

Teaching and Learning Social Studies

# Social Studies Instruction, Learning, and Assessment in the Contemporary World

Leveraging the Past to Form a New Future



**R. Mark Epps**  
**Rebecca G. Harper**

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**Social Studies  
Instruction, Learning,  
and Assessment in the  
Contemporary World**

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# **Teaching and Learning Social Studies**

Series Editor  
William B. Russell

The Teaching and Learning Social Studies book series primarily focuses on contemporary issues related to the teaching and learning of social studies. The primary aim is to create a substantive body of scholarship, which can improve the understanding of the theory, research, and practice of social studies education.

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**Leveraging the Past to  
Form a New Future**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## CHAPTER 1

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# REIMAGINING SOCIAL STUDIES

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### ABSTRACT

Due to the complex and dynamic nature of social studies content, the authors advocate for an inclusive and flexible method to approach instruction. Instead of the traditional focus on key events, historical figures, and a chronological approach to instruction, a focus on teaching through the use of a thematic approach and real-world connections, along with the inclusion of multiple perspectives that celebrate a multitude of ways of knowing and being in the world. It is through this lens that educators can begin to channel the transformative nature of learning and living in a diverse world.

*Keywords:* Culturally responsive; curriculum innovation; student engagement; critical thinking; global citizenship

History is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated, and the winner writes the history books-books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe. As Napoleon once said, ‘What is history, but a fable agreed upon?’

—Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*

Our past and present experiences intertwine to guide our conceptualization, evaluation, and relationship associations of both ourselves and ourselves to others. These experiences and associations are not born from a blank slate. Rather, they are created and shaped by the individual and stitched into the collective mosaic of life, one moment at a time.

Social studies reveals these moments through a series of known singular topics and events. In this light, social studies serves as the majority's agent as it knowingly conceals people underneath layers of standards, instruction, assessments, promotion, preservation, compartmentalization, and the hidden curriculum. Social studies, perhaps more so than any other content area, also serves as the catalyst of change when we, the people, use our experiences to our own and others' advancements. At its core, social studies has been both a concurrent limiting and freeing pursuit of knowledge; a pursuit that discourages and encourages us to learn from and about our experiences and associations, to learn of ourselves and others. In this book, we reimagine social studies moving from the limitations it imposes and toward the freedom that it envisions for each one of us.

Social studies is a complex content area often wrought with contradictions, generalizations, and dominant narratives that can diminish the contributions of those who are underrepresented in curriculum standards and texts. In many instances, social studies instruction is heavily guided by content present in textbooks (Fan & Kaeley, 2000; McKean, 2002), yet social studies texts often are written above grade level, contain inaccurate and incomplete accounts of events or misrepresentations, and provide superficial explanations of content (Bickford & Rich, 2014; Loewen, 2018; Wineburg, 2001). As a result, students often have an incomplete understanding of the world in which they live. However, Pinar (2023) reminds us of the complex pedagogy-learning relationship with history stating, "curriculum is also a complicated conversation in which students and teachers are not only speaking among and to each other and to themselves but also with those not present, including those past and those not yet here" (p. 4). As such, social studies classrooms should offer students opportunities to explore, challenge, and disrupt the dominant narratives presented in and through curriculum standards and instead begin to explore the underrepresented, overlooked, and omitted stories, histories, and events that have shaped society. If students are to develop a comprehensive and thorough understanding of the world in which we live, it is imperative that they are engage with the ideas and events that might be omitted from inclusion in traditional curriculum standards.

Two centuries have passed since the subject of social studies emerged in high school classrooms as a stand-alone course. In those years, a number of challenges have emerged with the instruction surrounding this discipline. While the ultimate goal of history and social studies teaching appears to be that of a historical knowledge and recall of specific historical events, names, dates, and order of occurrence, revisions to instructional methods, course materials, and educator preparation have not yielded the results desired in the recall of historical knowledge or their ability to name and explain events in chronological order (Çelikkaya & Kürümlüoğlu, 2019; Bell & McCollum, 1917; De Voto, 1943; Eikenberry, 1923; Pala & Şimşek, 2016; Safran & Şimşek, 2006; Wineburg, 2001). As it stands, social studies is

typically taught primarily through two approaches: chronological order of events or the implementation of thematic units.

