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2026

Teaching Social Studies to Build Literacy and Critical Thinking

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Social studies classrooms do more than teach history; they **build literacy, critical thinking, and analytical skills**. From exploring presidential elections to evaluating sources, students learn to ask essential questions and interpret complex narratives. These articles highlight key U.S. history topics, show **where teachers seek support**, and **offer practical strategies**—from oral history projects to reading instruction frameworks—for developing critical readers and thinkers.

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OPINION

Published December 26, 2024

How History Class Can Foster Lifelong Literacy Skills

By Sarah Schwartz

What does it mean for a high school student to read well? The answer is multilayered.

Teenage readers need a solid foundation, encompassing the ability to read fluently and understand grade-appropriate vocabulary. But they also rely on more nuanced skills.

One of these is disciplinary literacy—the idea that experts in different disciplines, such as history, science, and literature, communicate their ideas in distinct ways.

Education Week published a special report on developing disciplinary literacy in older readers in October, and hosted a forum on the same subject Dec. 12.

Two experts joined to talk about reading in history and social studies: Joel Breakstone, the co-founder and executive director of the Digital Inquiry Group, a nonprofit social studies curriculum organization, and Matt Sekijima, a social science teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District and a lecturer in UC Irvine's Master of Arts in Teaching Program.

Here are four key questions and insights from the conversation.

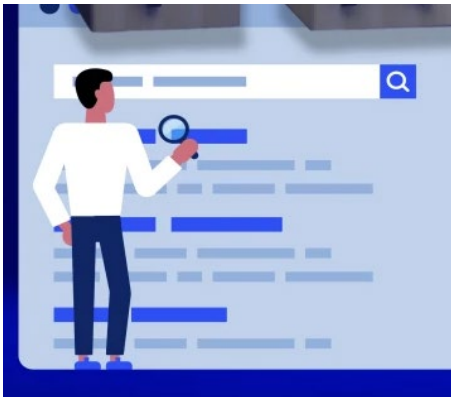
How do historians read?

Historians approach sources from the past "very differently" than the average high school student, said Breakstone.

Sam Wineburg, the co-founder of the Digital Inquiry Group, researched the literacy practices of historians as a graduate student. What he found shaped the basis of DIG's instructional approach.

"The students generally approached the texts as they would any other text," said Breakstone. "They read from top to bottom, and kind of read for content."

The historians, on the other hand, investigated the source. "Who wrote this document? When? And for what purpose? Before they even looked at the content, they were considering the source," Breakstone said. They wanted to understand, he said, "how the context influences the content."



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What does reading like a historian look like in a classroom?

It might mean asking students to think about the events that occurred right before—or right after—someone wrote a specific document.

For example, Breakstone said, in a 1775 diary entry, British officer Lt. John Barker talks about losing control over his men.

"That makes more sense when you think that the Boston Massacre happened a few years before, and British officers were put on trial," Breakstone said. "Barker might be more willing to say that his men were out of control than to take responsibility for what just happened."

Understanding this perspective can help students parse the varying viewpoints of historical actors and develop a clearer picture of what happened in the past.

How can teachers foster these skills?

There are questions that students can ask of all texts, said Sekijima. What's the author's background? What biases might they have? "Multiple biases can exist simultaneously," he said.

It's important for students to understand that everyone has a point of view, and that there's no such thing as a "neutral" narrator, he added.

Teachers can emphasize that students shouldn't write off sources with a bias, Breakstone said.

"What we want to push students to think about is the muddy middle," he said. "It's not to say that once we know that the source has some sort of perspective, that doesn't mean it's not useful. It's just, we need to take that into account, right?"

Teaching this way also requires making centuries-old primary sources accessible to students, Breakstone said.

"Historical documents were not written with adolescents in mind," he said. "For students to be able to actually access and engage in these interesting ways of reading and reasoning that we've talked about, we need to make sure that we scaffold them."

Most students don't go on to become historians. So are these skills still valuable?

Students can use sourcing practices to ask: Who's behind this information? What perspective do they have? for all kinds of information, not just historical documents, Breakstone and Sekijima said.

In Sekijima's class this year, he asked students to compare the home pages of different news sites after one of this year's presidential debates, evaluating what information was highlighted, what was left out, and how the different outlets presented candidates. The exercise demonstrated how journalism contributes to public perception.

Other applications are even more proximate.

When students repeat a conspiracy theory that their peers told them, or even repeat a rumor that's "floating around the school," Sekijima asks: "Did you source that? Did you corroborate that?"

The immediate, real-world application shows, "this is exactly why we do this in the classroom," Sekijima said. "This is not theoretical." ■

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Published September 25, 2024

The Topics That Dominate U.S. History Classes—And the Ones Teachers Want Help On

By Sarah Schwartz

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Developing informed citizens. Making connections from the past to the present. Presenting multiple perspectives on critical events in history.

These rank as the top instructional goals of U.S. middle and high school history teachers, according to a new, wide-ranging report from the American Historical Association.

The research, which includes a 50-state analysis of standards, a 3,000-educator survey, and a review of thousands of pages of instructional materials, draws a portrait that stands in stark contrast to right-wing claims of widespread liberal "indoctrination" in social studies classrooms.

While the right imagines that teachers are portraying a negative version of the American story, and the left fears that courses promote "a kind of blunt triumphalism," the report demonstrates that neither of these scenarios are true, said Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor of the history of education at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, who reviewed the report.

"They're not waving the flag, but they're also not trampling on the flag," he said.

So what are U.S. history teachers doing instead? Read on for four takeaways about the state of the subject in American classrooms. For more on the political pressures the teachers surveyed face in today's polarized landscape, see this story.

Civil Rights Movement and the American Revolution get top billing in U.S. history classes

Most students study U.S. history at least once in middle school—usually 8th grade—and then again for at least one year in high school, the report finds.

Teachers tend to focus on certain eras more than others, with the most popular being the Civil Rights Movement and the American Revolution and founding. About 80 percent of teachers said each of these periods were high priorities for coverage.

This finding isn't surprising, said Zimmerman. Both of these eras are "absolutely critical to the way we tell the story of America, and the way we deliberate it," he said.

Still, teachers voiced the need for more training to teach other topics well.

When asked in which eras they lacked sufficient background and support, Native America before European colonization topped the list, with 1 in 5 teachers selecting the option. Also commonly cited were more recent periods: the Great Recession and present day, President Bill Clinton and the New Democrats, and the Information Age.

Even teachers who regularly cover these time periods can find them challenging. Janell Cinquini, a social studies teacher in the Lake Oswego school district in Oregon, teaches a course on post-World War II history at Lakeridge High School.

"The closer you get to current day, the more likely that kids are to take political stances," said Cinquini. "When you start talking about George W. Bush, or you start talking about decisions that Obama made, they kind of get into their political camps. It makes it harder to keep it about policies and ideas, and not like, 'You're OK with what happened there because that was under a Democrat or Republican president.'"

