



# The Great Lakes Social Studies Journal

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# students in the center



# The Great Lakes Social Studies Journal



Volume 1 Issue 2 Fall 2021

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**Michigan**  
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Tomorrow's Leaders Learn Today

# From the Editor...

This school year more than any, I've been reminded many times about why social studies education is my passion—my students. As I have transitioned into teaching my social studies methods courses in-person, I realize how honored I am to work with teacher candidates and help them to serve their future students. This is why our second issue of the Great Lakes Social Studies Journal features work that puts “students in the center.”

This issue is full of takeaways educators can use with their students, including a local historical inquiry from Linda Doornbos and Ericka Murdoch, models of student talk from Kristy Brugar and Kathryn Roberts, and a lesson in economic literacy from Erin Adams. Dana Haraway and Michelle Cude wrote about the power of Grounding Circles for social-emotional development and Kenneth Plont writes about strategies for combating academic dishonesty in social studies in our Educator Corner feature.

Our second issue is dedicated to the educators who always put their students in the center! Thank you for all you do!



Dr. Annie McMahon Whitlock  
University of Michigan-Flint



## OLYMPIAD

### Who Are We And What Unites Us



**Tomorrow's Leaders Learn Today**



Linda Doornbos

Ericka Murdock

## **A Critical Inquiry, and a Call to Action: A prospective elementary teacher and a social studies teacher educator explore a pedagogy of justice**

In this article, we—a university social studies teacher educator and a prospective elementary teacher—describe our exploration into what history for justice can look like in the state and local elementary classroom. Inspired by Martell and Stevens’ (2021) “thinking like an activist” conceptual framework, we co-designed a critical social inquiry using the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework* (NCSS, 2013). More specifically, driven by the compelling question *Lawmakers or Lawbreakers?: The Crosswhite Family and the Community of Marshall, Michigan*, students are invited to interpret history through activist lenses. Using the C3 Framework’s Inquiry Arc, we explore this story rooted in slave history to better see and understand systemic racism in the present and then analyze a current event as a case study to invite collective activism.

Students begin the critical social inquiry through an interactive read-aloud of *January’s Sparrow* (Polacco, 2009)—a historically authentic and vividly illustrated telling of the enslaved Crosswhite family’s escape north in the 1840s. Then utilizing disciplinary literacy, they investigate the family’s journey through the underground railroad from a Kentucky plantation to the northern town of Marshall, Michigan, and scrutinize the risks the community members of Marshall took to orchestrate the family’s subsequent escape to Canada. Finally, the inquiry comes full circle when as a community of

learners, the students consider, *What would we be willing to risk when laws/rules are unjust?* Recent events bring a sense of urgency to this work. The killing of Black and Brown people, contentious political elections, the insurrection of the capital, attacks on Asian Americans, crimes targeting queer (LGBTQ) people, and the increase in antisemitism expose systematic social inequality and present challenges to democracy. We must address these challenges by centering justice—discussion, consciousness-raising, organizing, and collective action—so that as informed democratic citizens, we disrupt and dismantle inequalities to shape a better world.

Schooling plays a crucial role in preparing for and fostering justice-seeking democratic citizens. Therefore, along with many others (Crowley & King, 2018; Love, 2019; Martell & Stevens, 2021), we argue that classrooms must teach students how to take up the work of democracy. Students need the necessary tools to engage in civic problem solving and social activism to better the world. Doing so requires centering diversity-related issues in the social studies curriculum through inquiry-based instruction. However, social studies in elementary education is marginalized, viewed through a Eurocentric lens, and taught using didactic-based instruction (Alarcón, 2018). As a result, centering issues of equity and democracy become difficult and wrought with controversy. Leaning into the complexity, social studies teacher education must help prospective teachers center their work on equity, social responsibility, and social change.

Therefore, we explored teaching against the grain, moving from didactic-based to inquiry-based instruction and including counter-narratives in the curriculum by developing a critical social inquiry. To share our work, we introduce ourselves, provide the impetus for collaboration, and offer a brief overview of the perspectives informing our work. Then we describe the critical social inquiry, *The Crosswhite Incident*. Finally, we conclude with reflections on our work as we move forward to promote justice-oriented teaching and learning.

### **The Impetus for Collaboration: Who We Are**

Linda: As an assistant professor of elementary studies, I teach social studies content and methods courses. In the content course, taken early in the teacher education program, we begin articulating a vision for critical social studies teaching and learning. Then, as we engage in multimodal teaching and learning strategies, we identify sources of inequity and injustice, decenter the dominant narrative, and investigate actions taken by those misrepresented, omitted, or marginalized in the history of the United States and within our state. In doing so, we critically discern how we see, understand, and inhabit the world; constantly disrupt our assumptions as new evidence allow us to see the world from the perspective of others; and continually develop with others how what we are learning can shape the way we think, learn, and act as teachers to better the world. It was within the Fall 2020 content course that I met Ericka.

Ericka: The foundation of our collaborative work began with an independent project I designed in the social studies content course class taught by Linda. Drawing on class content and the need for additional credit, I created a Journey Box (Alarcón et al., 2015) to draw students into the human connection of the history of the [Crosswhite family's history](#)—particularly the aspect of community activism and its relevance within the cultural wokeness we were experiencing as a nation in 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I was unable to present my project in a classroom setting, so I did the next best thing and had my sons

(ages 7 and 11) immerse themselves in the project at home. I found the experience to be personally and professionally gratifying to watch them engage with different background knowledge and skill levels. This experience allowed me to think critically about how to differentiate this project to meet the needs of my future students. Within this project's work, Linda and I recognized our kindred spirit for teaching history for justice that leads to collective action.

### **How We Came to the Work**

The impetus for the collaborative work was threefold. First was our mutual desire for justice-oriented teaching and learning. Ericka, at the time, was a non-traditional graduate student pursuing a Master of Arts in education with a social studies endorsement. Her love for Michigan history and her exceptional ability to connect theory and practice prompted my invitation to draw on her work within the Journey Box to create a critical inquiry to be shared publicly. Second, digital technology provided us with the space to collaborate and to create a digitally accessible unit. Lastly, our desire to dig deeper into infusing justice-oriented local and state history was grounded in the recently adopted Michigan K-12 Social Studies Standards (2019) and its call for teachers to use C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc (Grant, 2013) as an instructional tool. Working across boundaries as co-learners, co-constructors, and co-conspirators, we entered this space to develop an inquiry unit that would engage students in critical disciplinary literacy to evaluate society and take collective action in making the world better.



## Perspectives

The following perspectives inform our work: professional learning, history for justice, and inquiry pedagogy.

### Professional Learning

Our work was grounded in the following principles of the social constructivist approach to professional learning (Raphael et al., 2014; Vygotsky, 1978):

- agency—sharing ownership to disrupt the notion of the top-down university transmission of knowledge and broaden the view of practitioner as a researcher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lasky 2005);
- situated learning—connecting the theory of justice to the practice of justice (Lieberman & Miller, 2008, Love, 2019); and
- dialogue—engaging as co-constructors of knowledge and co-conspirators in exploring and participating in justice-oriented social studies pedagogy (Love, 2019).

Through genuine collaboration, we grew in valuing the expertise we each brought to the work and our imaginative capacity to effect change by connecting theories of justice in history to critical inquiry-based teaching and learning.

### Justice in History Education

Driving our work was Martell and Stevens' (2021) "thinking like an activist" framework, specifically related to history education. The framework has three components:

- cultural preparation—envision a better, more equal, and just society through (un)learning systematic structures of oppression and work with others to bring about lasting change;
- critical analysis—recognize the unequal power relationships that have created and maintained systematic oppression; and
- collective action—understand the confrontational and non-cooperative action of past and present social movements to disrupt systematic inequality.

Putting these components into practice allows students to understand justice and do the work of justice. Understanding justice involves exposing unequal power relationships has created systemic racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, and many other forms of oppression and discrimination. Doing the work of justice involves acting with others to disrupt oppression to create a more just and equitable future. Noteworthy is the framework's intentional move away from glorifying individual actors in history to centering the social

movements needed (past, present, and future) to disrupt inequality and build a better world.

### Critical Pedagogy

Utilizing the thinking like an activist framework, we crafted a critical social inquiry using the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) of the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013). Reflecting a critical standpoint, we explicitly designed the inquiry to raise awareness and identify the social injustices of the past to promote freedom in the present (Crowley & King, 2018). More specifically, the social inquiry exposes students to a critical counternarrative that directly challenges the master narrative. The master narrative says European immigrants settled our country and that only those who are white and of European descent are true Americans. This dominant perspective, deeply embedded in our culture and found in elementary social studies curriculum, dictates a narrow version of American history that minimizes historically marginalized and oppressed people (Takaki, 2012). Hence, our social inquiry highlighting the story told in *January's Sparrow* (Polacco, 2009)—as a counternarrative—challenges students to examine the past critically and exposes them to a community willing to take risks to bring about social change.

Following the suggested guidelines for critical social inquiry as indicated by Crowley and King (2018, p.16), we implemented the four dimensions of the C3 Framework's inquiry arc:

- Dimension 1—ask compelling and supporting questions that explicitly critique systems of oppression and power (e.g., slavery, risks taken by the community to disrupt oppression);
- Dimension 2—use disciplinary knowledge and skill (e.g., geography, history);
- Dimension 3—expose students to sources that include the perspective of marginalized and oppressed groups (enslaved African Americans); and
- Dimension 4—develop tasks and an informed action that pushes students to take tangible steps toward alleviating the injustice explored in the inquiry (a case study of a current event).

As students move through the inquiry, they are doing history—not just learning about history (Barton & Levstik, 2004). In other words, "thinking like activists," students investigate the past to better understand the present realities of injustice, and as democratic citizens take collective action on a

social issue relevant to their lives (Martell & Stevens, 2021).

We turn now to provide a descriptive overview of the critical social inquiry. The inquiry is to be done over several class periods—virtually, hybrid or face-to-face. However, within Michigan or beyond, teachers are encouraged to tap into the IDM’s flexibility and adapt the inquiry to their particular context, curriculum, and students.

### Critical Social Inquiry Description

In addressing the compelling question, *Lawmakers or Lawbreakers? The Crosswhites and Community of Marshall, Michigan*, students consider the radical actions of the community of Marshall, MI through the experiences of the Crosswhite family. Students explore the journey of the Crosswhite family, fugitive slaves, through the Underground Railroad as they escape from Kentucky to settle in the unique community of Marshall, Michigan. In doing so, they examine sources that highlight the context and significance of a community’s resistance to injustice. As a cumulative unit, this inquiry assumes prerequisite knowledge of slavery and the Underground Railroad.

### Staging the Question

In staging the question, students interact with the three-part series of *January's Sparrow* (Polacco, 2009), as read by Ms. Anthony (2020), whose voice and literary expertise engage students in authentic dialect cadences of the slave narrative. As students identify the components of the illustrated story, they are invited to investigate the actions of the Crosswhite family and the community of Marshall to consider whether they were lawmakers or lawbreakers.

### Supporting Questions 1-3

The first supporting question—*What was the most likely path for the Crosswhite family to get from Kentucky to Marshall, MI?*—invites students to investigate geography’s physical and human aspects. Students interact with maps and other sources through the formative performance tasks to explore the Crosswhite family’s most likely path to freedom. First, they investigate a map of the Underground Railroad from Indiana to Michigan in 1848. Next, they explore a physical map to examine a possible route the Crosswhites could have taken

from the plantation in Kentucky to Michigan. Using quilt patterns and songs, students interrogate the various historical "stories" and the nature of legends.

The second supporting question—*What was life like in Marshall, MI?*—invites students into understanding the historical context of everyday life in Marshall, MI. The formative task calls on students to analyze primary source images and illustrations from *January's Sparrow* alongside primary source photos of Marshall, Michigan, during this time period.

The third supporting question—*What were the citizens of Marshall willing to risk protecting members of their community?*—invites students to examine the historical perspective of the actions of the Marshall community. The formative task is an interactive timeline featured through Sutori—a collaborative instruction and presentation tool for the classroom.

### Supporting Question 4 and Summative Task

The fourth supporting question—*What would we be willing to risk when laws or rules are unjust?*—prompts students to investigate a current event as a case study of the power of community activism. Examples include, but are not limited to, Black Lives Matter, hate crimes against Asians, and youth involvement in community issues.

After grappling with the historical context of the story and geographically examining the probable pathway to freedom, students demonstrate the depth and breadth of their understanding by completing the summative task—constructing an evidence-based argument to answer the compelling question: *Lawmakers or Lawbreakers? The Crosswhites and Community of Marshall, Michigan?* Students’ arguments could take a variety of forms, including a poster, Flipgrid, or paragraph. To extend their arguments, teachers may have students trace the timeline of the Crosswhite incident leading to the creation of the Compromise of 1850 and the Civil War.

### Taking Informed Action

Students draw on their *understanding of justice*—the collective action of the Crosswhite family and the community of Marshall—to consider ways of *doing justice*. The inquiry leads them in making essential connections between “historical understanding and democratic decision making as agency—the ability to act on decisions to bring about desired goals” (Barton, 2012, p.141). Students begin to understand that the Crosswhites were not simply acted upon by historical

forces but instead were active participants with their community as agents of social change. Then they critically consider a current issue relative to their lives and, as agents of change, participate in democratic decision-making. Using the “thinking like an activist” framework (Martell & Stevens, 2021), students engage in thinking about what they would be willing to risk when laws/rules are unjust or unfair as they:

- investigate and analyze varying perspectives on a current event/issue;
- recognize and consider issues of inequality;
- examine how groups of people are seeking to bring about change;
- take an evidence-based stand on the issue; and
- develop and enact an action plan.

When COVID restrictions dissipate, we plan for parts or all of this unit to be enacted in a classroom and are excited to observe and participate with young activists at work. But for now, we provide a brief reflection of our work and express our hope for future work to advance history for justice.

