

# Inquiry in Social Studies

Guide for Educators



Explore the foundations of inquiry-based social studies in the classroom.

# Inquiry in the Classroom



## The Shift Toward Inquiry-Based Social Studies

Since the publication of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards in 2013, **inquiry-based instruction has become the gold standard for social studies education**. More than a decade later, new efforts like the *Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy* have echoed the C3 Framework's call for inquiry in K-12 social studies education.

State education leaders are heeding that call.

According to a recent research, 38 states – with more to follow – have integrated inquiry principles into their social studies standards, setting the instructional priorities for more than 30 million students. The extent to which these standards shape the day-to-day experience of social studies for those students, however, depends in large part on whether or not classroom teachers receive the support they need to shift their instructional practice.

**Many teachers are unfamiliar with inquiry-based practices, and many more lack the high-quality instructional materials that they need to support them.**

## A Guide for Educators

inquirED has created the Inquiry in Social Studies Guide to help educators deepen their understanding of inquiry-based social studies and envision what it looks like in practice. The guide will explore the key building blocks of inquiry in social studies:

- Starting with Questions
- Building Disciplinary Knowledge and Skills
- Promoting Student-Led Learning
- Taking Informed Action

## How to Use the Guide

The Inquiry in Social Studies Guide breaks down each building block of inquiry-based social studies, provides a brief narrative or testimonial from the classroom, and offers practical ways to recognize these elements in curriculum materials and instruction.



### About inquirED

inquirED supports teachers with high-quality instructional materials that make joyful, rigorous, and transferable learning possible for every student. Our social studies curricula – [Inquiry Journeys \(K-5\)](#) and [Middle School World History](#) – are used across the country to help students build deep content knowledge and develop inquiry skills essential for a thriving democracy.

# Starting with Questions



## Question Types

In inquiry-based social studies, students learn by investigating different types of questions. Teachers (or curriculum writers) craft some of these questions to help students meet learning standards. Other questions, equally worthy of investigation, come from the students themselves, inspired by their curiosities and lived experiences. Types of questions generally include the following:

### Inquiry Questions

A single inquiry question – also called a compelling question – drives learning over the course of a whole social studies unit of study. A great inquiry question should be:

- Complex and open-ended, igniting student curiosity and driving them forward into their investigation
- Simply stated so students can easily understand and explain it
- Action-oriented, inspiring students to explore real-world connections and solutions

## Essential Questions

Multiple essential questions – also called supporting questions – frame the investigation into the larger inquiry question. Essential questions should:

- Be open-ended
- Lead to an investigation of social studies content
- Connect to the standards, objectives, and broader inquiry question of the social studies unit of study

## Student-Generated Questions

Student-generated questions – also called investigation questions – play an important role in inquiry-based social studies. As students investigate their own questions, they build knowledge that is deep and lasting because their learning connects to their curiosities and interests.

In general, student-generated questions should be:

- Generated throughout a unit of study
- Prioritized and improved by students
- Revisited by students to consider which ones have been addressed, and what new questions have arisen

## Educator Reflections

Rhonda Jackson, Second Grade Master Teacher in Detroit Public Schools, recently shifted to inquiry-based social studies instruction. For Jackson and her students, it took time to adjust to a shift in learning through the process of investigating questions. “Before we would study subjects; now it’s based on questions. It took a while, but now my students are more excited and they love social studies.”

**“It just took time for them to realize their questions mattered.”** Rhonda Jackson, 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Master Teacher Detroit Public Schools

According to Jackson, it took even more time for students to get used to asking their own questions. “We started our unit with the Question Formulation Technique,” Jackson said, “and it was hard the first time. But now? I can’t get them to stop coming up with questions! It just took time for them to realize their questions mattered.”

## What to Look for

### CURRICULUM



- A single inquiry question (also called a compelling question) drives learning in a unit of study.
- Multiple essential questions (also called supporting questions) connect individual lessons into a sustained investigation of the inquiry question.
- Student-generated questions for investigation are incorporated into instruction, including generating, revisiting, and revising.
- Multiple lessons across a unit provide opportunities for students to reflect on the inquiry question, essential questions, and student-generated questions.