Free online resources are more popular than traditional textbooks

Only about half of all teachers surveyed used a hard copy of a U.S. history textbook. A third had a digitally licensed version.

More common were free, online resources: About three-quarters of teachers said they used these. And the vast majority of teachers—85 percent—use at least some materials that they design and write themselves.

This range of choices on which teachers rely speaks to the decentralized nature of the American education system, said Nicholas Kryczka, the research coordinator on the project.

"Local decisionmaking prevails, and when I say local, I mean all the way down to the classroom teacher," he said.

Still, he said, there's a great deal of common ground in what teachers select. The top most popular free resources are:

- Federal museums, archives, and institutions (83 percent of teachers use these occasionally or often)
- PBS Learning Media (79 percent)
- Crash Course U.S. History, a series of informational YouTube videos created by young adult author John Green (79 percent)
- National Geographic (66 percent)
- Teachers Pay Teachers, a lesson sharing platform (61 percent)

Avoiding the textbook is a way to keep students' attention, said Cinquini.

"Students are so unwilling to read large sections," she said. "I think it causes us all to be searching for options. We can't just say, 'Read your textbook and let's talk later.' We're really looking for engaging material."

'Inquiry' is at the center of instruction. But it's not always used well

In attempts to engage students, many teachers turn to inquiry-driven lessons.

These assignments are designed to task students with the work of historians: analyzing artifacts and primary source documents from different perspectives to make arguments about the past. Usually, they're structured around a central question, one "designed to speak to big debates—unresolved issues that can motivate class discussion and set terms for a final assessment," the report's authors write.

Not all of these questions are well-designed, though, the report argues. Many ask students to make moral judgments—casting certain figures as heroes or villains, for example, or deciding if historical events were justified.

This framing asks students to litigate the past, when the goal of these activities should be to more deeply understand history—and how it shapes our present, the report's authors write.

Such a goal require teachers to embrace complexity, said David Bobb, the president of the civics education organization the Bill of Rights Institute. "Rushing to judgment or trying to get to the conclusion is bad inquiry," he said.

Some teachers fear their subject is seen as another reading block

Other lessons framed as "inquiry" tasks don't actually focus on historical thinking skills. AHA researchers found that many teachers use document-based lessons with "instrumental outcomes"—asking students to find the main idea of a passage, for example, or use details to support a claim.

With this framing, Kryczka said, "we're losing the real reason that we introduce students to these primary sources."

Some teachers interviewed said they thought their administrators treated history classes as simply another opportunity for students to practice literacy skills with nonfiction texts.

"It has a lot to do with the pressures that administrators face, which often has to do with test scores," he said. ■

Published August 28, 2024

Teaching Presidential Elections Isn't Easy. How One Teacher Manages

By Ileana Najarro

Shari Conditt has been a teacher for nearly 25 years. She's taught a variety of social studies courses and has always addressed presidential—and midterm—elections in class, starting with the 2000 election between George W. Bush and Al Gore.

She has taught the College Board's Advanced Placement U.S. Government and Politics course since 2012 at Woodland High School in Washington and has accumulated best practices from her years of instruction.

Even as national political discourse online and in media coverage has grown increasingly divisive, Conditt plans to stick with her years of experience in covering presidential elections and other political current events in class this year.

She spoke with Education Week about how such instruction has worked over the years and her goal for teaching things like presidential debates. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Courtesy of Kyla Keefer

AP U.S. government and politics teacher Shari Conditt poses for a photo in her classroom at Woodland High School.

Teaching U.S. presidential elections isn't easy

Oftentimes people will ask me, "Are you prepared to teach this election? It looks like a really tough one." And I say, "I haven't had a presidential election yet that was easy for me to manage." I taught the 2000 election [in a U.S. history course] and I told my kids that we were going to know who the winner was that night of that election. Turns out, not so much, we found out in the middle of December.

I don't think elections are necessarily remotely easy to teach regardless of who your candidates are. I think people have really strong opinions about certain candidates, and I think as a result, we wrap those opinions and our emotions into how we think about presidential elections.

When I taught the 2012 election, what it looked like to me was making sure that my students had an understanding of the primary organizational components of elections. Oftentimes the structures that social studies teachers tend to live in when we're dealing with political issues is that if we can deal with underlying structures, it's a safe place to engage.

For example, talking about primaries, talking about campaign finance, looking at conventions. Those are the underlying structures in an election cycle. I went with that traditional way of teaching the content, looking at those structures, making sure students understood an election calendar, understanding what are the windows in which you're going to see this funding structure in place, and what is a convention, and why does the city matter where the conventions are held. It wasn't specific to a candidate.

When I taught the convention this past year in AP [U.S. Government and Politics], I used a video from the 2016 convention on ABC News of a day one debrief of the [Republican National Convention] and a day one debrief of the [Democratic National Convention], and I just would follow a pattern continually so that there was no question of partisanship or ideological framework that I'm giving to my students. I'm just showing them a format and a structure.

The importance of deep dives and managing sensitive topics

AP [U.S. Government and Politics] is far more in-depth [than some other courses]. We'll talk about campaign finance. I'll have students pull data and start looking at fundraising records, etc. I think that's really interesting for them to see the role of interest groups. And we talk about PACs and super PACs. We also look at political ads, which I would not necessarily do in my AP [U.S. History] class or my U.S. History II class. We also talk about debates.

2016 was a bit of a unique one. I like to watch presidential debates with my students when I want to help frame them. But we don't get into the world of, do we agree with the answer? I'm more interested in looking again at the structure of debate. Did you feel like the question got answered? Did you feel like there was too much interrupting?

It's right around dinner time here, when the debates usually turn on at 6 o'clock. So my kids will come from sports practice and I'll feed them. We'll have dinner together as a class here at school and watch the debate. And so we watched the first debate [between former Secretary of State Hillary] Clinton and [former President Donald] Trump, and it went fine. I think my students handled themselves incredibly well. They had some great feedback.

And then, some information got released through the media on the Access Hollywood video, and I just started feeling really uncom-

fortable about how I was going to address some of those questions in class and what that was going to look like in the next debate. I decided I just was not in a place where I could manage that. I gave the students some tools to be able to watch at home.

Adapting to virtual learning after the 2020 election

2020, obviously, was incredibly unique, because all these things were virtual. This is the COVID-19 learning time so I was not with my kids in class during the debate. Instead what we decided to do was, we Zoomed into the first debate. It was contentious, I think is a diplomatic word, and I had decided to go off screen. I needed to do that for my own personal needs. I didn't want my students looking [at] my face to see how I was going to react to things. What I found fascinating about that is that my students didn't know that that first debate between [President Joe] Biden and Trump wasn't regular. They didn't have context to what a debate should look like.

When we did the debrief afterward, none of them were highlighting the sniping, the rudeness, the stepping over each other, and the lack of respect [for] the moderator—some of these things which, as folks who watch debates for years and years, would have immediately noticed. So thankful for resources that exist because I was able to go back and find historic debates. When I showed my students the 1960 [then Vice President Richard] Nixon and [then Senator John F.] Kennedy debate, where Kennedy is complimenting Nixon, and Nixon is complimenting Kennedy, the students were floored.