### **Advancing History for Justice: Reflecting on Our Work**

Linda: Exploring teaching and learning for justice with Ericka was a rich learning experience. Designing the inquiry was genuinely collaborative. Crucial to its success was a shared commitment to teaching history for justice, learning from each other, thinking differently, and rolling up our sleeves to do the messy, hard work. Ericka’s deep knowledge of Michigan history and tenacity in finding primary sources combined with my knowledge and experience working with the IDM and the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013) brought depth and breadth to this project. As co-constructors and co-conspirators, we disrupted the top-down approach to knowledge that is too often prevalent at the university, and the passive, maintaining the status quo curriculum taught in elementary social studies classrooms.

Ericka: The idea for this independent study started with a simple desire to bring the Crosswhite story — full of adventure, heroism, sadness, and triumph—to elementary children. As I dove deeper into the project, I began to question why this story, relayed by a renowned author and enthusiastically shared by the historians in Marshall, is virtually unknown to anyone outside of Cass County and Marshall, MI. It became clear the truth requires wrestling with our nation’s suppression of stories that expose issues of race and inequalities. It was from within that truth, Linda, and I realized that telling this story was so important. We

cannot hide away the parts of our history that speak uncomfortable truths, especially from our youngest learners. Instead, we must provide opportunities for students through inquiry to discover that even in our darkest times, we have always been a nation of people that worked together, embracing the power of community activism to make significant changes.

### **Continuing the Work**

Linda: As with any proper inquiry, I have more questions than answers. As I move forward in my work, what knowledge, skills, and perspectives are needed to teach history for justice, and how do we cultivate these within teacher education? What is required intentional work to bridge the gap between the theory with the practice of justice? How does collaborative work across boundaries better connect teacher preparation and classroom practice? Given the marginalization of social studies in the elementary classroom, will teachers take up student-driven inquiry-based learning? Given the current political climate and tension, will teaching history for justice’s call to collective activism be silenced? Specifically, these lingering questions propel me forward to create learning opportunities to:

- expose the dominant historical narratives that have omitted or marginalized other voices and experience
- living into the framework by connecting theory and practice so that as activists, we expose injustices and bring the silenced or omitted stories into the elementary classroom; and
- co-designing social inquiries using the C3 Framework to incorporate the mandated standards in relevant and powerful ways.

Ericka: As with any compelling inquiry, I desire to learn more. This project focused upon one family and one community to showcase the importance of drawing out this particular story of place and time, including many other notable people and places during the antebellum period. Yet, so much of the Crosswhite story was left untold. Therefore, while this unit may be complete, I plan to:

- expand my research into the Crosswhites after they moved to Canada;
- explore how their lives, directly and indirectly, intertwined with other notable Underground Railroad conductors such as George De Baptiste and Laura Smith Haviland; and
- continue to explore the power of story and work with others so that my future students not only *understand* (in)justice but provide space and time for the collective *doing* of justice.

In sum, we crossed traditional university boundaries with a sense of urgency to explore what enacting history for justice could look like through a social inquiry. Inspired by Martell and Stevens' (2021) call to take collective action to break down the "common barriers to enacting history for justice in the classroom: teacher barriers, student barriers, school and district barriers, and community barriers" (p.132-140) we will continue to lean into the complexity and center our work on equity, social responsibility, and social change.

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## 4th Grade Crosswhite Incident Inquiry

## Lawmakers or Lawbreakers? The Crosswhite Family and the Community of Marshall, Michigan

<b>C3 Indicators</b> <b>Michigan K-12 Social Studies Standards</b>	D2.Civ.4.3-5. Explain how groups of people make rules to create responsibilities and protect freedoms. D2.Civ.12.3-5. Explain how rules and laws change society and how people change rules and laws. 4 – H3.0.3 Use case studies or stories to describe the ideas and actions of individuals involved in the Underground Railroad in Michigan and in the Great Lakes region. 4 – G1.0.3 Use geographic tools and technologies, stories, songs, and pictures to answer geographic questions about the United States. 4 – C5.0.3 Describe ways in which people can work together to promote the values and principles of American democracy. 4 – P4.2.1 Develop and implement an action plan and know how, when, and where to address or inform others about a public issue.
<b>Staging the Compelling Question</b>	Introduce students to the Crosswhite story through an <a href="#">interactive read-aloud</a> of <i>January's Sparrow</i> . (Polacco, 2009). Invite students to investigate the actions of the Crosswhite family and community members of Marshall, Michigan, to consider whether they were lawmakers or lawbreakers.

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	Supporting Question 4
What was the most likely path for the Crosswhite family to get from Kentucky to Marshall, Michigan?	What was life like in Marshall, Michigan, at this time?	What were the citizens of Marshall willing to risk to stand up for what was right?	What would we be willing to risk when laws/rules are unjust?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
<a href="#">Interact</a> with a physical map and other sources to critically examine the Crosswhite's most likely path to freedom.	<a href="#">Analyze</a> images from <i>January's Sparrow</i> and historical documents to create a visual representation of everyday life in Marshall, Michigan.	Explore an <a href="#">interactive timeline</a> to understand the historical context and perspective of the time period.	Think like activists to <a href="#">analyze</a> a current event as a case study of the power of community activism.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<b>Source A:</b> Maps <b>Source B:</b> <a href="#">The Patchwork Path: A Quilt Map to Freedom</a> <b>Source C:</b> <a href="#">Follow the Drinking Gourd</a>	<b>Source A:</b> <i>January's Sparrow</i> (illustrations on pages 36-37, and 38) <b>Source B:</b> <a href="#">Historical Images/Document Bank</a>	<b>Source A:</b> <a href="#">Sutori</a> : Timeline	<b>Source A:</b> selected current events

<b>Summative Performance Task</b>	<b>ARGUMENT:</b> <i>Lawmakers or Lawbreakers? The Crosswhites and Community of Marshall, Michigan.</i> Construct an argument discussing the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from historical and contemporary sources while acknowledging competing views.
	<b>EXTENSION:</b> Trace the timeline of the Crosswhite Incident leading to the creation of the Compromise of 1850 and in turn leading to the Civil War.
<b>Taking Informed Action</b>	Create a plan to collectively take action on a current law/rule believed to be unjust or unfair using Thinking Like Activists (supporting question # 4).

\*Featured sources are suggested and links are provided. It may be that these links are broken and we apologize in advance for the inconvenience.

# What Were They Thinking?! Student-Centered Discussions to Build Understanding

Kristy A. Brugar

Kathryn L. Roberts

Cumulatively, we have worked with elementary and middle school students for over forty years. In that time, we have heard kids say the most thoughtful, interesting, and curious things as they attempt to make sense of the world around them. Sometimes these comments leave us in awe of what students know, occasionally they make us laugh out loud, and we are almost always left thinking about the possibilities for building further learning and connections.

We, and the teachers we work with, think carefully about how to present complex social studies content and concepts to our students. However, in recent years, we, and others who study social studies teaching and learning, have made concerted efforts to elicit and listen to the ideas our students have about these topics (Mueller, 2016; Roberts & Brugar, 2017). We have long known the benefits of meeting students where they are and building upon prior conceptual knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) and there are many instructional techniques designed to tap children's thinking about a topic. K-W-L charts, for example, are widely used in classrooms. However, these kinds of activities often fall short when it comes to doing something with the understandings students share, particularly in reference to social studies.

In this article, we offer practical suggestions for using verbal protocol to support students at all grade levels to share their thinking as they interact with a variety of social studies resources (though slight modifications to reflect development may be necessary). In addition, we offer suggestions for building upon and connecting students' understandings to key learning outcomes. These suggestions are not activity-specific, but rather suggestions for ways in which teachers and students might interact with each other and resources during nearly any classroom social studies experience. Verbal protocol is a think-aloud method in which people verbalize their thinking in real-time as they engage in a task (e.g., Eccles & Aarsal, 2017; Smith, 2017), often providing a window into not only what they are thinking, but what prompts particular thoughts. These interactions can take place in one-on-one, small-group, or whole-group settings. The suggestions we provide in this article are shared in the context of the Inquiry Arc (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013), but could be used in nearly all instructional contexts. We will first look at ways to support students as they share their thinking within each dimension of the Inquiry Arc, and then turn to how to scaffold and steer different types of student responses.

## Verbal Protocol in the Inquiry Arc

The examples we share in this article are contextualized within the C3 Framework Inquiry Arc (NCSS, 2013), which is inherently based in students forming and reforming questions as they learn and understand new content. The Inquiry Arc has four dimensions: (1) Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries, (2) Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts, (3) Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence, and, (4) Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action. In the sections that follow, we first provide some general advice to help you get students talking. Then, we suggest general prompts that we have found to be particularly helpful in each dimension of the Inquiry Arc. Finally, we share ideas for how teachers can respond to the different types of thinking that children most frequently share, honoring their contributions, while simultaneously directing the conversation toward the target learning outcomes.

### Laying the Groundwork

If your students are not used to thinking aloud, you may need to engage them in a low-stakes activity to get them in the habit. You can do this by having them engage in any challenging task—completing a puzzle with a couple extra pieces, finding locations on a map, or figuring out a riddle with several clues. We recommend having students do these tasks in small groups to give them an authentic audience to speak to. The role of the teacher is to observe, encourage students to talk about their thinking, unprompted and at any time, and provide probes to remind the students to share their thinking. These probes should be open-ended (i.e., there should not be one correct answer) and should generally not introduce the teacher's own thinking. Teachers should provide these prompts when students give verbal (e.g., "OH!" "Wait...") or non-verbal (e.g., a pause inactivity, undoing something they have done, looking pensive) clues that they are thinking. A few general prompts that we have found to be successful include:

- What are you thinking?
- I notice you did something different there, can you tell me why?
- I see that you're looking at X. What are you thinking about?
- Tell me why you decided to X.

Often the responses students give will raise more questions than answers. In that case, you might probe a bit further with prompts such as:

- Can you tell me more about that?
- I'm not sure what you mean by X, can you tell me more?
- What makes you think that?
- Can you tell me how you figured that out?

Notice that all of these prompts are designed to get students to talk more about what they are thinking, without steering the direction of the conversation or seeking a "right answer." Sometimes, you will need to do some steering, and we'll get to that later. However, when you're teaching students how to think out loud, your primary goal is just to get them to do it; the specifics of what they are thinking are much less important at this stage.

### Building on Students' Thinking

Getting students talking is an essential first step in supporting their thinking about inquiry. However, teacher support does not stop there. While we firmly believe that understanding is created through transactions between texts (broadly defined to include non-written materials, as well), context, and readers and will be unique to each student. We also know that the strongest understandings are tied to and based in the texts being studied (Rosenblatt, 1969). So, how do we reconcile encouraging students to think out loud about their interpretations of social studies sources (whatever the interpretations may be) and ensuring those interpretations are grounded in evidence and defensible? To begin, we have to think about what students' verbalizations are telling us. In our work with students (e.g., Roberts & Brugar, 2021), we have found that what students say generally falls into a few broad categories: questioning or wondering, repeating the text, adding information to enhance their understanding of the text, and riffing on a

theme. Each of these may be evident as part of students’ verbalizations as they discuss of text across the dimensions of the Inquiry Arc described in C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013).

In following Figures (1-4), we share general descriptions of these response types (Roberts & Brugar, 2021). The examples are drawn from our observations of fourth-grade students as they independently read and commented on two grade-appropriate, informational trade books on India and China (Apte, 2009; Friedman, 2008). We then make suggestions for ways in which teachers might build on these types of responses to scaffold deeper understanding about specific sources and/or the concepts within them. While the student comments are specific to the texts we read with these fourth graders, the suggested teacher responses are all open-ended questions that could be applied to nearly any text. This is by design; it allows teachers to use the same questions with many texts and thus for students to internalize these questions to use as they read on their own. The purpose of this type of questioning, whether teacher- or student-led, is not to assess comprehension, but rather to facilitate comprehension and deeper processing of texts and concepts.

Figure 3  
Adding Information to Enhance Understanding

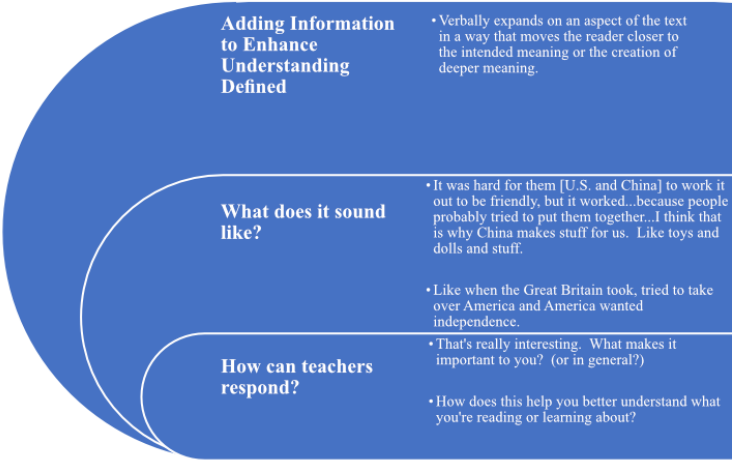
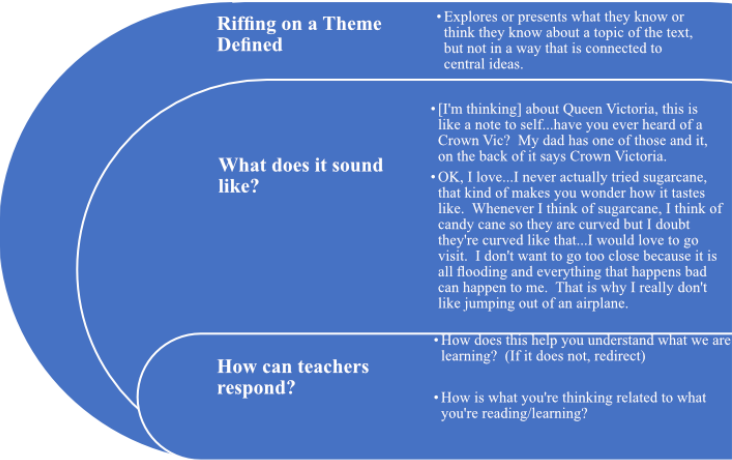


Figure 4  
Riffing on a Theme



### Verbal Protocol by Dimension

Once your students are comfortable engaging in verbal protocols in low-stakes situations, it will be much easier to encourage them to do the same when dealing with more challenging social studies content. The nature of each dimension of the Inquiry Arc also provides opportunities to provide open-ended prompts that are a bit more targeted to where students are in the inquiry process, and, depending on the dimension, these questions can be used to “spark multiple positions [and], perspectives...that can be...explicated and argued for with evidence” (O’Connor & Michaels, 2012, p. 3). In Table 1, we briefly describe each dimension, and then give ideas for specific verbal protocol prompts. Initially, it will primarily be the teacher using these prompts. However, as students become more familiar and comfortable with them, you may hear them using them as well.

