

ENGAGING MINDS IN Social Studies Classrooms

THE SURPRISING POWER OF **JOY**

JAMES A. EREKSON

Edited by
Michael F. Opitz & Michael P. Ford

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Introduction

It seems to me that most students are not born with intrinsic motivation for social studies; methods of attending closely to abstract structures and evidence must be taught, modeled, and applied. When I talk to people who love history, for example, they will often reference a specific class and teacher who helped to “wake them up” to history—which suggests, unfortunately, that up until that point other teachers had put them to sleep.

A joyful approach to teaching social studies embraces the fact that student motivation and engagement are at the top of the curriculum. Therefore, when planning social studies lessons, teachers need to address these affective aspects of learning, to be able to assess and discuss both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes as aspects of student growth.

Considering Noncognitive Skills

Research in neuroscience has taught us that there are connections between the deep, old areas of the brain (the hippocampus and amygdala) that house our sense of fear, safety, risk, and enjoyment and the newer surface areas of the brain that control our problem solving, rational thought, and planning (Medina, 2008). The “thinking” areas of the brain are inextricably wired to the “feeling” areas of the brain; that is, cognitive memory is connected to affective experience. The implication is that if educators hope to achieve powerful

learning, they must enlist learners' minds and hearts simultaneously. The joyful learning framework offers an opportunity to do just that.

Overview

In *Engaging Minds in the Classroom: The Surprising Power of Joy* (2014), Michael Opitz and Michael Ford present a framework for joyful teaching and learning that can be implemented in all content areas. The framework comprises motivational generalizations, factors to assess and evaluate when creating a joyful learning environment, and areas in which to promote learning. In this book, I discuss how to implement the joyful learning framework in the social studies classroom.

In Chapter 1, I outline foundational definitions and explain how joyful learning applies to social studies, providing information teachers can use to get the ante on engagement and motivation and stimulate student interest in all areas of social studies. This information also can help teachers frame discussions about joyful learning as needed in professional development situations, including discussions with other teachers and administrators.

Educators who want to enable joyful learning need an organized vision for how they and their students spend time in school. So, in Chapter 2, I discuss five elements that must be assessed in any effort to promote joyful learning in social studies:

- Learners,
- Teachers,
- Texts and materials,
- Assessments, and
- Schoolwide configurations.

Chapter 3 is the bread-and-butter chapter, with suggestions on what to do and how to do it. I provide some practical suggestions for implementing joyful learning in social studies classrooms; each suggestion aligns with principles of joyful learning as outlined in Chapter 1 and the elements discussed in Chapter 2, and prioritizes student engagement and motivation. Chapter 3 is intended to support teachers in applying the principles of joyful learning

in planning specific classroom activities—while understanding why they are doing what they are doing.

In Chapter 4, I discuss some of the contemporary demands educators face, especially policy demands that can make teachers feel less than joyful about prospects for learners, including:

- Response to Intervention,
- Achievement gaps and the need to accelerate student achievement,
- The Common Core State Standards and national social studies standards, and
- Accountability and assessment.

Connecting with diverse learners, particularly English language learners (ELLs), is a focus of the *Engaging Minds* series; throughout this book, you'll find teaching tips that suggest specific strategies and highlight research on how to support ELLs in social studies.

Conclusion

I believe that teachers can provide joyful social studies learning experiences while actively responding to contemporary demands. However, sometimes the optimism and emotion involved in the topic of joyful learning is seen as fluff and frill. Despite the common sense of joyful learning, despite research findings that clearly integrate joyful learning with cognitive academic outcomes, some continue to be skeptical of an approach to learning and learners that involves what they perceive as the “touchy-feely” aspects of human thinking. Ignoring these affective aspects of learners and learning, however, is ultimately detrimental to the learning process. Indeed, one might even attribute many of the educational failures of the past 60 years to a myopic focus on cognitive and behavioral learning and the rational and empirical aspects of content (Ravitch, 2010).

More recently, researchers have begun to return to noncognitive aspects of academic growth. A team from the University of Chicago published a monograph correlating noncognitive aspects of education with academic outcomes (Farrington et al., 2012). One correlation is between mindset and

performance (see Dweck, 2006): An academic mindset includes a sense of belonging, belief in one's effort, belief that one can succeed, and value of the work. Each of these aspects is more related to research on motivation and engagement than it is to cognitive processes such as information processing—and each is a component of joyful learning.

Opitz and Ford's (2014) definition of *joy* encompasses more than simple fun or entertainment. As I discuss in Chapter 1, learners will experience more enjoyment, feel more involved, and buy into their educational experiences when their schoolwork is oriented to joyful learning. Fun and entertainment may be products of joyful learning, but they are not the goal.

I join the other authors and editors of these books on engaging minds in adopting a broad view of joyful learning, reaching through research and scientific inquiry into philosophy. Our most powerful and involved moments with learners are always punctuated by a kind of joy, whether this stems from feelings connected to competence in asking questions, from interest in the content, or from students forging an identity based on the kind of learning they do in our classrooms. In order to create effective lesson and unit plans, to use accurate assessment instruments, and to present content effectively, we need to incorporate what is known about the noncognitive aspects of learning. My purpose in writing this book is to show social studies teachers how to organize and structure the work of joyful learning to benefit their students; my goal is for powerful and involved learning moments to feel less like a matter of luck and more like a matter of purpose and design.