

Social Studies Teaching and Learning

Volume 2, Issue 2

An open-source peer-reviewed journal of the



Co-editors:

Kimberlee Sharp, Morehead State University
Caroline Sheffield, University of Louisville

Peer Reviewers:

Joshua Kenna, University of Tennessee

David Childs, Northern Kentucky University

Jeremiah Clabough, University of Alabama – Birmingham

James Akenson, Tennessee Technological University

John Bickford, Eastern Illinois University

Natalie Keefer, University of Louisiana – Lafayette

Dean Vesperman, University of Wisconsin – River Falls

Scott Roberts, Central Michigan University

Ricky Mullins, University of Virginia's College at Wise

Charles Elfer, Clayton State University

Sean M. Lennon, Valdosta State University

Sandra Riegle, Morehead State University

Nefertari Yancie, University of Alabama – Birmingham

Jeffrey Byford, University of Memphis

Rebecca Roach, Morehead State University

Table of Contents

Practice

- Ricky Mullins and Molly Erwin, *“This is Our Time to Find Our Voice”*: Doing Discussion in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom 82
- Rebecca Roach and Claire West, *Picture Books, Posters, and Post-Its: Summarizing Text to Stage the Compelling Question* 89
- Russell G. Hammack, Lisa Matherson, and Elizabeth Wilson, *Inquiry and the Olympics: A Catalyst for Social Change* 100
- Ronald V. Morris, *Teaching Second-Grade Students to Curate and Interpret the Egyptian Museum* 112
- Samuel Northern, *Roadmap to Improving Social Studies Instruction* 122

Research

- Julie Anne Taylor, K. Dara Hill, and Jerry W. Tait, *Learning Gardens and Social Education in Detroit* 131

Roadmap to Improving Social Studies Instruction

Samuel Northern

Simpson Elementary School

Abstract

Typically, primary school teachers meet as grade-level professional learning communities (PLCs) to improve classroom instruction. In 2020, a team of elementary school teachers started their first-ever social studies PLC consisting of educators from various grade levels and departments. The PLC supported and monitored instructional design and assessment practices to increase teacher efficacy and effectiveness toward social studies instruction. Teachers constructed the meaning of social studies standards and inquiry-based pedagogy through active and hands-on interactions with materials. Other elementary schools can adopt or modify the PLC's structures, processes, and resources to transform social studies instruction in the early grades.

Key Words: elementary, inquiry, professional learning communities

Social studies often takes a back seat at the elementary school level. Primary schools prioritize reading and mathematics over other content areas. Numerous factors affect social studies teaching in the early grades, such as limited instructional time and low teacher efficacy related to social studies pedagogical content knowledge. (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010) Many professional development programs offered to elementary school teachers neglect social studies standards, practices, and assessments. If students are to receive a well-rounded education, social studies must be emphasized in school goals, professional growth, and curriculum frameworks (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) can positively impact the teaching of specific subject areas. PLCs engage participants in a hands-on approach to problem-based learning to use critical thinking skills, enhancing communication skills, and applying concepts to practice (Smith et al., 2008). According to the Kentucky Department of Education (2020):

A professional learning community, or PLC, is an organizational structure by design that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students. The school's curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices are monitored through the PLC design to ensure teacher effectiveness and, most importantly, student learning. PLCs require the utilization of data from assessments and an examination of professional practice as teachers and administrators systematically monitor and adjust curriculum, instruction, and assessment to ensure the goal of graduating all students are college and/or career ready.

At the start of the pandemic in March 2020, a vertical team of teachers at my elementary school saw an opportunity to establish a PLC around social studies standards and inquiry practices. Our school is situated in a rural area and serves first, second, and third grades. Each grade level contains ten homeroom teachers. Science, Social Studies, and Writing are taught in self-contained classrooms. Students are grouped and regrouped in math and reading classes according to specific goals and individual learning needs.

It has been over a year since our social studies-specific PLC's first meeting, and social studies instruction continues to be a school-wide priority. Compelling and supporting questions are listed on lesson plan templates. Social studies standards are integrated into reading instruction and writing tasks. Teachers' instructional procedures include standards from each disciplinary strand to deepen students' understandings of social studies concepts.

Our elementary school has come far in improving social studies instruction, and the work persists. The pathway to creating a viable social studies curriculum is open to all schools at all levels. The following "road map" can help schools develop their own versions of a social studies-focused PLC with a vertical team of teachers (see Figure 1).

