

**TEXT AND CONTEXT: FIELD-TESTING THE NEW YORK STATE GREAT IRISH
FAMINE CURRICULUM**

A team of historians, teacher educators and classroom teachers, coordinated through the Hofstra University Department of Curriculum and Teaching, created interdisciplinary units, lesson plans, teaching activities and class projects on the Great Irish Famine for grades 4 through 12. The material is part of the New York State Human Rights curriculum and was designed to model standards-driven document-based instruction and assessment and lessons that promote student literacy (Murphy, Miletta and Singer, 2000: 7-9). This study examines efforts to ground the Great Irish Famine curriculum in educational theory and research on literacy and social studies education, and concludes with a comparative report on the field-testing of lessons and document-based activity packages drawn from the curriculum guide in inner-city and suburban middle school social studies classrooms.

According to New York State social studies standards, teachers should encourage students to use a “variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points” in the history of the world, the United States and New York State. The Department of Education asks social studies teachers to stress “skills of historical analysis” during instruction, including explaining the significance of historical evidence; weighing the importance, reliability and validity of evidence; understanding the concept of multiple causation; and understanding the importance of changing and competing interpretations of different historical developments. Student mastery of these skills is measured by document-based essay questions on statewide examinations in Global History and Geography at the end of 10th grade and United States History and Government at the end of 8th and 11th grade (New York State Department of Education, 1996: 5, 13).

NEW YORK STATE SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARD 1,

History of the United States and New York:

Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.

1.1 The study of New York State and United States history requires an analysis of the development of American culture, its diversity and multicultural context, and the ways people are unified by many values, practices and traditions.

1.2 Important ideas, social and cultural values, beliefs and traditions from New York State and United States history illustrate the connections and interactions of people and events across time and from a variety of perspectives.

1.3 Study about the major social, political, economic, cultural and religious developments in New York State and United States history involves learning about the important roles and contributions of individuals and groups.

1.4 The skills of historical analysis include the ability to: explain the significance of historical evidence; weigh the importance, reliability and validity of evidence; understand the concept of multiple causation; understand the importance of changing and competing interpretations of different historical developments.

The curriculum team saw the development and field-testing of lessons, units and projects on the Great Irish Famine as an opportunity to a) develop a history-based thematic social studies curriculum that infuses the history of Ireland into United States and Global History courses; b) systematically root social studies instruction in educational theory, especially studies on promoting student literacy in the content areas and the ideas on teaching of John Dewey and Maxine Greene, and c) model an approach for field-testing social studies units, lessons, activities and projects among diverse student populations.

The curriculum team found that Irwin, Lunstrum, Lynch-Brown and Shepard, *Enhancing Social Studies Through Literacy Strategies* (NCSS Bulletin 91, 1995) contained useful strategies for promoting student literacy through content area instruction. Moore, Moore, Cunningham and Cunningham, *Developing Readers & Writers in the Content Areas K-12* (1998: 3-30), surveys literacy theory and makes a powerful case for the intersection of literacy and thinking skills. In addition, we benefited from papers by Smith and Singer (2000) and Zalinsky and Costello (2000) on the promotion of student literacy through participation in reader response groups and an article by Ehlers (1999: 5-9) in the *OAH Magazine of History* on the use of literature to help students situate themselves in historical contexts.

The Great Irish Famine curriculum guide consists of 150 interdisciplinary lessons and projects and is not intended to be used in its entirety in one classroom. It provides teachers with a choice from a broad menu of lessons, activities and projects and a variety of approaches to instruction. These include full class, individual and group work, the use of word banks, songs, cartoons, pictures, charts, maps, literature, letters and personal testimony by students about their experiences. Lessons are designed to encourage social studies teachers to provide and help students uncover and explore meaningful literacy contexts, by stimulating student interest in the subject being explored, building on prior knowledge and skills, creating a community of literate learners, promoting critical thinking, and creating a conceptual context, or scaffolds, for examining difficult written material (Graves and Graves, 1994; Langer and Applebee, 1986: 171-194; Rosenshine and Meister, 1992: 26-33).

Teachers are encouraged to organize student experiences in ways that create appropriate literacy and intellectual contexts that make concepts and content accessible to the students in their particular classes (Dewey, 1963: 33-50). Of particular concern in our work was Maxine Greene's argument that "In many

