



Incorporates
instructional practices
with Tier 1 and Tier 2
evidence ratings, as
identified by the Institute
of Education Sciences
and What Works
Clearinghouse.

SOCIAL **STUDIES** *Knowledge Adventures*

Inquiry-Driven Social Studies Instruction Based on
Respected Research and Literature

Introduction

Social Studies Knowledge Adventures is a reader-based supplemental program that inspires a love of social studies among elementary students and their teachers. The key to making time each day for social studies is to implement it during the literacy block. *Social Studies Knowledge Adventures* allows students to learn about history, geography, economics, and civics in engaging ways. Through content readers, reader's theater scripts, collaborative-research readers, and biographies, students use literacy skills as they build understanding of the social sciences. The accompanying lessons follow the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) from the NCSS C3 Framework, encouraging students to engage with and more deeply understand complex concepts.



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The Logic Model

This logic model illustrates how *Social Studies Knowledge Adventures* is designed to prepare teachers and students for success in social studies within K–6 classroom settings. The goal of this table is to visualize how implementing *Social Studies Knowledge Adventures* can support and contribute to achieving school and district goals.

Problem Statement: There is a need for engaging, standards-aligned elementary social studies resources that help teachers deliver meaningful instruction within limited classroom time while building students’ knowledge, vocabulary, and inquiry skills.

Outcome/Goal: To strengthen students’ social studies understanding and literacy-connected inquiry skills by equipping teachers with ready-to-use, blended instructional resources in civics, economics, geography, and history.

Theory of Action

Educators are committed to high-quality, standards-aligned social studies instruction.	Districts provide educators with a wide range of engaging instructional materials.	Teachers implement social studies lessons that emphasize reading skills, collaboration, and problem-solving.	Students engage in active learning through inquiry-based lessons.	Teachers deliver meaningful social studies instruction that builds vocabulary and inquiry skills.	Teachers gain knowledge of high-quality social studies instruction using blended instructional resources.
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Logic Model

Assumptions	Resources/Inputs	Activities	Outputs/Metrics	Outcomes	Impact
- Teachers need manageable social studies instruction. - Students benefit from a variety of texts and inquiry. - Strong scaffolds and background knowledge improve access. - Literacy and social studies reinforce one another.	- Readers - Biographies - Reader’s theater scripts - Collaborative-research texts - Teacher’s guides - Student inquiry pages - Digital slides - Primary sources - Videos - Audio - Assessments - Rubrics - Professional learning - Multilingual/scaffolded supports	- Text interaction - Source analysis - Vocabulary building - Discussion routines - Collaborative inquiry - Data-based analysis - Culminating problem-based learning project	- Lessons taught - Materials used - Inquiry tasks completed - Assessments administered - Student products created - Participation in blended instruction documented	- Increased social studies understanding - Improved literacy skills - Increased inquiry skills	Teachers will be better equipped to teach social studies that inspire and engage students.

Guiding Principles

Social Studies Knowledge Adventures is a blended product that incorporates digital components to enhance learning. Lessons include primary sources, videos, audio clips, and more to engage and motivate students. The product includes content readers, reader's theater scripts, collaborative-research readers, and biographies, along with comprehensive lesson slides, teacher resources, student inquiry pages, and project-based learning activities. All are designed to be interactive and engaging.

Deepens Content Knowledge and Vocabulary Through Literacy Skills

- high-interest, varied text types and highly engaging text features
- cross-disciplinary texts cover civics, economics, geography, and history
- reader's theater scripts focused on social studies content and reading fluency
- comprehensive coverage of social studies and literacy standards grounded in the Science of Reading
- easily accessible background knowledge

Empowers Students to Think Critically Using the Inquiry Design Model

- compelling and supporting questions
- inquiry-based learning tasks
- graphic elements and primary sources in the texts

Equips Teachers with Ready-to-Use Instruction That Drives Learning

- easy-to-implement lessons
- lessons guide students through the Inquiry Arc
- background information for the teacher included in every lesson
- professional development book
- *Management & Assessment Guide*
- multiple-choice and document-based assessments
- straightforward lesson format with built-in flexibility

Boosts Student Engagement Through Teacher-Led Blended Instruction

- anytime, anywhere access to all program materials
- engaging, knowledge-building lesson slides supporting print-digital connection
- blended student and teacher materials
- robust accessibility for all students