I think students really struggle with some of those contexts because they don't have a historical background. Part of my job as an AP [U.S. Government and Politics] teacher is to help them see that evolution in that process, too.

Plans for this year: Encouraging media literacy

[For this year], my plan is to get my student population together on Sept. 10, and watch the debate from the Constitution Center here at my high school, and begin to have some of those conversations. I want to have them engage by talking about how we fact check. How do we know if the fact check is accurate?

Most of the juniors roll into my classes as seniors, from AP U.S. History to AP [U.S. Government and Politics]. I've already told them that the conventions were happening [by the start of this school year.] I told them when they were and what to look for. I will start [this year] generally speaking, by reviewing some of those concepts.

I tend to do it through the lens of media. I don't want to be the person giving all the information out. I just feel like that's kind of a disengaging place for students, if I'm the one telling them what I think all the time, and it doesn't necessarily meet my own values as a teacher because I want my students to explore and have inquiry, versus just me being the sage on the stage.

Having my students look at various media sources to summarize what they see the media saying about various events I think is a better place to live. I'll have my students pick an article on a certain topic, but it's from four or five different media sources. So let's look at, how does Fox News present a wrap-up of the DNC, how does MSNBC do a wrap-up of the DNC?

I would much rather spend my time building the muscle so that they can determine perspective and see truth through multiple perspectives—and then it takes the pressure off of me, the teacher. ■

Luoman/E+

Published November 05, 2024

What Is Social Studies Literacy? How Educators in the Field Teach Reading

By Sarah Schwartz

When Phillip Hare started his first job as a social studies teacher more than 15 years ago, he entered the field with a history degree. But then, he was asked to teach geography.

The two subjects are technically under the same umbrella—social studies—but they draw on different knowledge bases, and distinct ways of reading, writing, and analyzing text.

"I found myself needing to build a lot of these skills," said Hare, now the president-elect of the National Council for Geographic Education, and a high school geography teacher in Taylorsville, Utah.

In a history class, students examine artifacts—oral histories, newspapers, photos—to make arguments about how to understand the past. They interrogate the provenance and bias of sources and try to corroborate claims.

In geography, the sources students consult, the kinds of arguments they make, and the questions they ask of text are different. Being able to navigate these diverse methods is known as disciplinary literacy.

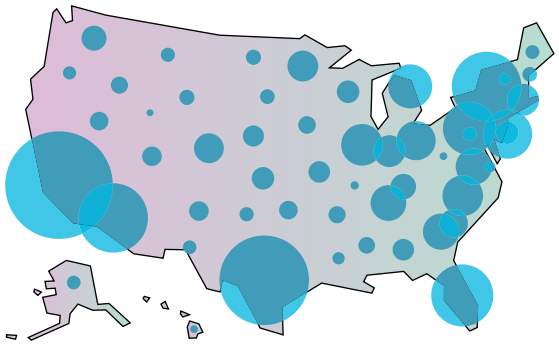
View the downloadable below for two examples of how social studies teachers build disciplinary literacy in geography and economics. And check out Education Week's recent report on literacy across the curriculum for more classroom-focused insights. ■

EducationWeek

How to Teach Reading Skills In Social Studies

What schools refer to as "social studies" is actually a collection of distinct disciplines, spanning history, civics, government, economics, and geography. The subject areas cover different content, but they also teach unique ways of thinking—economists ask different questions, and consult different sources, than geographers.

This subject-specific approach to reading and writing is known as disciplinary literacy. See below for two examples of how educators in different social studies subjects would teach these skills.



Geography

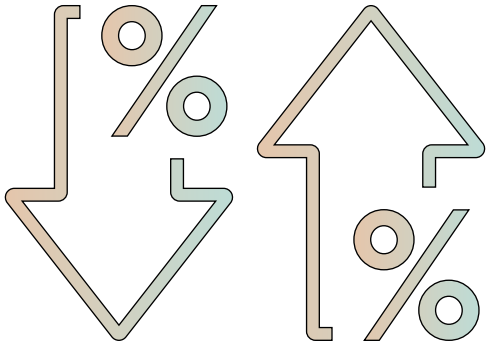
Using maps to answer questions

Phillip Hare, high school geography teacher in Taylorsville, Utah; president-elect of the National Council for Geographic Education

Objectives for reading and writing: Geographers take a "spatial perspective," said Hare. They want to know how the conditions of a place affect events. Presented with an electoral map, for example, geography students might ask what led to different candidates winning different areas.

Sources and methods: Hare teaches that maps can show different data depending on their scale. The same map of electoral votes would show whole states as blue or red, but that doesn't necessarily mean that every precinct in the state voted that way. More localized data could show a different story.

Vocabulary: Scale is an important concept in geography in general. Analyzing local, national, and global data presents different results, so students need to interrogate the scope of their sources.



Economics

How do people allocate resources?

Erin Adams, associate professor of elementary social studies education, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Ga.

Objectives for reading and writing: Economists study how people make decisions about how to distribute resources, especially when those resources are scarce. This can refer to money and markets, but economics isn't limited to those topics. "There are these resource-allocation problems in everything," said Adams.

Sources and methods: "Economists really like numbers and data," she said. Because economic texts usually rely on numbers, students often perceive them as neutral sources—but economists make arguments all the time. Policy papers, for example, often rely on economic arguments to advocate for a position. Lessons should teach students to interrogate motivation, Adams said: "Who produced this? Why was it produced? Who is the intended audience?"

Vocabulary: Certain concepts—trade-offs, profits and losses, supply and demand, as examples—are core to economics. Texts often reference these concepts to "shortcut" ideas, she said.

Illustrations: Getty

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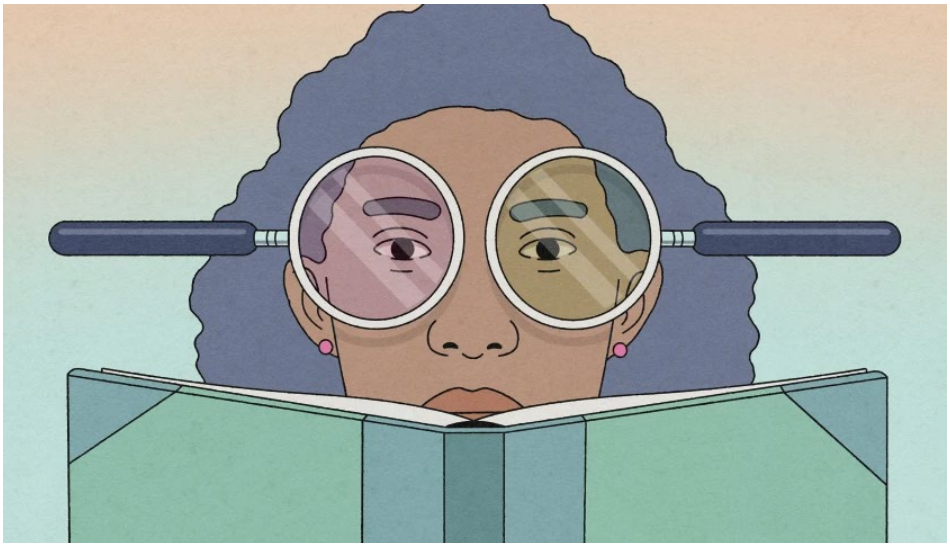


Dan Page for Education Week

Published October 28, 2024

'Can We Trust This Source?' And Other Questions Readers Ask in History

Those skills help with parsing news sources and TikTok videos, too

By Sarah Schwartz

When Valerie Ziegler's high school social studies students seek out political news, most of them don't turn on the television or browse the homepage of The New York Times. Instead, they get on their phones and open up TikTok.