respects, teaching and learning are matters of breaking through barriers - of expectation, of boredom, of predefinition. To teach, at least in one dimension, is to provide persons with the knacks and know-how they need in order to teach themselves. No teacher, for example, can simply lecture youngsters on playing basketball or writing poetry or experimenting with metals in a chemistry lab, and expect them to meet the requirements or standards she or he had in mind for that activity. Teachers must communicate modes of proceeding, ways of complying with rules and norms, and a variety of what have been called 'open capacities,' so that learners can put into practice in their own fashion what they need to join a game, shape a sonnet, or devise a chemical test" (Greene, 1995: 14).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Members of the Hofstra University New Teachers Network, an alumni group of new and mentor teachers who maintain a relationship with the university, field-tested social studies units, lessons, projects and activity sheets in ten school districts in the Greater New York Metropolitan area (Hines, Stacki, Murphy, Singer and Pezone, 2000). Middle school and high school students in selected classes were informed that they would be helping to develop a new social studies curriculum for New York State and that their input in this process was valued. Demonstration lessons were videotaped for analysis of student responses to questions, student reports on activities and projects, and student-to-student interactions during discussions in order to determine the appropriateness of material and the depth of student understanding of concepts and content introduced during instruction. Observers from social studies methods classes at Hofstra University assisted individual students and groups with assignments and identified reading passages, vocabulary words, questions and instructions on activity sheets that needed editing or clarification. In addition, student understanding was assessed through evaluation of an assortment of projects and written assignments. These included letters, written as historical fiction,

from immigrants to family members in Ireland describing conditions in the United States, and creation of a Great Irish Famine Museum where students displayed dioramas, “trading cards,” and posters (Murphy, A. Singer, Miletta and J. Singer, September/October 2000).

Where possible, the curriculum team selected inclusive middle school and high school classes with students who were performing at different academic levels. We also worked with students in honors, regular and remedial tracks and with schools with diverse student populations, including affluent, middle class and working-class poor districts, districts where the student population was overwhelmingly European American and districts with large Asian, African American, Caribbean and Latino/a populations. These choices were particularly important because of the history of contentious debate in New York State over who gets included in multicultural curriculum and concern whether lessons on the Irish experience in the 19th century could be presented in ways that engaged students from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, especially students in inner-city minority schools (Cornbleth and Waugh, 1995).

 Student Ethnicity in Districts Participating in Field-testing Social Studies Lessons, Activities and Projects from the Great Irish Famine Curriculum Guide

Suburban Districts

District	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Other
Herricks	62.6	0.3	3.2	33.9
Hicksville	75.1	2.2	11.7	11.0
Long Beach	64.9	13.4	18.4	3.3
Oyster Bay	81.4	6.0	8.6	4.0
Roosevelt	0.3	90.8	8.9	0.1
Uniondale	5.0	73.8	19.5	1.7
Westbury	4.8	58.6	32.0	4.6

Source: New York State Department of Education, 1998.

Urban Schools

Brooklyn MS	0.6	60.5	37.1	1.4
Queens MS	72.4	2.8	19.3	5.4

Queens HS	2.1	87.1	7.7	3.1
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Source: New York City Board of Education, 1998.

Some schools preferred that the Great Irish Famine curriculum team work with their most advanced students because teachers working with other students were expected to use separate remedial lessons and concentrate on developing basic skills. We believe this approach is a fundamental error. Margaret MacCurtain, head of an international committee of historians that reviewed the Great Irish Famine curriculum guide, noted after a series of site visits that some of the best class discussions she had observed were with lower performing students who seem to feel free to offer opinions, speculate about the past and make comparisons with the present. Too often, students in honors classes were either silenced by concerns about correct answers and grades, or were competing with each other for attention during discussions rather than exchanging thoughtful ideas (internal memo, December 9, 1999).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The initial plan for the Great Irish Famine curriculum guide was to develop separate high school and middle-level lessons and document packages which included edited and adapted material. The goal was to make it possible for students working at different academic levels to act as historians and social scientists as they analyzed and wrote about primary sources, participated in sophisticated group and class discussions, and drew conclusions about the past. Edited documents, designed for high school classrooms, were primary sources shortened to highlight key points with some definitions inserted into the text. Adapted passages were rewritten for upper elementary and middle school students with an effort to translate text into language more accessible to students while retaining main ideas, information and at least some sense of the original language. Documents used to explore the experience

of famine-era Irish immigrants in the United States included material excerpted from the diary of George Templeton Strong of New York, a book by an Irish actor who toured the American South in the 1830s, an historian's account of Philadelphia during the Jacksonian era, and a letter from an immigrant to New Brunswick, Canada who wrote to family remaining in Ireland (Binder and Reimers, 1988: 225-241; Gray, 1995: 150).

Through field-testing the lessons and documents in classrooms, participation in and observation of group work, and in follow-up discussions with students, we discovered that our distinction between social studies curriculum materials designed for upper elementary/middle level and high school level students often did not take into account the range of student performance. When analyzing the documents, many high school level students expressed that they were more comfortable with the adapted documents, while some middle-level students felt comfortable reading the edited material. On both middle school and high school levels, some students with a record of poor academic performance could not read either set of material. Teachers working with these students recommended that some of the documents be completely rewritten. In response, the team reorganized the curriculum guide to offer teachers the option of using differentiated edited, adapted and rewritten text with major language revisions, either with an entire class on any grade level or with selected students.