### CLASSROOM



- Students are engaging in discussion about inquiry, essential, and student-generated questions.
- Students are using protocols and cognitive routines that support generating, revisiting, revising, and reflecting on questions.
- Inquiry, essential, and student-generated questions are displayed prominently in the classroom to guide student learning.
- Anchor charts and other learning artifacts demonstrate the ongoing process of revisiting, reflecting on, and revising questions.

# Building Disciplinary Knowledge & Skills



## From Record Keepers to Social Scientists

In traditional social studies classrooms, students often act as record keepers - writing down facts, memorizing information, and recalling it on quizzes or tests. In contrast, students in inquiry-based social studies act as social scientists, building knowledge and skills in the core disciplines of social studies (History, Civics, Geography, and Economics) so they can answer complex questions, solve problems, or create solutions.

When students think and act like social scientists, they use the disciplinary lens and tools of History, Geography, Civics, and Economics to investigate the world. For example, when students adopt the lens of a geographer, they:

- Recognize key relationships, such as how humans interact with their environment or how climate influences migration and movement, etc.
- Ask discipline-specific questions, like How have humans modified their environment? or How does physical geography shape culture?
- Use geographic tools, such as maps to track migration patterns or analyze population distributions

Each social studies discipline provides a unique perspective and a specialized set of tools that help students interpret and engage with the world more deeply. By thinking and working like social scientists, students move beyond memorization to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and inquiry skills that they can apply in real-world contexts.

## Educator Reflections

Jaclyn Share, an instructional coach in Illinois, works with students and teachers to help integrate disciplinary investigations into elementary social studies classrooms. When students act as social scientists, they are not memorizing information but “building schema, constructing meaning,” according to Share.

“The topics we learn about in social studies are the contexts of our lives.” Jaclyn Share, Instructional Coach Illinois

“It’s far different from being told what to think,” she said. “The topics we learn about in social studies are the contexts of our lives. Disciplinary knowledge and skills are tools students can use to understand and affect their world.”

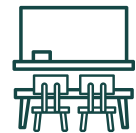
## What to Look for

### CURRICULUM



- Lesson objectives are aligned to rigorous grade-level standards in History, Civics, Geography, and Economics.
- Disciplinary sources presenting multiple perspectives are integrated into lessons.
- Multiple opportunities are provided across a unit for students to construct discipline-specific claims supported by evidence and reasoning.
- Lessons integrate the analysis and evaluation of sources and arguments across social studies disciplines.

### CLASSROOM



- Students are gathering, organizing, and analyzing evidence from primary and secondary disciplinary sources.
- Students are explaining their understanding of disciplinary texts, sources, and concepts.
- Students are working individually and collaboratively to construct claims supported by evidence.
- Students are using disciplinary tools to collaborate, create, produce, publish, and evaluate content.

# Promoting Student-Led Learning



## Student Voice and Choice

The concept of student-led learning can often be misunderstood to mean that students get to choose exactly what or when to learn. If this were the case, how could teachers ensure that students were meeting learning targets and developing the specific knowledge and skills required by state standards?

In reality, student-led learning in social studies means that students have the opportunities to:

- Contribute their own questions to drive classroom investigations
- Draw from their lived experiences as sources of knowledge
- Connect their curiosity and interests to social studies topics and learning goals

Within the context of student-led learning, teachers are positioned as designers and guides, creating the structures within which students can take ownership of their learning – and providing the needed scaffolding and support along the way.

## Educator Reflections

The shift to more student-led learning experiences was a challenge at first for Peggy Clark and her fourth-grade students. Clark’s students were used to coming to her with all their questions and looking to her to direct their learning.

**“It was amazing to see them develop ownership, so they weren’t relying totally on me all the time!”** Peggy Clark, 4th Grade Teacher

They struggled at first when she shared with them that they would be doing the research and sharing out what they learned on their own, “instead of me telling you what to do, how to do it, and what the end should be.”

