

Excerpt from Rachel Poliner’s “MAKING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS: CURRICULUM INFUSION” in T. S. Jones and R. O. Compton (Eds.) (2003). *Kids Working it Out: Stories and Strategies for Making Peace in Our Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Examples of Infusion

So what does infusion look like? The following sections provide examples of infusion in core curricula.

English, language arts and drama

Many literature and language arts teachers see the connections quite easily between CRE, SEL and learning to read and write after workshops on the concepts and skills. They may already know that studying the plot of a story is a matter of observing the escalation and de-escalation of the conflict. . They see that students can deepen their study of characters by identifying characters’ emotions, understanding their points of view, and observing their choices and communication styles. Students can rewrite dialogue to demonstrate the effect of communication choices on relationships and plot. They can write in journals about their own experiences in similar situations. The options really are infinite. Following are several examples, starting in Kindergarten.

A kindergarten teacher chose to focus on emotions, believing that her students were developmentally ready for a wider array of vocabulary for describing how they felt. She chose a picture book each week in which one or more emotions was evident. I observed her class during their lesson on the word “afraid.” She used *Sheila Rae, the Brave*¹, by Kevin Henkes. In the beginning of the story Sheila Rae is never afraid; she is so brave that she is cavalier. Sheila Rae rides her bicycle with no hands and growls at stray dogs. The teacher asked her students if they do these things. They said no, they would be afraid to do them. The teacher discussed with her students that sometimes feeling afraid can help you know what is and isn’t safe.

The story continued. Sheila Rae’s younger sister, Louise, is frequently afraid. One day, when Sheila Rae, in her bravado, wanders off only to become lost and desperate, Louise has followed her, stayed vigilant the whole time, and knows the way home. Louise was afraid but that didn’t stop her. She overcame her fear. The teacher engaged students in a discussion of times when they had been afraid and helped them identify what they did to overcome the fear. The students drew their stories and finished the sentence “I felt afraid when _____, so I _____.” Over the course of the year each child created a booklet of his or her own stories on many different emotions.

This teacher’s lessons introduced children to feelings words and related those words to the children’s own experiences. Through weekly exploration, she helped them know that emotions change and that people can make choices even when they feel strong emotions. She further reinforced their development of emotional vocabulary with art projects, feelings check-ins, and many other practices.

¹ Henkes, Kevin. 1996. *Sheila Rae, The Brave*. New York City: Mulberry (William Morrow & Co.).

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A third grade teacher can use *The Summer My Father Was Ten*², by Pat Brisson, to engage students in a discussion about taking responsibility for one’s actions, dealing with feelings of guilt, and befriending someone from a different generation and culture. She could follow that with *Mrs. Katz and Tush*³, by Patricia Polacco, in which an elderly Jewish widow and a young African-American boy become friends while sharing care of a cat. Through their visits they realize that they have other things in common besides their commitment to the cat, and the reader learns about similarities in Jewish-American and African-American experiences.

Fiction is especially helpful in CRE because it touches the mind and the heart. When students read *Marianthe’s Story*⁴, by Aliko, they cannot help but understand more about emigrating to the US and attending school before being able to speak English, while they feel more empathy for a child in that circumstance. The same is true for *Thank You, Mr. Falker*⁵, by Patricia Polacco, the story of Patricia’s own struggle with dyslexia as a child. Both of these stories are also useful for students in identifying bullying behavior, considering the motivation of bullies, and imagining possible interventions.

It is important to note that an infusion approach in language arts is not merely about choosing and reading books with a social message or a conflict nicely resolved. Simply reading the book aloud and moving on to other classroom tasks does not necessarily encourage conflict resolution education. Teachers who want to infuse CRE into their literature lessons have crafted careful questions for whole class discussions, small, guided reading groups, and individual journal reflections that encourage students to connect the story to various CRE concepts or skills.

The infusion lessons can become increasingly sophisticated as children read longer books. *The Cay*⁶, by Theodore Taylor, is a wonderful book for grade 5 or 6. Students hear the main character, a white boy named Phillip, change his images of war and people. As this World War II story starts, Phillip thinks war is exciting until he witnesses a ship’s destruction. His image of war is changed as is what he believes counts as bravery. Students can observe closely what interactions lead Phillip to lose his stereotypes of Timothy, a West Indian man. *The Cay* also offers memorable scenes in which Phillip has every reason to feel desperate and to give up his struggle, and instead he overcomes these setbacks. There are crucial lessons for young readers about finding one’s own motivation, facing enormous obstacles and building resiliency.

I could write an entire chapter solely on Mildred Taylor’s novel, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*⁷, often read in middle school. All of the concepts and skills mentioned so far can be applied to this story, and there are some additional opportunities as well. If students are asked to identify the emotions of one or more of the villainous characters they can build empathy precisely when empathy feels like a stretch. If they are filling in

² Brisson, Pat. 1999. *The Summer My Father Was Ten*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.