Figure 1  
Questioning and Wondering

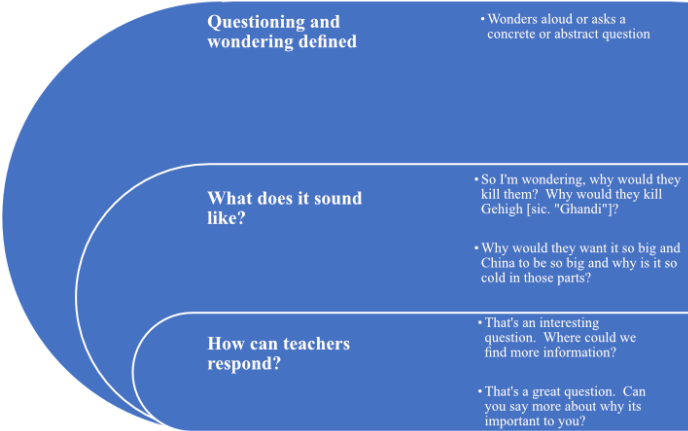


Figure 2  
Repeating the Text

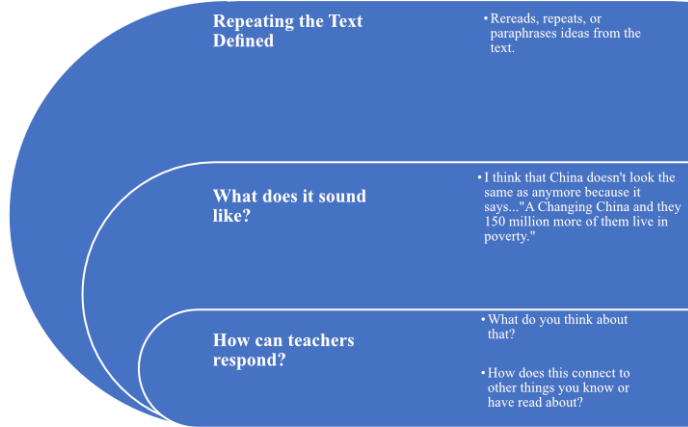


Table 1

*C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013) Quick Reference*

Dimension	Explanation	Possible prompts to get kids talking	Why teachers ask these questions
Dimension 1: Developing questions and planning inquiries	Developing questions to investigate societal issues, trends, and events is an integral part of the inquiry process. NCSS describes two types of questions: compelling and supporting. Compelling questions are those that focus on larger curiosities reflecting a social concern and enduring issue in one or more social studies discipline (e.g., civics, economics, geography, history) concepts, issues, or, ideas.	What are you curious about?  What do you want to know about this topic?  How can we go about learning more about this topic?	These questions provide important planning information for teachers. Students' responses provide insight on their background knowledge and (mis)understandings as well as their interests.  These types of questions can be asked when the topic is first introduced, as students are making a first pass through resources independently or collaboratively, or at the end of a lesson. The larger purpose is to authentically facilitate teachers actively listening to and interacting with students' responses in immediate and substantive ways.
Dimension 2: Applying disciplinary tools and concept (civics, economics, geography, and history)	NCSS describes the application of disciplinary concepts and tools as the "backbone for the Inquiry Arc" (2013, p. 17). As part of this dimension, students utilize prior knowledge as well as newly acquired understandings of social studies concepts and tools as they develop and refine their questions and pursue their inquiry.	In what ways does that help you think about this concept?  How does this connect to other things you already know?  How could you use a map or timeline (or other disciplinary tool) to help you answer or refine your question?	These questions provide further developmental information for teachers planning and instruction based on students' skills and knowledge. Different from the content-based information teachers gather from the questions associated with Dimension 1, these questions provide insight into process in the form of information about the ways in which students are using metacognitive and content-area literacy skills as they engage in social studies inquiry. Understanding students in these ways is important to the inquiry at hand, but also to understanding what resources students can draw upon in other contexts.
Dimension 3: Evaluating sources and using evidence	Students work toward conclusions about societal issues, trends, and events by collecting evidence and evaluating its usefulness in developing causal explanations	Tell me about the book/article/image/evidence you are reading.  How is this source helping you learn more about your question?  In what ways does this source share a particular point of view or way of thinking?	Each of these questions is important in helping students to forward their inquiries with increasing independence. Asking these questions as students are engaged with various social studies texts will model and help convey the necessity of students asking themselves these questions as they read. These questions position students to more successfully summarize, re-visit their purposes for reading, and compare and evaluate texts.

## Wrapping it Up

Classrooms are dynamic spaces, particularly when students are engaged in inquiries. When teachers are in the thick of it, responding on the fly to teachable moments, it can be difficult to think of ways to prompt students to share their thinking and ways to build upon that thinking to further understanding. Our hope is that the questions and prompts in this article will serve as a resource for teachers as they engage social studies content and inquiry with their students. These opportunities serve to both broaden and deepen the ways in which students and teachers engage with social studies content and concepts. In short, if we cannot explore the big ideas of social studies if we are beholden to small questions.

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# The Power of Grounding Circles for Social Emotional Learning in the Social Studies Classroom

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Michelle D. Cude

When norms and expectations for the classroom community are established and students are prepared to listen actively, understand the perspective of others, and disagree respectfully, there is a healthy foundation upon which to engage in discussions of difficult topics including controversial issues, societal injustices, and inequalities. Students who are typically reluctant to engage and participate may gain confidence to speak and share their thoughts and opinions when a safe environment is created. By describing the community as safe, we do not mean sterile, avoidant, or unwilling to handle difficult conversations, but rather a place where all feel heard and valued (Muchenje & Kelly, 2021). The goal is for all students to feel affirmed and to be empowered to challenge assumptions and engage in critical thinking, as Hess (2004) describes one of the seven characteristics of effective social studies discussion, “Participants feel comfortable, but there is still meaningful argument” (p. 154). By incorporating Grounding Circles, teachers can help students develop social and emotional competencies and prepare them to engage in powerful discussions in their social studies classrooms. More importantly, students’ experiences while learning to talk about challenging issues may embolden students to

“take action” in encounters outside the classroom working towards a better future (NCSS, 2013a).

There are many variations in name, purpose, and implementation of circle strategies. Depending on the goal and setting, circle strategies can be used to foster classroom management (Brophy, 1998; Frey & Doyle, 2001), implement restitution/restorative justice practices (Zehr, 2002; Mirsky, 2007; International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2017), offer proactive support (Evanovich et al., 2020), promote peacemaking (Coates et al., 2003), and bolster content delivery (McCall, 2010). Historically, using circle has disrupted power imbalances by equalizing each person’s voice, and creating a powerful sense of shared community even from the physical act of drawing chairs into a circle. We honor the origins of using talking circles, and a talking piece to identify the speaker, as originating with Indigenous peoples across Canada and the United States (Umbreit, 2003). These traditions emphasize speaking from the heart, having empathy, and solving problems through relationships by listening to and respecting everyone’s voice (Brown & Di Lallo, 2020; Greenwood, 2005). We encourage you to share the Indigenous heritage of these practices with your students, including its

use to engender equity, collaboration, and respect among participants, thus avoiding any sense of cultural appropriation.

We offer the Grounding Circle strategy (sometimes referred to in this article as simply Circle) adopted and adapted from in-service training by Eric Larson in the mid 90's, and now proffered by the Discovery Institute (2001). Grounding Circle is one method used to teach and motivate students to learn social and emotional competencies as they develop the prerequisite skills necessary for meaningful academic work. The Grounding Circle strategy has distinct parts including introducing oneself, identifying feelings, rating emotional status on a scale from 1-10, and responding to the prompt of the day. After everyone has shared, the facilitator then asks if anyone has a topic of discussion they would like to introduce for the good of the group.

In this article, we provide a rationale for incorporating social and emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom and examine how the Grounding Circle strategy operationalizes aspects of the social emotional learning (SEL) framework (Rimm-Kaufman, 2021). Then, we offer connections to the social studies classroom, outlining how the SEL skills inherent in Grounding Circle help teachers meet the standards of our discipline. Finally, we present the steps to implement the Grounding Circle strategy and discuss modifications for virtual learning. As you read, we encourage you to envision your ideal social studies classroom and write down your thoughts about what your classroom might look like and feel like, and how the Grounding Circle strategy might support you and your students.

## Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is in the forefront these days for good reason. The

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been researching and promoting attention to SEL for over twenty years, demonstrating impressive results through meta-studies of over 100,000 students globally impacted by the benefits of SEL (CASEL, 2021). A Nation at Hope, the report of the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2018), finds that teachers, parents, and students all realize that learning happens socially, emotionally, and cognitively in intricately combined ways. They report that teachers are asking for more training on SEL and students (66%) recognize that a school focused on SEL would help them achieve their goals and improve their learning. Levin's (2012) research explores the benefits of attention to SEL, which he refers to as the non-cognitive elements of schooling, resulting in enhanced adult performance levels in the workforce and increased economic benefit. On an international level, a 5-year study in Sweden (Klapp et al., 2017) demonstrated the positive impact of SEL in outcomes such as reduced drug use and improved mental health. The current global pandemic and the issues surrounding systemic racism are having profound effects on society and educational systems making the importance of emotional support and attention to mental health even more clear (Hamilton et al., 2019; King, 2021). The field of SEL, as described in the CASEL framework, concurs,

While SEL alone will not solve longstanding and deep-seated inequities in the education system, it can create the conditions needed for individuals and schools to examine and interrupt inequitable policies and practices, create more inclusive learning environments, and reveal and nurture the interests and assets of all individuals (CASEL, 2020, October 1, p. 4).



Glasser (1969) suggested that students' voices needed to be heard in the classroom and the best format for that was a listening circle. One common iteration is Morning Meeting or circle time which has become popular in elementary schools across the country, and its value substantiated in the literature (Bowden et al., 2020). An integral component of the Responsive Classroom, Morning Meetings are used to check in with students and set a positive, respectful tone in the classroom. These meetings bring the parts of a classroom community—teachers, paraprofessionals, students—into a circle to open the day with greetings, affirmations, and an overview of planned activities (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2015). These practices, and others like them, set the tone of a respectful community for learning. The goal is for every individual to feel connected to the whole and be valued, respected, and heard while embedding academic learning (Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc., 2009).

While such an emphasis on SEL has been largely adopted in elementary schools, the practice is less often employed in middle and high schools (Hamilton et al., 2019) despite evidence of the need to focus on SEL with adolescents (Gonser, 2020). Growth in SEL is a lifelong process. According to the CEO of [CASEL](#), the new 2020 definition of SEL includes all levels—young children through adults as follows:

**SEL advances educational equity and excellence** through authentic school-family-community partnerships.... SEL can help address various **forms of inequity and empower young people** and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities (emphasis added, Niemi, 2020, n.p.).

Using SEL strategies in middle and high school encourages students to build on skills from elementary programs to better prepare them to contemplate, discuss, and take informed action at more mature levels in response to historical and current societal problems and issues (Durlak, et al., 2011).

Transformative SEL (CASEL, 2020) is a relatively new form of SEL implementation focused on “social justice oriented civic engagement” where students work together to “critically examine root causes of inequity” and find collaborative solutions. The purpose is described as, “redistributing power to promote social justice through increased engagement in school and civic life. It emphasizes the development of identity, agency, belonging, curiosity, and collaborative problem solving within the CASEL framework” (CASEL, 2020, n.p.). For more information on this exciting direction for SEL that supports the social studies mission, [please see this site](#).

## SEL Framework

Rimm-Kaufman (2021) combines five competencies originating from CASEL (2021) with work by Gregory and Fergus (2017) focused on promoting equity. These SEL components provide a useful framework for the Grounding Circles strategy we propose for the social studies classroom. Consider how they match your own goals for teaching.

- **Relationship skills** – Skills needed to establish positive, healthy relationships, including communication, active listening, managing conflict, negotiating peer issues and appropriate risk taking. Relationship skills also includes the ability to navigate



these skills within differences in background, ethnicity, race, age, disability, and social class.

- **Social awareness**—Ability to understand perspectives and empathize. Recognition of norms for behavior and sources of support. Social awareness includes an awareness of systemic inequalities and their differing impact on people.
- **Self-management**—Ability to regulate thoughts and emotions resulting in appropriate behavior to meet situational demands. Skills include stress management, impulse control, and perseverance. Self-management involves code-switching--reading the cues and adjusting tone and language appropriately for a context.
- **Self-awareness**—Ability to recognize and understand relationships between emotions, thoughts, and behaviors grounded in a sense of self with awareness of strengths, limitations and reasonable self-expectations, optimism, and confidence in one's abilities. Awareness includes being able to identify one's own emotional state and recognize its effect on others. Acknowledging how one's identity (social class, religion, race, ethnicity, age) may incur privileges and/or disadvantages within society.
- **Effective decision making**—Making productive choices weighed with the ethical understanding of benefiting self and others. Realistic decisions, guided by logic, self-determination, awareness of impact on others, and consideration of the common good.