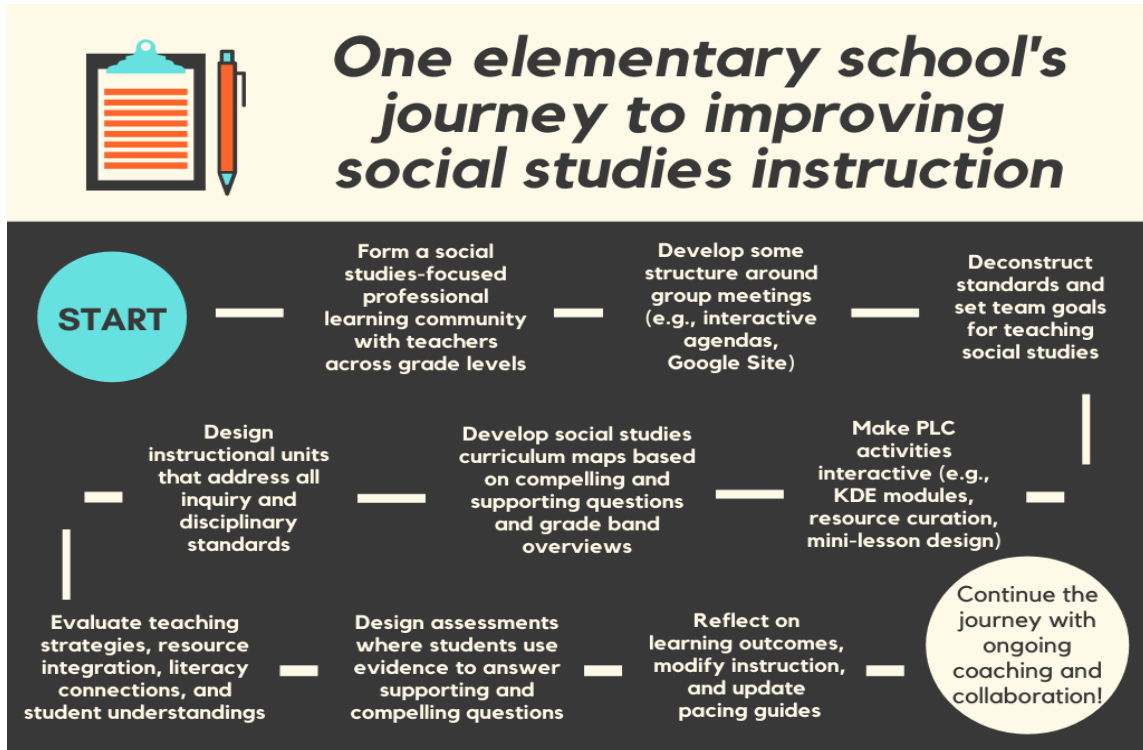
Form a social studies-focused PLC with teachers across grade levels

Our first iteration of a social studies PLC comprised eight volunteers: the curriculum coordinator, librarian, two first grade teachers, two second grade teachers, and two third grade teachers. We proudly called ourselves the Social Studies Council. Team members possessed strong teaching qualities and a commitment to professional growth. We started by expressing our philosophies toward social studies education. Responses led to a shared vision of a social studies curriculum that promotes student inquiry by exploring real-world issues and problems.

Develop some structure around group meetings

The Social Studies Council used different tools to keep work organized and accessible. Each PLC meeting worked off an interactive agenda in Google Docs. Meeting agendas contained headings, links, goals, and other pertinent information about the meeting's topic. See Figure 2 for a screenshot of a meeting agenda. Google Docs is great for collaboration as they let participants comment and make edits.

Google Sites was another platform the PLC used to curate materials. The Social Studies Council Google Site contains information on standards, a bibliography of resources, professional learning modules, and strategies for embedding the inquiry process. See Figure 3 for a screenshot of the PLC's website. Teachers contributed to the social studies website by posting links to resources and recommending tools to support student products. The PLC's Google Site is now a well-established resource utilized by all teachers in the building.

Figure 1*PLC process for improving social studies instruction*

Deconstruct standards and set team goals for teaching social studies

Goals are essential to a PLC's sustainability. Goal-setting serves as a motivational tool and encourages shared ownership of learning among team members. The Social Studies Council prioritized goals after deconstructing social studies standards. We used Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) standards deconstruction tool to analyze standards for every grade level. JCPS's (n.d.) standards documents help teachers understand the Kentucky Academic Standards for Social Studies, so curriculum and instruction are suited to fulfill the intentions of the standards. PLC members' engagement in the process of deconstructing standards inspired collective action toward developing a cohesive curriculum.