The Importance of Social Studies

What exactly is involved in social studies? The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) published revised standards in 2010, resulting in *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. It identified ten themes of study:

- Culture
- Time, Continuity, and Change
- People, Places, and Environments
- Individual Development and Identity
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Production, Distribution, and Consumption
- Science, Technology, and Society
- Global Connections
- Civic Ideals and Practices

However, William B. Russell III and Stewart Waters (2021, 1) identify that it is one thing to know the themes addressed in social studies, but even more important to understand the purpose of these themes— “to develop good citizens for the democratic society in which we live.”

It is well-documented that social studies instruction benefits all students, even those as young as PreK. By participating in social studies in classrooms, students learn about the past, think critically, and make informed decisions about their world (NCSS 2017). And while most educators understand the importance of social studies instruction, it often remains an add-on to the curriculum, rather than an essential component.



One common sentiment is that teachers often report they do not have enough time to teach social studies. The NCSS advocates for a designated block of time each day, but with competing curricular demands, how can teachers accomplish this goal? This is where integration becomes key. In its position statement on elementary social studies, the NCSS (2017) emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of the field and notes that integrated instruction is not only valuable, but essential for effective learning. As students learn content, they also apply reading and writing skills, build vocabulary, engage in higher-level thinking, and more. In this way, all areas of the curriculum become more meaningful.

“The most effective paradigm for integrating the social domain of knowledge and skills is through children’s personal experiences at home, at school, and in the broader community in which they live. Social studies are one of the essential aspects of children’s development and education, including social skills, socialization, and social responsibility” (Ucus 2018, 111).

Julie Lackaff and Gayle Mindes (2013) state that children are prepared to be lifelong learners as they engage in meaningful social studies themes, including history, economics, and geography, that connect to their own lives. Mindes (2008) emphasizes the importance of inquiry-based instruction that grows from students’ natural curiosity. Sukran Ucus (2018) further explains that social studies themes can be explored in many meaningful ways—through play, personal interactions, literacy, and project-based learning, the collection and analysis of data, and report presentations.

Social Studies Knowledge Adventures is a comprehensive, standards-aligned program that allows students to make meaningful connections across the social studies disciplines, build literacy skills, and participate in hands-on projects and inquiry-based activities that foster problem-solving, collaboration, and creativity.



Social Studies Through Literacy

A growing body of research suggests that literacy skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking can be effectively taught across nontraditional disciplinary boundaries (Johnston et al. 2024). Literacy integration supports students' overall literacy development. Not only do children build knowledge and skills, but they also experience learning environments that are inclusive, culturally relevant, and supportive of their individual identities (Compton-Lilly 2006; Moje et al. 2009; Muhammad 2020). By integrating literacy with other content areas, teachers communicate the value of students' identities and lived experiences (Johnston et al. 2024).

In *Social Studies Knowledge Adventures*, students use literacy skills for a meaningful purpose: building social studies understanding. Fiction and nonfiction texts help children make personal connections to social studies topics, creating emotional connections that carry them to places and situations that inspire learning (Almerico 2013). The program is designed to place rich, engaging texts in students' hands so they can explore social studies concepts through inquiry while also strengthening reading and language development.

Engaging with social studies topics through reading and discussion strengthens both content knowledge and literacy skills. In fact, a groundbreaking study by the Fordham Institute found that “increased instructional time in social studies—but not in ELA—is associated with improved reading ability” (Tyner and Kabourek 2020). The link between literacy and social studies is clear, and Knowledge Adventures provides purposeful opportunities for students to interact with a wide variety of texts as they grow into independent thinkers and develop deeper comprehension.

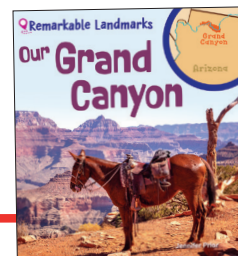
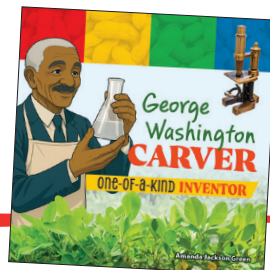
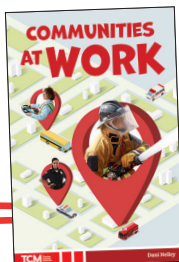


Research to Practice

Tier 1 Evidence

Use content-area literacy instruction to improve oral and reading comprehension skills.