## SEL in the Social Studies Classroom

This SEL framework is particularly well suited to the needs of the social studies classroom due to its close alignment with goals long understood to be the heart of the discipline. Beginning back with the New Social Studies movement in the 1960s, Newmann and others proposed reforms to social studies curriculum that emphasized decision-

making, personal beliefs and values, and a more inquiry-based approach (Bohan & Feinberg, 2008). A large public survey of high school social studies teachers, measured in 2010 and again in 2019, revealed that most teachers still highly value the teaching of civic dispositions in school including the responsibility to consider the well-being of others. In fact, of those attributes measured, *treating others who are different from you with tolerance and respect* ranked among the highest in importance (Hamilton, et al., 2019). In the position statement *Revitalizing Civic Learning in Our Schools* (2013), the National Council for the Social Studies states that our discipline ought to embrace the values which prioritize justice, equity, critical thinking and decision-making, value-based reasoning, fairmindedness, and cultural sensitivity. By learning these skills in both elementary and secondary schools, we can live and work together, engaging in collaboration and deliberation in a robust and civil manner. One might conclude that social studies has been prioritizing SEL as virtues of democratic citizens all along (Hansen & James, 2016).

The C3 Framework which inspires much of our current direction in social studies education also links well to the SEL focus. As shown in Table 1, pillars of the C3 philosophy are woven into the various layers of the Grounding Circle strategy, from initial risk-taking, to respect for diversity, to final collaborative problem-solving. These all directly relate to the underlying purposes of the C3 framework as expressed, to create “active and responsible citizens [who] are able to identify and analyze public problems, deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues, take constructive action together, reflect on their actions, [and] create and sustain groups” (NCSS, 2013a).



## Grounding Circles as SEL Strategy

### Using Circles to Embed SEL in Social Studies Classrooms

Grounding Circles is one practical way to ensure these values impact our practices and are visibly infused into our normal classroom routines. It provides a structure to “educate for democracy by educating as a democracy” (Meier & Gasoi, 2017, p. 69). While some may suggest social studies content be integrated into Circle meetings (Cofie & Carson, 2017; Responsive Classroom, 2017), we contend that the very act of conducting these community-building meetings is accomplishing aims of social studies as articulated by the National Council for the Social Studies:

Young students benefit from the development of social skills and habits such as civility, self-discipline, toleration, and responsibility that are necessary for working with others and sustaining a robust democracy. These character traits for older students should emphasize the development of a mature understanding of the fundamental principles of our shared civic life ... as well as on the dispositions and skills needed to engage in the public debate over the practice of these principles. (NCSS, 2013b)

Circle, as we are offering it here, is purposefully disconnected from content. Instead, it focuses on the soft skills of group dynamics, managing emotions and interactions, communication, and self-reflection. Checking in on the students’ personal wellbeing communicates care, safety, and inclusivity, all necessary precursors for engaging with the controversial topics of history (Hess, 2009). Students and teachers are then ready to move into the content of the lesson.

Teaching Tolerance, now known as Learning for Justice, offers a framework for anti-bias social justice

which closely aligns with the social emotional skills used in the Circle strategy. For example, the Diversity domain (Standards 8 and 9) asks teachers to give students opportunities to practice respectful curiosity about others and “exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way” building “empathy, respect, understanding, and connection” (Teaching Tolerance, 2018, p. 5). Practicing these skills and attitudes in Circle will help students gain self-confidence to step up and speak up. This is truly the goal of a social justice educator. As Brown and Di Lallo (2020) state,

We accept and understand the impacts that racism and other forms of systemic oppression have had on us and the world(s) in which we live ... and seek to increase the awareness of the circle as a method that increases voice, decreases invisibility, and does not privilege one worldview or version of reality over another. (p. 368)

### Impact of Circles

Evidence of the impact of using circle largely resides in the classrooms where courageous teachers prioritize their students’ wellbeing and emotional health as much as their intellectual achievement. Most of the available research traces the effect of SEL programming in general because it is difficult for a researcher to isolate the effect of a single strategy when teachers who are SEL motivated naturally gravitate to using several strategies to bolster the SEL in their classrooms. The studies we find give a strong commendation for the use of circle as well as other SEL strategies to accomplish many objectives. For example, Hamilton et al. surveyed 15,000 teachers and administrators and found that SEL practices were key in raising student achievement and believed to be essential to “improved student outcomes and school climate” (2019, n. p). Durlak et al. (2011)

delivered an impressive meta-study of the effects of SEL interventions which demonstrated increased prosocial behaviors and academic achievement, and decreased inappropriate behaviors. Updating their earlier work with more recent studies, Mahoney et al., (2019) added the finding of sustained positive impact of SEL in studies occurring at least seven months, and often more than a year, post-intervention.

These studies focus specifically on circle strategy; however, they are implemented in a variety of settings and differ in purposes and goals. Muchenje and Kelly (2021) evaluated 14 smaller studies from UK, France, US, Ireland, and Canada looking for the factors that specifically made circle strategy successful. In these cases, the circle groups were comprised of teachers rather than students but the findings suggest that the format of sharing in the circle lent positive outcomes for the climate of the school, a finding whose transferability to student populations needs to be studied. The adults responded positively to the feeling of safety in the group, to offset the sense of vulnerability they felt with sharing with a group they did not know well. Muchenje and Kelly (2021) also identified a circumstance they labeled “double loop learning” where the students felt more capable solving their own problems because they had been part of the group solving others’ problems. Barski-Carrow (2000) cites the circle strategy as giving the participants an opportunity to express empathy, values, and emotions, putting “these experiential and emotional factors at the center of its learning process” (p. 438).

### **Practical Implementation of Grounding Circle Strategy**

Just as there are a variety of purposes for using a circle strategy, there are many variations on how to conduct circle. Some offer strict rules of engagement and use of a “talking piece” while

others allow more free-flowing communication. We encourage you to find the fit and flow that works best for you and your students. Students of ours have modified the title for other contexts including “huddle up,” “gather ‘round the campfire”, or “circle of sharing,” and you may find your group personalizes the name of your circle strategy.

Circling at the beginning of the day/week or at the end of the day/week is advantageous as students often benefit from the opportunity to debrief past situations or share anticipated events. Typically, we say, “What is said in Circle, stays in Circle” and we have been amazed at how seriously students abide by this level of confidentiality. We do, however, communicate the limits of confidentiality at our first meeting to be sure students are aware of situations requiring mandatory disclosure, namely danger to self or others. Recently we have become aware of a parent group raising issues surrounding the confidentiality aspect of Circle (Malekoff, 2020). However, the overwhelming concern for students’ mental health, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, substantiates the necessity to take measures that prioritize the social and emotional wellbeing of students. We encourage you to include your administration in planning for Circle as a part of your classroom practice.

To begin each session, arrange the classroom into a circle configuration without barriers of desks, if possible. It is recommended that books, phones, computers and other distractions not be permitted in Circle, although we allow students to eat if appropriate. The facilitator and any other adults in the classroom are equal members in Circle and should blend in and sit in the same fashion as the students. A suggested script is provided below in Table 1 for several reasons. First, having a detailed and specific outline instills confidence in teachers new to Circle.

**Table 1**

*Grounding Circle Process and Connections to Frameworks*

Grounding Circle Process and Connections to Frameworks		
Steps*	SEL component**	SS frameworks***
<p><b>Step 1:</b> Ask, “Who would like to risk for the sake of learning?” This means, “who would like to go first?” After sharing, this person chooses which way the Circle will go.</p>	Relationship skills: Risk-taking	<p>Risk-taking &amp; initiative.</p> <p><b>C3 Framework Dimension 4: Taking Informed Action.</b> Taking action towards building a community. Being willing to step out, even when it seems uncomfortable, to share your voice or initiate change.</p>
<p><b>Step 2:</b> When it is a person’s turn, they offer their name, an emotion, a number rating, and a response to the daily question as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“My name is ____.” (every time no matter how much you use Circle or how well people know each other)</li> <li>“I feel ____.” Fill in the blank with an emotion word. We emphasize using specific emotions rather than general terms like “good.” This helps build emotional awareness and vocabulary skills. You can use an emotion sheet with pictures (or emoji sheet). A person does not have to share WHY they feel a certain way. Remind students that all emotions are acceptable.</li> <li>Rank the emotion 1-10 with a 10 being very strong.</li> </ul>	<p>Relationship skills: Introduce self</p> <p>Self-management: Identity</p> <p>Self-awareness: Identification of feelings</p> <p>Relationship skills: Communication</p>	<p><b>C3 Framework:</b> “An essential element of social studies education, therefore, is experiential—practicing the arts and habits of civic life” (p. 6).</p> <p><b>Learning for Justice Social Justice Framework Anchor Standard 1: Identity --</b> “Students will express pride, confidence and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people. Students will ... understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces” (p. 3).</p> <p><b>Learning for Justice Social Justice Framework Anchor Standard 2: Diversity --</b> “Students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people” (p. 3).</p> <p>Acceptance of others, valuing difference, everyone’s voice is valued.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Answer a daily question, such as “what was something positive you did in the last 24 hours?” Questions may vary and reflect progressive levels of disclosure. Topics vary and are planned to progress progressive in developing appropriate disclosure”</li> <li>Responses can be as simple as, “I’m here.” Or, “I got up.” If the person seems hesitant to answer, the leader says, “that’s okay, we can wait.” Everyone waits respectfully. Sometimes when someone is really stuck, and particularly once the group knows each other well, others will offer suggestions.</li> </ul>	Self-awareness: Appropriate optimism	<p><b>Learning for Justice Social Justice Framework Anchor Standard 1: Identity --</b> “Students will express pride, confidence and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people” (p. 3).</p>
<p><b>Step 3:</b> Everyone claps. Then the next person takes their turn following the same prompts, until everyone has shared.</p>	Relationship skills: Support and Affirmation	<p>Affirming contributions rather than judging.</p> <p><b>National Council for History Education (NCHE): History Habits of Mind:</b> Approaches can initially be experienced with one’s peers as a way of making them a real skill for Dewey’s “associated” living in a democracy. Includes empathy, multiple perspectives, appreciating diversity.</p> <p><b>Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12):</b> “Students must have ample opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations... Being productive members of these conversations requires that students contribute ... a multitude of ideas in various domains... [they must] adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks” (2020, n.p.).</p>
<p><b>Step 4:</b> After all students and teachers have had their turn to speak, the leader then says, “Does anyone have anything for the Good of the Order?” This is a time for people to bring up anything they want to talk about collectively. As the group becomes more cohesive, students typically feel comfortable bringing up conflicts, negotiating differences, and engaging in problem-solving for personal and/or current school/social issues.</p>	Relationship skills: Communication and Risk-taking	<p>Group skills. Problem-solving. Active listening. Respect for difference.</p> <p><b>C3 Framework:</b> “participatory skills” such as problem-solving skills; “working collaboratively, engaging in opportunities to discuss and debate current social problems and issues” (p. 90).</p> <p><b>NCHE:</b> “Appreciate the diversity of cultures, ... elements of our shared humanity, [and] multiple perspectives” (n.p.).</p>

\*SEL Scripting adapted from <http://www.discoveryprogram.net/>

\*\*Based upon framework provided in Rimm-Kaufman’s (2021) work.

\*\*\*See Reference section for citations of all social studies frameworks.

Second, following predictable structures provides security and comfort for students. And third, the steps offered here are aligned with the specific SEL components, and linked to the relevant social studies frameworks. The script provided is appropriate for students of all ages and has been used successfully in graduate classes as well.

Even if the pattern seems repetitive, we recommend developing and maintaining consistent routines in order to provide comfort, predictability, and a sense of security for the participants. As an example, we share one author's experience: I was teaching 7<sup>th</sup> grade history when the 9-11 crisis happened. Finishing that school day, and navigating the ones that followed, necessitated several impromptu sharing and support sessions as several staff and students had family members involved. If my students and I had already been familiar with a predictable structure for sharing feelings and talking through problems prior to the tragedy, I feel sure we would have benefitted from the sense of security and comfort it would have provided. Having Circle embedded in your community practice, when crises come (such as pandemics, school violence), you and your students will already have a tool for coping and navigating difficult times.

The other author reflects: When working as a school psychologist assigned to the middle and high school alternative programs in the mid 90's, I was fortunate to participate in a transformational professional development experience on the Discovery program (Larsen, 2001). Circle was the grounding activity and how we began each morning of the four-day training. Since then, I have facilitated Grounding Circles in alternative schools, traditional schools with students as well as with groups of teachers, and in college classrooms preparing preservice teachers and I have witnessed the power of Circle. Although universally students are somewhat hesitant to

engage initially, a great number offer unsolicited positive reviews at the end of the school year or semester. Usually after the first month, students expect and look forward to sharing in Circle and begin to complain if the schedule changes and interrupts or cancels a session. While confidentiality is discussed on the first day of Circle, it seems reasonable to expect issues to arise from breeches; yet, in my many years of implementation, I have never experienced a single negative instance or repercussion. My students comment they appreciate the time to connect as individuals, as people first and students second. More times than not, when we meet off campus for our final class, students invariably insist on having a final Circle, clapping and connecting one last time despite the relatively public venue. Graduates often write back after their initial years of teaching and share their successes with using Circle in their own classes. My practice is further affirmed when I sporadically receive emails from former students that begin, "Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I feel excited, about a 10 and I wanted to tell you..." or "Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I feel stressed, at about a 10 and I'm wondering if we could talk about..." The relationships established and strengthened through Circle provide an essential foundation for learning and living, now and in the future. It is my sincere hope you find it makes a difference for you and your students in and out of your classroom.

In Table 2 (see p. 70), we offer the following hints gained through our training and experience in implementing Grounding Circles. They are each paired with the appropriate SEL skills they support.