Irish Immigrants in New Orleans, Louisiana (Powers, 1836: 2:238-244)

Edited document: One of the greatest works now in progress here is the canal planned to connect Lac Pontchartrain with the city of New Orleans. I only wish that the wise men at home who coolly charge the present condition of Ireland upon the inherent laziness of her population, could be transported to this spot. Here they subsist on the coarsest fare; excluded from all the advantages of civilization; often at

the mercy of a hard contractor, who wrings his profits from their blood; and all this for a pittance that merely enables them to exist, with little power to save, or a hope beyond the continuance of the like exertion.”

Adapted text: One of the greatest works now in progress here is a canal. I only wish that the men in England who blame the condition of Ireland on the laziness of her people could be brought to New Orleans. Here the Irish survive on poor food and are at the mercy of hard employers who profit from their blood; and all this for a low wage that only allows them to exist, with little power to save or hope.

Rewritten text with major language revisions: A great canal is being built in Louisiana. I wish people in England who think the Irish are lazy could see how hard they are working here. Irish immigrants in New Orleans are treated badly by their employers. Their wages are low. Their food is poor quality. They have little hope.

A number of researchers have expressed concern with academic and social tracking, both between classes and within classes (Singer, 1997: 67-68; Wheelock, 1992; Oakes, 1985). Jeter and Davis (1982: 1-7) and Sadker and Sadker (1994) document the impact of differential expectations by teachers on female students. Since the 1970s, researchers have repeatedly concluded that African American students do not receive equal learning opportunities in many classrooms (Gay, 1974; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Because we share these concerns, curriculum writers and classroom teachers met regularly in focus teams to question potential bias when assigning material to students, teaching full classes, and setting up study groups. In addition, the research team which evaluated the lessons described in this paper was racially and ethnically diverse. It included six classroom teachers, two of whom are European American, one who is African American, one who is Caribbean American, and two who are of mixed Latino/a and European American heritage. The primary curriculum writers, who also led many of the demonstration lessons, are both European American. As a group,

the team believes that the type of differentiated instruction modeled by these lessons offers an alternative to tracked and segregated classrooms.

As the classroom teachers and curriculum writers field-tested the Great Irish Famine curriculum at the ten sites in a total of 23 classrooms, the team also learned other valuable lessons. While the content of lessons was important and students were concerned with the plight of Irish immigrants, the way it was presented was fundamental for capturing their interest and promoting learning. When teachers engaged students in activities, used references that had meaning to a particular group of students (Thelen, 1986: 603-609), reviewed vocabulary and provided a context for language, provided readings that were accessible, and encouraged freewheeling discussions (Nagy, 1988), every group of students responded enthusiastically to the curriculum (Irvin, Lunstrum, Lynch-Brown, and Shepard, 1995). Inner-city and suburban students, immigrants and native-born, and students from different ethnic backgrounds were all fascinated and engaged by events prior to, during, and after the Great Irish Famine. This is detailed later in the study in a direct comparison of one urban and one suburban middle school social studies classroom.

The specific lessons on Irish immigration to North America in the mid-nineteenth century that are the focus of this report were designed to establish a literacy and learning context. They were taught to one seventh, one eighth and two eleventh grade classes. Before breaking into teams to examine document packages and prepare reports, classes read, sang, and analyzed the songs “Paddy Works on the Railway” and “No Irish Need Apply” (Fowke and Glazer, 1973: 84-85, 152-153) and a political cartoon, “St. Patrick’s Day, 1867,” by Thomas Nast (Keller, 1968: 103). They also discussed the reliability of folk songs and political cartoons as historical sources and compared attitudes toward Irish immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century with attitudes towards immigrants in the United States today. Group singing of the songs

tended to be spirited. In some classes, students joined for the chorus, while in others they grappled with the traditional tunes and sang the verses as well. In a few classes, volunteers transformed the songs into contemporary “raps.” During opening discussions, a number of students testified about their personal experiences as immigrants or discussed problems faced by their families and relatives when they arrived from other countries. In concluding discussions, students drew connections between the treatment of immigrants in the past and present as they tried to understand the Irish experience. During the time period when the curriculum was being field-tested, a group of New York City police officers were acquitted of criminal charges in the death of an African immigrant and students in the urban schools repeatedly referred to this incident during discussion.

In New York State, teachers are under considerable pressure to prepare students to pass rigorous assessment tests to meet state-wide standards. The percentages of students achieving proficiency and mastery levels on these tests are published in local newspapers. As a result, teachers often assign reading materials geared to the level of the exams. Unfortunately, students who cannot navigate the material successfully are unable to perform learning activities. Instead of gradually developing their literacy and social studies skills, they become disengaged or disruptive, and fail to learn. In response to this problem, the differentiated material in the Great Irish Famine curriculum is designed so that students can explore social studies concepts and content on the highest levels while they continue to develop literacy skills.