Social Studies Knowledge Adventures includes nonfiction content readers, biographies, fictional reader's theater scripts, and collaborative-research readers. Each engaging text helps students understand complex social studies topics.



Science of Reading

Over the past several decades, a significant body of research has examined how children learn to read and what equitable, evidence-based literacy instruction looks like. While some students may develop reading skills more easily than others, proficient reading is not an innate ability. Reading is a complex process that must be explicitly taught through systematic instruction and supported practice (National Reading Panel 2000).

Because literacy development requires extensive exposure to language and text, there is often not enough time in the literacy block alone to practice all the skills students need. Social studies provides an excellent opportunity to extend reading practice across the school day by engaging students with rich, content-driven texts. Reading more complex texts over time also helps students build reading stamina and deepen comprehension (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). Cognitive research further demonstrates that comprehension is not merely a function of strategy use, but of what a reader already knows. Prior knowledge enables readers to make sense of new information, draw inferences, and remember what they read (Willingham 2006). This insight aligns with the long-standing work of E. D. Hirsch Jr. (1987), who emphasizes the central role of shared knowledge in literacy development.

Research emphasizes that strong reading development depends on both word reading and language comprehension (Scarborough 2001; Duke and Cartwright 2021). Language comprehension, in particular, relies heavily on vocabulary and background knowledge. Social studies provides an ideal context for developing language comprehension because it offers authentic topics for students to read about, discuss, and write about. Integrating social studies content with literacy instruction strengthens vocabulary and comprehension while also increasing student engagement (Tyner and Kabourek 2020; Hattan et al. 2025). To become effective readers, students must apply comprehension strategies automatically and independently. Students need opportunities to read widely, critically, and deeply with diverse texts (Allyn and Burns 2020). The research suggests that literacy development is inseparable from content learning. A knowledge-rich curriculum—particularly in social studies—does not compete with reading instruction; it is a primary mechanism through which reading comprehension develops. Through meaningful engagement with rigorous texts, students become independent thinkers who not only understand what they read but also question and explore ideas beyond the page.



Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary development is a cornerstone of children’s learning, serving not only as a tool for communication but also as a foundation for building domain knowledge across subjects. The words children know shape what they can understand, connect, and retain. Yet despite its central role, a growing body of research points to concerning gaps in vocabulary development, with many children demonstrating significantly weaker word knowledge than expected for their age (Reardon et al. 2012). Providing students with opportunities to build academic vocabulary through content literacy helps deepen and enrich word meanings, making them more real and useful over time (McKeown and Beck 2011). Of utmost importance is learning vocabulary for thinking and communicating (Phythian-Sence and Wagner 2007), as well as understanding word meanings and how they connect to the concepts being learned (Foil and Alber 2002). For this reason, teachers must implement effective strategies that enhance both literacy development and content-area understanding.

Vocabulary instruction is integral to effective social studies learning and plays a critical role in reading comprehension. Research shows that thematic, vocabulary-rich instruction in social studies strengthens reading and writing across content areas (Kim et al. 2021). Because social studies immerses students in complex ideas and relationships, it provides meaningful contexts for learning and applying Tier 2 academic vocabulary.

In addition to introducing new terms, social studies instruction helps students develop strategies for determining the meanings of unfamiliar words. Students use historical context, analyze word parts, and notice repeated academic language to build flexible word-learning skills that transfer to other settings. Explicit vocabulary instruction before and during reading strengthens comprehension, builds background knowledge, and supports verbal reasoning—key components of the Science of Reading (National Reading Panel 2000; Scarborough 2001). This purposeful, context-embedded approach is especially important for multilingual learners and students reading below grade level.