Over time, though, her students started to become more independent (and engaged) in their learning. “It was amazing to see them develop ownership,” she reflected, “so they weren’t relying totally on me all the time!”

## What to Look for

### CURRICULUM



- Connections to students’ prior knowledge and lived experiences inform and shape learning experiences across a unit of study.
- Protocols and cognitive routines that support independent thinking and problem solving are integrated into lessons.
- Students have opportunities to choose how to represent their learning through multiple modes, including speaking, writing, visual representations, etc.
- Student self-assessment, reflection, and goal-setting is embedded across a unit of study to inform student work.

### CLASSROOM



- Students do the majority of the talking, thinking, and doing across learning experiences.
- Students demonstrate personal agency, such as making choices about their learning, providing input, and advocating for help or resources when needed.
- Students engage in continued goal-setting, reflection, and feedback to revise their thinking and work.
- Artifacts of learning (anchor charts, unit displays, etc.) show evidence of student-led learning and collaboration.

# Taking Informed Action



## Learning With a Purpose

In inquiry-based social studies, students are encouraged to take informed action - a purposeful, public response to a challenge uncovered during their investigation. To better understand informed action, it might be helpful to break that definition down into its parts.

- Informed action is *purposeful* because students take time to propose, design, and iterate on their ideas.
- Informed action is *public* because students are not taking action for themselves (or just to show their teacher what they know), but instead, to have an impact beyond the walls of their classroom.
- Finally, informed action is a *response* because students are taking an action that is rooted in what they learned during their investigation.

If students are only informed during a social studies investigation, they might pursue an inquiry question but only be challenged to show their understanding to their teacher on a test. And if students only take action, then their challenge might be limited to participating in an activity that's vaguely related to their learning.

It's not that tests, stand-alone projects, or activities have no value; during an inquiry-based social studies investigation, they can effectively assess learning, engage students, and check for understanding. However, these tasks should not define the entire focus of student learning in social studies.

When an inquiry promotes informed action, however, the point becomes clear and resonates with students. They identify a challenge that is informed by learning and addresses a real-world problem – one that matters to their community and connects to their lived experience. Their audience is outside the classroom as well, whether it's students in a different grade or outside their school building. While they may receive a grade, the grade isn't the point of their action. Students are trying to have an authentic impact on the world. To view examples of Informed Action in Inquiry Journeys, inquirED's K–5 social studies curriculum, visit our informed action blog.

## Educator Reflections

Students in Jenny Hutzelman's Ohio second-grade classroom beamed with pride as they gathered around the community garden they had created as an informed action project. They had worked for weeks investigating economic and civic principles during their unit, distinguishing between needs and wants, both as individuals and as members of a school community.

“They learned that just because they're in second grade doesn't mean they can't make a difference, make things better.”

Jenny Hutzelman, 2nd Grade Teacher Ohio

“We were in the first months of the pandemic,” Hutzelman shared, “and students identified the need for a place outside to be healthy and safe.” Students worked to create and deliver presentations to their principal and PTO – and after approval and construction, they were able to stand in front of the culmination of their work.

According to Hutzleman, it was an experience they will never forget: “They learned that just because they're in second grade doesn't mean they can't make a difference, make things better.”

## What to Look for

### CURRICULUM



- Opportunities to solve a real-world problem in response to the compelling question are integrated into units of study.
- Students are prompted to identify challenges and opportunities in their local community to take action related to their key learnings
- Students are guided to identify their audience, desired impact, and the goals they will work toward in the informed action process
- Lessons integrate a multi-step design process into units of study (brainstorm, prototype, give and receive feedback, revise, reflect, etc.).

### CLASSROOM



- Students reflect upon learnings and identify key ideas and concepts to integrate into their informed action project.
- Students are actively engaged in the planning of their informed action project, including identifying the audience, desired impact, and goals.
- Students engage in brainstorming, prototyping, feedback, and revision as part of creating their informed action project.
- Student-generated artifacts related to planning and implementing informed action (purpose statements, goals, reflections, etc.) are visible and accessible to students.

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