



Integrating ELA and Social Studies for Coherence and Depth

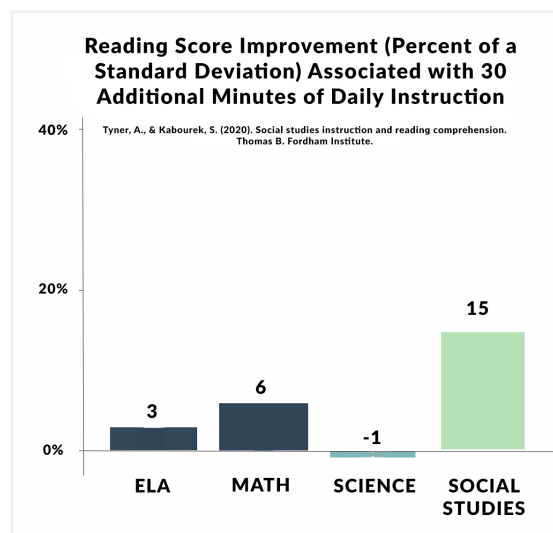
WHEN ELA AND SOCIAL STUDIES ARE DESIGNED AS ONE INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM, SCHOOLS REDUCE FRAGMENTATION, STRENGTHEN LITERACY AND KNOWLEDGE BUILDING, AND CREATE LEARNING THAT TRULY CONNECTS.

Fitting every subject into the school day has become a real challenge in elementary schools. Making sure learning is connected and coherent across subjects is even harder. One way to ease these challenges is by deeply integrating ELA and social studies.

[Integrated ELA and social studies](#) creates a more meaningful and powerful experience for both teachers and students. It allows teachers to guide students through connected learning experiences where literacy and social studies reinforce each other. For students, this approach leads to better understanding, stronger comprehension, and knowledge-building that transfers across contexts.

As interest in integration grows, it's important to note what integrated ELA and social studies is *not*. It's *not* occasionally pairing texts or relying on alignment documents and crosswalks. It's *not* about asking teachers to coordinate multiple programs. Successful coherence requires careful design, not teacher heroics.

“Integration isn’t about adding content to ELA or squeezing subjects together,” Elisabeth Ventling Simon, chief academic officer and co-founder of inquirED, says. “It’s about designing instruction differently from the start. And we can’t ask teachers to do that on their own time.”



WHY THE ELA/SOCIAL STUDIES PAIRING IS UNIQUE

Literacy learning anchored in purposeful, sequenced social studies content across history, civics, geography, and economics helps vocabulary grow, comprehension deepen, and knowledge transfer across context, Simon says.

A national longitudinal study from the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#) found that spending additional time on social studies every day was associated with gains in reading achievement. In contrast, allocating additional time to science or even ELA did not produce comparable gains in reading outcomes.

This pattern is consistent with [a broad body of research](#) that shows that background knowledge significantly strengthens reading comprehension, especially for students with fewer opportunities to build content knowledge outside of school. This helps explain why social studies instruction can have such a powerful impact on ELA outcomes.

BENEFITS OF INTEGRATING SOCIAL STUDIES AND ELA

High-quality integrated materials connect ELA and social studies through purposeful text and source sequencing, coherent knowledge building, and intentional integration of both sets of standards.

SUPPORTS COHERENT TEACHING AND LEARNING

Separate programs for reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and social studies mean elementary school teachers and students have to manage multiple routines, materials, and expectations, increasing [cognitive load and fragmenting learning](#). Truly integrated materials replace separate, disconnected programs, letting students build skills, concepts, and knowledge in both subjects within a single instructional block. This includes intentional decisions about how texts and sources are sequenced and how knowledge is built across lessons. The resulting instructional synthesis of social studies, reading comprehension, writing, grammar and vocabulary is aligned to both subjects' standards.

"When ELA and social studies live in one coherent block, teachers stop juggling programs and students experience learning that actually feels connected," Shanti Elangovan, founder and CEO of [inquirED](#), says.