### **Conducting Virtual Grounding Circles**

One of the most challenging events we have navigated is the transition to online teaching and learning. We all struggle with the sea of blank screens, talking into an abyss, and managing our own and students' screen fatigue. As educators we search for ways to develop and sustain a classroom



community, foster personal connections, and combat isolation; Grounding Circle is a viable strategy. Although Grounding Circle is designed to be an in-person experience incorporating verbal and nonverbal communication, it can be adapted to the virtual interface. We offer some observations and suggestions as fellow teachers, and look forward to future research on the impact of using virtual Circle.

The process of using Grounding Circle in an online format follows essentially the same format as described with a few notable issues. Conducting Circle in person allows teachers and students to assume equal status in taking turns. Once the first person shares, they decide which way the circle continues with teachers sharing when the circle reaches them. In the online environment, relative position on the screen changes rapidly; thus, the circle progresses by having the person sharing select the next person to take their turn. We encourage neutral selection by asking, “Who is next on your screen?” in an attempt to avoid peer favoritism. In addition, students tend to select their peers leaving teachers to share last. Since participants are muted in the online format, we use sign language clapping to recognize the participant’s sharing or coordinated “microphones

on” for clapping. We are exploring online ways to create an interactive circle image with participants selecting their place on the circle, thus allowing the process to more closely mirror an in-person experience.

## Conclusion

As social studies teachers, how can we not draw connections from the events of 1955 in Alabama to recent events in many cities and communities all over the United States? Connections to and discussions about current events, issues, and injustices in our society such as the widespread protests after the killing of George Floyd are vital in the social studies classroom (DiAngelo, 2018). However, it is equally imperative to first provide the foundation that grounds these difficult conversations in a safe environment where all are treated with respect and dignity. Without the appropriate preparation and investment in the SEL health of the classroom community, such discussions can derail and make some students choose not to participate and others feel unheard. Students operate in a world mediated by their emotional outlook and environmental

**Table 2**

***Tips for Grounding Circle Success and SEL Skill Development***

<b>Description</b>	<b>SEL Skill</b>
Allow wait time. Everyone participates, although Good of the Order is volunteer only. Some versions allow students to skip their turn or come back to a student; however, under normal circumstances, all are expected to participate. This reduces the potential contagion effect of students choosing not to participate.	Teacher: Relationship skills
Teach the following phrase and use it as appropriate: “Give yourself the respect of not talking until everyone is listening.”	Relationship skills: Active listening
Allow any and all emotions... over and over and over again. Remember boredom is developmentally appropriate for adolescents. How a student feels is not a reflection on teachers or the class. Even when it is difficult, keep practicing accepting all emotions.	Teacher: Social awareness and self- management
Follow up on 10’s associated with negative emotions. Offer a chance to share in group. If the person prefers not to share, please offer, “I’m here if you want to talk more later.” You may also facilitate connection to guidance or other support the student is comfortable talking to.	Self-awareness; Effective decision- making
If a student monopolizes Circle, it may be necessary to conference individually with the student to help them plan what and how much to share and/or develop a signal system with the teacher to let them know when to wrap up.	Social awareness; Effective decision- making
Sharing why someone feels the way they do (good or bad) is not required. Use your judgement about inviting someone to share more. Sometimes we say, “Is this something you want to talk about?” or “Is this something you want to share with the group?”	Self-awareness; Self-management; Effective decision- making

safety, so how they are feeling greatly impacts how they are learning. Using Grounding Circles prioritizes the safe and inclusive environment of the classroom and is instrumental in setting the stage for controversial issues debates, substantive conversation, and hard history discussions. The incorporation of SEL strategies, specifically Grounding Circle, can play a powerful role in supporting students in developing relationship skills, social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, and effective decision making, thereby preparing students to be the next generation of workers, voters, parents, and civic-minded citizens.

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# DO YOU BUY IT? A CASE FOR A CRITICAL ECONOMIC LITERACY



Erin Adams

Most people would agree that an economically literate population is essential for democracy (Ayers, 2019). Scholars have identified many positive outcomes of economic literacy for young people, including “increasing their chances of being self-reliant and fully independent” citizens (Marri, 2017, p. 172). Because “economic issues frequently influence voters in national, state, and local elections” a better understanding of economics enables people to “identify and evaluate the consequences of private decisions and public policies” (National Council for Economic Education, 1997, p. 1). Economic literacy is intimately tied the fostering of democratic citizens “who understand the macro and micro [economic] forces that affect their lives” (Marri, quoted in Zubrzyck, 2016). It is viewed as vital to informed voting, civic competence, and the promotion of the common good because voters’ “own economic

well-being is deeply connected to the well-being of the nation as a whole” (Marri, 2017, p. 172). As Nobel Prize winning economist Robert Solow (2003) put it, we must educate citizens “who are able to look at economic policy issues and realize what they are really about beneath the [politicians’] slogans” (p. 1). To put it in economic terms, economic education and economic literacy are viewed as public goods worthy of monetary and curricular investment (i.e. time, money, and attention).

## Economic Literacy and the Economics Literature

The gold standard of both economic and social studies education is the ability to “think like”

disciplinary experts; historians, economists, political scientists and geographers (Seixas, 1993). For economics, this means adopting “an economic way of thinking” (Council for Economic Education, 2010; Jackstadt et al., 1990). That is, the ability to identify economic problems and choose from a variety of potential solutions. Economically literate people “comprehend and analyze multiple historical accounts and supply historical examples of economic phenomena” (Shreiner et al., 2021, p. 12). Economic literacy is measured by scores on multiple-choice proficiency examinations such as the Council for Economic Education’s Test of Economic Literacy (Walstad et al., 2013) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Buckles et al., 2008) as well as state-level tests.

Proficiency with economic concepts and terminology is only one component of literacy. Literacy refers to the construction and communication of meaning. Disciplinary literacy is an “emphasis on the knowledge and abilities possessed by those who create, communicate, and use knowledge within the disciplines” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012, p. 8). It considers the tools disciplinarians use in their practice to drive their inquiry. Of particular interest for this article is the notion that disciplinary inquiry considers “forms of knowledge sharing” (Shreiner et al., 2021, p. 12). Economists use concepts like supply and demand to conduct their analyses, but they use rhetoric, figurative language, metaphor and ideographs to communicate between one another and to the public (Dolfsma, 2001; Lagueux, 1999; McCloskey, 1998). One consequence of only focusing on how economists (allegedly) think, is that it conceals what they *actually* do. Like other disciplinary experts, economists read and write in a variety of genres including speeches, books, textbooks letters, public policy reports, research articles and more (Adams, 2021). In this article, I expand the notion of economic literacy beyond a test score or familiarity with terms and vocabulary (Gans, 2015; Graupe,

2019; Nelson & Sheffrin, 1991) by considering economics as literature, science as persuasion and economic literacy as the ability to critically approach the economic discourse that is produced for public consumption.

In addition to making a case for an expanded notion of economic literacy, the article provides a teaching idea to engage students in a critical analysis of economic literature. 2017’s “An [open letter to Congress](#) signed by 137 economists supporting the GOP tax reform bill” (*Open Letter*, hereafter) is used to both model an economic literacy lesson and serve as an example of why a more expanded version of economic literacy is needed. In this exercise, students not only learn economics, but they also learn about themselves and their relationship to media, evidence and affect.

### Economic Literature

By writing for an intended audience, economists “engage in wordcraft” (McCloskey, 1994, p. 51). Human capital and the invisible hand are among the metaphors economists use to communicate with each other and with the public (Graupe & Steffestun, 2018; McCloskey, 1983, 1995; McCloskey & Klammer, 1995). Economics can be read as literature and “what is successful in economic metaphor is what is successful in poetry and is analyzable in similar terms” (McCloskey, 1983, p. 504).

Ideographs are another form of wordcraft. They are “ordinary terms infused with moral and constitutional value and used in political discourse to represent the ideals of a culture and to call for collective commitment to a normative goal” (Lu, 1999, p. 490). These are abstract terms that “sum up an orientation” to a particular set of beliefs (McGee, 1980, p. 7). Societies are conditioned to have certain predictable reactions to ideographs, which often make people feel unified. Liberty, tyranny, and rule of law are some examples. Ideographs allow an

author to say a lot with only a few words. Crucially, ideographs transmit ideology without appearing to be ideological. Because ideographs' meanings are assumed to be commonly understood, ideographs give people a reasonable excuse for their actions and initiatives without having to provide a nuanced or thoughtful explanation or examination. For example, a President may talk about wanting "peace" without defining peace or explaining the various viewpoints on peace (Stoner & Perkins, 2016).

These rhetorical devices (figurative language, metaphors and ideographs) are particularly prevalent in periodicals written by economists for public consumption such as *The Economist*, *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* (Skorczynska & Deignan, 2006). Likely, these kinds of publications and the rhetorical strategies employed are the sort of economic discourse students and their families will be exposed to the most. In short, students are consumers of economic discourses, and those discourses operate economically. Part of being a smart consumer is understanding rhetorical tactics producers use to convince people to buy their product.

## Evidence and Incentives

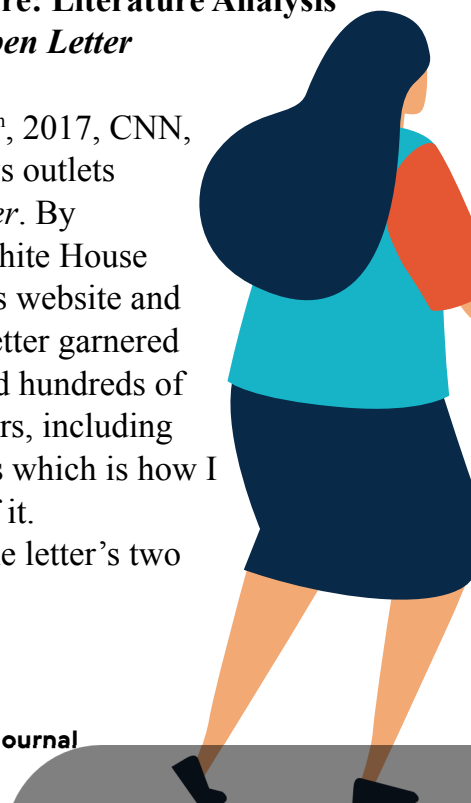
Economically literate citizens consider a work's authority, credibility, and evidence. However, students in general may have issues with this. For example, when viewing websites, high students associated aesthetic value with credibility (Breakstone et al., 2019). McGrew et al., (2018) found that the teens and young adults have difficulty distinguishing between real and fake news and are generally not adept at evaluating online sources. Michigan State's "Understanding high school students' use of evidence in deliberating public policy" study found that when asked to rank the importance of evidence in both the abstract and in the context of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, students "shifted their

evaluations of the trustworthiness and persuasiveness of evidence depending on whether they were making these assessments in the abstract or in the context of the *Brown* case" (Crocco et al., 2017, p. 68). The study found that high school students viewed evidence that appealed to emotions and personal experiences as more trustworthy and persuasive than other forms of evidence such as statistical data, empirical research and law/policy (Jacobsen et al., 2018).

Economists can rely on senses, too. Take the law of demand. The "distinguishing mark of an economist" is that they "believe it ardently" (McCloskey, 1998, p. 25). Yet, perhaps this belief has to do with introspection, feelings, thought experiments, lore, and the aesthetics of a good analogy as much as empirical evidence (pp. 25-26). Mathematical formulas are persuasive not because of what they say but what they do. Mathematical models are taken as neutral, value-less, and agenda-less, which makes them seem trustworthy. Economists' ability to do difficult mathematics bolsters their credibility (McCloskey, 1983, p. 500). In the lesson described here, students interrogate what makes a claim or some taken-for-granted assumption or truth *seem* believable. That is, how do economists "sell" a policy and why do consumers buy it?

### Procedure: Literature Analysis The Open Letter

On November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017, CNN, CNBC and other news outlets posted the *Open Letter*. By November 30<sup>th</sup> the White House posted the letter on its website and Tweeted it out. The letter garnered thousands of likes and hundreds of re-tweets by supporters, including members of Congress which is how I first became aware of it. CNBC summed up the letter's two main points;



## Opening Exercise

- 1.) Economic growth will accelerate if the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act passes, leading to more jobs, higher wages, and a better standard of living for the American people.
- 2.) A competitive corporate rate is the key to an economic engine driven by greater investment, capital stock, business formation, and productivity – all of which will yield more jobs and higher wages.

The TCJA marked the first overhaul of the tax code in 30 years and cut the corporate tax rate from 35% to 21% as well as adjusted deductions for households which would prove to be particularly consequential in the 2020 pandemic.

Although increasingly dated, the *Open Letter*, is still a valuable tool for social studies and economics educators. One, because it provides insight into how the public, including politicians, are persuaded to support monetary policies like the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA hereafter). Two, time has allowed for a re-evaluation of the TCJA. Upon further examination and “despite the ardent claims of its advocates, [the] TCJA significantly reduced federal revenue relative to what would have been generated had the law not passed” (Gale & Haldeman, 2021, p. 4). That shortfall has been acutely felt in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, the TCJA ended tax deductions for work-from-home employees just as many employees were forced into working from home (Adams, 2020; Finley, 2019) Three, since the letter is aimed at the non-expert public, the writing is mostly accessible. Four, it is a good example of supply side thinking. The document implicitly sells the public on supply-side economics without using those words. In this way, it distances itself from the ideological connotations of Reaganomics and trickle-down economics. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the TCJA will be up for renewal in 2025, making it a significant political issue for lawmakers and voters.

Start by analyzing a single sentence or statement from the literature under consideration. For this lesson, I chose the seemingly straightforward and innocuous sentence; “A twenty percent statutory rate on a permanent basis would, per the Council of Economic Advisers, help produce a GDP boost by ‘between 3 and 5 percent.’” Identify the claim(s) being made and then analyze the author’s persuasive techniques including appeals to authority (i.e. expertise) and word/stylistic choices.

