# Igniting Justice:
## *The Skilled and Empowered Voice of Social Studies Curriculum*

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We want to start with an acknowledgement of the current state of social studies and the tension between standards-based curriculum planning and broader conceptual aims of social studies instruction. Educators' struggle to address social studies standards is not a new phenomenon (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995). In an epoch of high-stakes testing inspired by federally driven initiatives (e.g., No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top), what is tested directs what is taught; thus, social studies is pushed out of the curriculum to focus instruction on math and literacy (Au, 2007, 2009b). Teachers of social studies now face additional standards that will influence instruction in the coming years—specifically, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the new College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. Each new set of standards has the potential to dramatically alter curriculum planning and classroom instruction, and during the initial rollout the new standards will add a layer of confusion and complexity to the profession. For example, educators are rightfully concerned that literacy instruction will suppress the critical potential of social studies (Au, 2007; Au, 2009a; Gilles, Wang, Smith, & Johnson, 2013). However, other educators may appreciate the transition from scripted curriculum and content-heavy social studies instruction to incorporate critical pedagogy through skill development emphasized by the Common Core. We offer this article as a way to acknowledge teachers' confusing experiences and demonstrate an approach for navigating social studies planning in an era of new standards. Through conceptual lenses of social justice and issues-based education, our approach to curriculum planning and instruction ignites civic action and encourages students to find their voice for justice.

### The Social Studies Curriculum

Structurally, the focus of social studies curriculum is discipline centered and enacted in schools through fragmented courses, such as history, civics/government, economics, geography, anthropology, psychology, and sociology (Evans, 2004.) Schools, for example, offer courses in disciplines that focus on knowledge acquisition in a content area. This fragmentation results in curriculum that is bloated and forces superficial content-driven instruction in order to "cover the content," often at the expense of in-depth analysis and meaningful learning. As a policy, content in social studies is directed by school- or district-level standards and, it appears, will remain this way for some time to come. Standards from the National Council for the Social Studies (1994) emphasize broad themes and connections across disciplines rather than specific content, while the next sets of standards social studies teachers will be required to navigate again do not emphasize social studies content. For example, the CCSS are meant to "complement the specific content demands of the discipline, not replace them" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & the Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010, p. 60), and the C3 standards seem to intentionally shy away from politics of content inclusion, citing that such decisions are "best left to state and local decision makers" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. 29). The forthcoming challenge

for social studies educators is navigating the changing tides and moving targets of standards that amplify focus on literacy skill development and increased pressures of high-stakes tests driven by policy desires to promote college and career readiness. Within the current environment of uncertainty, social studies teachers should embrace this period as one of curricular freedom—an opportunity to explore pedagogical practices that promote literacy development and effective communication skills in students.

### Middle School Students: A Critical Opportunity for Educators

Research has demonstrated that curriculum and instruction are poorly matched to the needs of adolescents in middle schools (Jackson & Davis, 2000), and low expectations for middle school students' intellectual capacity persist among middle school teachers prepared through secondary programs (Conklin, 2008). A gap between theory and practice exists; for example, while young adolescents have the ability to think in complex ways (Byrnes, 2003; Keating, 2004), the demand for higher-order thinking for middle school students is decreasing (Eccles et. al, 1993). Clearly, middle school is a site ripe with possibilities for improved social studies curriculum and instruction, and advocates for change have argued the need for specialized preparation for middle school teachers (Conklin, 2010; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003).

Middle school provides a critical opportunity to promote justice-oriented citizens through curriculum that engages students in analysis and discussion of social, political, and economic structures and promotes communication of prospective solutions to perennial issues facing democracies (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). If, as Youniss and Yates (1997) argue, the development of a social identity that embraces an orientation towards civic and political participation is the prime task of adolescence, then middle school is a time to develop the sense that they have capacity to be effective as civic participants. Civic attitudes and behaviors, habits of participation (or non-participation), form in youth and are difficult to change later in life (Flanagan, 2004; Levine, 2007); thus, it is important for adolescents to view themselves as active participants in society and commit to work with others for the common good. Transforming the classroom into a democratic environment that fosters the development of civic knowledge, skills, identity, behavior, and aims for students is critical for teachers of adolescents.

