04-Groover- SS in Life

Monday morning, and once again I sat in class thinking that social studies must be the most boring subject in the world. The teacher droned on about the importance of memorizing all the state capitals, the location of all 50 states, and the names of all United States presidents (in order). Yawn! “Why can’t we ever learn about how people really lived during different times?” I thought. I was fascinated by the *Little House on the Prairie* book series written by Laura Ingalls Wilder and desperately wanted to know more about pioneer life. I was intrigued by the many Native American names in my hometown of Rochester, New York. Why couldn’t we learn about Native Americans, how they lived and why they were forced to move to reservations?

Year after year, my social studies classes consisted of memorizing names, dates, and fairly useless facts without ever digging in to the real meat of the subject, the how’s and why’s of the events. It was my least favorite class, and my grades often reflected that. Finally, in my senior year of high school, a required course in U.S. Government sparked my interest when my teacher delved into hands-on activities and the impact government had on my life. My attitude toward social studies began to change. However, it was not until I began working in my current job that I developed a true appreciation of social studies.

I now spend my days in various elementary classrooms supporting special needs students as a Resource Assistant. I work very closely with students in need of intensive support. Part of my job is to preview the social studies curriculum and modify content by paring it down to the big ideas. I create a variety of materials to use with students, and pre-teach/re-teach classroom content as needed. I have the opportunity to sit in on social studies lessons with classroom teachers at different grade levels. I can observe different teaching styles and instruction methods, allowing me to see which methods really gain students’ attention. At the same time, I have learned more about social studies than I ever did in school.

My colleagues are a very creative group, who constantly look for new ways to get students involved. Our students examine Michigan’s Native Americans by going to the Outdoor Discovery Center, where they explore wigwams and traditional methods of planting crops. They use handmade Native tools and play games played by tribes hundreds of years ago. Second graders research famous Americans and create detailed presentations for the rest of the school to view. Third graders explore economics by creating, marketing, and selling their own products to fellow students and staff. Fourth grade students learn about government by forming their own three branches of government and creating bills which go through the process of becoming laws. They enforce those laws and use the judicial review process when needed. Students don’t just read about slavery; they encounter what it really was as they are packed like sardines on a “ship” for the Middle Passage. They role play plantation owners and slaves as they pick and pack “cotton” while listening to call and response songs. One 5th grade teacher re-creates Colonial Williamsburg in her classroom. Students spend time exploring everything from colonial schools to working as a shoemaker to visiting the local tavern for a meal and games.

Social studies has taken on a whole new meaning for me because of my dedicated colleagues. I never thought that I would learn more in my job than I did in school. The best part is that I have enjoyed my social studies experiences as an educator. I know that my experiences will lead me to look for creative ways to bring social studies to life for my own students. I will not ask for rote memorization of material. I truly believe that students learn more when the material becomes personal and meaningful. They need to see how government, economics, and geographical changes (like the settling of countries) impact their lives. They need to see that history isn’t just a bunch of old names and dates; it’s someone’s story. Together, we will dive in to the heart of the material. My students will develop personal connections to social studies.