To identify the claim, consider the promises being made. In this case, the claim can be summed up as “GDP will increase.” Then identify *who* is making the claim and/or the source of the claim’s legitimacy. It is the Council of Economic Advisers, we are told, that say the TCJA will increase GDP. The Council of Economic Advisors sounds like a group of value-neutral professionals. The use of specific calculations like “4,700 companies from 2004-2016” is so specific that it seems credible, as if the experts have done the math. The public might not notice that no evidence or explanation is provided. In sum, do you buy it? Should the Council for Economic Advisors be believed? Will their claims come true?

## What Makes this Letter Persuasive?

After the opener, students conduct further analyses of the given economic literature using the same process. Divide the document into sections for students to analyze in small groups. A sample graphic organizer is provided at the end of this



article, divided into three columns. The content to be read is in the left column. In the center are prompts for identifying the texts' claims, language choices and appeals to authority. The third column contains the sentence starter "these claims seem believable because \_\_\_." Again, at this point students aren't trying to determine what the truth is, only what makes the contents *seem* true. Throughout the process, students should be attuned to their feelings, including hunches and initial/gut reactions which can be documented and reflected on later. After analyzing the letter, examine how it operates.

### ***Expertise and authority***

Listening to experts is important. However, the issue here is not expertise but potential partisanship. A quick Google search for "Council of Economic Advisers" reveals that it is part of the Executive branch and that its Chair is appointed by the President. That information challenges the assumed neutrality and objectivity of economics and economists. Students should be prompted to consider how the devices used in this segment effectively sell the public on the TCJA. Would the claim be less effective if the letter did not cite the Council or if it explained the organization? The key here is to consider how appeals to authority and word choices work together to make the claim believable or trustworthy at face value, not whether there really would be an increase in GDP (that comes later). These questions help students see that economists have viewpoints, commitments and ways of thinking (Shanks, 2020) .

### ***Word choices***

Consider how the letter used ideographs, or buzzwords. For example, the letter uses the term "job-creating businesses" twice and the letter's overall message is that tax cuts create jobs and that

more jobs are in the public interest. Other examples of figurative language include alliteration such as "debate delves into deficit" and "competitive corporate" and personification "capital is mobile in its pursuit of lower tax jurisdictions". The juxtaposition of vivid descriptors such as "broken," "underperformance" and "forfeit" "ignite" and "record-setting" are intended to elicit and channel emotional responses. These words convey a sense of urgency and even patriotism. They are also difficult to argue against. After all, does anyone want a broken economy? Less money for workers? Notice that the letter continually asks readers to consider "workers," not CEOs or capitalists. Why would that be appealing to the public (Alvarez, 2019; Robison et al., 2021)? The way the letter is written, supporting the tax cuts means doing one's part to uphold America's economy, collective well-being, and sense of exceptionalism.

The *Open Letter* makes extensive use of the job creator ideograph. Each ideograph has a history and etymology. Job creator is a relatively recent term used in the media and among politicians on both the political and ideological left and right to refer to businesses or entrepreneurs. It only gained popularity and positive connotation during the George W. Bush administration (George, 2012). Upon further reflection and per the tenets of economics, entrepreneurs aim to make money not jobs. Since labor costs money, some businesses see reducing, not increasing, their human labor force as key to economic success (Neary, 2011). An alternative viewpoint is that it is the government's responsibility to create jobs since it controls currency and collects taxes (Kelton, 2020). Moreover, in the *Open Letter*, as in popular economic policy discussions, "more jobs" is positioned as the only solution to the nation's social and economic problems (Livingston & Haselby, 2016; Peck, 2014). By pausing to examine this taken-for-granted assumption, we

might ask who gains from this narrative? Why “job creator” and not other terms like the more direct “salary creator?” After all, job creation is not the same thing as paycheck, living wage or employment creation (Adams et al., 2021; George, 2012; Rollert, 2011).

### Further Research and Fact-Checking

Reading the *Open Letter* years after the TCJA’s passage, allows students to assess the bill and the letter’s claim that the revenue generated would be “more than enough to compensate for static revenue loss” (Bischoff, 2020). Some say 80% of corporations’ increased liquidity went to shareholders, buybacks and dividends, not workers as promised (Hendricks & Hanlon, 2019) and that federal revenues decreased over time (Gale, 2020). The issues surrounding the current job surpluses and worker shortages add nuance to “job creation” as a persuasive tactic in the future (Kaplan & Winck, 2021; Spiggle, 2021).

Students might also investigate the 137 economists that signed the letter, as some questions have been raised about their credentials (Fang, 2017). Uncovering allegiances complicates the metaphoric task of “thinking like” an economist or any disciplinary expert. Students might investigate other open letters that were also published in response to the TCJA but that take an entirely different viewpoint. One letter was signed by 200 Ph.D. economists and another signed by 400 millionaires. These primary sources are counternarratives to the *Open Letter*’s claim that “our colleagues across the ideological spectrum” believe that corporate taxes burden workers.

### Evidence and Affect Audit

This lesson aligns with the recommendation to “give students more opportunities to evaluate evidence” and to help them “recognize the factors that influence how they evaluate evidence” understanding that, often, credibility is in the eye

of the beholder (Crocco, et al., 2017, p. 70). Economically literate individuals make good choices regarding who or what should be believed and acted upon since “we believe and act on what persuades us” (McCloskey, 1983, p. 512). For us, and for economists, “the invisible hand is so very discrete, so soothing, that we might be inclined to accept its touch without protest” (McCloskey, 1983, p. 507). Without these insights, citizens risk being swept in by the kind of ideographic rhetoric that hinders informed citizenship and democracy.

Understanding affect is an important part of learning that is “inseparable from the cognitive content” (Helmsing, 2014, p. 128). Students can complete an “affect audit” (see Appendix) to reflect on their relationship to economic evidence and document their feelings, gut reactions, and initial impressions. Were there words, phrases or ideas that resonated more than others? Did certain ideas feel familiar or in line with the school curriculum or with their existing beliefs or knowledge? How did those feelings relate to the letter’s trustworthiness? For example, students might have felt drawn in by the letter’s rhetorical use of “our,” which is used seven times to create a sense of shared ownership, responsibility, and fate. The *Open Letter* plays on these senses well, threatening collective ruin by “forfeiting our competitive edge” through (according to the authors) idleness and inaction. The *Open Letter*’s promises of prosperity instill a sense of comforting hope while making counterarguments difficult.

### Conclusion

Like all “dealers in ideas” (McCloskey, 1983, p. 483) economists are subject to economic forces, with some ideas and writings being more highly valued, incentivized, rewarded, policed and adopted than others (Cherryholmes, 1983; McCloskey, 1994; Varoufakis, 2017). The method described in this article teaches a discipline’s structure (Segall, 2013), considering what

economists *do* in addition to what they *think*, *say* or *know*. Economically literate citizens should be able to critically read economic discourses to see the rhetorical devices at work. The inquiry considers the qualities that make an economic claim believable and an argument persuasive. As a method of disciplinary inquiry, it allows students to “frame and clarify economic problems by considering historical and contemporary contexts and intentions” (Shreiner et al., 2021, p. 12). Pragmatically, the *Open Letter* and other layperson-oriented media are the way most people interact with economic discourse. Citizens are consumers of economic rhetoric. Therefore, economically literate people need to know what they are buying into. Finally, economically literate citizens don’t just understand fiscal and monetary policies, they also understand how and why such policies are adopted in the first place. This is important because, as economic educator Anand Marri put it, “we’re not trying to create junior economists by teaching economics. We’re trying to create engaged citizens. That’s why we have public education” (Zubrzycki, 2016, n.p.).

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Table 1. Rhetorical analysis graphic organizer

Letter's Text	Analysis	Conclusions
	Claims	These claims seem believable because:
	Language Choices	
	Appeals to authority/expertise	

[Click to Download  
Graphic Organizer](#)

Table 2. Affect Audit

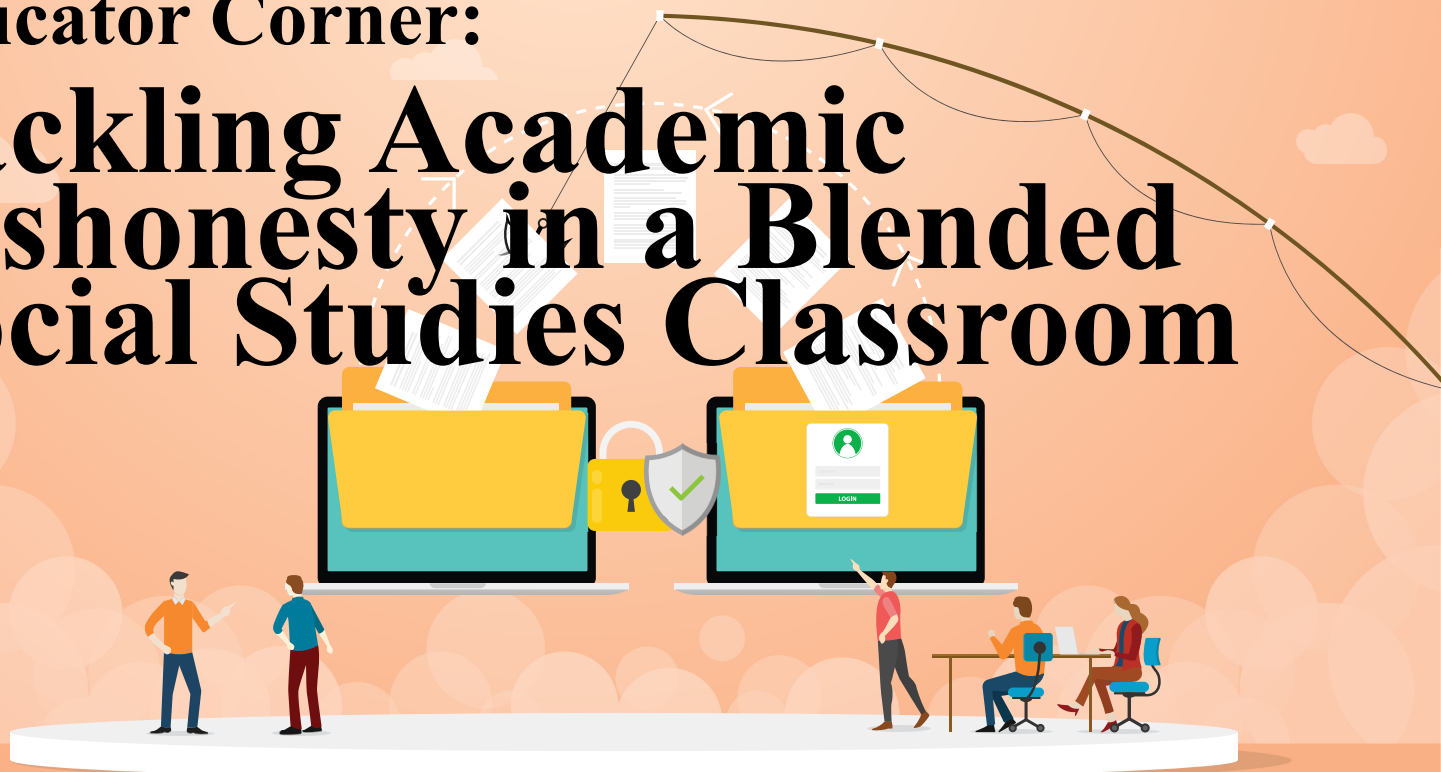
Initial Impressions:
The Elements I thought were most persuasive:
I think I am most convinced by:

[Click to Download  
Affect Audit](#)



## Educator Corner:

# Tackling Academic Dishonesty in a Blended Social Studies Classroom



Kenneth Plont

In this article, I address how to tackle the issues of academic dishonesty (plagiarism and cheating) in three different educational contexts. The first context is within my own former school, [Blended Learning Academies](#), a non-profit, alternative high school that works with a blended approach and consists of many asynchronous learners. My proposed solution to the issue of academic dishonesty includes [project-based learning](#) and [creative problem-solving](#), which are two solutions that I believe prioritize student mental health and well-being above punitive measures. Second, I discuss potential solutions to the rampant academic dishonesty prevalent in high-achieving, college-bound high school students. In this setting, I strongly advocate for mental health support and addressing the issues of student stress and often debilitating time constraints above all else. Finally, I address how to address academic dishonesty by eliminating triggers for social anxiety in the context of middle school students. The common threads among all aforementioned educational contexts include: addressing student social and emotional needs, providing robust support and flexibility for self-expression and emotional transparency, as well as allowing students time and space to exercise their own creativity. By emphasizing creativity and emotional well-being, we can build enduring relationships with our students and motivate school-wide integrity and academic motivation.

## Academic Dishonesty in Alternative High School Setting Grades 9-12

### Introduce Project-Based Learning and Creative Problem Solving to High School Students

I worked at an alternative non-profit high school called Blended Learning Academies in Lansing, Michigan. I taught social studies for 9th through 12th graders, and struggled daily with students copying and pasting answers from the internet for our written assessments. Our school was exactly what the name implies: a blended approach to school, meaning that some of the learning is done asynchronously through our learning management system, [Kickstand](#). Students also learn synchronously through our daily zoom lessons and when we're learning together in person in pre-covid times. A lot of answers for social studies assessments are just a click away for our students who are learning asynchronously (Tyre, 2001, p. 32). With increased internet access and the ever-expanding amount of information (or misinformation) that's available online, academic dishonesty runs rampant when not adequately addressed by the teachers or staff at the school. According to research done in the *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, if students are allowed more autonomy and flexibility in their learning, students will be less inclined to cheat and plagiarize (academic dishonesty) when we give them ample opportunities to exercise their own creativity and focus less on grades and performance outcomes (Yuan et al., 2017, p. 313). Additionally, teachers looking to focus less on performance outcomes and grades should view this Dylan William documentary on Youtube about ["The Classroom Experiment"](#). This resource gives firsthand accounts of experimenting with a focus that shifts

from performance outcomes and instead encouraging student creativity and autonomy.