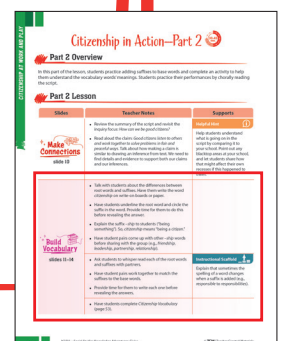
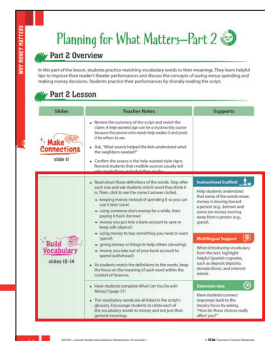


Research to Practice

Every *Social Studies Knowledge Adventures* lesson includes a Build Vocabulary section as part of the IDM, ensuring students develop academic and disciplinary vocabulary needed to discuss the topics.



Teach a set of academic vocabulary words intensively using a variety of instructional activities.



Social Studies Content Knowledge

Elementary social studies instruction is grounded in core disciplinary content drawn from civics, economics, geography, and history. These disciplines help students understand how societies function, how people interact with one another and their environments, and how the past shapes the present. This can be challenging in our ever-changing society, requiring teachers to use varying instructional approaches. The broader purpose of this work extends beyond content acquisition. As stated by the NCSS (2017):

“The purpose of elementary school social studies is to enable students to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world. Social studies content allows young learners to explain relationships with other people, to institutions, and to the environment, and equips them with knowledge and understanding of the past. It provides them with skills for productive problem-solving and decision-making as well as for assessing issues and making thoughtful value judgments. Above all, it integrates these skills and understandings into a framework for responsible citizen participation locally, nationally, and globally. The teaching and learning processes within social studies are uniquely organized to develop these capacities, beginning with the youngest learners in our schools.”

Rather than teaching isolated facts, effective social studies instruction organizes content around big ideas, essential questions, and meaningful contexts that support deeper understanding. It is also necessary to consider cultural backgrounds and engage students in learning and problem-solving (Russell and Waters 2021).



The NCSS (2017) emphasizes five ways teachers can make the learning and understanding of social studies powerful for students. It emphasizes that social studies content and instruction should be:

1. **Meaningful**—focusing on the diversity and natural interests of students, challenging them to make meaningful connections and expand viewpoints
2. **Integrative**—addressing topics across the curriculum, allowing for depth and focus, and capitalizing on teachable moments
3. **Value-based**—allowing and encouraging critical thinking skills, discussing values, and engaging in problem-solving
4. **Challenging**—providing opportunities to research, debate, discuss, ask questions, and evaluate
5. **Active**—facilitating discussion, debates, project-based learning, and role-playing

The NCSS (2013) emphasizes that strong social studies instruction builds conceptual knowledge, allowing students to revisit ideas and apply learning across topics and grade levels. When students engage with rich texts, primary sources, and inquiry-based lessons, they develop a more coherent understanding of social studies content that supports both academic learning and civic awareness.

Social Studies Knowledge Adventures is intentionally designed around this disciplinary content. Each unit and lesson connects reading and inquiry to key social studies concepts, ensuring that students are building the foundational knowledge necessary for understanding civics, history, geography, and economics. In addition to learning content, students must learn how to think and work within the discipline of social studies. Elementary social studies should be powerful, purposeful, and grounded in disciplinary practices such as asking questions, using evidence, evaluating sources, and communicating conclusions (NCSS 2025). *Social Studies Knowledge Adventures* meaningfully integrates decision-making, questioning, identifying patterns, making connections, evaluating claims, and more. These practices help students move beyond memorization and use content knowledge toward deeper reasoning, critical thinking, and informed decision-making.



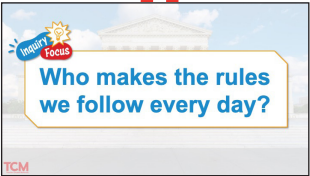
Research to Practice

Each lesson begins with an inquiry focus. This is a compelling question—featured prominently on a lesson slide—that drives inquiry and provides students with a purpose for reading.



**Tier 2
Evidence**

Responding to questions helps students appreciate and build on each other's experiences, knowledge, and understanding.



C3 Framework and the Inquiry Arc

In 2013, the NCSS, in collaboration with several national civic organizations, published *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*. The C3 Framework was developed to support states and educators in creating rigorous, engaging, and meaningful social studies instruction.