Based on classroom observations, an analysis of lesson videos and follow-up discussions with teachers, we found that as long as teachers had available reading material appropriate to a particular class or even specific individuals in a class, lessons were successful. This was especially true in inclusive classrooms. Teachers commented that having the same material available in different formats made it

possible to teach students social studies content, concepts and analytical skills while they worked at developing their reading and writing skills.

Teachers who field-tested the curriculum adapted lessons to make them more appropriate for their classes and used different teaching strategies successfully. For example, working in middle schools where the New York State curriculum is less proscribed, Adeola Tella, Rachel Gaglione and Lynda Costello had the freedom to concentrate on projects. Their students participated in creating displays for a regional Great Irish Famine museum that was exhibited at a local university. The teachers also were able to set aside time where students could directly comment on the lessons and the curriculum material.

High school teachers like Siobhan Miller and Nicole Williams had to fit lessons into crowded calendars. When teaching the sample lesson on Irish immigration, Miller and Williams organized students into expert groups and each group reported to the full class on the Irish experience in a different locale - New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia or New Brunswick, Canada. Full classes compared information from the group reports and drew general conclusions about Irish immigration to North America in the mid-nineteenth century. Miller was able to use the edited version with all of her students and did the lesson in one class period. Williams allocated two class periods. The first period started with "Paddy on the Railway." The second period, where groups reported back to the full class, began with "No Irish Need Apply." Williams used two different approaches with her classes. In one section, students were heterogeneously group and all students used adapted versions of the documents. In the other section, she created homogeneous groups of three or four students with similar reading scores and assigned the groups either adapted or rewritten texts based on their performance level.

Cheryl Smith works primarily with inclusion classes and emphasizes differentiated group-based instruction (Tomlinson, 1999). She prefers mixed-level

student teams and assigns edited, adapted or rewritten versions of documents to individual students based on their reading performance. When possible, each team member examines a different aspect of the topic by using a different source. In this case, each team member studied conditions faced by Irish immigrants in a different location. Smith's approach makes it possible for every student to understand material and requires that they each provide information for their group's final report to the class. Smith is a strong proponent of teacher-prepared organizers that help student teams arrange information and necessitate contributions from every team member. The organizer for this assignment required the team to report evidence of anti-Irish stereotypes, violence against immigrants, unsafe working and living conditions, and positive experiences in each locality.

Teachers generally reported that interest level among students was extremely high and that the lessons on Ireland easily connected with other curriculum topics, including colonialism, industrialization, human migration, and human rights. They contributed to promoting student understanding of National Council for the Social Studies themes, especially Culture and Cultural Diversity; Time, Continuity and Change; People, Places, and Environment; Power, Authority, and Governance; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; and Global Connections (NCSS, 1994).

COMPARING URBAN AND SUBURBAN CLASSROOMS

Final versions of a two-day sample lesson on Irish immigration to North America in the mid-nineteenth century were field-tested under controlled conditions at an urban and a suburban middle school to establish whether lessons on the Irish experience in the 19th century would engage students from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. The participating teachers in both schools frequently assign group activities and generally have students sit at tables with their teams. In both cases, lessons were taught by one of the curriculum writers from Hofstra University and videotaped for analysis. The lesson that was evaluated emphasized the

creation of a learning context for students and included activity sheets available in edited, adapted and rewritten formats. The lessons utilized student discussion of their own family histories as the basis for comparing the experiences of different immigrant groups at different points in United States history, with a particular focus on similarities and differences in the experiences of contemporary immigrants and Irish immigrants from the mid-nineteenth century.

The *Urban* school is located in an inner-city Brooklyn, New York neighborhood. According to the school's published profile, 98 percent of the children are "Black" or "Hispanic," 22 percent attend some form of special education, and 14 percent have limited English proficiency (New York City Board of Education, 1998). On standardized New York State reading tests administered in May, 1997, only 30 percent of the sixth graders achieved passing scores, and the eighth graders scored significantly below city and state averages. Only 56 percent of the teachers are fully licensed and permanently assigned to the building.

At the *Urban* school, students generally study immigration to the United States at mid-year during the eighth grade as part of a unit on immigration and industrialization. An eighth grade social studies class was videotaped as part of the testing of the Great Irish Famine curriculum material. In the spring of the previous year, while seventh graders, students had been tested for reading performance by the New York City Board of Education and were evaluated against national norms. Of the 31 students in the class, two were not tested, eight scored between the sixth and 20th percentiles, 12 scored between the 21st and 30th percentiles, seven scored between the 31st and 40th percentiles, one scored between the 41st and 50th percentiles and one student scored between the 51st and 60th percentiles. All students in this class receive special instruction in separate, smaller, reading classes. However, in social studies, the teacher works without assistance.

The *Suburban* school is located in a district outside of New York City. Seventy-Five percent of the students in the district are “White,” 2.2 percent are “Black,” 11.7 percent are “Hispanic,” and 11 percent are listed as “Other” (New York State Education Department, 1998, 13). Ninety-eight percent of the district’s sixth graders achieved the minimum state level on standardized reading tests (50). Seventy-seven percent of the teachers have permanent state certification (30).