### Conceptual Framework for Curriculum Development

Social studies is an important content area of schools and critical in preparing students to be enlightened and engaged citizens in a democracy, to evaluate injustice and inequities, and explore

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multiple perspectives and imagine possibilities for social change. Students should be engaged in opportunities to consider varied voices and priorities of citizens and interests while considering and weighing the evidence of experts to challenge injustice and address root causes of problems. Education of justice-oriented citizens requires students to communicate with and learn from others who may hold different perspectives and to reach consensus or effectively promote or advocate for change in sometimes contentious venues. While there are many approaches and perspectives that warrant consideration, in our view, curriculum planning and design situated in a framework of education for social justice and through issues-based education is one pathway to achieve the desired outcomes for middle school students listed above.

Agarwal-Rangnath (2013, p. 4) suggests several characteristics of social justice teaching that teachers need to consider when enacting social justice curriculum; for example, teachers must do the following:

- study and learn about the lives of students in their communities;
- develop and enact academically rigorous curriculum that bolsters learning and achievement of all students in the classroom;
- challenge students to examine the world around them and encourage students to make change in their schools, communities, and the world;
- see themselves as both responsible for and capable of challenging and altering an educational system that is not adequately servicing large numbers of children, particularly poor children, children of color, and children with special needs;
- work in and around policy constraints to reform and restructure curriculum.

The task for social justice educators is to facilitate the students through the constructive questioning and deconstruction of knowledge and power; to challenge, confront, and disrupt "mis-

conceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences"; and create a "learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change" (Nieto & Bode, 2007, p. 11). Students who participate in curriculum and instruction that focus on citizen action and emphasize constructive dialogue rather than generic structures and obligations are more likely to support and engage in such actions (Jonsson & Flanagan, 2000).

While the civic potential of social justice education is clear, teachers are tasked with the challenge of framing curriculum that focuses on justice issues in a meaningful way for students. One such approach is issues-centered education. According to Ochoa-Becker (1996), issues-centered education is "a curriculum that uses public issues to emphasize controversial questions as the content for social studies. It is an approach toward teaching and learning that does not intend to provide right answers but underscores the need for students to learn how to examine significant questions and become more thoughtful decision makers about public life" (p. 6).

Thus, issues-centered education promotes the disciplined inquiry of perennial public issues and controversies; encourages perspective taking, including those that may be different from one's own; and empowers adolescents to actively participate in reflective decision making (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996; Shaver, 1992). Reorganizing curriculum around issues is an effective tool for classroom instruction that is engaging and relevant to students and promotes authentic forms of expression and assessment.

A framework developed by Onosko (1996) is a useful tool for framing issues-based units. He suggests practitioners should explore various types of issues; determine if the issue is debatable; design in-depth units based on a central issue; explore issues that are important and interesting; explore issues that can be researched; and connect daily lessons to the central issue (pp. 22–24). In the Table 1, we offer suggestions for framing a justice-oriented unit for middle school students focused on zero tolerance policies in schools.

In this example, framing an issues-based unit through questions that emphasize the exploration of issues and policies that affect youth directly (in their schools) also promotes opportunities for students to consider the effect of policies on students in similar situations. Each of the sub-issue questions helps students develop background knowledge and build toward an opportunity for students to examine zero tolerance policies and make policy recom-

### Table 1: Framework for Issues-Based Questions

| Type of Issue | Questions |
| --- | --- |
| Policy | Should schools adopt zero tolerance policies to promote school safety? |
| **Sub-issues** | |
| Factual | Which offenses are most often subject to zero tolerance policies? |
| Definitional | What is a "zero tolerance" policy? |
| Ethical | Is justice applied fairly to youth? Do zero tolerance policies in schools push youth into the prison system? |
| Legal | To what extent does the US Constitution protect youth against unreasonable punishment? |

mendations framed by the question, Should schools adopt zero tolerance policies to promote school safety? Students can explore current events and controversies around inequality and discrimination that result from enactment of policies for youth of color and students with disabilities and develop potential alternative solutions to address persistent problems from zero tolerance policies.