According to NCSS (2013), the framework helps guide teaching and learning around the “concepts, skills, and disciplinary tools necessary to prepare students for college, career, and civic life.” The framework also helps students develop “the intellectual power to recognize societal problems; ask good questions and develop robust investigations into them; consider possible solutions and consequences; separate evidence-based claims from parochial opinions; and communicate and act upon what they learn.” The framework encourages students to investigate compelling questions, analyze sources, and develop evidence-based conclusions. It also highlights the importance of disciplinary thinking and civic engagement, supporting students in using social studies knowledge to better understand the world and participate thoughtfully in their communities.

A key feature of the C3 Framework is the Inquiry Arc, which represents a shift from traditional, fact-driven instruction toward learning that is centered on curiosity, investigation, and evidence-based reasoning. The Inquiry Arc harnesses students’ natural questioning instincts and organizes inquiry into four interconnected dimensions that support investigation in social studies (NCSS 2013).

Dimension 1—Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

Dimension 3—Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence

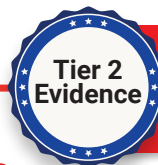
Dimension 2—Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools

Dimension 4—Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

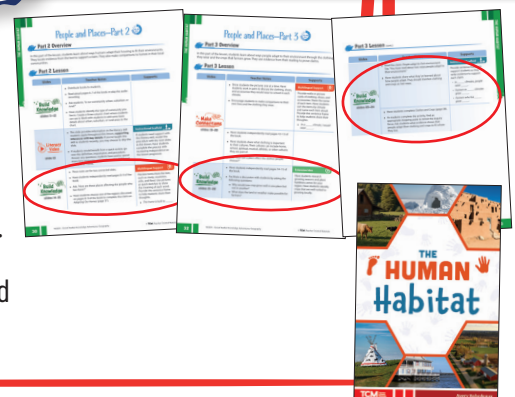


Research to Practice

- Each *Social Studies Knowledge Adventures* lesson includes opportunities for students to read every day.
- Students analyze sources, make claims, and evaluate evidence.
- Students then engage in discussion, reflect through writing, and create presentations, as they build their knowledge.



Ensure that each student reads connected text to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.



Together, these dimensions promote active, challenging learning experiences across grade levels and content areas (Swan et al. 2014). The four Inquiry-Arc dimensions are designed to frame and scaffold student learning of social studies content.

While these teaching recommendations have been well received by teachers, they often report implementing inquiry practices at low levels (Thacker and Friedman 2017). Similarly, David Hicks, Peter Doolittle, and John K. Lee (2004) reported an underuse of inquiry, specifically with primary sources. It is believed that several factors contribute to this. Teachers may not have experienced inquiry practices in their own education; they may not value inquiry as a necessary approach, rather than merely a “trick of the trade,” and they may not have seen inquiry in action. While there has been hesitancy to implement inquiry practices, inquiry supports important habits of mind, including questioning, critical thinking, and evaluating sources and data (Brugar et al. 2024).

Social Studies Knowledge Adventures is intentionally designed to assist teachers with implementation of the Inquiry Arc. Each lesson provides a clear inquiry pathway—grounded in compelling questions, supported by disciplinary content, and reinforced through source-based reasoning and discussion. Rather than requiring teachers to build inquiry from scratch, the program offers a structured approach that allows students to experience the full arc of investigation in developmentally appropriate ways. Teachers serve as guides and facilitators, supporting students as they ask questions, explore evidence, and communicate conclusions through meaningful social studies learning.



Inquiry and the Inquiry Design Model

Kathryn L. Roberts, Kristy A. Brugar, and Alexander Cuenca (2024) describe inquiry as students developing and investigating questions through interdisciplinary thinking, both within and beyond social studies, to build a deeper understanding of topics, concepts, and ideas. They further note that inquiry promotes important habits of mind, including questioning, critical thinking, and evaluating sources and data—skills that are especially valuable in elementary classrooms. Social studies inquiry is a powerful tool that guides students toward becoming engaged citizens by encouraging them to examine sources and consider the consequences of decisions (Brugar et al. 2024).

Inquiry is not a new idea. In fact, S. G. Grant, John Lee, and Kathy Swan cite significant ideas from the seminal work of John Dewey (1959), Jerome Bruner (1960), and Joseph Schwab (1978). Dewey, in particular, advocated for relevant, active learning that encouraged students to explore problems drawn from daily life. Although inquiry was initially embraced by science educators, various forms of inquiry in social studies emerged in subsequent years.