So Ziegler, an economics and Advanced Placement United States Government and Politics teacher at Abraham Lincoln High School in the San Francisco Unified district, spent time in September teaching her class to parse these videos as savvy consumers.

After the presidential debate between Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump, Ziegler asked students to investigate the provenance of the TikToks they watched that analyzed the back-and-forth between the nominees. Who's providing this information? And what's their agenda?

"At its root, we're trying to make informed citizens. ... I'd like to think that we've given them the skills to navigate the media, to be able to navigate the content that comes to them," said Zielger.

This adversarial stance—evaluating a source's bias and possibly challenging its claims—is central to teaching civics and history, educators and experts say. It's different from how students would approach a novel or an expository essay in an English/language arts class. And it's a key example of how literacy skills operate in social studies.

Students need these discipline-specific literacy skills to do well in history, government, civics, and economics classes. But they also need them for life after school, said Sam Wineburg, the co-founder of the Digital Inquiry Group, a nonprofit social studies curriculum organization, and an emeritus professor of education at Stanford University.

They teach young adults how to "contend between the cacophonous voices of a democracy," he said. "You don't just look at something at face value. You say, 'Wait a second, who wrote that?'"

What 'literacy' means in social studies

This distinction is important now as districts nationwide consider how best to structure their overall literacy programs.

One idea that's slowly gained traction is the notion of building students' general content knowledge about science, social studies, the arts, and culture through what's known as "knowledge-building" reading programs—ELA curricula that incorporate those topics, often through groups of paired fiction and nonfiction texts. Research shows that when students know more about the world around them, their reading-comprehension abilities benefit from this background knowledge.

But these reading programs can't take the place of dedicated history or civics instruction, experts caution. In part, that's because they don't always teach the ways of reading, thinking, and writing that are unique to social studies.

"There are important disciplinary literacy skills and practices that aren't going to show up in your ELA program," said Nell Duke, the executive director of the Center for Early Literacy Success at Stand for Children, an education advocacy organization.

Literacy is an umbrella term, Duke said. It can refer to reading and writing skills in a reading class, but it's not restricted to that subject. Students use literacy skills throughout the school day.

At a basic level, students need to be able to read and write well to access content in other subjects, Duke said. To read a textbook in history class, for instance, requires general reading-comprehension skills and an understanding of academic vocabulary. Students might use skills like summarizing text or using evidence to support their claims in written responses to questions.

But there are literacy skills that are specific to the social studies subject students are studying, said Duke. In economics, students need to be able to make sense of different graphical representations of data. In geography, they need to be able to read a map.

And in history, students need to be able to identify a text's source and explain why that provenance matters.

How historians read documents, and how it differs from other fields

"There's a very specific way that historians read documents," said Joel Breakstone, the executive director of the Digital Inquiry Group.

Historians want to know who wrote a primary-source document, and for what purpose, because those factors shape how the reader would interpret the information. They triangulate information presented in one text with others, "seeking out points of similarity and departure," Breakstone said.

And they want to place text within a mo-

ment in time, he said. To analyze the Gettysburg Address, for example, students need to understand what was happening during the Civil War when President Abraham Lincoln delivered it.

Placing documents in context is essential to reading in history, Breakstone said, and the way a student might approach it in that class differs from how they might approach it in another class.

Students could analyze the Gettysburg Address "as a piece of rhetoric" in an English classroom, he said. (In fact, the Common Core State Standards suggest it as a sample informational text that 9th and 10th graders could work with in ELA.)

But, he said, "it's a different thing to read it as a particular document delivered by a particular politician at a particular moment in time."

Teaching students to 'get the facts'

The distinction between general literacy and discipline-specific literacy skills can be murky, and, in general, teachers say that students should master the former in elementary school, while work on the latter becomes increasingly intentional in middle and high school.

To prepare students to think this way in social studies, they need to get comfortable reading and writing in the subject—and teachers need to explicitly foster those skills, said Monica Brennan, a K-5 instructional coach at Hillside Elementary School in the Farmington district in Michigan.

As a former 2nd grade teacher, and in her current role, Brennan has used a few different curricula that attempt this goal.

In one, social studies lessons included a lot of reading and writing prompts. In another, students explored the same topic across disciplines in an interdisciplinary unit—learning about rice, for example, by exploring what the food means to different cultures and investigating how seeds grow.

In the reading curriculum she works with now, some lessons are centered on social studies topics. She helps teachers draw connections between those topics and the content in their social studies periods.

"I think there's not one way to do it. But what I've started to learn as an educator is that we want some fluidity in our classrooms," Brennan said, referencing the delineation between social studies and ELA. "That's part of my role, helping teachers to see that it's OK for there to be blurry lines there."

Before elementary schoolers can get to more discipline-specific ways of reading and writing, they need to master the basics, she said.

In one civics lesson that Brennan taught, students wrote to their local government about improving equipment at a local park. Lessons on persuasive writing had to precede that activity.

"I'm giving a really clear framework of what it is—you give an argument, you elaborate on it," Brennan said. "There are still some ELA activities that need to take place in order for that social studies lesson to be successful."

By the time students get to high school, they're learning and refining discipline-specific ways of evaluating text and persuading audiences.

When Ziegler, the California teacher, has taught U.S. history, she asks students to analyze a painting that claims to depict the first Thanksgiving.

"Initially, students look at that and say, 'Wow, ... it must be like this, and they're all happy,'" Ziegler said. But she guides students to investigate further questions—when was this painting created? By whom?—that uncover that it was painted in the 1930s, hundreds of years after the event supposedly took place.

The lesson she uses prompts students to consider how an author's time and place, and their motivation, might influence the source they create.

Ziegler wants her students to pose those questions to the information sources in their own lives, too, whether they're learning about local ballot initiatives, seeking tips on filling out student financial-aid forms, or trying to understand headlines about unemployment numbers.

"I hope that we're giving them the skills to say, 'OK, I'm going to get the facts and I'm going to sit down with people and discuss this and not just see what I get online but really make an informed decision,'" she said. ■

Published April 22, 2024

Oral History Offers a Model for How Schools Can Introduce Students to Complex Topics

By Sarah D. Sparks

As historian David McCullough said, history is the study of who we are and why we are the way we are.

