within a tight schedule. The instructors were spending less time teaching Mathematics and Language Arts, rather than teaching a core topic and covering all subjects.

In the year 2005, 90% of the schools were teaching by integrated curriculum, and demonstrated a dramatic improvement in test scores. “There was an increase of 30% for English taught with at least one other subject. It is interesting that in 2003 cross-curricular English did not report an increase, but English combined with one other subject substantially increased. This perhaps illustrates the complexity of fully integrating English while still meeting the requirements of the NLS” (Boyle, B., 2008; Bragg, J., 2008, p. 16).

Integrated thematic curriculums have also demonstrated helpfulness to the English Language Learners (ELL’s). Helen Warnod, a respected bilingual teacher in Camberwell Primary School in Camberwell, Victoria, writes how “Designing curriculum in this way can provide opportunities for students to see or identify ‘big picture’ ideas in an overcrowded curriculum by transferring knowledge across curriculum areas. Students can then achieve outcomes in meaningful contexts and reflect between their learning and
aspects of the real world” (Warnod, 2002, p. 1). Warnod attempted to teach ELL’s in this manner to lower the amount of time it took them to learn English as their second language. “rich in concepts which will provide many opportunities for “life experiences” they would learn the new language faster” (Warnod, 2002, p. 1). This method was found beneficial to the ELL’s because they had more time to learn each topic through “hands-on” experiences and were immersed in deep conversations with students who already spoke English. “Widen opportunities for learning when teaching and learning content in a second language” (Warnod, 2002, p. 1). After great success with the integrated curriculum program amongst the ELL students she concludes, “that an integrated curriculum program would “maximize their learning of both language and content” (Warnod, 2002, p. 8).

After reviewing several different research studies on the topic of integrating thematic curriculums, it has repeatedly confirmed that the positive effects are substantial and mind blowing. Integrating curriculums has benefited teachers and students across the nation, and the program is beginning to leave a positive mark on more schools every year. It has been stated that teachers are becoming more relieved and less stressed teaching combined subjects. According to Spraker, “meta-analysis of more than 200 research studies… show that teachers in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary teams feel less isolated and more supported” (as cited in Starn, 2008, p. 17). If teachers use this style of “team-teaching” it will bring relief to the classrooms and establish a sense of community that is better for the teachers, as well as the students.
Negative Effects of an Integrated Thematic Curriculum

Positive effects of integrated thematic curriculum are far more superior. However, negative aspects are noticeable and being analyzed to determine what approach would be best to correct the dilemmas. Burton, an advocate for the unit, also studied the setbacks to the program as well. He claims that, “there are two major problems with integrated programs: (1) the potpourri problem (i.e., random samplings of knowledge, lack of focus, and absence of structures of knowledge) and (2) the polarity problem (i.e., territorial claims by specialists in knowledge areas)” (Burton, 2001, p. 1).

It is difficult for some students to master all subjects. Loss of focus for the key learning areas and developing behavioral issues in the process. Phillip H. Phenix, famous philosopher, states, “the difficulty with cross-disciplinary studies is that they offer a temptation to shallow, non-disciplined thinking because of the mixture of methods and concepts involved. They require more knowledge and skill, greater care, and better mastery of materials than do studies within a particular discipline, where the lines of productive thought may be kept more directly and continually in view” (as cited in, Burton, 2001, p. 2).

Paul George, a writer for the Educational Digest, argues against integrated curriculum because he testifies there is no given proof that claims thematic units are as productive as people claim. “There is little evidence Integrated Curriculums present more opportunities for real problems or puzzling situations to motivate or provoke persistence in learners. Excellent teachers have infused traditional curriculum with real-world problems for a century. It is specious to suggest they haven't, or that they could do so much more with disciplinary structures removed” (George, 1996, p. 16).
Planning and organizing the agenda according to the thematic model consumes an excessive amount of valuable time for the teachers. This has resulted in a negative aspect of thematic integrated curriculums. Teachers may only discuss the theme on hand for a week or two with students, but may have spent three to four months with other teachers developing the materials necessary to teach that theme.

Michael Whelan, a teacher of Montclair State University, commented the negative effects to this style of teaching, “one is the amount of time spent on one unit of topic. Even though only four weeks of class time were spent creating their projects, the teachers he observed spent 3 months talking about one project. This means that the students in their classes spent that much time studying only one event” (as cited in, Starn, 2008, p. 17). Whelan fears that this style of teaching will be less helpful to students because the students will not be sufficiently prepared for the end of the year testing.

Grading reports or exams given by integrated instruction can be difficult. Whelan mentioned, “how to you grade imagination, creativity or initiative? While those are all commendable byproducts of the project, they are not what the students are ultimately held accountable for at the end of the year” (as cited in Starn, 2008, p. 17). Establishing an integrated curriculum may be beneficial after the state tests are given and there is more time to teach “hands-on” lessons without fear of receiving low-test scores.

**Conclusion**

After spending a considerable amount of time reading quality literature reviews on the positive and negative effects of an integrated thematic curriculum, it is evident the positive attributes overpower the negative effects. Data leads people to understand that students learning by integrated thematic units have increased test scores, motivation, self-
esteem, focus areas, and a love for school. Teacher communication and staff support have also proven to be a positive effect of the program. Curriculums are created to implement infamous amounts of units with a great turnout amongst students. At the end of every teaching agenda comes a culminating experience, which allows educators to assess each student on the mastery level achieved from the teachings of the current topic of discussion.

