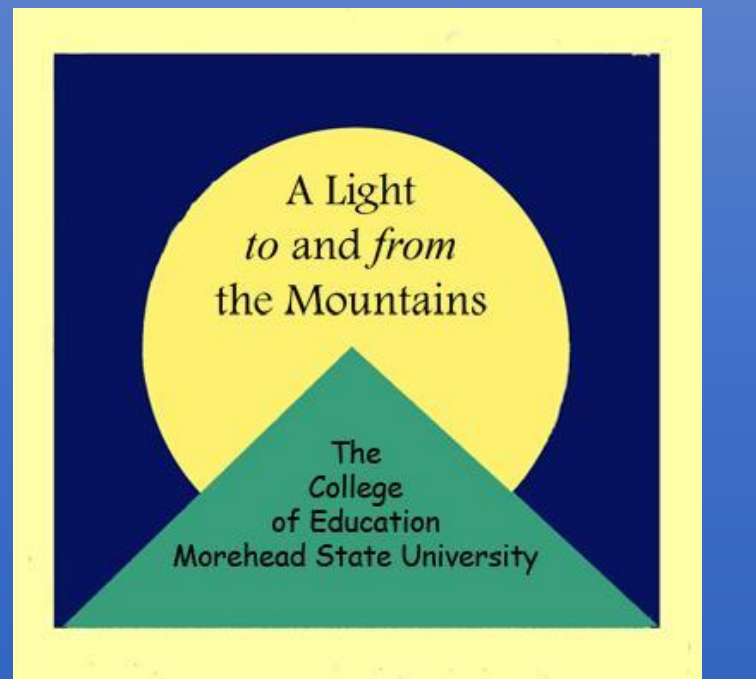




Elementary Teachers' Experiences Using Informational Texts to Teach Social Studies in Eastern Kentucky

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Introduction

Maloch and Bomer (2013) define *informational texts* as a category of nonfiction that conveys information about the natural and social world. Unlike some nonfiction and fiction texts, *informational texts* do not contain characters. They also are different from other nonfiction genres. They utilize special text features, such as content - specific vocabulary, indexes, captions, and realistic illustrations and/ or photos. *Informational texts* are highly engaging for younger students. The motivational and engaging quality of informational texts have been shown to improve students' literacy skills (Maloch, B. & Bomer, R., 2013). Importantly, the use of *informational texts* has been shown to positively impact elementary students' development of *intertextual connections* and *content knowledge* (Kuhn, K. et al., 2017).

Examples of *informational text* sources are shown below:



Statement of the Problem

Since Kentucky's adoption of the ELA Common Core in 2010, elementary teachers have increased their use of informational texts in their literacy instruction in order to meet the 50% non-fiction and 50% fiction balance required by ELA CC. This shift toward teaching students to read primary, secondary, and other challenging real-world texts to meet ELA CC demands may be the impetus behind a renewed attention given to social studies in elementary schools. If so, the researchers in this study aim to uncover and understand three research questions:

- 1) *To what extent do elementary teachers claim to use informational texts to teach social studies?*
- 2) *To what extent do elementary teachers align the use of informational texts to Kentucky's and national social studies standards?*
- 3) *To what extent do elementary teachers assess their students' social studies content knowledge when using informational texts?*

Population

The researchers followed these steps to determine all potential participants (elementary teachers) in the study:

- 1) **Population frame:** the 22 counties in MSU's service region
- 2) **Population frame source:** the **KY Council on Postsecondary Education** website (see Figure 1)
- 3) **Elementary schools (grades K – 5) within the population frame source:** the **KY Department of Education** website (see Figure 2)
- 4) **Identification of all potential participants:** websites of every elementary (K – 5) school in MSU's service region.

Total elementary schools in MSU's 22 county service region: **96**

Total (N) elementary teachers: **1,815** (see Table 1)



Figure 1. The 22 county service region of Morehead State University selected as the population frame for the study. The counties are circled and shown in light blue (KY Council on Postsecondary Education, 2017).