In most cases, social studies is taught in chronological order, with specific attention to events and individuals that reinforce the dominant narrative (Puustinen & Khawaja, 2021). The idea that chronological teaching is the best method for this discipline is based upon two claims. One is that in order to understand the events and concepts in social studies, content must be delivered in the order in which they occurred and experienced chronological order. Two, teaching in a chronological sequence is effective and appropriate across grade levels and ages. Ultimately, this method of delivering historical content is believed to be the most effective method. In addition, since most textbooks are arranged in this same manner, some teachers adopt this approach since it follows traditional textbook organization and chronology is the expected mode of delivery by parents, learners, and stakeholders (Metro, 2017). While it might seem that instruction should move through time in a chronological manner, time, for young people, can seem like a nebulous concept due to learners' understanding and application of time and the distance between historical events studied and present day. Young learners who have been alive for less than two decades might find connections with events of another century unrelatable and disengaged from their contemporary lives. Thus, instruction that follows this method is problematic for several reasons, including the fact that it can limit the range of time periods that students learn and can hinder student motivation (Barton, 2009). When students believe that history is made up a series of isolated events and figures, it can create a surface-level understanding, and miss the mark on providing opportunities for students to think, reflect, and apply their learning at a deeper and more personal level. In such, social studies teachers often are charged with teaching the breadth and not the depth of social studies, creating a drive-by approach to learning where events and figures are crossed off on the linear timeline, rarely to be situated in context or reengaged again. As a result, students may miss chances to make connections and develop relationships between comprehensive historical themes and ideas that occurred outside of sequence yet may inform other world events. Plus, in many instances, students are presented with one overarching, dominant narrative that may not adequately address and acknowledge contributions from other groups.

While teaching chronologically is overwhelmingly the most widely accepted instructional model for social studies teaching, the use of a thematic approach has increased as a means of instructional delivery in social studies. Although the use of the thematic approach in social studies has emerged in the past hundred years, according to Moyer (2016), the use of themes in academic disciplines has been popular since Dewey (1963) suggested curriculum should be connected to real-life experiences. Thematic teaching employs the use of broad themes that can

apply to multiple historical events and figures, allowing students to make connections and apply their own real-life experiences to these historical themes. The very nature of thematic instruction involves the notion of connecting ideas together under a larger umbrella theme (Davies & Shankar-Brown, 2011), which can aid students in understanding the significance and connection between events that occurred during different time periods. While this approach to teaching social studies has a number of benefits, it is not without criticism. For some, teaching social studies thematically is problematic due in part to its lack of focus on chronological events along with the notion that this approach teaches less history because it forces instructors to determine which themes and concepts will be the focus, rather than a list or group of events that must be addressed (Turan, 2020). However, one might argue that with either approach to teaching social studies, most social studies teachers are asked to teach and assess standards that span centuries, from the viewpoints of different individuals, and across geographic regions in a matter of 180 school days. In fact, Anderson and Cook (2014) share that many of the challenges faced by today's social studies teachers are directly connected to this overwhelming amount of content along with the heavy emphasis on district assessments, semester exams, End of Course exams (EOCs), Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and state assessments. Plus, social studies teaching does not simply include historical events, figures, and dates, but rather content related to government, geography, economics, and civics. Each of these items further exacerbates the problem of how content should be presented in order to be learned.

Regardless of the content delivery approach, according to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (2016), a strong and rigorous social studies curriculum involves activities and engagements that allow students to draw upon their past experiences to make connections between their prior knowledge current and contemporary events. In addition, students should be both critical and creative, draw conclusions, and utilize real world experiences and application to their learning and to historical events and concepts. The NCSS (2016) expounds upon this assertion with:

The social studies curriculum is integrative, addressing the totality of human experience over time and space, connecting with the past, linked to the present, and looking ahead to the future. Powerful social studies teaching combines elements of all the disciplines as it provides opportunities for students to conduct inquiry develop and display data, synthesize findings, and make judgements. (p. 181)

With this being the challenge put forward by the NCSS, finding ways in which not only to deliver content effectively, but also meet the needs of the diverse population of students in classrooms is the challenge presented in this volume.