ADDRESSES THE ELEMENTARY CURRICULA TIME CRUNCH

Elementary teachers can struggle to fit required subjects into a [limited time](#). "When we add up all research-supported instructional priorities, the school day comes up about two and a half hours short," Nell K. Duke, executive director of the Center for Early Literacy Success at Stand for Children, says. "Interdisciplinary instruction

is one of the only realistic ways to address that overload."

USES SOCIAL STUDIES' KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING POWER TO STRENGTHEN COMPREHENSION

Social studies builds the kind of broad, durable knowledge that [comprehension](#) depends on. Unlike typical ELA short text sets that introduce a topic for a week or two, social studies develops conceptual knowledge over time. Ideas like community, governance, interdependence, and culture become mental frameworks students draw on to make sense of new texts and real-world issues.



Integration isn't about adding content to ELA or squeezing subjects together. It's about designing instruction differently from the start. And we can't ask teachers to do that on their own time.



ELISABETH VENTLING SIMON

CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER AND CO-FOUNDER OF [INQUIRED](#)



THE COMBINATION IN ACTION

One example is a first-grade unit in the fully integrated K–2 ELA and social studies curriculum [Inkwell](#), which invites students to explore the question: Why do communities need different jobs?

Anchor texts and source sequencing:

Integrated HQIMs sequence texts and sources so each one builds the conceptual knowledge students need to read the next with greater depth and insight. In the Inkwell module, students begin with *Job Wanted*, an accessible introduction to how jobs meet community needs. *Night in the City* expands that understanding by showing a wider range of workers and introducing the concepts of goods and services. The final anchor text, *Marvelous Cornelius*, adds real-world complexity through the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Across the sequence, students revisit these texts and explore wraparound sources — informational texts, videos, and historical images — so that by the final anchor text and module assessment,

they bring the background knowledge needed for more [robust comprehension](#).

Standards alignment by design: In a typical ELA program, students might analyze *Night in the City* by examining plot, describing character feelings, identifying the main message, and completing grammar or writing tasks tied to those components. In high-quality, integrated instructional materials, that same work functions as a link to social studies learning. Students identify the main topic and key points while also making sense of goods, services, and community roles. They [write](#) about how different workers support a community, using text evidence and disciplinary vocabulary.

Deeper knowledge-building for comprehension and transfer: In an integrated ELA and social studies curriculum, when students read “Marvelous Cornelius,” they see Cornelius as more than just a helpful character; he’s also a volunteer responding to urgent community needs after Hurricane Katrina.

By examining additional sources about the hurricane, students deepen their understanding of how jobs help communities function and why, after the storm, volunteer efforts were necessary to support recovery. This accumulated knowledge deepens comprehension, enabling students to apply what they know as they discuss and write about how communities work together in response to adversity.

INTEGRATED INSTRUCTION BRINGS MEANINGFUL LEARNING

Integrating ELA and social studies provides connected instruction that is centered on how children actually learn. It supports teachers by providing a single, unified instructional block rather than a set of disconnected programs, and it supports students by building the knowledge and disciplinary understanding that make deeper comprehension possible. Integration helps students read with confidence, write with purpose, and better understand their world.

An integrated curriculum, Elangovan stresses, is more than the sum of its parts. When ELA and social studies work together, the impact of each subject multiplies. Social studies provides the knowledge that makes literacy learning stick, while ELA gives students the tools to read, write, and discuss that knowledge with clarity and purpose.



About **inquirED**

inquirED supports teachers with high-quality instructional materials that make joyful, rigorous, and transferable learning possible for every student. [Inkwell](#), their integrated core ELA and social studies elementary curriculum, brings ELA and social studies together into one coherent instructional block that builds deeper knowledge, comprehension, and literacy skills. [Inquiry Journeys](#), their K–5 social studies curriculum, is used across the country to help students develop the deep content knowledge and inquiry skills essential for a thriving democracy,

Learn more about [integrating ELA and social studies](#).

“ When ELA and social studies work together, the impact of each subject multiplies. ”

SHANTI ELANGO VAN
FOUNDER AND CEO, INQUIRE D