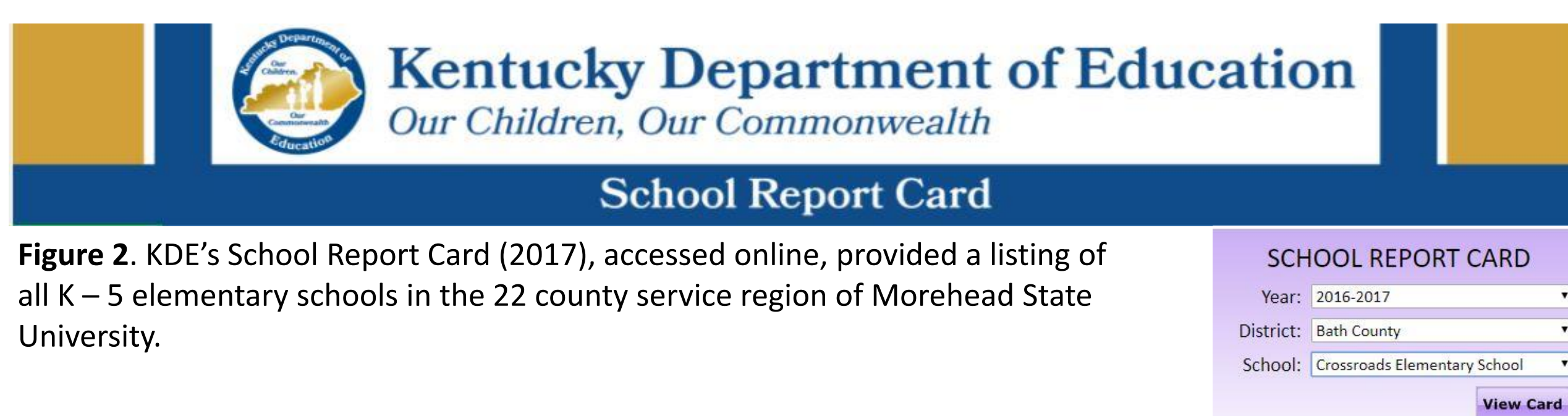


Figure 2. KDE's School Report Card (2017), accessed online, provided a listing of all K – 5 elementary schools in the 22 county service region of Morehead State University.

Abstract

One component of the United States' public school curriculum core is social studies. Since the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), elementary social studies has been marginalized, and in some cases, eliminated from the school day in favor of increased time for literacy and mathematics instruction. Kentucky's adoption of the ELA Common Core standards in 2010 and emphasis on informational texts to teach reading, may turn out to be an opportunity to re-position social studies' importance in the elementary school day. This study seeks to understand whether the ELA Common Core is the impetus teachers need in order to revitalize social studies instruction in the elementary grades.

Table 1. Number of Elementary Teachers by County in Morehead State University's Service Region, 2017-2018

County	n	County	n
Bath	48	Letcher	123
Boyd*	156	Lewis	27
Breathitt	37	Magoffin	46
Carter	80	Martin**	---
Elliott	28	Mason	66
Fleming	58	Menifee	30
Floyd	131	Montgomery	94
Greenup*	120	Morgan	56
Johnson*	226	Pike*	160
Knott	134	Rowan	84
Lawrence	75	Wolfe	36

*includes independent district

N = 1,815

**information unavailable

Method

The researchers (Purdum & Sharp) are employing **quantitative research** methods, more precisely, **descriptive research** to ascertain elementary teachers' practices using **informational texts** to teach social studies. The researchers selected **descriptive research** because the study has to do with teacher perceptions, practices, and demographics (Gay & Airasian, 2000). They conducted an extensive review of the literature in order to operationalize the term, informational texts, and to determine the variables to be explored in the study. From there, they developed and received IRB (Institutional Research Board) approval of a 32 question **survey** asking teachers to respond to questions about their familiarity with informational texts as teaching devices; their instructional practices; their familiarity with and use of social studies standards, ELA standards and the intersection of the two; and their assessment practices as related to social studies and ELA standards. The researchers disseminated their survey using **SurveyMonkey** (2017) between February 28 and March 30, 2018.

Of the 1,815 (N) teachers, 101 emails were returned as invalid and removed from the list due to changes in teachers' employment status. The updated population total became **N = 1,714**, with **208** respondents by March 30th, 2018 for a **12.1% return**.

Results

Figure 3 shows the distribution of teachers who reported utilizing informational texts to teach social studies content and skills, of which 84.3% (n=208) reported strongly agree or agree. Seventy-six percent of the respondents reported teaching social studies at some point during the school day or week. When planning for instruction, 71% of the respondents reported aligning their informational text instruction with the Kentucky Academic Standards for social studies, and 47.6% reported they align instruction with the national (NCSS) standards for social studies (see Figures 4 and 5). Although 71% is a promising statistic, it still falls well short of the 91% of teachers who reported they align informational text instruction with the ELA CC standards. Corroborating the alignment of standards for instruction results, the teachers responded similarly in what they actually assess when using informational texts. Seventy-four percent reported they assess social studies content and skills, while 89% reported assessing literacy skills when utilizing informational texts (see Figure 6).

Q17 I utilize informational texts to teach social studies content and skills.