For social studies teachers, there may be familiarity with framing units to be issues centered and in selecting materials and resources to support content knowledge development. A challenge, however, is in selecting appropriate instructional strategies and methods to support student learning and literacy skill development aligned with the new Common Core State Standards. In the following sections, we offer examples of strategies and methods for instruction aligned with the Common Core standards for reading, writing, and speaking and listening. Our recommendations extend the ideas suggested in the framing of an issues-centered unit on issues of justice and zero tolerance policies in schools and are appropriate for elementary- and secondary-level social studies. However, our emphasis is for middle school teachers who are interested in promoting civic literacy and effectively implementing the Common Core standards, with the goal of empowering students to be enlightened and engaged democratic citizens beyond the classroom.

### Reading: Empowering Students to Critique the Milieu of Ideas that Constitute Knowledge

Textbooks remain an integral component of social studies classrooms despite staunch criticism over the content contained within and its overuse as an instructional tool (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Sewall, 2000; Sleeter & Grant, 1991; Wade, 1993). Students often experience challenges with textbook-based instruction due to any number of factors, such as limited background knowledge,

limited points of view in many social studies materials, unfamiliarity with the formats and the instructional styles used in social studies classes, high vocabulary density in social studies materials, a complex variety of genre and sentence structures in social studies materials, heavy reliance on advanced literacy skills, and limited opportunities for hands-on activities. Texts, however, can include a variety of multimodal textual practices (i.e., linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modes), and pedagogies that embrace multimodal representation in academic settings are well established (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Kress, 2003). For example, consider the following examples of texts to consider when developing issues-based units with alternative texts:

**Table 2: Teacher Resources: Zero Tolerance Multimodal Texts**

| Resources | URL |
|---|---|
| **Online Text** | |
| National Association of School Psychologists: "Zero Tolerance and Alternative Strategies: Educators and Policymakers" | http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/zt_fs.aspx |
| **Video and Text** | |
| *Tavis Smiley Reports:* Episode 6: "Education Under Arrest" | http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/tsr/education-under-arrest/zero-tolerance-policies-are-these-post-columbine-measures-putting-minority-students-on-the-fast-track-to-the-prison-system/ |
| **Infographics** | http://www.suspensionstories.com/ |

There are a number of reading strategies that facilitate monitoring comprehension (e.g., RAFT), organizing content from the text (e.g., graphic organizers), summarizing key details and main ideas (e.g., paired reading), generating questions and answers (e.g., question-answer relationship [QAR]). It's important to recognize that different strategies promote different ways of engaging with the text; teachers need to be aware of the goodness of fit. In other words, teachers need to purposely select a strategy that achieves the aim and intent of the objective.

Questioning is vital to successful enactment of issues-based instruction; thus, QAR is an appropriate strategy given the way students engage with a text with this strategy (Raphael, 1986). QAR is a strategy that involves students in assessing text through four types of questions: *in the book* (answers directly stated in the text); *think and search* (answer is derived from the interpretation of different parts of the text); *author and me* (the answer is not

**Table 3: Example of QAR Questions and Issues-Based Questions**

MODEL QAR QUESTIONS

| Types | Type of Issue | Question |
|---|---|---|
| *in the book* | Definitional | What is a "zero tolerance policy"? |
| *think and search* | Factual | Which offenses are most often subject to zero tolerance policies? |
| *author and me* | Legal | How would you (author) explain "due process" and "equal protection" protected by the 14th Amendment to students suspended under zero tolerance policies? |
| *on my own* | Ethical | Is justice applied fairly to youth? |

stated directly in the text; students integrate personal knowledge and information provided by the author); and *on my own* (answer is not in the text; students develop answers from background knowledge). Teaching the QAR strategy requires teachers to model types of questions for students; the issues-based questions can serve as a framework for students, with a goal of students learning to effectively generate their own questions during reading of different texts.