At the *Suburban* school, immigration to the United States in the pre-Civil War era is included in the curriculum towards the end of seventh grade. Two seventh grade social studies classes were videotaped as part of the field-testing of the Great Irish Famine curriculum material. Students in both classes were tested for reading performance on the Metropolitan Achievement Test earlier in the year and were evaluated against national norms. Of the 26 students in Class A, one scored below the 20th percentile, one scored between the 21st and 30th percentiles, one scored between the 31st and 40th percentiles, four scored between the 41st and 50th percentiles, five students scored between the 51st and 60th percentiles and 14 students scored above the 61st percentile. Of the 26 students in Class B, one scored between the 21st and 30th percentiles, two scored between the 31st and 40th percentiles, three scored between the 41st and 50th percentiles, five students scored between the 51st and 60th percentiles and 15 students scored above the 61st percentile. Each of the classes in the *Suburban* school has three students who have registered learning disabilities. As a result, a special education teacher assists the regular teacher in instructing the classes.

URBAN STUDENTS STUDY IRISH IMMIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA

At the *Urban* school, the first day of the two-day lesson began with students working individually, reading the song “Paddy on the Railway” and answering three questions. At the *Urban* school, only three students could complete the opening questions in the five minutes allocated for the initial activity. Many students were

stuck trying to decipher the phrase “Filly-me-oori-oori-ay.” While students read, the special instructor and the regular classroom teacher (below, the term “teacher” refers to the special instructor) circulated around the room answering questions. After five minutes, the teacher decided to pull the class together and proceed with the lesson.

During full class discussion, four students identified themselves as immigrants and at least two-thirds of the class had at least one parent who is an immigrant. Many students argued that immigrants in the United States are subject to discrimination today. Three students spoke about personal experiences being harassed by police or store owners. Other students argued that this was because “you are Black, not because you are an immigrant.” The teacher asked students how these experiences compared with what they read in the song about Irish immigrants to the United States in the pre-Civil War era and students launched into a comparison. A student responded, “like the Irish, we are not respected.” Two students specifically referred to widely publicized local cases where police officers had been accused of unjustified attacks on immigrants and African Americans. The teacher used this opportunity to define “stereotype” and “nativism” with the class.

At this point in the lesson, two students went to the map and located Ireland. Then the class sang the song. Based on analysis of the videotape, approximately half of the students sang the verses as well as the chorus and all students were following along on their activity sheets. During the ensuing discussion eight students spoke to the question of whether the song was a valid or “true” historical source. They weighed their own ideas against comments by other students. Andrew (*) said he could not accept it as true because he “did not even know who wrote it or when. It’s been passed down and changed. It has too many exaggerations. How could she have so many children so fast?” Lisa responded that the song was “extending the truth to show the way people feel. It’s not a lie. It’s the way people experienced things.” To

support Lisa, Anna drew on her past understanding and compared the song to “a poem by Maya Angelou. She explains herself in her poems. These people explain themselves in their songs.”

The teacher showed the class a political cartoon by Thomas Nast depicting Irish immigrants as wild, drunkards and ape-like. Students discussed whether the cartoon was evidence in support of Paddy’s complaints in the song. Tanika was concerned that only some people might be prejudiced and that students needed to know what was happening to Irish immigrants in different parts of the United States. The teacher asked what other sources they would like to see before arriving at a conclusion. Students wanted to see newspaper articles from the time and to check an encyclopedia. The teacher explained that they would organize the next lesson to help students answer their own questions by bringing in newspaper articles and other evidence from different parts of the country.

Toward the end of the period, the teacher asked the class if there were other questions. A student wanted to know why people hit Paddy with stones and sticks. The teacher asked if anyone knew what a strike was or had a parent who had gone on strike. Four students raised their hands. Two had fathers who were drivers, one had a mother who worked in a factory, and one had a mother who cleaned offices at night. They each spoke about strikes and told the class why someone would be “really angry if a person tried to take their job even if they were hungry.” The teacher explained that part of the problem faced by Irish immigrants was competition with other groups to get jobs. The Irish needed the jobs very badly and were willing to work for lower wages. Sometimes this led to fighting and people getting attacked with “stones and sticks.”

The second lesson in the *Urban* school opened with a review of student questions from the previous lesson, particularly whether similar problems were facing Irish immigrants in different parts of North America. Four “rewritten” primary source

documents describing conditions for Irish immigrants in New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia and New Brunswick, Canada were provided to help the class research its answers. The teacher explained the procedure for the assignment. Students in the teams would take turns reading to their teammates aloud and then the team would decide on answers to the questions at the bottom of the page. Each team would explain their answers to the class and then the entire class would fill out a chart on the Irish immigrant experience in pre-Civil War North America. Before breaking up into teams, student pairs came to a map of North America in the front of the room and located New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia and New Brunswick.