Current state standards in social studies emphasize student performance through verbs such as “identify,” “distinguish,” “integrate,” and “describe,” suggesting a broader shift toward critical thinking (Walker et al. 2020). While inquiry-based instruction is central to high-quality social studies learning, planning and implementing inquiry lessons can feel complex and time-consuming for teachers. Often, the challenge lies in the mistaken belief that inquiry is simply a skill to be taught—the idea that we “do” inquiry. In reality, inquiry is a process in which students engage (Brugar et al. 2024). Students reflect, ask questions, wrestle with claims, and make decisions using a variety of strategies.



Research to Practice

Tier 1 Evidence

Implement inquiry-based social studies instruction to increase vocabulary and oral comprehension.

The IDM provides a clear, structured framework. In the IDM, questions, sources, and tasks work together to help students build understanding and communicate evidence-based conclusions.



What character traits help people succeed?



Build Vocabulary

A BOLD CHILDHOOD

Read the story and think about the character traits of the children in the story. Write down the traits you think the children have. Then, write down the traits you think the children need to be successful in life.

courage
doing something even though it is dangerous or difficult

curiosity
wanting to know more about things



Build Vocabulary

Which image shows courage?
Which image shows curiosity?



The IDM was developed as a practical blueprint to support educators in designing meaningful inquiry experiences that are aligned with the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc (Grant et al. 2022). *Social Studies Knowledge Adventures* provides easy-to-implement lessons based on the IDM that encourage students to engage with social studies themes through questioning, critical thinking, active learning, and problem-solving.

In the IDM, **questions**, **sources**, and **tasks** work together to help students build understanding and communicate evidence-based conclusions (Grant et al. 2022). Rather than leaving inquiry open-ended or unstructured, IDM provides a clear instructional framework that guides students through investigation in purposeful, developmentally appropriate ways. By offering a coherent structure for inquiry, the model supports students in developing the habits of inquiry and evidence-based reasoning central to social studies learning. In this model, inquiry is not an alternative to knowledge-building but a vehicle for it. Students investigate compelling questions using carefully sequenced, content-rich texts in civics, geography, history, and economics, building both understanding and academic language.

Inquiry-based instruction, when grounded in content-rich materials, provides a powerful structure for integrating literacy and social studies. Rather than treating reading as a set of isolated strategies, this approach organizes instruction around meaningful questions in civics, geography, history, and economics. Students engage with sequenced, primarily informational texts to build knowledge, acquire domain-specific vocabulary, and develop understanding over time. In alignment with frameworks such as the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, students analyze sources, evaluate evidence, and construct responses to compelling questions. Critically, this work is supported by explicit teacher guidance, ensuring that inquiry functions as a structured process for knowledge-building rather than unguided exploration. In this way, inquiry serves as a bridge between literacy development and disciplinary learning, reinforcing research from the Science of Reading that comprehension is rooted in what students know.

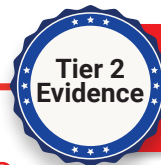


Supporting and Engaging All Students

An ever-growing body of research indicates that effective instruction must be designed to support the learning of all students through differentiation, scaffolding, and access to grade-level content. These inclusive and differentiated practices are overwhelmingly associated with improved engagement, achievement, and a sense of belonging for diverse learners. This includes multilingual learners and students with academic needs (Florian 2014; Tomlinson 2017; Ainscow 2020). Rather than reducing rigor, high-quality instruction provides multiple entry points to the same complex content so that all students can participate meaningfully in learning experiences. In social studies, inquiry-based and content-rich instruction has been shown to support engagement and comprehension when students are given structured supports such as vocabulary scaffolds, guided discussion, and opportunities for collaboration (Kim et al. 2021; Vaughn et al. 2017). When these supports are seamlessly embedded within instruction, students are better able to construct deeper understanding of civics, history, geography, and economics.

Social Studies Knowledge Adventures is designed to integrate a wide range of instructional approaches that support and engage all learners. The program includes embedded supports within each lesson, as well as explicit supports designed for specific populations of learners.

