

Third Grade - TCi Social Studies

After carefully reviewing TCi's third-grade social studies curriculum, I have assessed it to be a confusing "info dump" of factoids relating to scattershot topics in a manner inconsistent with the intellectual level of 8-year-olds.

The following pages will explain why...

As an introduction, Lesson One of Unit One is understandably general and accomplishes its purpose fairly well. "The Four Core Social Sciences" are defined as:

- 1) Economics
- 2) Geography
- 3) Civics
- 4) History

I wrongly assumed that this introduction also seeks to provide a preview (or an outline) for the way the rest of the book is organized.

My first concern arose when – in the section titled "Study Your State: The First People in Your State" – the term, archaeologist, is used with **no prior definition**. There is **no listing for archaeology in the index** either.

Later in Lesson One of Unit One, it came as a surprise to read that third-grade students are expected to embark upon a research project: "[Write] several questions about your state's first people on index cards. You will try to answer these questions through research..."

Does tasking 8-year-olds with research make sense so early in the school year?

Of even more concern was a subsection of Unit One, Lesson One, which is titled: "Library and Information Literacy Skills." This section entails a discussion of "Sources."

I find it VERY PROBLEMATIC:

First, the ensuing discussion is **well beyond the academic level of students new to third grade**. Please consider this excerpt from the text (italics mine):

“Which secondary sources are the best? To figure out which secondary sources are best, ask yourself these three questions: (1) Who is the author? (2) Is this source new or old? (3) Why did the author write this source? Make sure that the secondary sources you use are written by good authors. The author should be an expert on your research topic. It is also important that the author is not biased. Biased authors can leave out important information. They may try to convince you that their opinions are facts. It is also better to use new sources, rather than older sources. New sources have newer information. Newer information is more reliable than older information. Older information may be incorrect. A good secondary source should also be objective. That means that it is simply giving you the facts. Objective sources do not reveal the author’s opinion, try to convince you to think a certain way, or try to change your opinion. Authors can write to give you facts or to convince you that their opinion is best. You want to create your own opinions.”

How is this age-appropriate for third graders?

- How are third graders supposed to know who is “an expert” on their research topic?
- How are third graders supposed to know if an author is trying “to convince you that his/her opinions are facts?”
- Adults have a difficult time deciding if secondary sources are “objective... simply giving you the facts.” Why are children entering third grade tasked with that harrowing feat?

OPTION: An interesting online curriculum for third graders approaches the matter differently – more simply and with more interaction. It asks students a series of questions like these:

Which sentence states a **fact**?

Bill Gates was a founder of Microsoft.

Computers make life better for people.

Which sentence states a **fact**?

The state of Hawaii is located in the Pacific Ocean.

Hawaii is too far from the other states.

A second serious problem with the section titled “Sources” is that it misleads students into thinking that new sources are better than older sources. This is simplistic, often wrong, and biased. In fact, **it exhibits the very bias that the CTi authors warn students against.**

In a subsequent section titled “Websites and the Internet,” students are instructed to place their trust in websites that end with .gov and .edu. Please carefully read the following quote from the book:

“... we need to know who wrote the website. Are they an expert? Websites that end with ‘.edu’ belong to schools or colleges. Usually, .edu websites are reliable. Make sure the information on the website was posted by a teacher, not a student. Websites that end with ‘.gov’ are government websites. Government websites are very reliable.”

“Government websites are very reliable.” ... **Might that not indicate a bias on the part of the CTi authors?**

In Section 7 – titled “Organize Your Information” – third graders are told to “have fun” with their research project because if they’re bored, their audience will be bored too. This message is followed up with instructions to “add something ... a picture, graph, map, timeline, or artifact.”

I would like to point out that nearly each of these examples – graph, map, timeline – warrants a separate lesson; yet the curriculum does not dedicate space to helping third graders understand what a graph and timeline are (though it does feature the profile of a cartographer). Nevertheless, students are not actively engaged in making a map – much less a graph or a timeline. How are third graders supposed to include visuals without first understanding what they are and then understanding how to create them?

Clearly, this section is not targeted to the needs of 8-year-olds, who will feel lost and overwhelmed. I predict that this will invariably lead to taking academic shortcuts, like cutting-and-pasting downloadable visuals (produced by strangers), and doing so will add nothing to the children’s intellectual development. On the contrary, it will encourage a bad habit of mindlessly cutting-and-pasting other people’s work.

In Unit One, Lesson Two (titled Exploring Regions of the United States), the introduction lists the “five themes of geography” – location, place, human-environmental interaction, movement, and regions.

In the subsection titled “location and direction,” there is an explanation of globes and maps: “Globes are round like Earth... To use a map, you need to know the four cardinal directions. North is the direction toward the North Pole...” Etc.