For minority students and those who are from marginalized communities, the narrative that often justifies the majority's viewpoint, one that is often centered on misguided patriotism, can further exacerbate a difficult situation. Curriculum that focuses on the celebration of particular nations and individuals does not meet the needs of learners nor include their experiences or voices. Considering the fact that today's classrooms more diverse than ever before, with non-White students making up 56% of the public school student population (Irwin et al., 2024), the need to include and embrace this shift in classroom demographics is more important than ever. Plus, this diversity is even more pronounced in certain school settings as 33% of students of color attend schools where 75% of the student population is comprised of other students of color. While the diversity of students is increasing in public school settings, the same cannot be asserted for teachers. In fact, in 2021–2022, 80% of all public school teachers were White (Irwin et al., 2024). Now more than ever, educators, administrators, and curriculum developers are called into action in a collective effort to make certain that all students are represented in the curriculum and the materials and sources utilized in instruction. While many history texts include diverse characters and publishers have made a concerted effort to include information on individuals of color and women, in many instances, the content is restricted to examples of oppression and brutality (Barton, 2009). As a result, rather than their lives, their liberties, and their pursuit of their dreams, many students may be resistant to this inclusion due to the nature of the inclusion, which can result in what Adichie (2009) refers to as the “single story” (00:13). Single stories are dehumanizing in that they offer only one narrative of an event, group, or race. In many cases, students may only have experience with one version of a historical account of life. This can result in a variety of fallout, with the best-case scenario being that students have an incomplete version of history and the worst being that their understanding is false. Regardless, both outcomes are problematic and can only be remedied by interrogating the curriculum and the relationship between people, schools, society, and the politics of education (Apple, 1979/2004, 2000, 2012).

Acknowledging student perspectives and experiences can help students make valuable connections between history and current events (Barton, 2009). However, making such connections may prove problematic when educators fail to acknowledge a student's own unique background, especially when students encounter divisive historical ideas and concepts (Barton, 2009). Plus, the failure to connect history to other disciplines and ideas can unintentionally create a silo-like thought structure where students perceive history as irrelevant and disconnected from their personal worlds. However, to know history is to experience it, yet many students are missing the experiential and relevance components in their academic learning. We argue that by creating opportunities for students to engage with and learn

from and about what [Britzman \(1998\)](#) coined difficult knowledge and what later scholars specifically described in history as difficult histories ([Gross & Terra, 2018](#)), are much needed in the social studies classroom. Gross and Terra summarize the latter as:

1. Being central to a nation's history.
2. Refute broadly accepted versions of the dominant narrative.
3. May connect with questions or problems of the present.
4. Often involve violence and unrest.
5. Create uncertainties that challenge existing dominant narratives or understandings.

In order to address these difficult histories, students need the space and place to discuss, construct, de-construct, and co-construct interpretations and understandings to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of historical evidence. Optimally, they should also become co-creators of their curricula and conduct their own interrogations and inquiries of what is considered the historical and contemporary knowledge of social studies. One avenue of approach for this manner of thinking and instruction is to openly acknowledge that what we have learned and taught as norms, the majority's identified and enforced norms, can no longer be accepted as such ([Freire, 1968/1970](#); [Gay, 2023](#); [Ladson-Billings, 2021](#)). In place of the previously adopted one-size-fits-all majority-controlled education in which most American learners were forced to comply, we propose practices that are identifiable and relatable to all the students we teach.

We argue that social studies teaching should be recursive and fluid, allowing for movement forward, backward, inward, and outward, thus creating opportunities for students to examine events not just through the rote memorization of dominant facts and figures, but through critical inquiry and reflection. Because of the high concentration of content that is presented through personal accounts and stories, providing learning engagements for students to examine the narratives and counter-narratives while acknowledging the role of those whose lived experience is documented or unveiling, can provide optimal occasions for this type of critical examination. Historical narrative inquiry involves examining the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space with temporality, sociality, and place serving as contexts for understanding ([Clandinin & Connelly, 2000](#)), and can allow students to re-examine and critique common historical interpretations by taking into account contextual factors. Thus, historical narrative inquiry allows for this recursive and cyclical learning process, where students conduct inquiry, investigate, and develop interpretations that involve the acquisition of new knowledge along with the restructuring and re-conceptualization of existing narratives.