The QAR strategy and subsequent examples of questions engage students through close reading of texts, have students analyze key details and ideas, and evaluate points of view. As such, incorporating the QAR strategy aligns with the following Common Core reading standards:

**Table 4: QAR Strategy Alignment with Common Core Reading Standards**

| Strategy for Reading: Question and Answer Relationship | |
|---|---|
| | **Reading 1:** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. |
| | **Reading 2:** Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. |
| | **Reading 6:** Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text. |

**Writing: Empowering Students to Find Voice and Demystify Conceptions of Justice**

Knowledge and power work to sustain and legitimate discourses; thus, engaging students in the exploration of the historical and social construction of knowledge requires engaging them in critical literacy (Giroux, 2005). Often, the politics of language influences what teachers expect of students in classroom writing and communication among students. For teachers purposefully utilizing the beliefs about writing (Writing Study Group of NCTE, 2004) and integrating writing processes in the classroom every day will help students develop language and writing skills. To promote sense making with students, effective writing tasks should include a deliberate purpose for meaningful writing with an authentic audience in mind.

To effectively develop writers, educators should consider three common modes of writing for inclusion in social studies classrooms. Attention must be given to the cognitive challenges associated with different types of writing; for example, a writing integration should include narrative, descriptive, and expository works (see Table 5). Each of these helps students develop key skills that are sustainable and transferrable over time as students write to apply their knowledge and experiences in multiple settings.

**Applied Example: Expository Writing in Social Studies**

It should be noted that effective inclusion of varied types of writing, including narrative and descriptive, with social studies content is developed over time. A comprehensive writing process helps to support students' ability to compose expository works and achieve in-depth learning. As a way to illustrate an approach to teaching expository writing, social studies teachers could assign students a process-analysis piece focused on the question, Should schools adopt zero tolerance policies to promote school safety?

**Table 5: Types of Writing for Middle School Social Studies**

| | Narrative | Descriptive | Expository |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Purpose/Goal** | Tell a structured and meaningful story or account of a series of events. | Use specifically gathered sensory or other information via observation, interviews, or research to invent or present an imagery-filled picture. The work should make the reader relive an experience with you. | Inform others by explaining, rethinking, or expanding insight on a concept not previously understood. |
| **Critical Attributes** | Rough idea and conversation style formation and practice | Attention to common emotions and connections to form new meaning | Paints a vivid picture of an idea, a place, or a person with words and images |
| | Raises forming questions and concerns to rethink or wonder | Each element works together to form or build towards conflict. | Detailed discussion, analysis, and reflection on sensory or information intake, which describes the sensation and experience of something |
| | Demonstrates a mind's wandering connected to an idea, event, or aspect of life | Careful selection of multiple details to advance points and progression within the work | Focuses on one subject |
| | | | Captures and puts the reader into a sensory world |
| | | | Organization must logically and naturally fit the subject matter |
| | | | Strives for balances between details and impressions |

*Example Assignment Prompt*

The lines of youth and adult blur in a pool of blood, but violent crimes in schools trigger cries for appropriate justice and an end to the age of violence. A question of controversy emerges: Should schools adopt zero tolerance policies to promote school safety? As a reporter for an online newspaper, your task is to write an informational process analysis article to explain how zero tolerance policies in schools will or will not decrease school safety. This article must convey your clear claim toward this justice process and its implications while informing and helping the public understand the related process steps, complex ideas, and information. The article will demonstrate an effective selection, logical organization, and analysis of content. Also, it must contain relevant online news and expository appropriate elements, signal phrases, and graphics. This article will be 2–4 pages and written with careful attention to the conventions of standards of English.