Over the past summer, I created a course on the American Civil Rights movement on Schoology in an effort to combat the issues of dishonesty and lack of engagement for students doing most of their school work through an LMS and in an asynchronous style. Within the course, I built in numerous opportunities for student discussion around civil rights topics with discussion forums. Some discussion questions that were asked included: "how does the struggles of the civil rights movement relate to our own lives today?" and explaining that students can relate the struggles against bigotry to the Black Lives Matter protests over the past few years and police brutality. I wanted students to have choice and flexibility to relate the content to their own lives in a way that was appropriate, engaging and comfortable for them (and the school, obviously). Beyond that, I built-in a whole project-based learning unit within the course where students could research numerous civil rights figures from Fannie Lou Hamer and James Baldwin, to Malcolm X and Angela Davis. After exploring the key events, figures, and court cases that helped the Civil Rights movement achieve their aims, students picked one figure to research for a few weeks, at their own pace, and gather primary source material. From there, students could create an infographic, short film, music video, song, painting, scrapbook, newspaper article, or whatever they want to create through project-based learning to showcase their understanding of the civil rights leader that they chose.

Through building such a course, I wanted to create ways that students could be more

engaged through their creativity and I wanted them to find ways to relate the content to their own lives and their ambitions as far as social justice goes. By allowing the students the autonomy to choose a project and participate in frequent discussions about topics relevant to our lives today (racism, police brutality, sexism, homophobia, etc), I notice that there's a lack of copy-and-paste answers from students that I work with now, and there's a concerted effort on behalf of several students to participate in the discussions, absorb the material about civil rights and relate it to their own lives and creativity. Even through an asynchronous course, where students have the opportunity to act dishonestly (plagiarize answers or cheat off a friend), students chose to express themselves and be creative when educators strive to meet students where they're at and relate the content to student's personal lives and the urgent social studies topics that are being discussed today. As a highly creative individual myself, seeing students engaged and being passionately creative about social studies and social justice issues motivates me even more to create a classroom climate where the emphasis on creativity and flexibility allows for a school environment where students feel less inclined to act dishonestly when it comes to their school work.

### **Apply Project-Based Learning and Creative Problem Solving to Students' Daily Lives.**

I highly recommend that teachers and staff work towards a curriculum that largely focuses on project-based learning (PBL) and creative problem-solving (CPS) to remove some of the grade-centered pressure and time constraints that many of our students feel on a daily basis. According to numerous studies of high school students, the PBL environment achieves higher levels of academic performance, improved

problem-solving skills, and more positive attitudes throughout their learning process for students. PBL encourages students to pick their own research topics within a certain subject area or discipline and exercising their own agency, with the guidance of a teacher, to complete a project of their choice. The ways in which students can choose to complete the project include: making their own movies, songs, poems, letters, paintings, written papers, among many other options. In addition to PBL, CPS contributes a more structured approach for producing creative outcomes with students who struggle with the incessant emphasis on higher grades and performance outcomes. Both PBL and CPS provide opportunities for students to be responsible for their own learning, and it is no secret that students who work in alternative and non-traditional learning environments desire more creative outcomes for their learning (Yuan et al., 2017, p. 319).

At my previous school in Lansing, I often gave students the option to replace a lesson on Kickstand with a PBL assignment of their choice. For instance, I had one student who worked late nights at a bakery to support his family in Central America who had recently been deported by I.C.E. He also had to take care of his autistic brother, who was also a student at the school. He struggled to stay awake during the brief lessons that I would give in-person or over Zoom, and after calling him out sarcastically by saying stuff like: "Stay up too late on TikTok again last night?" I asked what he was really interested in learning about in history and decided that scolding him or telling him to just wake up and do his work wasn't going to suffice. For weeks, he just said he hated the subject and would mostly submit copy-and-paste answers for any assessment on Kickstand.

One day, I sat the student down and asked if he would like to create something instead of giving him a zero on assignments, begging him to do his

work, continually tapping his shoulder in class to wake him up, and offering some vaguely encouraging words in hopes of motivating him enough to do work. One day, I noticed that he was wearing a Metallica t-shirt, and being a musician myself, I decided to take some time to connect with him about music. His eyes immediately lit up when I discussed heavy metal music with him, but I learned he was also a big jazz fan. I brought up that we were focusing on the Civil Rights unit (it was February at the time) and if he wanted to find a music figure (Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, John Coltrane) and create a song (he's a guitarist), music video, painting, essay, scrapbook, infographic, drawing, etc. about one of his favorite jazz greats and their impact on the civil rights movement, I would count it for the lesson he was working on about the Civil Rights movement. Eventually, I discovered that I had to sit with him and do some of the research with him. Without guidance, he wasn't going to start, no matter how "stoked" he seemed to be that I liked Metallica's "Ride the Lightning" album as a teen or that I was allowing him some autonomy in doing PBL instead of assessments on Kickstand for his social studies class.

In the end, the student created a video of him summarizing some of the racism and violence Coltrane, Fitzgerald, and Holiday faced while being a touring musician before and after segregation in the United States and their roles in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This example is one way to show how educators can be flexible, but address a student's social and emotional needs. This student clearly needed some space for authentic self-expression and transferring that to his school work was pivotal in motivating the student to engage academically in an honest way. By providing him insight into my own life as a punk rock musician, it created a personal element that allowed for unhindered self-expression and

creativity from a student that many other teachers would have likely punished in a way that would've been detrimental to this traumatized and often exhausted student's academic progress and engagement. This example strongly supports the premise that was laid out in *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, which stated that if students are allowed more autonomy and flexibility in their learning, students will be less inclined to cheat and plagiarize (academic dishonesty), when we give them ample opportunities to exercise their own creativity and focus less on grades and performance outcomes (Yuan et al., 2017, p. 313). Furthermore, allowing space for this creativity to flourish is likely to have a significant impact on student mental health, as evidenced by increased student engagement, motivation and their creative ambitions.

### **Continue to be Flexible and Creative with Your Students to Discourage Academic Dishonesty**

Some examples of PBL ideas for social studies classrooms include everything from: having students create their own movie about their experiences at [Black Lives Matter protests](#) and what they've learned, or having students [read a book](#) on anti-racism and chose to either write a paper about what they learned, or creating their own visual representation (a music video, a song, a painting, a drawing, etc.) about their experiences and what they learned. Often PBL is accompanied with a presentation of the individual student's creation during my own classroom experience (Atudorei, 2019, p. 30). These efforts to enhance creativity in the classroom have proven to be fruitful for everyone involved, in my experience. For high school students, creativity is an effective way of establishing stronger relationships with their teachers and can lead to higher degrees of motivation for individual students. Creativity is

a cathartic coping strategy for our student population that largely consists of students who struggle with poverty, racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, housing and food insecurity and “fitting in” while they are at “normal” schools. The goal of utilizing project-based learning and creative problem-solving solutions is to optimize student behavioral and social coping strategies by developing individual or group projects based on creative means (Atudorei, 2019, p. 30). By doing so, we can take the focus away from grades and performance outcomes, and center our educational conversations on unique creative contributions and individual self-expression.

### **Cheating, Dishonesty and Plagiarism with High Achieving Grade 9-12 College Prep Students**

#### **Gradually Removing Elements of “Achievement Culture” From the Classroom**

According to research on students who default to the question of “why not?” when it comes to plagiarizing online and cheating off of classmates, the first step behind uncovering the motivations for cheating among high-achieving high school students bound for college is to acknowledge student struggles. These struggles include immense stress, depression, debilitating anxieties, mental illnesses (bipolar and borderline personality disorder), unrealistic standards and expectations, smartphone addiction and dependency, self-esteem issues, feelings of jadedness towards this system of education, and more (Straw, 2002, pp. 4-7). Students immersed in this often cutthroat and competitive educational environment express feelings that “the deck is stacked against them,” meaning that effort and resistance can be equally as futile, leaving them in a state of stress, confusion and desperation in many instances (Doyle, 2010, pp. 18-20). As a preventative measure, I advocate for teachers and staff to actively work to dismantle these types of high-pressure educational contexts and openly discuss these heavy feelings and listen

to the desires of students (Doyle, 2010, pp. 18-20). The first step to dismantling these types of high-pressure educational contexts is understanding that the prevalence of internet plagiarism, cheating and academic dishonesty are rooted directly in the aforementioned struggles with stress, mental illness, fatigue, and a seemingly never-ending race against time. Additionally, high-achieving, college-bound high school students continually express concerns over sleep deprivation, extreme exhaustion, turning to drugs like Adderall, and frustrations concerning the “superficial” nature of achievement culture. I highly recommend watching a [Ted Talk on trauma-informed practices in schools](#).

Although I don’t have any firsthand experience other than the occasional substitute teaching shift at a “high-achieving” school, I believe that the aforementioned examples of tapping into the creativity of my student whose parents had been deported and was an avid musician and music fan, hold true in this context as well. Regardless of status or how “well” students have achieved, a lot of their intrinsic needs remain the same, albeit with obvious personal complexities and nuance. What I do have some experience with is teaching students who came from “high performing schools” because of specific trauma or mental illness present in their lives. One student, who was a straight A student at their previous school in Lansing, was expelled because she was holding onto a vape pen for her friend at an after school event. This punitive measure in some way made her feel depressed and eventually even suicidal. She made one mistake and had a difficult time living up to the same educational standards she once held herself to. She started off the school year by turning in work that I later discovered was her stepmother completing for her and indicated that her reasoning was that “she just couldn’t keep up and didn’t have enough time to recover before.” This was a telling sign of a student struggling with mental health and her dishonesty

was indicative of something larger looming beneath the surface of things in school.

Eventually, this student finished all of her credits outside of social studies and focused on social studies her last semester before graduating. She expressed to me one day in class (she was the only student in the room) that she felt like she would never “achieve” enough, especially with graduating from an alternative high school. Her motivation went way down for months again, and she didn’t want to finish high school or her social studies credits for an extended period of time. After eventually connecting with her over our mutual love for Nirvana and other bands, I started to see her doing more work, little by little. The personal connection and flexibility of time in the classroom, which was spent sidetracking and talking about grunge music was beneficial in the long run for the student. One day, she opened up to me and indicated she had broken her hand after punching the wall one day after a really bad anxiety attack after a fight with her parents over their perceived “downgrading” her in school status by being forced to go to an alternative school because of one small mistake. I knew that punitive measures of any kind would likely make her sink further into mental and emotional turmoil and she wouldn’t feel as engaged to complete her work in school.

I offered for her to give the answers verbally to the assessments when working with her on her social studies work. Once her hand healed, she finished with several of her other classes for other subject areas. After many hours of sitting with me before, during and after school, she completed her entire economics course in between talks about music and politics in the world at the time. Once the incessant pressures of achievement culture and lack of support through tough mental health hurdles were addressed, she opened up and finished her economics course and graduated high school. She no longer felt the need to act dishonestly, and her work was exceptional once she was able to

relax enough and have the space to finish her work authentically. Her case is one of many cases of students who just needed robust mental health support and movement away from strictly punitive measures to re-engage her with her studies. The flexibility and tapping into her creative and artistic interests (grunge music) allowed me to forge a personal connection with the student and I believe that our teacher-student relationship is what helped her feel confident enough to engage with school as her authentic self again.

### **Provide Therapeutic Coping Solutions and Decrease Stress for Students**

Achievement culture creates incentives for students to cut corners and find alternative ways to reduce stress and time constraints (Gullifer & Tyson, 2013, p. 1214). Achievement culture is simply part and parcel of an unnecessarily strict emphasis on performance outcomes, comparing students' achievements to others, and unfettered competition. This accumulation of stress and pressure forces students in high-achieving educational environments to cheat, plagiarize and contribute dishonest work. The first step is providing viable therapeutic solutions for a stressed student base, and openly discussing these issues to break down barriers between teaching staff and students within the school. First and foremost, the teachers’ primary focus should be on the maintenance and growth of each individual relationship with each student, in order to ensure that the school can build a learning culture based on transparency of emotional and academic struggle, instead of high grades, college acceptance letters, and outperforming their peers. With ever-increasing numbers of students diagnosed with various mental health struggles, including: anxiety, PTSD, and depression, these pressing issues deserve to be prioritized over performance outcomes (Siebert, 2019, pp. 122-123). High-

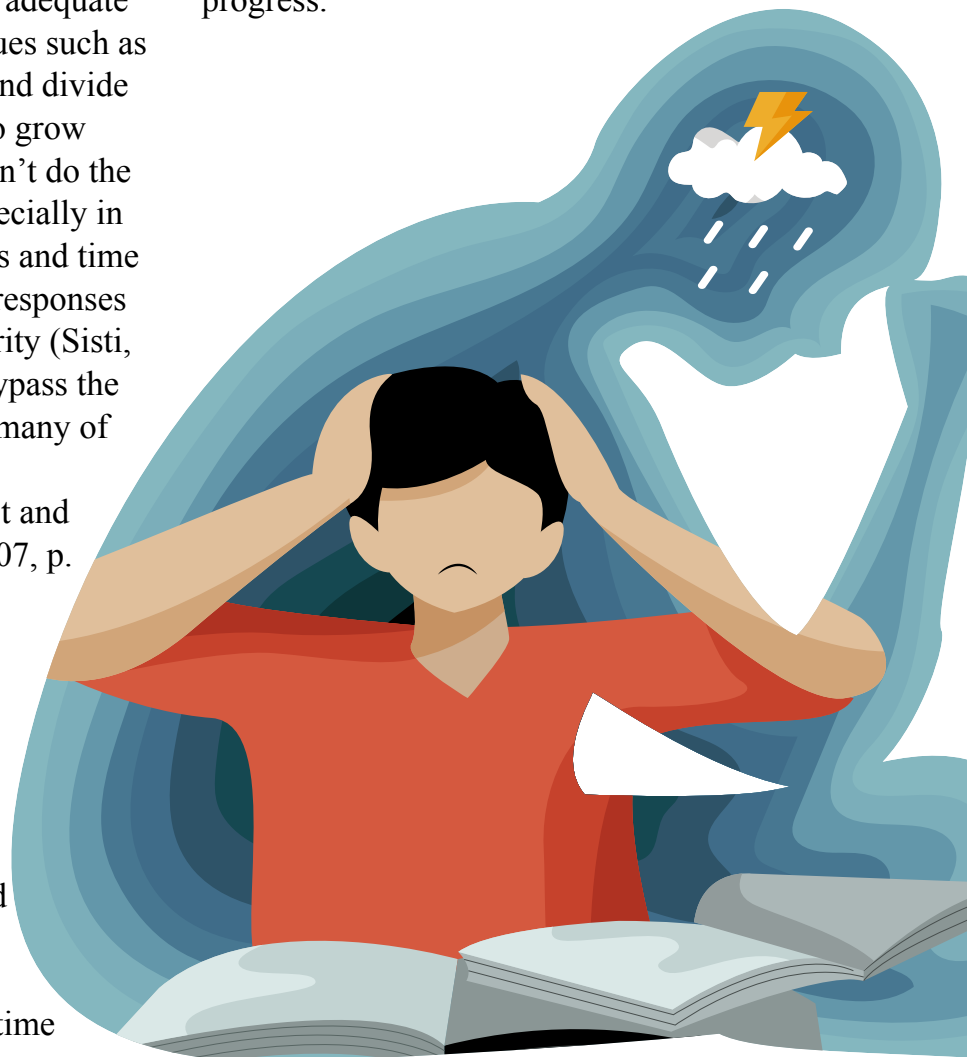
achieving high schools need robust programs that support counseling and open communication about the aforementioned emotional struggles that often impede honest and authentic academic progress.