That's why teachers in the Memphis-Shelby County public schools, as racially isolated now as they were when the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed school segregation, have launched a curriculum to introduce their students to the 13 children who helped integrate these Tennessee city schools in 1961.

Memphis-Shelby County teachers, researchers from the University of Memphis, and the local Memphis 13 Foundation worked with seven of the 10 surviving members of the Memphis 13—a group of Black 1st graders who peacefully enrolled in four all-white schools at the height of the civil rights era—to develop teacher training, lesson plans, and oral history activities for elementary students.

"Just going home and talking to grandparents or talking to the elders in their community was never going to be enough," said Anna Falkner, an assistant professor at the University of Memphis and a co-developer of the curriculum, "because it wouldn't provide [students] with the context that they needed in order to understand what happened and understand the ongoing effects of, for example, the way segregation looks today."

The Memphis 13 project offers a model for how schools can introduce complex subjects to students, even in early grades, while also giving them opportunities to investigate social studies in their communities

"Really consider the context," Falkner said. "What are the specifics that can help students understand their Southern context or the context wherever they are and what that means in relation to the larger experience. It's not just focusing on that national narrative, not just sharing Brown v. Board, but really thinking about, what did this look like in my backyard? What did it look like for my family members or my community members?"

For example, teachers met with surviving members of the Memphis 13 to identify projects for students in 2nd and 5th grades, when Tennessee social studies standards cover civil rights issues. Sheila Malone, one of the students who first integrated into the district's Bruce Elementary as a 1st grader, suggested that 5th graders record the experiences of others who had attended the district schools during desegregation.

Courtesy of the Memphis 13 Foundation

A group photo of 12 of the Memphis 13 students.

> **"What we need is not the ability to advertise more, but a systematic plan to rebuild our teaching workforce."**
>
> **DAVID ROBERTSON**
> Director of Human Resources, McClellan, CA

"[Malone] wanted the students to go back home and share the story and have intergenerational conversations about the history of our schools," said Gina Tillis, the director of curriculum and instruction for the Memphis 13 Foundation, who co-developed the Memphis curriculum. "One of the things that I've noticed with the members of Memphis 13 is, as they're sharing their stories, they're unpacking memories that have been silenced. ... This is a really powerful space for students to reflect on their education, their parents' and their elders' education, and what we're doing collectively to create a more inclusive and equitable school system."

Second graders, for example, watch documentaries and review news accounts about the school desegregation decisions in Memphis and other cities, identifying ways children their age participated. In 5th grade, students review collected oral history interviews and collect their own, as well as analyze modern policies related to school integration. Tillis said the project plans to expand the curriculum to 8th and 11th grades in the future.

Building school integration history projects

Emerging technology has made it easier for educators to engage their students in active

historical research, according to the Center for Public History and Digital Humanities at Cleveland State University in Ohio. The center, for example, has developed apps to help students record interviews and archive historical documents.

Efforts like those of the Memphis 13 helped integrate public schools in the decades following the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. However, these trends began to reverse in the 1990s and have worsened to this day, even as the overall public school population has grown more diverse. Studies find schools serving high populations of students of color continue to have on average fewer educational opportunities—including challenging courses, experienced teachers, and other resources—compared with schools serving mostly white students.

While the Memphis 13 are well known, Tillis stressed that schools can use community history to engage students regardless of where they are. "Everyone has a school desegregation story. Every district, every person ... and every district story is unique," she said. "It's, I think, one of the most powerful stories to share because it offers you this platform to really deconstruct what's going on in our schools."

Researchers recommended that schools interested in developing similar projects:

- Work with local historians and groups to identify social studies topics and events that had strong effects on the local community. This can include school district librarians or archivists, for example.

- Provide teachers with training in both the historical context and strategies and tools for documenting community history.

- Focus on topics that encourage students to make connections between history and current issues in their community.

"One of the lessons that we're hoping to share with other school districts is just the power of listening to your community members who are historians, even if they don't work for the local archive: the neighbor down the street who kept all the newspapers, the person who knew everybody in the neighborhood," Falkner said. "Finding those community members and making a meaningful way for them to participate in the curriculum development is the most important piece." ■

Sonia Pulido for Education Week

OPINION

Published February 21, 2025

5 Strategies for Teaching Social Studies In Turbulent Times

By Larry Ferlazzo

Today's post is the latest in an ongoing series to help teachers thoughtfully navigate the challenges of our current national political environment.

Two social studies teachers share what they are doing in the classroom. Math, English, and English-language learner educators will contribute their experiences in future posts, along with administrators and students.

'Tug' at Current Events

Christie Nold (she/her) teaches 9th grade social studies in a public school on unceded Abenaki land in South Burlington, Vt.:

As a social studies teacher, I believe in the importance of exploring contemporary issues and tracing their historical roots. When discussing the war in Ukraine, I know we must look to the annexation of Crimea. To understand the annexation of Crimea, we must consider the policy of Russification and deportation of the Crimean Tatar people. To understand the deportation, we must further explore Stalin's reign of terror. Together with my students, we keep tugging the thread as far back as it might take us.

I see the recent orders coming from the White House no differently. In order to understand the question of birthright citizenship, we must trace back to the 14th Amendment. The context of Reconstruction era policies is essential to making sense of the 14th Amendment, which requires understanding of chattel slavery. Importantly, Indigenous people did not receive full citizenship for 56 years following the passage of the 14th Amendment.

When students are provided the opportunity to "tug" at current events, it can open a window of understanding as it relates to our historical past. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the current federal administration might attempt to place limits on a teacher's ability to pull at certain events. When the threads of contemporary policy lead us to xenophobia, racism, and colonial displacement, students often have questions.

So, how do we create space for these explorations? In our 9th grade classroom, we begin each day with the headlines. Students are encouraged to notice, wonder, and build connections to our current lessons. On Fridays, we pause for a full current events day. We work to integrate essential media literacy lessons and allow students to follow stories of choice, pausing when there is a direct connection to a current unit.

In a recent Friday lesson, students watched the sermon delivered by Episcopal Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde. Following her sermon, they viewed President Donald Trump's immediate response followed by a post he wrote to Truth Social. From there, students explored the headlines. How was the sermon being reported? Which news outlets covered it favorably, which did not? Why does it matter that it was covered so many different ways? Ultimately, what did they think about the sermon and response?

In our Holocaust Studies class, Fridays are spent diving into stories together. What does it mean that ethnic cleansing is in the headlines? When was the term first used? Does it apply? How are German papers reporting on Musk's support for the right-wing AfD party? What is the role of the church in holding leaders accountable?

In each of these discussions, it is not about telling students what to think but encouraging them to consider how to think. To pull, build connections, and witness how our understanding of the past can help inform the present. Taking just 10 minutes each day to explore the headlines can lead to a rich year of learning and exploration together.