In the next subsection titled “Scales and Symbols,” the text explains: “A short distance on a map represents a much greater distance on Earth... Color is another important map symbol. The color blue usually stands for water.”

The content in these subsections is good – NECESSARY, BASIC, & AGE-APPROPRIATE. However, these two subsections stand in stark contrast to content put forth in the previous lesson. There is a confounding inconsistency in the level of content sophistication throughout TCI’s third-grade social studies curriculum.

In a subsequent subsection titled “Regions in the United States,” the text reads:

“The features in a region can affect the people living there. For example, the Midwest is mostly made up of flat plains covered with rich soil. So, many people who live there are farmers. People can also affect the environment in good ways and bad. Farmers in the Midwest, for instance, might protect the environment by growing crops on terraces to prevent erosion. But they might also use pesticides that can pollute soil.”

The above paragraph struck me as an odd use of space. The rest of this section is very general. It could have used more examples to help clarify important concepts... but, instead, the author(s) chose to insert an environmental angle. That wouldn’t be so problematic were it not for the fact that this section **skims over some of the main points it is trying to make** about specific regions of the U.S. As an introduction to a subsection within Unit 2, **it feels flimsy and incoherent.**

Furthermore, the nature of specific words defined within this section point to the pedagogical inconsistency of this curriculum. Consider some key words defined within this lesson; they are very basic: climate, humid, inland, plateau, basin.

On the one hand, the text defines words like “climate,” “humid” and “basin” for 8-year-olds. It tells them that the “color blue [on a map] generally stands for water.” This is arguably age-appropriate.

But on the other hand, the same text expects 8-year-olds to discern whether

authors of secondary sources are “experts in their fields,” “unbiased” and “objective.” This is clearly NOT age-appropriate.

The inconsistency of expectations in this curriculum is of grave concern. An incoherency of content is also evident throughout the textbook...

As I continued to read the textbook, I became increasingly alarmed by the disjointed, random nature of its content. It **reads like a travelog**, stringing together tidbits of information about different places across the United States. It devotes a mere 1-3 sentences to an idea before introducing a new idea. Hence, my earlier reference to this curriculum being an **INFO DUMP**. Here are some additional cases in-point:

- Unit One, Lesson Two, the subsection titled “Explore: Earth and Its People” ... This section is a **confounding montage of snippets** describing places in the world and people who inhabit them. It is interesting but goes into absolutely no depth, and leaves me feeling like I just watched a “Top 10” YouTube video. It is a shallow presentation of LOTS of information that I believe won’t “stick” in the heads of third graders. There is a **LACK OF FOCUS. By trying to squeeze MORE information onto the page, I believe the lesson conveys LESS meaning.**
- Unit One, Lesson Three, the subsection titled “Settling in Your State” ... **This subsection is disjointed.** It starts off by talking about immigration from other countries. Then it asks if the student’s state has “restaurants that serve Chinese, Indian or Mexican food.” This lesson mentions ethnic restaurants repeatedly, presumably as something third-graders can relate to... but in so doing, **it stereotypes immigrants as restaurant owners.** The section then switches gears and challenges students to create a marketing pitch that will attract people to move to their state.
- Unit One, Lesson Three, the sub-section titled “A Nation of Immigrants” ... This subsection **covers so much ground with so little detail that the information becomes a blur.** One thing that stands out, however, is the repeated **emphasis on “nativism” and discrimination. The takeaway: America isn’t nice to immigrants.**
- Unit One, Lesson Three - Explore #3: The History of the Midwest ... **This subsection is completely disorganized.** It starts off citing Native American tribes in the Midwest. Then, it diverges to Sacagawea and Lewis and Clark’s expedition to the Pacific. Then, it talks about Canada. It loops back to the Midwest and talks about fur trading. It talks about the

Homestead Act. Transportation. Department stores. Theodore Roosevelt. The Rough Riders. Louis L'Amour. Lawrence Welk... **In 22 VERY SHORT PARAGRAPHS, this section IS ALL OVER THE PLACE.** (I didn't see any constructive activities to help third graders make sense of this deluge of data.)

- Unit One, Lesson Three - Explore: Native Americans, Then and Now ... **This section begins with references to “legal relationships and treaties.” *I'm not sure how third-graders are expected to understand this.* This section does not teach children about the Native Americans but rather focuses almost exclusively about the white man's treatment of them. It paints the white man as ruthless without noting that many native American tribes were also ruthless to other native Americans.**
- Unit Two, Lesson 1 - Students are taken on “a train tour:” of the Northeast. The first stop is West Quoddy in the eastern corner of Maine. This section also reads – at best – like a travel guide that leaps from information about a foghorn, to topography, to geology and geography of the area... **all in four short paragraphs.**

TCi's third-grade curriculum continues in this manner – delivering a hodge-podge of information that is bound to confound 8-year-olds rather than educate them.