³ Polacco, Patricia. 1992. *Mrs. Katz and Tush*. New York City: Bantam Doubleday Dell.

⁴ Aliko. 1998. *Marianthe’s Story*. New York City: Mulberry (William Morrow & Co.).

⁵ Polacco, Patricia. 1998. *Thank You, Mr. Falker*. New York City: Philomel Books (Putnam).

⁶ Taylor, Theodore. 1969. *The Cay*. New York City: Avon Books (Doubleday & Co.).

⁷ Taylor, Mildred. 1976. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. New York City: Puffin (Penguin).

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their perception of various characters’ points of view, they see how different perspectives affect conflict. Further they can see that sometimes the most courageous action is not a loud escalating behavior that uses power over people; sometimes it is an act of sacrifice that restores peace.

A ninth grade teacher reported to me how her students had outlined the escalating conflict in *Romeo and Juliet*⁸ in an enormous graph on the chalkboard. Another high school English teacher used *Of Mice and Men*⁹, by John Steinbeck, to expand emotions vocabulary (important at any age level) by inferring what characters are feeling (since a feeling word is rarely mentioned in the text). Characterization can be explored by analyzing the conflict styles, for example, when the characters argue over whether or not the dog should be killed.

High school students who read the mystery *Sacred Clowns*¹⁰ by Tony Hillerman will learn about Navajo culture and different forms of justice. In the book, Officer Chee feels caught in the tension of upholding the law and its system of punishment, and upholding another form of justice that restores balance and makes amends. This and other novels in which characters are sorting out how to make a situation “right,” are opportunities to consider restorative justice.

Here’s an example from a drama class. A middle school teacher engaged his students in writing scripts of typical early adolescent conflicts, using those scripts to practice writing and saying I messages in particular. Students need practice to internalize a new behavior, especially one that is supposed to be useful at life’s challenging moments. Drama performances, by definition, offer that kind of practice. This teacher then videotaped the performances so other classes could use them as discussion starters.

There is an infinite array of infusion opportunities in literature and language arts. This tiny sampling barely scratches the surface. Several published guides and series are now available connecting CRE to specific stories, and these materials can be helpful models, but teachers who learn the foundation concepts of CRE and SEL can infuse those concepts into the study of any piece of literature they choose.

Some districts have involved parents in their approaches to literature infusion. In this way, the students will get reinforcement of the concepts at home, and parents will improve their own conflict skills. Books can be chosen for a parents’ workshop in which characters who are parents deal effectively and creatively with conflicts. For example, introducing the terms “positions” and “interests” and then applying those to *First Pink Light*¹¹, by Eloise Greenfield, can open a discussion about dealing with power issues with children.

History

It is fairly obvious that studying national and international conflicts is, in and of itself, part of conflict resolution education. But social studies is not just the study of major events, dates, places and actions. It is also preparation for living in a democracy.

⁸ Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*.

⁹ Steinbeck, John. 1937. *Of Mice and Men*. New York City: Penguin Books.

¹⁰ Hillerman, Tony. 1993. *Sacred Clowns*. New York City: HarperCollins Publishers.

¹¹ Greenfield, Eloise. 1976. *First Pink Light*. New York City: Black Butterfly (Writers and Readers Pub.).

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Many of the creative techniques that teachers employ in social studies education are or can be CRE-related, whether or not the teachers already identify them as such. Explicitly linking CRE skills offers understanding of escalation, motivation, decision-making and a study of alternative courses of action. Moreover, CRE infused into social studies classes encourages respect for different views, develops dialogue, and provides real life examples of restorative justice and experiences in community problem-solving.

For example, fourth grade students studied a local community problem in which different groups wanted different things. Students interviewed family members and neighbors to learn about their points of view, and then brainstormed options. Third graders in another classroom did role-plays of people invested in and affected by Christopher Columbus’ voyages. (A good literature connection would then be to read *Morning Girl*¹², by Michael Dorris.)

Oral history interviews, used by many teachers, make history personal for students, help build listening and questioning skills, and deepen students’ understanding of one’s place in history. Whether the interviews relate to immigration, civil rights, women’s rights, the labor movement, or any other aspect of modern history, students from upper elementary through high school can appreciate individual choices about how to act on an issue, how to be patient through long-term change processes, and how contexts and choices change over time.

In a high school world history course, which included the study of world religions, one teacher chose to make her comparison charts come alive by inviting four people to class, each representing a different religion. In a rotation station structure, small groups of students interviewed them. In that structure, rather than listening to a panel of speakers, students had more active and intimate interactions, and more practice questioning and listening.

Infusion of specific CRE concepts can highlight certain dynamics of history. For example, in his unit on the Russian Revolution, a middle school teacher’s students analyzed the positions and interests of the peasants and of the bureaucrats, giving them a deeper understanding of the motivation of individuals and groups. Infusing positions, interests and brainstorming into the study of the American Revolution is also useful.¹³

A high school teacher had her advanced placement European history students identify the conflict styles used by leaders at the Treaty of Versailles. She reported that applying conflict styles concepts to this study gave her students much more insight into why some promises were kept and others were not.