At their tables, students sat in eight groups of either three or four students. Activity sheets consisted of the “rewritten” primary source documents and four questions. Each group was assigned one of the locations. While students worked in their teams, the teacher circulated around the room assisting them. Students worked diligently on the assignment, continually referred to the documents in their conversations and written answers, and built from each other’s understanding.

For example, group A was one of two teams reading about New Orleans, Louisiana. Three students were present, all female, and one student was absent. One of the three was the only student in the class with a reading score above the national norm. The other two both had reading scores that placed them at the low point in the spectrum, at the ninth percentile. Lisa, the strongest reader of the three students, organized her teammates to read the passage and answer the questions. Their conversation focused on two of the four questions. The first question asked: “The author wishes that people in England who think the Irish are lazy could see how hard they work. In your opinion, why does he make this wish?” According to Lisa, “(H)e makes this wish because since everybody treats the Irish people wrong, they need to see how bad it is for them.” Denise believed “(H)e wishes this because they are calling the Irish people lazy and they really are working hard. If they see how they work they will

see they are strong.” Nyema added “(T)he people in England don’t know what the Irish are doing so they maybe think they are lazy and they are prejudiced. The people in England should come here and try experiencing what they (the Irish) are going through.”

The third question introduced an issue that at first puzzled students. It asked: “The author writes that slave labor is much too expensive to use in the building of the canal. In your opinion, why does the author believe this?” Lisa thought that this question meant the author believed slavery was a good thing. She called the teacher over to check her interpretation of the question. The teacher helped them locate the area in the passage where the author discussed slavery. Lisa examined the passage and said, “(I)t’s because the Irish are cheaper than slaves because they come from another place and need the jobs. The bosses have to buy slaves but not Irish.” Denise interjected, “If a thousand slaves became sick and died working on the canal they (the bosses) would go out of business.” The second team that examined the Irish experience in Louisiana became more involved in a question that asked them to describe conditions for Irish immigrants who were working on the canal in Louisiana in 1833. This group never discussed the issue of slavery. However, Lisa’s question and Denise’s insight about slavery became part of the overall class understanding of the Irish experience in America when their group reported on what they had read.

Both groups that examined the Irish in New York City focused on the issue of citizenship and prejudice. In group C, Andrew began by saying, “Strong (the author) doesn’t want them to become citizens because they are from another country and they get treated bad.” Lawrence responded to Andrew’s general statement by pointing to the passage where Strong says “(I)t is enough to make you sick.” Lawrence told the group, “(H)e calls them (Irish and Italians) the scum of humans. He’s saying that the Irish are animals.” A girl on the team, Yvette, agreed with Lawrence, “(H)e doesn’t

want them to become citizens because they are like animals to him.” Another Black girl on the team, Makeba, commented, “That is the way White people talk about Black people, the way he talks about the Irish. It’s racism.” Andrew added, “This is full of prejudice.”

SUBURBAN STUDENTS STUDY IRISH IMMIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA

As a result of experience with students in the *Urban* school, activity sheets were rewritten by the curriculum team before teaching the lessons in the *Suburban* school. A word bank was added to the song “Paddy on the Railway” including the phrase *Filly-me-oori-oori-ay* and explaining that it “is a nonsense word that gives the song spirit.” Reading passages were double-spaced and the lesson organizer that was provided to teams was made easier to follow. Whether as a result of these changes, because of differences in reading performance between students in the two schools, or because a special education teacher was working with the special instructor and the regular classroom teacher, every student in both classes of the *Suburban* school were able to complete the opening assignment in the allotted time.

As students in the *Suburban* school entered the room, they copied the AIM question, “What was life like for Irish immigrants to the United States in the 1840s?” and copied and defined the day’s vocabulary word - famine. The regular classroom teacher had students exchange definitions of famine and explained that a famine in the 1840s led many people from Ireland to immigrate into the United States. At this point she introduced the special instructor who distributed the activity sheet “Paddy on the Railway” and asked students to read the song and answer the three questions at the bottom of the sheet. Students were given five minutes to complete the assignment, and while they worked, the teacher circulated around the room assisting them. As noted above, every student in both classes was able to complete the assignment, with students who finished early helping others who were still working.

During full class discussion in *Suburban A*, three students identified themselves as immigrants and seven other students identified themselves as having at least one parent who is an immigrant to the United States. These students briefly discussed what they knew about their family's experiences and listed the problems faced by immigrants today, including getting jobs, earning money, making friends and learning English. A student from Salvador said that "Americans felt they were better than immigrants" and a student whose family was from Colombia agreed with her. These comments were the only concerns expressed about possible contemporary discrimination against immigrants and did not lead to broader discussion. However, they were used by the teacher to help the class define "stereotype" and "nativism."