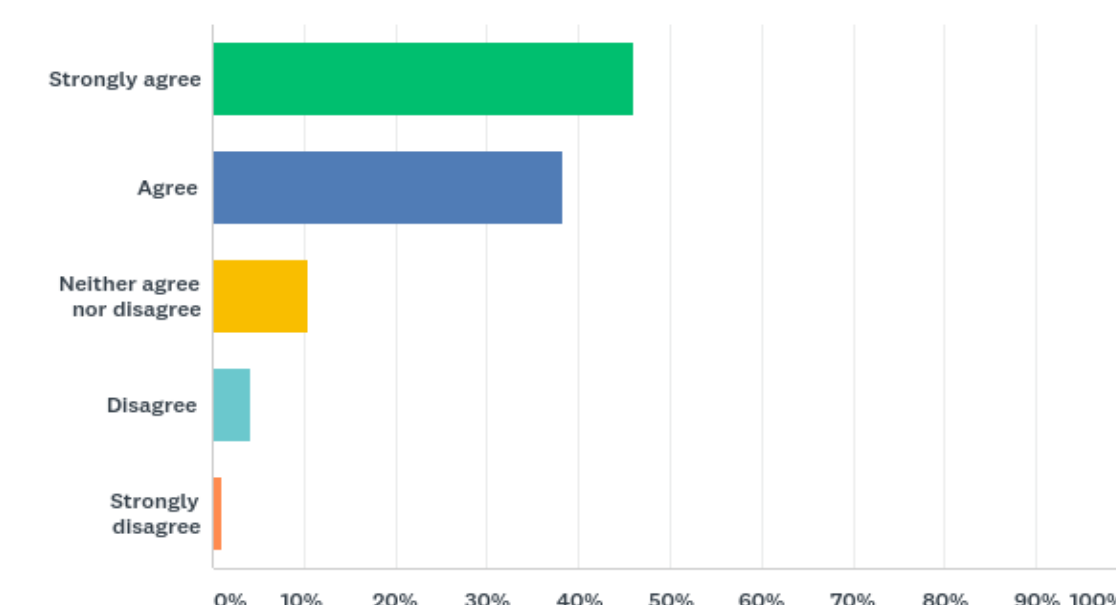


Figure 3 is question 17 on the survey. It addresses research question #1, "to what extent do teachers claim to use informational texts to teach social studies?"

Q30 I consult the Kentucky Academic Standards for social studies (KAS SS) when selecting informational texts for my students to read.

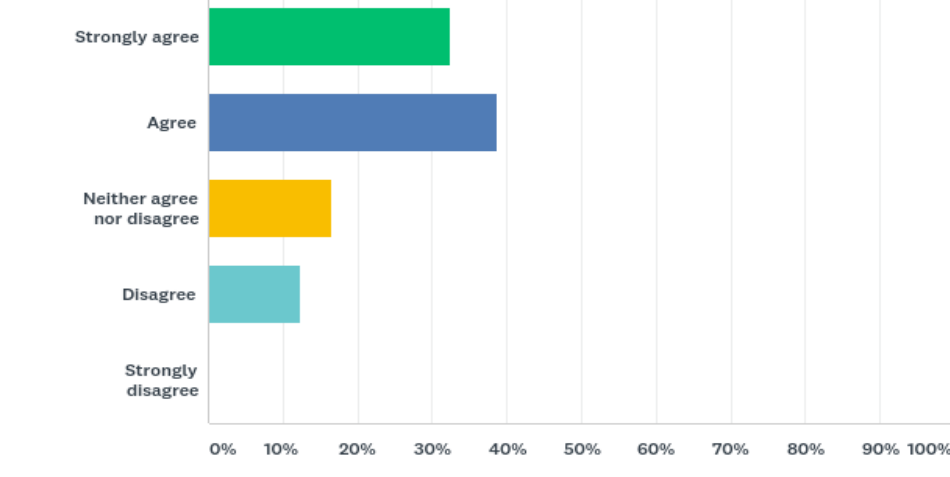


Figure 4 is question 30 on the survey. It addresses research question #2, "to what extent do elementary teachers align the use of informational text to Kentucky's and national social studies standards?"

Q34 I consult the NCSS Ten Thematic Strands when selecting informational texts for my students to read.