Instructors can easily avoid negative effects by ensuring the students learning agenda’s are planned carefully and with the encouragement of other teachers. Procrastination is not a habit for educators to practice while implementing integrated curriculums as the agenda’s take careful planning to guarantee a successful day of education. Due to the amount of positive effects of the integrated thematic units both teachers and students can make education a fun-learning experience.
Section III:

Procedure

Development and Approval of the Project

The thought of my project came to me during EDUC 596, where I had to develop an idea for my Master’s Project. However, the time I spent teaching fifth grade multiple subjects I was frustrated that the school’s “team-teaching” approach was not completely distinguished, as it should have been. Therefore, creating an integrated curriculum seemed near and dear to my heart and this was what I wanted to accomplish. Once I met with Valerie Beltran, instructor of EDUC 596 and submitted the proposal for my project I was approved to create an integrated thematic unit for the primary grades (K-3rd).

How was the Project Developed?

I started the project by making a decision of how I was going to organize my thematic units. I decided to create two thematic units for each month of the year for each grade level. I printed out the California State Standards for each level and for each subject being taught. Then, I began researching all grades’ curriculum materials and time frames where each teacher is allowed to give the necessary district’s assessment tests. After I received all of my valuable information I arranged each unit and began creating lesson plans that fit each subject for each grade level.

Since I am developing an integrated thematic unit for each month of the year, I started with the first month of school. The lesson plans for September are a basic review and ease into the new school year. The first couple of weeks of school students do not have their books and materials, and therefore this is a perfect chance for a teacher to get to know each student. The teacher will be able to determine where students are successful
the most, and where they need extra help. The lessons match the standards accurately, and can be used by any teacher choosing to do so. The rest of the lesson plans were designed around the school’s curriculum materials and standards to have each child ready for the STAR test at the end of the year. All lesson plans are organized inside a binder by grade level and month. All matching materials needed to fulfill the unit are with each lesson plan. Any teacher will be able to pick up the binder and be ready to go with a successful lesson in no time.

**Who was involved with the project?**

I used the Houghton-Mifflin Language Arts reading materials as a pacing guideline, and matched the rest of the subjects to the theme of what was being taught in the Language Arts Unit. Even though, the Language Arts curriculum was not designed to be integrated, it was the easiest way to adapt the other subjects being taught with the Language Arts program. Since I started with the beginning of the Language Arts reading program, it was simple to have the students ready to take the school district’s assessment tests at the end of each semester.

**Implementation**

Since I began working on this project, I have not had a chance to use it in the classroom. I created the project to help all teachers, including myself, to plan decent lessons that follow the curriculum and state standards. All students need connections to be able to establish and retain vital information to be successful on all levels. This project will come in handy during the school year to teach by theme and have children be involved and enthused with their learning. Team teaching is really important to have all students on the same level, and therefore this project can be tailored to all teachers’ needs
and ways of teaching. Since all lesson plans follow the standards and school’s curriculum, this project can be used right away and on the very first day of school for all grade levels. Every lesson has master sheets to be copied and used, laminated charts and art projects for examples, and detailed step-by-step lesson plans for easy use. Books and videos may be purchased through the school’s library or bought and kept for personal use. The school even has websites that allow teachers to download interesting videos and pictures for informational purposes only.
Section IV: Evaluation

Once I completed the long journey of finishing up my Master’s Creative Project, I met with Ms. Janet Bertoldi, Principal of Alice Shaw Elementary School, and Mrs. Gwyn Kelly, a high school math teacher to evaluate my hard work. Ms. Bertoldi has been in the educational field for 23 years in the Santa Barbara County, and Mrs. Kelly has been teaching for 21 years. Both educators have been around for awhile to see thematic units in action verses the current educational curriculum.

Before Ms. Bertoldi became a principal, she was a 3rd grade teacher and taught each subject separately. She felt her students did not receive the information that she was trying to get across as easily as she hoped. She did mention to me that she would have loved to use thematic units while teaching. She feels that her students might have performed at a higher level if she did. She agrees with the idea of combining the subjects to perform at mastery level. Now, that she is a principal she is, of course, always finding ways to bring up every student’s CST scores to a higher level. She explained to me that she will be offering the idea to her staff to try and begin teaching to this method to see if it will help prepare the students for the STAR tests. She was also amazed on how many lesson plans and instant activities were created. She was definitely impressed with my dedication to the educational environment.

Mrs. Kelly has been teaching high school for 21 years and has two young boys in the primary grades. She is very active in her son’s education and follows the standards closely. She was able to evaluate my project based on her experiences with thematic teaching in the single subjects, but also through the development of her boys. She was
very interested and amazed on how detailed the project is, and how easy it would be for her to automatically begin teaching the themes. Mrs. Kelly told me that this project would be easy to adapt to all grade levels, even for her high school students.

Overall, my hard work and dedication paid off and I feel very confident that the thematic units for the grades k-3rd will be very beneficial and accepted among the other primary grade teachers.
References


http://viking.coe.uh.edu/~ichen/ebook/et-it/cognitiv.htm