Make PLC activities interactive


A portion of our PLC meetings was spent exploring best teaching and assessment practices from the Kentucky Department of Education's (KDE) professional learning modules for teachers. KYstandards.org provides many professional learning modules that help build a better understanding of the Kentucky Academic Standards. Information in the modules helped the Social Studies Council transition to an instructional planning process most fitting to new state

social studies standards. KDE's professional learning modules cover a range of topics, including getting to know the standards and creating collaborative civic spaces.

Figure 2

Sample PLC meeting agenda

Social Studies Council
SES Social Studies Google Site




True or False?
In Kentucky, the discipline strands in social studies are meant to be taught in **unison**. Students recall and understand **themes** and topics better if the social studies strands are **integrated** and not taught in isolation.

The organization of the KAS for Social Studies requires a balance between the inquiry practices and the discipline strand standards as both are crucial to developing a mastery understanding of the standards.

Compelling Question: Does my assignment meet the intended depth and rigor of the KAS for Social Studies?

1. Are there any discrepancies between how you and/or your PLC rated the assignment? If so, discuss the differences.
2. Review the [reflection section](#) of the Social Studies Assignment Review Protocol. What changes are needed to improve alignment to the KAS for Social Studies?



Assignment Review

- [Grade 1 Social Studies Assignment](#)
- [Grade 2 Social Studies Assignment](#)
- [Grade 3 Social Studies Assignment](#)
 - [Assignment Review Protocol Template](#)

For additional examples of strongly aligned KAS for Social Studies assignments, visit the [Student Assignment Library](#).

PLC members used information in the social studies modules to complete activities outside of scheduled gatherings. Teachers designed mini-lessons, created compelling questions, and curated instructional resources. For one PLC assignment, teachers selected *one* source that connected with a standard from *each* disciplinary strand (i.e., civics, economics, geography, and history). After considering what students will learn by engaging with the source, the teachers wrote a compelling question and four supporting questions (one for each disciplinary strand). A third-grade teacher mapped social studies standards for a short story about Kamishibai (a form of Japanese street theater and storytelling) (see Figure 4). The teacher's inquiries support students' critical thinking about social studies concepts in light of the text.

Figure 3

Social Studies Council Google Site



Teachers completed PLC assignments with the intention of one day using the material to support classroom instruction. Teachers displayed and discussed their work samples at PLC meetings. The process helped teachers see the full spectrum of standards and ideas to enrich the social studies curriculum.

Develop inquiry-focused social studies curriculum maps

The insights teachers gained from deconstructing standards, completing training modules, and presenting PLC assignments led to revamping social studies curriculum maps. Compelling questions have taken the place of unit titles. Instead of listing standards solely by discipline, redesigned curriculum documents group standards by each unit bundle's supporting questions. Revised social studies curriculum maps show an obvious correlation among standards, supporting questions, and learning targets. Our curriculum documents reflect the interconnectedness of disciplinary standards and signify the impact of the inquiry process.

Design instructional units that address all inquiry and disciplinary standards

Training modules, weekly assignments, goal monitoring, and reflective discourse spurred teachers' enthusiasm for designing standards-based social studies instruction. Teachers collaboratively designed a lesson planning template structured on key elements of the inquiry process: questioning, investigating, using evidence, and communicating conclusions (see Figure

4). The instructional document identifies the concepts and skills students are expected to master for each standard. A key step in the instructional design process was making connections to other subject areas, teaching resources, current events, and student interests. After identifying essential learning goals, curriculum connections, and appropriate sources of information, teachers were ready to outline instructional procedures.