There are also dedicated materials that connect CRE to social studies. *Talking Peace: A Vision for the Next Generation*¹⁴, by former president Jimmy Carter, offers primary source material at a middle school reading level. Students read about peace-making skills that have failed and others that have succeeded, their application to the international conflicts and interpersonal conflicts that make negotiations and mediations challenging. Former President Carter’s thoughts about historical conflicts, his

¹² Dorris, Michael. 1992. *Morning Girl*. New York City: Hyperion.

¹³ See the web site: www.ncip.org for the American Revolution lesson by William Galloway and others.

¹⁴ Carter, Jimmy. 1993. *Talking Peace: A Vision for the Next Generation*. New York City: Dutton Children’s Books.

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comparison of global perspectives on human rights, and his personal stories about negotiations allow students to connect skills they have been practicing to the larger world.

*Conflict in Context: Understanding Local to Global Security*¹⁵ offers an in-depth study of the dynamics of conflict and significant skill-building lessons that can be applied to many regions, periods and issues. Activities on security in students’ immediate environments build up to case studies of real international human rights issues, such as land mines, free trade, debt relief, and child soldiers, helping students connect the concept of security from a local to a global focus.

Another curriculum, *Dialogue: Turning Controversy into Community*¹⁶, highlights that the very way in which we conduct public discourse on controversial issues connects CRE to curriculum and classroom practice. A middle or high school social studies course with a unit on debate can offer an alternative unit on dialogue. Through debate students gain skills in critical thinking and advocacy, but the goal within the debate is winning. The goals of a dialogue would be learning rather than winning, building relationships rather than enemy images, and deepening understanding rather than polarizing an issue. Dialogue as a structured form of discourse on controversial, complex issues promotes critical thinking, but of a different nature. Students learn to listen in order to understand, instead of listening in order to rebut. They learn to ask questions that uncover assumptions and respect varying interests, instead of asking questions that attack. They are engaged in identifying their own assumptions and encouraged to stretch their thinking to embrace multiple points of view.

Mathematics and Science

It is often a surprise to teachers that even mathematics offers opportunities to infuse conflict resolution concepts and skills. Particularly within an interdisciplinary unit or course, there are many connections to be made. Such activities have the added advantage of helping students see that math skills really do relate to their lives. For example, after each major census count of US population, representatives in the US House of Representatives are reapportioned. Math and social studies students may find the often dry civics lesson on reapportionment to be much more interesting when it is a math puzzle that involves controversy related to political parties, urban and poor communities, states with large or small populations, and regions that are growing versus declining.¹⁷

A fifth grade teacher organizes his math curriculum to build on students’ interests, such as connecting math to issues of equality and fairness, using math to uncover

¹⁵ Mertz, Gail and Carol Miller Lieber. 2000. *Conflict in Context: Understanding Local to Global Security* Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.

¹⁶ Poliner, Rachel A. and Jeffrey Benson. 1997. *Dialogue: Turning Controversy into Community*. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.

¹⁷ Gross, Fred E., Patrick Morton, and Rachel A. Poliner. 1993. *The Power of Numbers: A Teacher’s Guide to Mathematics in a Social Studies Context*. Cambridge MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.

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stereotypes and to understand history.¹⁸ Students can conduct polls, or classroom or community censuses. They can collect evidence of data being used to support opposing viewpoints. All of these activities encourage students to see that math is part of the language people use if they are to participate in solving complex problems.

Like math, interdisciplinary science units offer innumerable opportunities to identify different points of view, look at questions of fairness and justice, and consider how communities act to solve problems. Any environmental issue can involve research, interviews, role-plays, dialogues and problem-solving. Some of the same kinds of projects mentioned earlier can be useful in science, such as oral history interviews. For example, in a study of systems for dealing with garbage, students can interview relatives or neighbors who are older and/or from another country and find out how long they kept things, how much they threw out, where it went, and so on.¹⁹

Students are likely to find the news more interesting as they notice that science usually involves conflicting viewpoints. Certainly, current topics including anything related to genetics, energy use, nutrition or other complex issues will offer practice and application of CRE skills.

Changes in technology throughout history offer another approach to case studies. The story of how longitude was finally determined, for instance, is an epic story combining history and science, of individuals fighting institutions and persevering despite setbacks.²⁰

¹⁸ Peterson, Bob. “Teaching Math Across The Curriculum.” Milwaukee: *Rethinking Schools*, Fall 1995, Vol. 10, No. 1.

¹⁹ Ballin, Amy, Jeffrey Benson and Lucile Burt. 1993. *Trash Conflicts: A Science and Social Studies Curriculum on the Ethics of Disposal*. Cambridge MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.

²⁰ Sobel, Dava. 1995. *Longitude*. New York City: Walker Publishing Company.