

Qualitative Study Finds Core Knowledge Good for Teacher, Student Morale

Merri Holly Gadd

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This study examines the impact of Core Knowledge implementation at a poor rural school in northern Mississippi. At the time of the study, 84% of the students were African-Americans and 95% received free breakfast and lunch.

Gadd observed the school lives of several third grade teachers and their students. During the course of the year, she made scheduled and unscheduled visits to the classrooms, interviewed teachers and students, and monitored teacher journals and student portfolios. Gadd's study concentrated heavily on the motivation of teachers and concluded that "teachers are motivated when they are learning themselves, and when they see evidence of how much their students are learning." She saw evidence that both kinds of learning were fostered in the Core Knowledge school.

Teachers were enthusiastic about Core Knowledge, as the following excerpts from their journals show:

I am very happy to be involved in Core Knowledge. I feel that I am being educated as well as my students! I am sure my students enjoy Core Knowledge much more than our old ways which were very boring. They love the trade books and are eager to read.

I've always felt like that there were...children in our grade that were getting overlooked because they had few abilities and all, but I have seen so many of these children come out, it just absolutely scares me that it's been overlooked all this time.

This is an absolutely wonderful program. I hope to see more and more schools, as well as teachers, implement it. The most encouraging thing about Core Knowledge is being able to observe the students' learning and progress. The last two years have made such a difference in both my teaching and my students' performance. This is the way I plan to continue teaching.

This is the best thing that has happened to education. It has energized me as a teacher. It can be compared to a revival. Of course, it's not new. Better schools have always taught this to an extent. This is a wonderful chance for children with very few advantages. Teaching Core Knowledge is not easy but the rewards make it worthwhile.

I think Core Knowledge is wonderful. I have found that teaching Core Knowledge adds tremendous excitement and motivation.

The teachers noted that students were able to learn the Core Knowledge material and also connect it to their own lives. One of the Core Knowledge history topics for grade 3 is Ancient Rome. Several teachers were surprised and delighted to discover students drawing on information they had learned about Ancient Rome in unexpected ways. For example, during a bus trip to Memphis, students began pointing out examples of Roman architecture they were passing. The teacher journals record other, similar episodes:

One [student] told me Monday that his preacher was preaching about things that happened during the time of the Romans. He recognized several things and even told me the book and chapter the sermon was about. How wonderful... .

[Students] have more confidence because... they know these things, and they know that...they know a lot more than their parents about what they are studying. They're always coming in and saying they told their parents

something. I had one girl whose brother was in college — he was studying Roman civilization. She taught him something he didn't know.

Teachers also noted that students were able to make connections between different topics within the Core Knowledge curriculum:

It's fascinating to see the students voluntarily comparing and contrasting. We have studied Roman & Viking people and are now studying the N.A. Indians. Students have picked up the differences & likenesses of the Indian tribes but are also comparing/contrasting the Indians to the Romans/Vikings. Examples :(1) The Indians, Romans, & Vikings all used shields in warfare; (2) the Vikings and Kwakiutts lived in long houses; (3) The Vikings and Kwakiutts used boats as their main transportation.

I am amazed at the questions the students are asking. They are comparing the Romans and the Vikings! "Did the Vikings have a republic or kings? Did they speak Latin? Did they build big temples and use the three types of columns? My children didn't do this last year.

Gadd noted that many teachers developed art activities and hands-on projects based on the Core Knowledge topics, and many of the resulting art projects were displayed on the classroom walls. She observed in various classrooms a mural of the solar system, pictorial pages of words learned in the Rome unit, a cardboard model of an Eastern Woodland Indian long house, and numerous other projects. Teachers also reported that students seemed more eager to do independent reading than they had been in previous years. As for students, their comments were also positive:

This year was great. I like it very much when we were studying about Native Americans, Black history, and slavery. We got very smart this year by studying hard.

This is the last day of school. I am sad and happy. I liked prehistory, Romans, and Black history. I want to become a scientist. I am all ready a good detective.

This year I liked studying about Indians, Dinosaurs, and The Colonies. But most of all I like the dinosaurs the best.

In her concluding section, Gadd talks about how her study changed her own ideas about education. She also presents a list of key components for successful implementation of Core Knowledge, including the following.

- Intensive training should be provided. While the leaders at the school attended two workshops and the national conference prior to implementation, some teachers felt the need for more training for all teachers. One teacher noted, "We needed to have more workshops...not by our own personnel, but by people from other schools where it had been successful in the classroom."
- Teamwork and collaborative planning time for the teachers proved to be a vital component for successful program implementation. Gadd reports collaboration provided the third-grade teachers with "support, motivation, acknowledgment, ideas, and a group of peers with whom to cry, laugh, and to celebrate successes with." She goes on to say how important collaboration was in keeping up motivation throughout the year.
- Strong administrative support must be provided for participating teachers and students. "The principal," says, Gadd, "must become an important team member in the classroom by coming in to see how things are progressing, looking at student work, discussing important program issues with the teachers, and providing encouragement and support."