Helping Students 'Feel Their Own Agency'

Sarah Cooper teaches 8th grade U.S. history and civics and is the associate head of school at Flintridge Preparatory School in La Canada, Calif. She speaks at conferences about pedagogy, AI, and more and is the author of two books, Creating Citizens: Teaching Civics and Current Events in the History Classroom *(Routledge) and* Making History Mine *(Stenhouse):*

In all times and especially fluid times, we as social studies teachers can help students feel their own agency—beginning with understanding the news.

In my classes, students bring in an annotated news article for homework once a week. On the other days, I start class with a brief overview of a current event while they take notes.

One of my favorite approaches for navigating the information flow is to ask these 8th grade U.S. history and civics students to imagine that the news is water, and they should twist their own "news faucet" only as much as they feel comfortable.

Sometimes, students say, "Bring it on!" because they are feeling well resourced and want to immerse themselves in the world's issues. Some days, they slow the torrent to a trickle because they were up until midnight, or their

friends are asking for advice, or they're worried about a math test. And some students regularly go niche, searching for articles about health, science, food, or business that only indirectly relate to top stories.

Beyond the news faucet, here are several approaches that ground students in the news, so that they can feel knowledgeable rather than helpless.

1. Define terms.

What could be more basic than this? But I've found that key terms unlock major concepts.

At the beginning of the year, the 8th graders memorize a list of common government ideas such as pension, supermajority, incumbent, due process clause, and redistricting. They learn even more during our Constitution unit second quarter, everything from what an amendment is to how a congressional compromise committee shepherds a bill toward law.

Throughout the year, I delight in choosing daily current events that will teach both political and general vocabulary, recently including tariff, executive order, and altruism. Bonus points if I can relate a current event back to the history or civics we've studied, such as enumerating the multiple ways policy happens in the U.S. (laws, court decisions, amendments).

Words emanate power, and students feel this power when a headline they would have skipped over transforms into one they can explain to their parents at the dinner table.

2. Go pro and con.

I'm always surprised by how much the simple strategy of listing pros and cons, for and against, elucidates both sides of an issue (for issues that truly have more than one side).

In just the past couple of weeks in our 8th U.S. History and Civics class:

- Students in pairs listed at least one benefit and one drawback of tariffs based on a Wall Street Journal article. When I asked whether anyone had talked about these levies with their families, a few discussed the potential effects on their parents' businesses or building projects, making the news personal.

- We watched a recent NBC News clip about Starbucks employees striking and then, in desk partners, listed at least one perspective an employer and employee might have about forming labor unions.

- Another bonus: This current event linked to the rest of the lesson, which featured Harriet Robinson's speech to the Lowell Mill workers in 1836. Such layering of history and current events feels rich and relevant.

3. Look for the good.

This mantra keeps me going when talking with adolescents, who hold our future in their hands, on their screens, and through their relationships with each other. If I'm going to present an article about a natural disaster or challenging event, it better be something that offers a margin of hope.

Most recently, our school community has been heavily impacted by the latest California wildfires. I've thought hard about which stories to share, and the two I've ended up with so far have focused on firefighters taking care of each other's mental health and the forming of a half-dozen commissions to rebuild Los Angeles.

My students, savvy young people who carry the pandemic and now these fires as defining elements of their childhood, do not always buy the positivity I'm promoting. For instance, when I asked one class section about why private citizens would want to organize groups to help L.A. get back on its feet, they first brainstormed reputation and money—only offering love for the city after a little prompting.

But day by day, through a mix of giving definitions, listing perspectives, and highlighting helpers, I hope to create a sense that everyone has a voice and everyone can have an impact. Not incidentally, when teaching social studies feels more complex than ever, such conversations make me feel I might be having an impact as well.

Thanks to Christie and Sarah for sharing their experiences and advice. ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades. He is currently a volunteer tutor to English-learner newcomers at a local school and to youth in juvenile hall.

Advertisement

Giving Teachers the Resources to *Thrive!*

The Power of HQIM in PreK–8 Classrooms

In today's educational climate, when test scores are down and NCES reports that a third of students are behind grade level, High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) are not just nice to have, but may be the most impactful and low-cost interventions a school can make.

Research conducted by David Steiner for the Journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education suggests that High-Quality Instructional Materials can close outcome gaps, significantly improve state test scores, and boost student achievement more than many common school improvement interventions.

A report released by The New Teacher Project in 2018 revealed that when students who started the year behind grade level had greater access to HQIM, specifically grade-appropriate content, they closed the outcomes gap with their peers by more than seven months.

The research is clear: high quality materials make a difference

HQIM don't just improve student outcomes, but can also greatly ease the burden on teachers. EdReports suggests that teachers spend 7–12 hours a week searching for educational materials online or creating their own materials from scratch. Both approaches show the dedication of our teachers. They are willing to put extra time into meeting the difficult task of covering standards while meeting their students' needs.

> **Teachers spend 7–12 hours a week searching for educational materials or creating their own from scratch.**

The problem is that online and self-made materials do not always match the standards, and online materials are often not vetted for accuracy. By providing comprehensive, researched, standards-based materials, HQIM save teachers hours of prep time and the worry over whether their standards are being met.

An example of HQIM are the PreK–8 Social Studies curricula offered by Studies Weekly. All Studies Weekly programs are designed and continuously updated to ensure teachers have access to quality, effective resources.

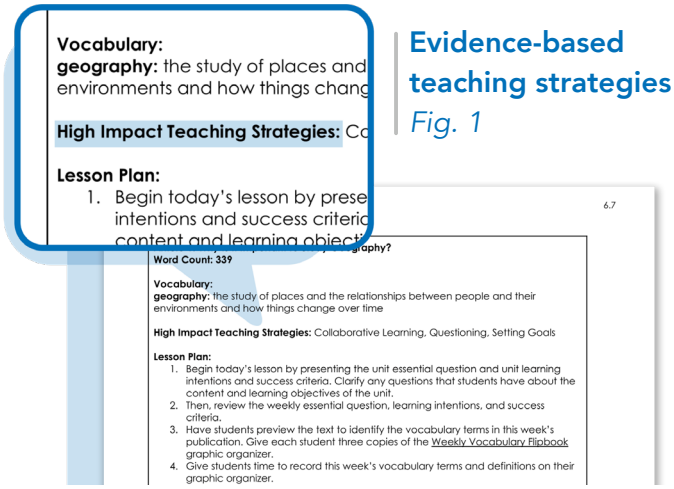
Indicators of High Quality Instructional Materials

- Evidence-based teaching strategies
- Alignment and adherence to standards
- Comprehensive and grade-appropriate learning materials
- Adaptable content
- Accessibility to all teachers and students
- Embedded teacher supports

StudiesWeekly

Evidence-based teaching strategies

Studies Weekly bases its curricula on research-backed frameworks to support effective teaching. Lessons use the C3 Framework and Inquiry Design Model to guide students in asking questions, analyzing sources, and building evidence-based understanding. Integrated literacy strategies give students meaningful practice in reading and writing. High-Impact Teaching Strategies are highlighted right in the Teacher Edition, making it easy for teachers to spot and apply research-based methods *(Fig 1)*.