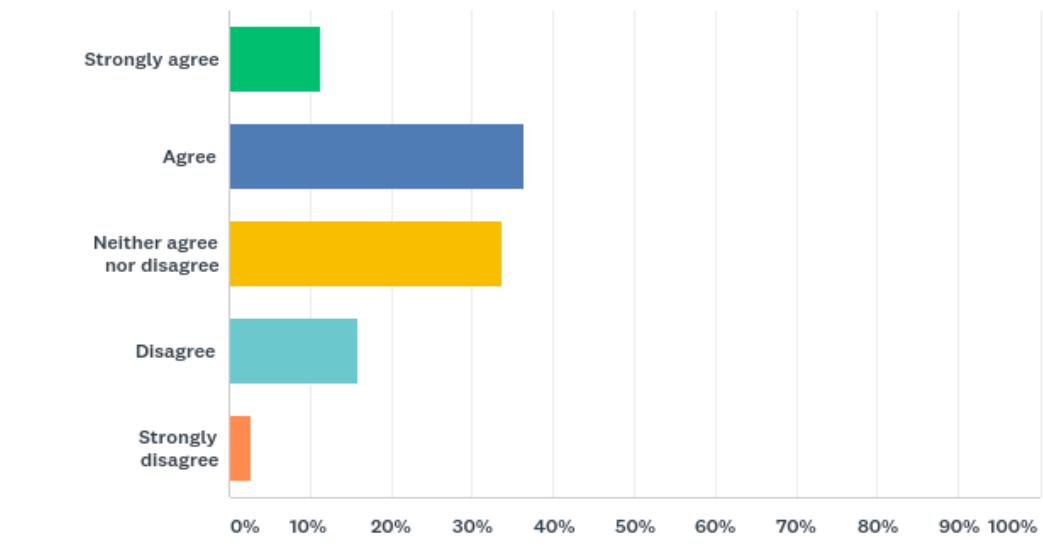


Figure 5 is question 34 on the survey. It addresses research question #2, "to what extent do elementary teachers align the use of informational text to Kentucky's and national social studies standards?"

Q42 I assess my students' social studies content knowledge and skills acquired from reading informational texts.

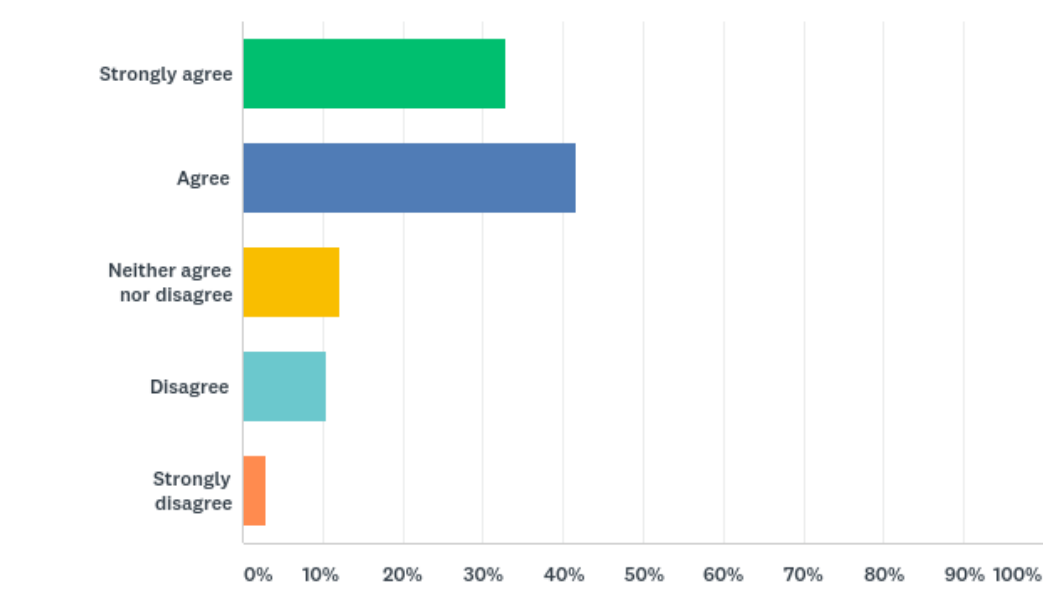


Figure 6 is question 42 on the survey. It addresses research question #3, "to what extent do elementary teachers assess students' social studies content knowledge when using informational texts?"

Conclusion

Three research questions were conducted in a survey to determine elementary teachers' use of informational texts to teach social studies. The majority of the respondents claimed to utilize informational texts to teach social studies content and skills. More teachers seemed to consult the Kentucky Academic Standards rather than the NCSS Ten Thematic Strands. The results also indicate that teachers' primary use of informational texts is for teaching literacy skills, and to a lesser degree for teaching social studies.

The findings from this research are important because social studies is a component of the Kentucky Academic Standards for elementary grades, but actual attention given to social studies remains inconsistent. Further analysis of the survey data will illumine: 1) grades in which social studies is taught, 2) the frequency in which social studies is taught in each of the elementary grades (K – 5), and 3) the value teachers give to social studies as an elementary content area. Further analysis will also reveal further nuances of the ELA CC standards and how they are impacting teachers' instructional decision – making regarding the teaching of social studies.

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