Social studies learning in this manner involves reading with a critical eye, analyzing accounts and sources, and cultivating inquiry that help

foster historical thinking. In fact, historical thinking offers an instructional approach focused on inquiry that promotes thinking about historical events in relation to contemporary events (Loewen, 2018; Martin, 2012; VanSledright, 2004; Wineburg, 2001). Inquiry-oriented approaches in history encourage students to utilize evidence and data to draw conclusions about events, and can motivate learning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1916, 1938; Levstik & Barton, 2005; Vygotsky, 1987). This approach is aligned with those utilized by historians and supports contemporary learning theory (Bransford et al., 1999). In contrast, traditional curriculum programs and textbooks may limit the opportunity for historical inquiry due to the structure and composition along with limited supplemental sources, especially those that include additional accounts and explanations of historical events. Where textbooks and mandated curriculum materials may fall short in fostering a culture of critical inquiry, material presented in the forthcoming chapters offers a unique perspective for social studies teaching and focuses intently on material that is inquiry-based and relevant, thus providing the authenticity and applicability that can improve student motivation.

## **CONNECTIONS TO OVERARCHING SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS AND GOALS**

Regardless of the standard sets followed from a local or state level, the ideas and notions presented forth in this volume follow the [National Council for the Social Studies \(NCSS\)](#) mission and beliefs (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.). In particular, material specifically addresses Standards 1 and 4, listed below.

Standard 1. Content Knowledge—Candidates demonstrate knowledge of social studies disciplines. Candidates are knowledgeable of disciplinary concepts, facts, and tools; structures of inquiry; and forms of representation.

Standard 4. Social Studies Learners and Learning—Candidates use knowledge of learners to plan and implement relevant and responsive pedagogy, create collaborative and interdisciplinary learning environments, and prepare learners to be informed advocates for an inclusive and equitable society.

This volume also supports the principles established in the College, Career, and Civic (C3) Life Framework ([National Council for the Social Studies, 2013](#)). The C3 is driven by the following shared principles about high quality social studies education:

- Social studies prepares the nation’s young people for college, careers, and civic life.
- Inquiry is at the heart of social studies.
- Social studies involves interdisciplinary applications and welcomes integration of the arts and humanities.

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- Social studies is composed of deep and enduring understandings, concepts, and skills from the disciplines. Social studies emphasizes skills and practices as preparation for democratic decision-making.
- Social studies education should have direct and explicit connections to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts.

We adopt [von Borries \(2009\)](#) explanation of history as a “mode of thinking” (p. 283), rather than a list of events and names to be memorized, and thus this book is laid out as such. Below you’ll find a brief summary of the chapters that follow where topics are addressed and explored by theme and overarching ideas rather than chronologically. In fact, readers will notice that they frequently will see events and figures from different decades, centuries, and eras making appearances in the same sections, as we believe that meaningful social studies learning can occur when students see the interconnectedness of multiple social studies concepts, ideas, and the interconnectedness of life.

### **CHAPTER 2: LEARNING FROM THE CONQUERED: RE-EXAMINING THE PAST THROUGH AN INDIGENOUS LENS**

This chapter provides a rarely seen and highly relevant examination of historical events and relationships through an Indigenous lens. Delving into both well-known and less commonly taught United States historical engagements, the chapter centers on America’s unfolding and interconnected historical relationships, concepts, and outcomes as positioned within Indigenous perspectives. Concentrating on indigenous and non-Indigenous primary sources to reexamine the co-relational history, we explore history’s portrayal through the cultural implications of Indigenous nations and people. *Learning from The Conquered: Re-examining the Past Through an Indigenous Lens* concludes with the lasting impacts of history directly and indirectly proffered and reinforced through the absence of indigenous perspectives in history.

### **CHAPTER 3: BEYOND ANNE FRANK: EXAMINING PERSECUTION AND GENOCIDE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CONFLICT**

Transitioning beyond the persecuted individuals and groups widely taught in America’s secondary and postsecondary social studies classes, Chapter 3 examines the victims and survivors of government-approved persecution and genocide whose histories are forgotten, overlooked, or ignored.