Evidence-based teaching strategies
Fig. 1

Alignment to standards

HQIM need to align with and cover standards. Studies Weekly provides and maintains standards documentation to clearly show how the program covers state standards.

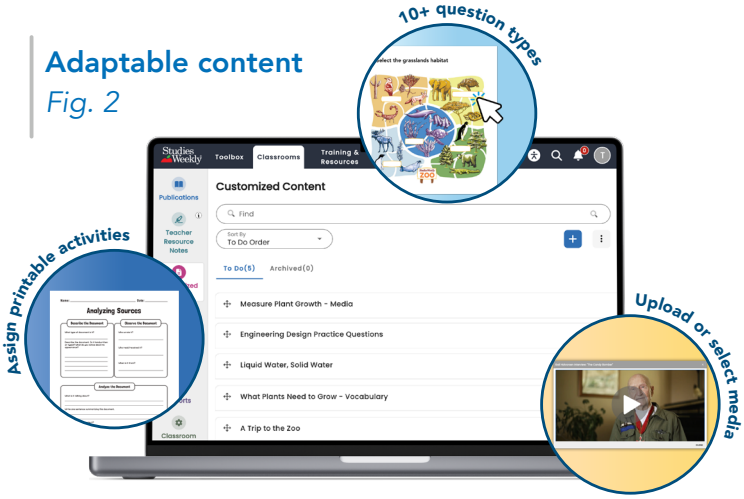
Studies Weekly also maintains standards alignment documents in the Studies Weekly Online learning platform, to help teachers take the guesswork out of standards coverage.

Comprehensive, grade-appropriate learning materials

Studies Weekly's curricula are complete programs, with scaffolded, grade-level materials to span the whole school year. Each publication is built to meet students where they are by scaffolding up to provide access to grade-level language, concepts, and learning objectives. The materials are carefully aligned to state standards and include everything educators need to deliver high-quality instruction, from engaging lessons and content to ready-made assessments.

Adaptable content that can be scaffolded, differentiated, and customized

An important aspect of HQIM is the ability to adapt content to students' needs. The Studies Weekly Online platform allows teachers to differentiate instruction at both the class and individual student levels. Teachers can customize online articles, activities, quizzes, assessments, and more according to their teaching styles and students' needs. Customized content can be assigned to individual students or the whole class, allowing teachers more control over the online learning experience *(Fig. 2)*.



Adaptable content
Fig. 2

Studies Weekly programs also contain suggestions for differentiation, extension activities, and additional readings throughout the Teacher Edition to help teachers easily adapt instruction without taking extra prep time.

Accessibility to all teachers and students

HQIM must be accessible and inclusive. Studies Weekly's Social Studies curricula accommodate the needs of all learners with resources embedded into the Studies Weeky Online learning platform.

StudiesWeekly

Accessibility Features:

- A variable-speed audio reader
- ADHD-focused reading panels
- Google Translate integration
- Color and text adjustment options
- English Language Development slides

Studies Weekly ONLINE

Embedded teacher supports and resources

Teachers are asked to accomplish a lot in a limited time and often with limited resources. Studies Weekly provides teachers with many usable and adaptable resources to make it easy for them to pick up and differentiate their curriculum.

The Studies Weekly Online learning platform contains a vast library of digital resources, like lesson videos and images, primary source interviews, and virtual field trips.

Student grades and reports are also accessible on the online platform, making it easy to monitor student progress and identify opportunities for intervention early.

Professional development

Effective, ongoing professional development is critical to the successful partnership of a teacher and curriculum program.

To support teachers throughout their school year with Studies Weekly, teachers have access to hundreds of hours of on-demand PD through their Studies Weekly Online account. Sessions range from implementation and curriculum-specific resources to classroom management and effective instructional strategies. These help teachers feel professional support and growth throughout their entire partnership with Studies Weekly's HQIM.

Budget constraints? HQIM are not out of reach

Investing in High-Quality Instructional Materials is a leap toward student success and academic excellence for all learners. Knowing the importance of HQIM, Studies Weekly keeps its Social Studies curricula as low-cost as possible so no school has to choose between affordability and quality.

Want to learn more about how Studies Weekly's HQIM can remove obstacles for teachers, improve student outcomes, meet standards, and achieve the goals of your school or district, all for a low price? Reach out to a Studies Weekly representative for samples, quotes, and more through the contact information below.

Curriculum that helps teachers do what they do best.

Reach out to unlock what's possible.

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OPINION

Published January 30, 2025

The Problem With Primary Sources In Black History Education

Do you know how to put Black history sources in context?

By Abigail Henry

Are you prepared to put a primary source in context when teaching Black histories? I am asking this question because guidance on how teachers should respond to racially charged moments is an overlooked part of teacher training.

One vivid memory from my years teaching 9th grade African American history in Philadelphia comes from the first day of my Abraham Lincoln unit. Students read a 1855 letter from Lincoln to his close friend Joshua Speed. "You know I dislike slavery," Lincoln wrote, "I also acknowledge your rights and my obligations, under the Constitution, in regard to your slaves. I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down."

Every year I taught the course, more than one of my Black students squirmed in their chairs and protested, "I'm not a creature!"

I often used this challenging moment as a teaching opportunity by asking my students, "Wait, but he said he hates slavery, isn't that a good thing? Wait, then again, isn't referring to Black people as animals racist? What y'all think? Is Lincoln being racist in this jawn or is that just how people talked back then?"

What I did in that moment was start to racially contextualize the source. What do I mean by that? I define "racialized contextualization" as using racial-literacy skills to understand a primary source in its original context. An important part of this context is the problem of primary sources in Black history: While there are valuable archives of Black perspectives throughout American history, the voices that shape our historical record are disproportionately those of powerful white people.

Social studies teachers are familiar with contextualization and encouraging students to think like a historian. Indeed, in recent years, I started to keep the Digital Inquiry Group's Historical Thinking Chart next to my desk. Separated into categories of sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, and close reading, this chart guides teachers on what to consider when using primary sources.

Some teachers, too, are familiar with racial literacy and have the ability to foster productive classroom discussions about race.

What I am interested in is where these two skills—contextualization and racial literacy—meet when using primary sources in teaching Black history specifically. How can we effectively teach Black history when there is a dearth of available primary sources from the Black perspective? How do we discover the undiscovered?

Teachers must explain how the lack of easily accessible primary sources makes it difficult to fully corroborate the primary sources we do have (contextualization) and discuss Black emotions that would possibly exist within the voices missing from our historical archive (racial literacy).

Back in that Philadelphia classroom, I used to ask my students who Lincoln sent that letter to and when. These standard questions about perspective and historical circumstances prompted my students to discuss Lincoln's overlooked racism and moral compass.