### **Continue to Monitor and Check In With Students' Mental Well-Being**

Once the topics of mental health and dismantling the worst aspects of achievement culture are addressed, I believe that these educational environments will see a decrease in the amount of cheating. The propensity of high-achieving college-bound high school students to cheat is high, especially when relationships with their teachers are strained and riddled with animosity and conflict. Many students echo the sentiment that “they felt like they had no time to do their papers,” and because of this lack of adequate time and space to address underlying issues such as mental health struggles, the resentment and divide between teachers and students is likely to grow (Sisti, 2007, p. 221). Students simply won’t do the work for teachers they don’t respect, especially in high-stress environments where the stress and time pressures outweigh any nuanced ethical responses surrounding academic honesty and integrity (Sisti, 2007, p. 226). Students will attempt to bypass the lack of technological sophistication that many of their teachers might exhibit because the foundational relationship of honesty, trust and integrity was never established (Sisti, 2007, p. 217).

By creating an environment where student’s concerns about mental health and overall well-being are heard, I’m certain that we will see students respond and together, teachers and students can foster environments where less stress and pressure are involved for high school students bound for college life. A prime example of this practice working in real time

is my now former student, who I mentioned earlier in this section. Even though she was removed from a high-achieving school with a clear path to a good college for one mistake, she was able to rebound and engage authentically with her education through support for her mental health and creativity. Furthermore, the student who I mentioned whose parents had been deported and was struggling to engage or stay awake would benefit from robust mental health care, even outside of my support and connection with him on a creative and emotional level as a teacher. Robust support programs that include student counseling and open meetings between staff and students about work load, stress levels and routine mental health check-ins with every student are essential for authentic academic progress.



## **Cheating, Dishonesty and Plagiarism in Middle School Grades 6-9**

### **Address Social Anxiety in Middle School Classrooms**

As someone who has previously worked with grades 6 through 9 before becoming a high school teacher, I truly believe the biggest issue with middle schoolers is social anxiety, which can lead to academic dishonesty. Being a former middle school student myself, this was definitely my own personal experience in this type of educational context and I often caved when I felt too anxious, overwhelmed, depressed or unmotivated. I cheated off of my friends by taking their math homework home and copying their answers for myself. I would peek over at other student's answers, especially "higher performing" ones whenever I was too anxious or depressed to sleep the night before and couldn't focus on complex math equations or a multiple choice question on a test. Now, as someone who has worked in schools, I see that this problem hasn't changed much since, and students are pushed because of their anxieties to act dishonestly just to meet the standards, expectations, and assumptions that they hold regarding their academic progress and engagement. That is certainly how I always felt until I graduated high school and I anticipate I'm not alone in this conclusion.

Middle school, for me, was an experience riddled with confusion, unease, unnecessary academic pressures, debilitating social expectations and standards, and endless peer pressure to conform and meet everyone's expectations, which also a seemingly common phenomenon (Sisti, 2007, p. 224). As indicated in additional research, middle school students certainly feel the same pressure to conform to the school's social and academic standards, regardless if these expectations are implicit or explicit, and regardless if they're originating from

students themselves, teachers, parents, or various other staff members alike (Yuan et al., 2017, p. 313). The first step in promoting an educational culture of flexibility, academic honesty, and empathy is eliminating social distractions and potential triggers for social anxiety among students. For more suggestions on how to combat anxiety in the classroom, check out [this informative article](#).

### **Provide Space and Time for Social-Emotional Learning for Students**

As teachers, we can actively facilitate our own social-emotional learning sessions that provide middle school students with ample opportunity and space to express their worries and anxieties outside of a context focused on social pressures and incessant pressures of conformity and social or academic rigidity. Students can participate in [social-emotional learning sessions](#) in formal and informal settings, and on an individual or group basis to help ensure a school culture of integrity, honesty and not one of desperation for social validation in any way (Redding, 2017, p. 159). Middle school students often experience the same cognitive overload that students in high-achieving, college-bound high schools experience. Middle school students express that they're receiving "too much information" between social media, news media, and while at school. Excessive information overload combined with emotional stress and anxiety over time constraints and social expectations certainly leads to fatigue, which leads to students cutting corners. Cutting corners ultimately means students resort to less desirable outcomes such as plagiarism, copying, cheating, etc. when they feel their emotional needs and social concerns are not adequately addressed.

One example of this is when I was student teaching at a middle school in Pontiac, Michigan a few years ago, and caught nearly an entire class of over 30 kids were in on a cheating scheme together.

student had committed suicide, which obviously impacted a lot of kids. Once I found the group of kids with the “cheat packet” of answers for my cooperating teacher’s final test on the Civil War on his learning management system, many students seemed indifferent. Some just shrugged and said, “well I did what I had to do, it’s all just too much.” Instead of immediately doubling down and telling students that they were in big trouble, I asked them if they wanted to chat about the stress that they were feeling. Immediately, my university supervisor (also in the room at the time) praised me for doing this. Afterwards, the cooperating teacher pulled me aside and asked me not to be “so lenient” with the kids and scheduled a meeting with the university to discuss how I handled the cheating scandal.

Personal feelings aside, I had a strong sense that our students (who were mostly all students of color) experienced trauma and stress that I wasn’t privy to as a white suburbanite male from a middle class family, but also that their lack of fear of punitive measures showed that it just wasn’t cutting it. The next day, the cooperating teacher told me we had to punish them. No recess, no bathroom passes, no occasional music in the classroom, no candy, nothing. They took their test on the Civil War in complete silence and when the scores came back, the average was somewhere around 50%. The abysmal scores overall were indicative to me that the students’ emotional, creative and mental health needs were not being met. The students got the same review packet that they used to cheat with before, the teacher and I retaught the same lessons nearly verbatim in an effort to “reteach” and somehow we were both shocked that the scores didn’t improve much at all the second time around. This is one example of neglecting student’s complex and varied social, emotional, mental, creative and other needs and how it can severely and adversely impact their academic performance. If they had time and space set aside for this, I believe that their scores on the final test would improve and if we would have listened to their concerns, we could have found a way to be more flexible, even within the

expectations surrounding curriculum pacing that my cooperating teacher was being held to.

### **Address the Issue of Cell Phone Usage and Social Media to Decrease Social Anxiety for Students**

When working in middle school settings, whenever I would catch a student cheating, it almost always involved cell phones. While I’m generally against punitive measures, especially with younger students, I think that there should be some punitive measures attached to excessive cell phone usage, particularly cell phone usage for cheating, plagiarising, and dishonest academic work. My suggestion would be to ban social media from the classroom in general on day one, as many schools already do. Any middle school student caught on social media loses all phone privileges if students are allowed to use phones for that purpose outside of social media. From there, students must complete a scheduled talk with a school counselor about why that student felt the need to resort to cheating or dishonesty. The school’s counselor will then report to that student’s group of teachers, the teacher will hold a meeting, and discuss what would be best to reach this individual student and meet their emotional needs. For more talk about how social media affects students’ well-being, [check out this video](#).

Another common issue I found with middle schoolers, is that when they were attempting to engage with something like PBL, they were often too distracted to see their creative ideas and ambitions come to full fruition. When walking around and checking in with students working on a social studies PBL project (creating a scrapbook, making a newspaper article on a computer program, editing a movie they made on iMovie, creating a song on GarageBand) their mind was focused on Snapchats and TikToks pouring in. Social media and cell phones can act as a hindrance to creativity and authentic self-expression that is needed to discourage dishonesty academically. Therefore, it should be explained thoroughly to students that while social

My cooperating teacher decided to keep teaching the usual lessons on the Civil War while M-step testing was going on and only a few days after a student had committed suicide, which obviously impacted a lot of kids. Once I found the group of kids with the “cheat packet” of answers for my cooperating teacher’s final test on the Civil War on his learning management system, many students seemed indifferent. Some just shrugged and said, “well I did what I had to do, it’s all just too much.” Instead of immediately doubling down and telling students that they were in big trouble, I asked them if they wanted to chat about the stress that they were feeling. Immediately, my university supervisor (also in the room at the time) praised me for doing this. Afterwards, the cooperating teacher pulled me aside and asked me not to be “so lenient” with the kids and scheduled a meeting with the university to discuss how I handled the cheating scandal.

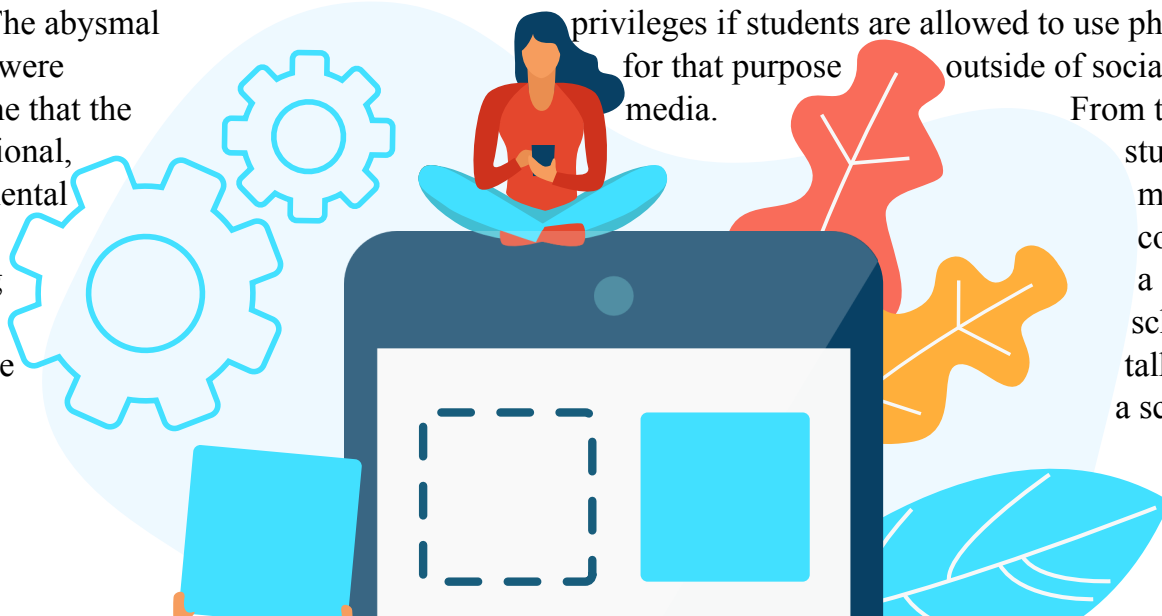
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### **Continue to Meet Student's Social-Emotional Needs and Provide Flexible Space for Individuals to Grow and Learn**

In these meetings discussing individual student needs mentioned in the previous section above, teachers can discuss what might have led that student to react to stressful situations by plagiarizing another person's work, copying off of another's test, or sharing answers on a Facebook group that includes several students from the class.

Middle school students are often frequent social media users and can easily share answers to each other when teachers use the same assessments and assignments every year, or utilize material widely available on the internet. I suggest that in addition to punitive social media measures, middle school teachers should alleviate other opportunities for student social anxiety and cheating through social media by modeling by example and setting the foundation for honesty and integrity early on (Siebert, 2019, p. 124). By having teachers make our content and revising it to fit individual student needs, we will begin to scratch the surface of addressing the aforementioned social anxiety and academic-social fatigue many younger students feel in increasingly competitive educational contexts.

### **Conclusion**

By emphasizing the sheer amount of creative potential and prioritizing the emotional well-being of our students, I believe educators can create educational environments where cheating, dishonesty and plagiarism are less of the norm, and the exception to the norm. When teachers effectively communicate expectations, empower their students to express themselves emotionally and creatively (these are obviously intersecting), students will feel less pressure to focus only on grades and compete with peers to meet often unrealistic expectations (Sisti, 2007, p. 227.). Every student deserves to have their mental well-being prioritized above any performance outcome. When students feel as if their well-being and creativity are not valued by their teacher, it is no wonder they resort to cutting corners, sharing answers with each other through technology, buying papers online, copying test answers and copy and pasting answers from the internet verbatim for their assessments. Teachers can change this culture of dishonesty, stress and educational trauma by creating adequate time and space for student self-expression, discussions surrounding student mental

health and well-being, and by allowing students to exercise their individual creativity.

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