In *Suburban B*, six students identified themselves as immigrants and five others as having at least one parent who is an immigrant to the United States. Student responses to questions and the dynamic of class discussion were similar to *Suburban A*. A student whose parents were from India mentioned the problem of having to earn "new credentials so they can follow their profession." A Latina student, whose parents are Dominican, introduced the problem of discrimination and stereotyping. According to this student, "People always assume that my mother can't understand English because she has an accent." Her statement was supported by another young man of Indian ancestry, who discussed his mother's difficulty finding a job. The comments by these students led to the defining of "stereotype" and "nativism."

Following discussion of problems facing contemporary immigrants, the teacher explained that the song "Paddy on the Railway" tells us what happened to Irish immigrants when they came to the United States in the 1840s. In both *Suburban A and B*, there was an uneven student response to singing the song. About half of each class joined in singing the chorus, but the special instructor sang the verses by himself. Discussion of the song in both classes began with an effort to place it in historical time, prior to the Civil War during slavery days. In the full class

discussions, students in both classes explained the content of the lyrics in great detail. In *Suburban A*, a number of speakers made connections between discrimination against the Irish in the song and examples of discrimination against immigrants to the United States mentioned earlier. One student referred to stories in the local newspaper about “people beating up immigrants who are looking for work.”

In both *Suburban* classes, the students who initially spoke felt that the song should be accepted as an accurate historical document because, according to one student, "it is from the time when the Irish came to the United States." The teacher had to introduce the ideas of exaggeration and uncertainty of authorship before students began to question the song's reliability. At this point, the classes compiled lists of alternative sources, including diaries, newspaper articles, books, the original words to this song, other songs, letters and pictures, that they would want to examine as "historians" in order to evaluate the accuracy of "Paddy on the Railway."

In *Suburban A*, in response to a request for pictures, the teacher introduced a political cartoon by Thomas Nast depicting Irish immigrants. A student immediately responded, "those drawings look like gorillas." The class got very animated and, when asked, about one-fourth of the students in *Suburban A* identified themselves as descendants of Irish immigrants. Two students commented on the cartoon using vocabulary words introduced at the start of the lesson. One declared that "these are stereotypes about Irish people," and the other that "this is racism, nativism." After viewing the cartoon, students decided that they wanted to examine other sources that would help them figure out whether Paddy's story painted an accurate picture of the Irish immigrant experience. Students suggested reading newspaper articles and diaries.

In *Suburban B*, when the cartoon was introduced, a student immediately shouted out, "the people look like monkeys." As a result of questioning, the class discovered

the cartoon was accusing Irish immigrants of drunken behavior on St. Patrick's Day. In this class, only two students identified themselves as descendants of Irish immigrants. One of these students explained to the class the significance of St. Patrick's Day and the class discussed the implications of the cartoon. One student commented that "drawing people like monkeys says they are not really human. That's the way they treated Black slaves, too."

At the conclusion of this lesson, four students in *Suburban A* argued that conditions for immigrants to the United States were worse in the past than today. Tiffany stated it was worse because "now people know it isn't right to treat people this way and discrimination is against the law." Bernice said, "it was worse then because they made immigrants do the hardest work." Dave added that "we better understand the meaning of the Constitution now and that everybody is equal." None of the students disagreed with them. In *Suburban B*, students continued to question the reliability of sources at the end of the lesson. One student asked the teacher if the song "was really from the past." Another asked if discrimination against the Irish was "only on railroads." Students in this class wanted to see sources from other parts of the United States.

Because of the range of reading levels in these classes, a decision was made to have the students who were assigned to read about New York City use edited versions of the text, to have students reading about New Orleans and New Brunswick use adapted versions, and to have students reading about Philadelphia use rewritten versions. If a team had an extra member, that member was assigned one of the adapted texts on either New Orleans or New Brunswick.

Reassignment of students to new teams for specific lessons is a regular occurrence in these classes. Decisions about the assignment of students to particular groups and about who would receive which material were made in advance. Based on the recommendation of the inclusion teacher, the material was organized so that

while working in teams, students performing at lower academic levels would be the third person in their group to report to the team. This was done to permit more academically advanced students to act as models for the activity.

The second day in *Suburban A and B* began with students reexamining the political cartoon by Thomas Nast, reviewing the vocabulary words famine, stereotype and nativism, and restating the question from the conclusion of the previous lesson, "Can we rely on the song "Paddy on the Railway" as an accurate report of the Irish immigrant experience in America?" Following the review, teams were reorganized and, once the classes were settled, the teacher explained the group assignment. Each student received a document about the Irish immigrant experience in a different city in North America. Team members had fifteen minutes to read their documents and answer questions at the bottom of the page. At the end of fifteen minutes, the teams, working as a group, completed a summary sheet comparing the Irish experience in the different cities. Teams had five minutes to complete this part of the activity before reporting to the full class.