Yet, questions solely around historical thinking never fully led me to where I wanted to take students: the history of power and racism. To racially contextualize Lincoln with accuracy, we need to include the voices of Black people who supported him—and those who did not. (Even Frederick Douglass changed his mind about Lincoln over the course of his life.) I was prepared on how to counter my students' reaction because of my own regular practice of what Howard Stevenson calls as racial mindfulness.

Black historical contention—the principle that to effectively teach Black history, we must acknowledge conflict within and in-between Black communities—requires that we also teach the voices of everyday Black folk. What was the Black mom at home saying about Lincoln while her husband fought in the Civil War? What did people like Emilie Davis, a free Black woman attending anti-slavery meetings in Philadelphia, think? Most of the time such perspectives have not been preserved, at least not in sources readily available to teachers.

I was recently reminded of the need for this racialized contextualization when designing a lesson plan about the story of Isaac Woodard Jr., a veteran who was beaten blind by a police officer several hours after returning home from World War II.

After spending several hours searching online for primary sources and example lesson plans that included Black perspectives, I discovered that most existing resources included public statements from President Harry Truman and Orson Welles' radio coverage of the beating at the exclusion of first-person accounts, following the attack.

Teaching these two perspectives alone would not reflect the full picture of what hap-

pened after he was beaten, instead shifting the focus of a lesson to the moral concerns of "white saviors" rather than on Isaac Woodard Jr. as a person with his own feelings or on the Black activists who publicized the injustice. Not one of the lesson plans I found online included a source from the perspective of the Black community's rage or sorrow at the violent trauma. As Brittany Jones describes, these racialized emotions "can also influence how educators teach history and how students engage with and understand history."

In addition to learning about Black activists and their allies, it is important to me that students learn about how Black folks felt, including Woodward himself, about such an event or how they supported Black men like him. Who taught him to live his life as a blind Black man? Who in the Black community helped him in the next five decades of his life?

These stories of resilience are just as significant as the actions taken by prominent white figures—but they are often missing from the primary sources readily available to teachers. To fully racially contextualize a primary source, teachers should highlight for their students the missing artifacts in Black history. Discussing the imbalance of whose voices were preserved and elevated in history will help Black students express their own emotions today. ■

Abigail Henry is a Schomburg Fellow and a graduate assistant at the University at Buffalo. She is the instructor for the university's Teaching Black history micro-credential courses and the founder of theBLKcabinet, a consultancy that focuses on Black history education.

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OPINION

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Mister Rogers Showed Me How To Teach Civics

Learning civics should start as early as kindergarten

By Angela M. Evans

As an educator and a parent, it feels like I field a hundred questions from my children and students some days. Often, these questions are ones I can easily answer or we can investigate together. But other questions stop me in my tracks, reminding me that children are keenly aware of the emotions and conversations of the adults around them.

Our youngest learners have deep questions about honesty, emotions, and the behaviors of adults: "Why do people get treated differently because of their skin color?" "Why do grown-ups lie?" "Why can't I get to see my grandma anymore?" "Who are you voting for to be president?"

When faced with these challenging questions, I turn to the teachings of beloved television host Fred Rogers.

Despite my initial desire to change the subject, I remind myself of Mister Rogers' wisdom: "Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable." His gentle demeanor and emphasis on emotional literacy have equipped generations with the tools to navigate loss, conflict, and the complexities of human relationships. These lessons made us better neighbors, community members, and citizens.

Fifty-six years after the first episode of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" aired, the show's messages of kindness, love, and acceptance remain as relevant as ever. Mister Rogers knew children must repeatedly be told they are good and worthy of love. He realized that children must be allowed to experience all their feelings and be taught safe and healthy ways to manage them.

Just as we teach foundational academic skills at an early age, children need to be taught about accepting differences, navigating challenging situations, and accepting failure without giving up. We wouldn't wait until middle school to help a child learn to read or do simple addition and we cannot wait until there is an issue with bullying, intolerance, or insensitivity to help our children become kind, socially aware, and responsible citizens.

Should we have our 1st graders debating the merits of political candidates? Certainly not. But we can equip them with skills like feeling and showing respect and empathy toward others, making responsible decisions, and managing their emotions. As Mister Rogers said, "Childhood lies at the very heart of who we are and who we become."

Learning about civics can begin in kindergarten with the simple understanding that everyone is part of a community and that every single person, for better or for worse, has a role in shaping that community. The goal of civics education is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to be responsible citizens who contribute positively to their communities and the broader society.

This goal can be achieved in many ways, including through schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports programming that creates a sense of identity and belonging based on shared norms, values, and school culture. When properly executed, these programs promote positive behavior and enhance social-emotional skills.

I have seen the power of PBIS in my own school. We spend time teaching the students how to value self-control, thoughtfulness, accountability, and respect in all parts of our school, from the hallway to the classroom to the bus. Since we began this program several years ago, I have seen an increase in the overall positivity of our school culture, as well as improved engagement, behavior, and participation from our students. These values are now so ingrained in our school identity that students will remind each other about demonstrating expected behaviors.

Developing a classroom democracy is another excellent way to teach students about voting, decisionmaking, and respecting differing opinions.

There are several simple ways to begin to sow the seeds of democracy in the elementary classroom, such as assigning classroom jobs. This demonstrates to the students how everyone must do their part to make sure the classroom functions properly. As the students get older, they can apply for jobs in the classroom or the school. The applicants could ultimately give speeches, and the process could end with elections.

Student voice is another important element of a classroom democracy. Allowing students to help shape classroom rules and procedures demonstrates that their thoughts are important. It also creates a sense of ownership and, again, supports the power of a group of people working toward a common goal.

Other activities that promote civic engagement at the elementary level include community service projects like organizing food drives or performing for older people.

In my school district, we host an annual

143 Day of Kindness, which references Mister Roger's code for "I love you": 1-4-3. During this one-day celebration of kindness, our community honors Mister Rogers' legacy by coming together to foster a culture of compassion. In partnership with Remake Learning—a network of educators, local businesses, and libraries in the greater Pittsburgh region—we bring hundreds of children and families together to engage in activities like painting kindness rocks and making music together.

In addition, the event brings together community partners, from Cub Scout troops to first responders, to promote Mister Rogers' advice that children "look for the helpers" when processing scary news. Since its launch in 2022, the event has had such a positive impact on our school district that it has inspired other districts to create similar programs.

While these ideas provide a wonderful entry point, civics education should be more than just activities implemented by some teachers, some of the time. As we enter into the summer break, I urge educators and parents alike to reflect on ways to cultivate civic-mindedness in the next generation.

In an era marked by political polarization and social upheaval, civics education is more important than ever. We must take meaningful action by incorporating civics education into the curriculum and sowing the seeds of a more compassionate and inclusive world for future generations.

After all, this is what Mister Rogers would have wanted us to do. ■

Angela M. Evans is a K-3 music teacher in the Shaler Area school district in Pennsylvania.

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