As the prompt for expository writing indicates, students will examine and convey complex ideas through analysis, publish their writing, and conduct research based on focused questions. Thus, incorporating an expository writing assignment aligns with the following Common Core writing standards:

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**Table 6: Expository Writing Assignment Alignment with Common Core Writing Standards**

| Expository Writing | **Writing 2:** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content. |
| --- | --- |
| | **Writing 6:** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others. |
| | **Writing 7:** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation. |

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### Speaking and Listening: Discussion for Students to Apply Content and Take Action

Research has demonstrated the efficacy of discussion in classroom instruction on student interest, engagement, and knowledge (Hahn, 1996; Hess & Posselt, 2002). Effective discussions occur in open climates, focus on interpretable topics or questions, allow students to thoroughly prepare for participation, and require teachers to skillfully plan and facilitate discussion (Hess, 2010). Teachers must realize they are teaching both "with and for" discussion (Parker & Hess, 2001). Put differently, teachers are "using discussion as a form of interaction to promote disciplinary learning and democratic competence" *and* "are also teaching students to become better discussants" (Hess, 2004, p. 155).

Classroom discussion can take many forms and offer multiple opportunities for students to engage in collaborative knowledge construction. If the purpose of discussion is to achieve a deeper understanding of ideas and values in a powerful text, teachers should choose the Socratic seminar method (Gray, 1989). For others, the purpose of the discussion may be for students to find solutions to problems and to consider different points of views; in this case, the appropriate discussion method is deliberation (Harris, 1996; Singleton & Giese, 1996). Many teachers, however, promote the discussion of controversial issues and work to strengthen students' ability to evaluate evidence and support a position; this is achieved through a structured academic controversy (Johnson & Johnson, 1988).

### Classroom Example: Structured Academic Controversy

For a moment, let's revisit the policy-level question of the issues-based unit: Should schools adopt zero tolerance policies to promote school safety? This question is controversial, requiring students to explore both sides of an issue using cooperative learning to evaluate the strength of evidence supporting or against a position; thus, a structured academic controversy (SAC) is a discussion method best suited for students. A SAC discussion is structured to engage students through a process to (1) review evidence to argue one side of an issue, (2) listen to the other side and ask clarifying questions, (3) switch sides and argue from the opposing position, and (4) reach consensus as a group and come up with an agreed-upon solution. Ideas for discussion can be any controversial or public issue. In Table 7, some key features of both sides of the zero tolerance controversy are highlighted. Teachers could select resources around the examples or guide students through a focused inquiry to gather supporting evidence.

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**Table 7: Sides of the Zero Tolerance Controversy for a Structured Academic Controversy**

| Yes, schools should adopt zero tolerance policies to promote school safety. | No, schools should not adopt zero tolerance policies to promote school safety. |
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| School violence is at a crisis level and increasing. | Zero tolerance policies unfairly impact students of color and students with disabilities. |
| Zero tolerance is clear discipline for students and is consistently applied to all students. | Zero tolerance policies are not developmentally appropriate for adolescents and force students out of school during important years. |
| Removal of students will create a better school climate for students who remain. | Zero tolerance policies divert student and educational resources to security technology and security personnel. |
| Zero tolerance policies deter students from bad behavior. | Zero tolerance policies place tremendous strain financially and on the mental health of students and families. |
| Parents support zero tolerance to ensure student safety. | Disciplinary alternatives may be better suited to promote school safety. |

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In a structured academic controversy, students actively prepare for discussion through a guided inquiry, evaluate evidence from multiple sources, and use evidence to support positions. Hence, enacting structured academic controversies aligns with the following Common Core speaking and listening standards:

**Table 8: Structured Academic Controversy Alignment with Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards**

| Structured Academic Controversy | **Speaking and Listening 1:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. |
| --- | --- |
| | **Speaking and Listening 2:** Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. |
| | **Speaking and Listening 3:** Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric. |

**"Children Have the Right to Say!"**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states: "When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account." We offer the ideas in this paper to help teachers decrease tension and increase the voice of/for justice with a social studies curriculum that promotes reading, writing, and discussion. Through experience, teachers will develop a repertoire for representing content and transforming knowledge of topic-specific subject matter in a variety of ways that interact with their knowledge of student difficulties and misconceptions. Framing social studies curriculum and instruction through lenses of social justice and issues-based education is pivotal in the development of civic actors and encourages students to find their voice for justice. Indeed, for students to take action in the real world, special attention must be given to design instructional opportunities around issues of social justice and engage students in the authentic development of critical literacy skills.

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