- The lessons include scaffolding, providing temporary support as students apply new concepts to complex tasks.
- The lessons strategically provide extensions that allow students to engage with content at a deeper level. Rather than simply adding more work, extensions invite students to apply knowledge in new ways, extend their thinking, or explore ideas more deeply.
- The lessons also address the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students. Supporting multilingual learners begins with recognizing the knowledge and perspectives they bring.

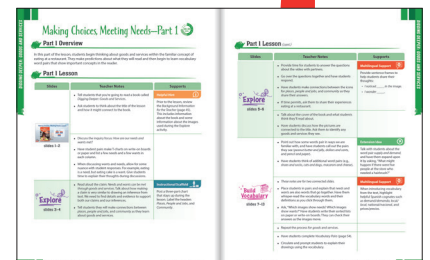


Provide instructional supports to students struggling in the areas of literacy and English language development.



Research to Practice

To meet the needs of all learners, instructional supports are provided throughout lessons. Scaffolding suggestions provide temporary supports, so new concepts and complex tasks can be experienced in more manageable ways. Extensions allow students to progress beyond the basic lesson when they are ready for a challenge. Finally, multilingual supports help students to actively participate, share their cultures and lived experiences, and continue learning English.



Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) “is a philosophical framework based on cognitive neuroscience research investigating how the human brain learns” (Almeqdad et al. 2023). It has become a commonly used approach to provide learning experiences for all students. This includes students with exceptionalities (Alquraini and Rao 2020; Rao 2015). The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) developed the Universal Design for Learning framework based on the understanding that all learners have the capacity to achieve high levels of learning when barriers are intentionally removed. “Traditional ‘one-size-fits-all’ learning environments create barriers that have potential to impede students’ academic achievement, engagement, and social development” (Zhang et al. 2022). These barriers may lead to unintentionally excluding diverse learners from educational opportunities (Rao and Meo 2016). UDL focuses on designing flexible learning environments that elevate student strengths and provide multiple pathways for success across disciplines, including social studies.

The UDL Guidelines promote a student-centered learning environment by encouraging teachers to set clear goals, anticipate potential barriers, and create meaningful options that account for learner variability. Rather than retrofitting instruction for individual students, UDL emphasizes proactive design that supports a wide range of learners from the outset.

The guidelines address learner variability through three interconnected principles:

- **Engagement:** the “why” of learning. Learning environments are designed to spark interest, sustain effort, and support students in developing self-regulation and ownership of learning.
- **Representation:** the “what” of learning. Content is presented in multiple ways to support perception, comprehension, and understanding of language, symbols, and ideas.
- **Action and Expression:** the “how” of learning. Students are provided with varied ways to interact with content, demonstrate understanding, and communicate their thinking.

In social studies classrooms, UDL supports equitable access to complex texts, inquiry, discussion, and performance tasks by offering flexible approaches to content, process, and demonstration of learning. Together, these research-based principles ensure that all students can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities (CAST 2024). The lessons in *Social Studies Knowledge Adventures* have been strategically designed to provide experiences appropriate for all learners.



Problem-Based Learning

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is an inquiry-driven instructional approach in which students build knowledge and skills by engaging with complex, real-world problems over time. Rather than passively receiving information, students actively participate in learning through research, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving. PBL typically culminates in a public product, such as a presentation, written proposal, or other authentic demonstration of understanding. The Gold Standard PBL model (Buck Institute for Education 2015) identifies key elements of high-quality implementation, including a challenging problem or question, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, and a public product.

This approach aligns closely with Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which emphasizes that cognitive development is fundamentally shaped through social interaction. Within the Zone of Proximal Development, students construct understanding through guided engagement with teachers and more knowledgeable peers. In this framework, communication and collaboration are essential mechanisms for learning, as students co-construct meaning through conversation and shared problem-solving. Teachers facilitate these interactions, supporting students as they develop both academic understanding and social competencies within collaborative learning environments.

Research further supports the effectiveness of these approaches in social studies education. Tri Zahra Ningsih et al. (2025) found that instructional models such as PBL and cooperative learning significantly enhance students' communication and collaboration skills by engaging them in structured, interactive learning experiences. These models require students to actively participate in group problem-solving, articulate their thinking, and work together to construct knowledge.