Figure 4

Source aligned to social standards across disciplinary strands

Source	“Kamishibai Man” (Journeys Lesson 9)	
Compelling Question	How do traditions change over time?	
Disciplinary Strand	Standard	Supporting Question
Civics	3.C.CV.1 Compare civic virtues and democratic principles within a variety of diverse world communities.	How was the Kamishibai man’s storytelling an example of a civic duty? What were Kamishibai men’s involvement in their communities? Did they benefit their communities?
Economics	3.E.MI.2 Describe the relationship between supply and demand.	How had the demand for the Kamishibai man’s storytelling changed when he returned to the city?
Geography	3.G.MM.1 Analyze how human settlement and movement impact diverse groups of people. 3.G.HE.1 Explain how the culture of places and regions influences how people modify and adapt to their environments.	What had changed geographically that affected the Kamishibai man’s journey into the city? How did the Kamishibai man adapt to the change he discovered? What were the influences that caused the tradition of storytelling to change?
History	3.H.CE.1 Compare diverse world communities in terms of members, customs, and traditions, to the local community.	What events took place that led to the change in the way the Kamishibai man told his stories? Is there a tradition we have in our community or that you have in your family that has been passed down through the years? How has it changed?

Figure 5*Social Studies planning document*

Social Studies Planning Document	
Unit:	
Grade:	
Timeframe	
	•
Standards	
	•
Major Topics/Themes	
	•
Connections (Journeys, Current Events)	
	•
Compelling Question	
	•
Supporting Questions	
	•
Resources	
	•
Instructional Procedures (including Formative Assessments)	
	1.
Communicating Conclusions (Summative Assessment)	
	•

Evaluate teaching strategies, resource integration, literacy connections, and student understandings

Effective and inclusive instruction is responsive to students' misconceptions, queries, and unique learning needs. The Social Studies Council dedicated meeting time to reflect on instructional practices. We centered conversations on how pedagogy and resources impact

student learning. PLCs can be the perfect environment for sharing student work, referencing instructional alterations, and discussing inquiry-based strategies for subsequent activities.

Design assessments where students use evidence to answer questions

The Kentucky Academic Standards for Social Studies calls for a variety of assessment types, especially performance-based assessment. Performance assessments ask students to create products or perform tasks to demonstrate mastery of skills and standards. The Social Studies Council designed tasks that give students opportunities to investigate answers to compelling and supporting questions. Teachers have taken students on virtual tours of Kentucky farms to investigate ways human activities impact the physical environment. Students have used nonfiction texts, photographs, and pop culture to create collaborative e-books on what defines countries in North America. Compelling and supporting questions sustain students' investigation of multiple sources to support conclusions.

Reflect on learning outcomes, modify instruction, and update pacing guides

PLC meetings are a great time for discussing changes made during classroom instruction. The Social Studies Council used questioning techniques to clarify the context and intent of instructional plans. Teachers analyzed student work samples in light of scoring guides and state standards. Collective reflection on instruction and learning outcomes can help teachers identify growth areas and give meaningful feedback. Responsive and nonjudgmental feedback fosters a sense of trust and agency among PLC members.

Continue the journey with ongoing coaching and collaboration

The journey to improving social studies curriculum and instruction has no final destination. The improvement process is continuous and iterative. Through ongoing collaboration and coaching, teachers continue to curate resources and refine lesson plans. Our motivation lies in giving students engaging and hands-on experiences to learn social studies skills and concepts. Students need access to inquiry-based, standards-aligned social studies instruction early in their educational paths. Collaborative professional learning communities can jump-start students' journey to being thoughtful, productive, and responsive citizens.

Samuel Northern is a National Board Certified Teacher-Librarian. He is the Teacher/Librarian at Simpson Elementary School in Simpson County, KY. He has a Masters of Science in Library Media Education and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Western Kentucky University. Sam currently serves as past president of the Kentucky Association of School Librarians.

References

- Fitchett, P.G. & Heafner, T.L. (2010) A national perspective on the effects of high-stakes testing and standardization on elementary social studies marginalization. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 38(1), 114-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2010.10473418>
- Jefferson County Public Schools. (n.d.). Social Studies Curriculum Framework. <https://sites.google.com/jefferson.kyschools.us/jcpscurriculumandinstruction/curriculum-frameworks/k-12-social-studies>.
- Kentucky Department of Education. (2020, May 15). *Professional learning communities*. <https://education.ky.gov/school/stratclsgap/Pages/plc.aspx>.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (2017). *Powerful, purposeful pedagogy in elementary school social studies*. <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/powerful-purposeful-pedagogy-elementary-school-social-studies>
- Smith, T. R., McGowan, J., Allen, A. R., Johnson, W. D., Dickson Jr, L. A., Najee-ullah, M. A., & Peters, M. (2008). Evaluating the impact of a faculty learning community on STEM teaching and learning. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 77(3)203–226.