Before distributing readings and summary sheets to students, the teacher had volunteers come to the front of the room and locate New Orleans, Philadelphia, New York and New Brunswick, Canada on a map of North America. Students needed help to find New Brunswick, but remembered the location of New Orleans from studying the Louisiana Purchase. Students were also asked, "Why do you think Irish immigrants ended up in these areas?" In both classes, students responded that these places "probably had jobs" and were "near the Atlantic Ocean and people came from Ireland on boats."

Students in both classes in the *Suburban* school worked very effectively, both individually and in their teams. Once again, the regular teacher, the special instructor and the inclusion teacher circulated around the room assisting students with difficult passages and questions, and students who finished their assignment

early helped their teammates. In *Suburban A*, teams listed examples on a summary sheet. Because of time considerations, the activity was modified so that students in *Suburban B* wrote either YES, NO, or NOT SURE for each category.

One team was videotaped during group work in each *Suburban* class. In *Suburban A*, the team's captain was Bernice, a young woman who has certified learning disabilities but who reads at grade level. The group also included one student, James, who reads significantly below grade level, a student, Kevin, who reads above level, and two other students who read on grade level. Bernice kept the group on task, read the categories on the summary sheet to each of the team members who answered for their localities, and recorded their responses.

At the conclusion of the two-day lesson, an overhead projector was used to project a blank summary sheet. In *Suburban A*, because of the number of examples provided by each of the teams, the class was unable to complete the entire summary sheet. The final discussion of the similarities and differences between the regions was based on incomplete data. However, students unanimously agreed that the predominance of evidence supported what they had learned about the Irish experience from the song "Paddy on the Railway."

In *Suburban B*, the class easily completed the modified summary sheet. During discussion that followed, students disagreed about particular conclusions and whether they represented anti-Irish stereotypes or nativism. For example, they argued about whether "not caring about what happened to Irish immigrants" qualified as an example of nativism. However, this class also agreed that the predominance of evidence supported what they had learned about the Irish experience from the song "Paddy on the Railway."

As a follow-up activity, students in the *Suburban* classes were asked to write "letters home telling families in Ireland about their experiences in North America." The letters were evaluated by a team of middle school teachers and participant/

observers and provided further evidence that students, across-the-board in both *Suburban* classes, had a firm understanding of the content and concepts presented in the lesson.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that field-tests of the New York State Great Irish Famine curriculum demonstrate that upper elementary, middle and high school students from diverse backgrounds with a range of reading performance and prior school achievement are able to develop complex conceptual understandings when social studies educators create literacy and learning contexts and present content using differentiated texts. The units, lessons, activities and projects included in the Great Irish Famine curriculum offer teachers a variety of materials written for students with different academic levels for use throughout the school year. They make it possible for teachers to tailor activities to meet the needs of individual students and to gradually move all students in their classes to higher levels of academic performance.

In addition, our research suggests that social studies curriculum designers need to take the following considerations into account as they prepare curriculum material:

- Each social studies classroom has its own internal dynamic. This is related to the lived experience of students and the goals, individual talents, preferences, and experience of teachers. The same lesson plan with the same goals was used in *Urban* and *Suburban* classrooms but different, though related, lessons were taught. Perhaps, because of social class differences, *Suburban* students were less concerned than *Urban* students with discrimination, both in the past and today, and less skeptical about the reliability of official documents.
- In the *Suburban* classrooms, where students had more experience with group work and using document packages, full class and team instruction was more structured and student teams worked more efficiently. On the other hand, there was less student-to-student interaction during class and group discussions, which may have

resulted from adherence to formal structure. An effective curriculum should balance structured and open-ended activities.

- In the *Urban* school, students tended to be less reserved, both during discussion and during singing. This made discussion more dynamic, but also more difficult to direct. In full-class discussion and in groups, students continually responded to each other's comments. As a result, the process took longer and required the teacher to carefully monitor the progress of the lesson.
- Significantly, there were differences within, as well as between, the classes at the two field-test sites. The second half of the first day of the lesson took different directions in the two *Suburban* classes. During group discussions, teams in both locations gave their own focus to the material they were reading. Scaffolding on prior learning was clear in all classes. However, student references to previous experiences were markedly different.
- The significance of the ability of students to locate themselves in the lessons was apparent in student responses to questions about the experience of contemporary immigrants, connections students drew between immigration in the past and present and in the parallels students discovered between the Irish and the African American experiences. However, it is important to note that the lessons proceeded satisfactorily, though with less animation, in classes with a smaller immigrant presence. Options for establishing a context and motivating discussion in other settings might include distributing a newspaper article or headline on problems facing contemporary immigrants to the United States or a discussion of the way that teenagers feel stereotyped and discriminated against by people in authority.
- As we wrote, edited and field-tested the Great Irish Famine Curriculum, we were continually reminded that no curriculum can or should be "teacher-proof." All contingencies and contexts cannot be anticipated in advance. Student difficulty deciphering "Filly-me-oori-oori-ay" was an unanticipated problem and

underscores the value of flexibility in curriculum design and the importance of respecting teacher experience and choice.

(*) Not actual student names.

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