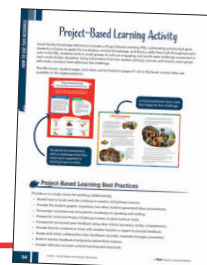


Research to Practice

Social Studies Knowledge Adventures includes a project-based learning activity that allows students to work together to explore complex, real-world problems. This allows students to take active roles in research, design, and problem-solving.



Incorporate group work into content-area instruction.



Assessment

Assessment is an essential part of effective instruction. It helps teachers measure students' understanding of content and skills, determine whether learning goals are being met, and adjust instruction to support continued growth.

Summative assessments are typically used to evaluate student performance and are often administered as end-of-lesson or end-of-unit tests and quizzes. In contrast, formative assessment is an ongoing process that provides learners with timely, constructive feedback to support their learning and help them achieve their goals. As Karin Vogt et al. (2020, 6) explain, formative assessment enhances student achievement by allowing for continuous feedback, instructional redirection, and teacher adjustments that better support student understanding. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which emphasizes that learning is constructed through social interaction rather than simple memorization of facts. From this perspective, students develop meaning through engagement with others and with various resources, and the interactions between students and teachers become an integral part of both the learning and assessment process.

The C3 Framework emphasizes assessments that reflect students' conceptual understanding and their ability to apply disciplinary skills in authentic ways (NCSS 2013). To provide meaningful evidence of learning, assessments must be aligned to standards and instructional goals. Backward Design models support this alignment by establishing learning outcomes first (Wiggins and McTighe 2005), and the IDM similarly calls for assessments that foster learning throughout the inquiry process (Grant et al. 2015). Effective assessment should also reflect principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiation, ensuring that all students have multiple ways to demonstrate what they know.



Social Studies Knowledge Adventures incorporates a variety of assessment methods, including quizzes, document-based assessments, and rubrics, to evaluate student learning and support ongoing instruction. According to the program guide, rubrics are specifically provided to support formative assessment practices and to assist teachers in evaluating student work as they complete document-based tasks. These assessments are designed to promote higher-order thinking, requiring students to analyze information rather than simply recall facts. In addition, the questions encourage students to demonstrate their organizational and written communication skills. Beyond content knowledge, the program also assesses reading fluency, emphasizing not only accurate decoding but also expression and appropriate pacing. To support this, a fluency rubric is included at each grade level to evaluate key components of oral reading development.

Knowledge Adventures also incorporates culminating PBL experiences that allow students to apply the vocabulary, content knowledge, and literacy skills they have developed throughout each unit. These tasks serve as an authentic extension of learning, requiring students to synthesize information and use higher-order thinking to solve complex, real-world problems. By integrating these culminating activities with quizzes, document-based assessments, and rubric-scored performance tasks, the program provides a comprehensive approach to both formative and summative evaluation of student understanding and skill development.

Once teachers develop a clear understanding of what students need to be successful, they are able to design learning environments that appropriately challenge each learner and support continued growth. A key function of formative assessment is to provide both teachers and students with regular feedback on progress toward learning goals, which can ultimately contribute to increased academic achievement. Formative assessment helps bridge the gap between students' current understanding and their intended learning objectives. In addition, it provides students with concrete evidence of their progress, enabling them to actively monitor, reflect on, and adjust their own learning. This ongoing feedback process also empowers students to take greater ownership of their educational goals and track their progress over time (Ismail et al. 2022).



Conclusion

Social Studies Knowledge Adventures offers a comprehensive and research-based approach to elementary social studies instruction by integrating content learning, literacy development, and inquiry-based practices into a cohesive program. Grounded in its four core principles—deepening content knowledge and vocabulary through literacy skills, empowering students to think critically through the IDM, equipping teachers with ready-to-use instruction, and boosting engagement through teacher-led blended learning—the program addresses the growing need for meaningful and efficient social studies instruction within the elementary classroom. By purposefully embedding social studies into the literacy block, applying principles of the Science of Reading and vocabulary development, and aligning with the recommendations of the NCSS, the C3 Framework, and the IDM, the program ensures rigorous and accessible learning experiences for all students. Knowledge Adventures provides educators with a practical pathway to build informed and engaged learners who think critically about the world around them.



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