

Teaching Young Learners with the C3 Framework

Big Thinking for Little Learners: Making Social Studies Accessible with Micro-Inquiries

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Teaching social studies to younger learners can be a challenge, especially given the time crunch many elementary teachers face trying to cram social studies into their week. That challenge is further compounded when we add in the many diverse needs we encounter in our classrooms and the hyperscrutiny teachers are facing within their communities, and we have a perfect storm of uncertainty and apprehension.¹ The response to these barriers is often the oversimplification of social studies into a read-aloud or single children's book to meet a teacher's literacy goals.² We know that teachers would like to offer more robust and engaging social studies lessons but may not know how to do so.

Enter micro-inquiries, a method that breaks down rich, meaningful content and skill explorations into short lessons that teachers can include in *less* than a single lesson. These lessons integrate multiple perspectives, allowing teachers to teach within the constraints of divisive issue legislation.³ In our foundational publication, we introduced micro-inquiries as a streamlined adaptation of the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) and C3 Framework.⁴ Recognizing that full IDM implementations can be time-consuming and challenging for elementary teachers, micro-inquiries retain the IDM's core components—compelling question, sources, and argument task—while significantly reducing time and complexity. This allows teachers to offer meaningful inquiry experiences even within tight instructional periods, addressing common classroom constraints such as limited instructional time, diverse learning needs, and the necessity to navigate controversial issues sensitively.⁵ We have found that these lessons also make clear that elementary students *can* study a topic from diverse viewpoints, escaping the oversimplification that too often plagues materials created for elementary-age learners.

More importantly, micro-inquiries also provide opportunities to tailor the experience to meet each student's diverse

needs. By using visuals, simplified texts, and clear step-by-step activities, teachers can make the content and inquiry-associated skills accessible for all learners. This can also help ensure that students with emerging literacy skills still have opportunities to investigate compelling questions and form their own evidence-based conclusions all within a focused social studies task.

What Are Micro-Inquiries?

As educators and inquiry designers, we have worked to address the challenges of traditional full IDM inquiries by developing micro-inquiries. While we believe strongly in the value of more robust inquiry experiences for students (i.e., the original blueprint as seen in *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model*⁶), we recognize that the challenges of teaching and curriculum construction do not always permit many opportunities for inclusion. Micro-inquiries are a streamlined inquiry format that retains the core elements of inquiry while providing more structured guidance for teachers.⁷ Micro-inquiries build on the IDM creators' acknowledgment that there are countless ways to adapt and personalize inquiry blueprints to fit diverse classroom needs.⁸

Like their larger inquiry counterparts, micro-inquiries are composed of the three essential elements—a compelling question, an argument task, and a set of sources. Swan and colleagues emphasize the necessity of framing inquiries explicitly around these components to support students' critical thinking and analysis.⁹

Micro-inquiries connect closely to other IDM adaptations such as the Building Block IDM, trade book inquiries, and focused inquiries. The progenitors of the C3 Framework have long recognized that a one-size-fits-all model of inquiry is not realistic, and as such much of the innovations in the

last decade have been to build upon and adapt the IDM to fit varying lengths of time and student autonomy.¹⁰ The Building Block IDM¹¹ introduces modular inquiry activities tailored for educators new to inquiry-based instruction, while trade book inquiries¹² leverage children's literature to create engaging inquiry experiences for younger learners. Focused inquiries zoom in on specific historical events or concepts. Micro-inquiries complement these adaptations by offering a structured, concise inquiry approach, thus broadening the inquiry toolkit available to elementary teachers.

However, micro-inquiries are designed to fit in as little as 15 minutes (yes, really!). This format allows teachers to manage time effectively while providing students with a complete inquiry arc. Unlike larger inquiries which have little in the way of guardrails, micro-inquiries are designed to give explicit direction on exactly how many sources should be included and what each source needs to accomplish. By narrowing the scope of sources and focusing on a single compelling question, micro-inquiries allow educators to create meaningful inquiry experiences within tight time constraints, making them especially well-suited for today's elementary classrooms. Micro-inquiries achieve this through working through the 5 C's¹³:

- A **compelling source** sparks curiosity and engages students in exploring the inquiry's central question.
- A **compelling question** is a weighty question that encourages critical thinking and allows multiple valid answers, supported by provided sources.
- A **context source** situates the compelling source within its historical, cultural, or other context.
- A **contrast source** presents an alternative perspective or counterargument to the compelling source, fostering debate and critical evaluation.
- A **complexity source** adds nuance or a third perspective, challenging binary thinking and deepening analysis of historical events or issues.
- An **argument task** is a concise argument that includes a stance, a "because" statement, and supporting evidence.

Adapting Micro-Inquiry for Younger Learners

Micro-inquiries are excellent for younger learners and those who may be struggling readers because they emphasize *engagement* over extensive reading and writing while still supporting literacy skill-building and social studies proficiencies. Because the sources are short and limited in number, you have more flexibility in the supports you put around the sources that help to lift students up.

One of the wonderful things about micro-inquiries is that they can be tailored for all students, including emerging readers/writers or English Learners (ELs). While a variety of different techniques and modifications can help to serve students, two we will cover in this article are increasing reliance on visual sources and using short, modified text sources

for students.

All-Photo Inquiries

Although *history* is by definition centered on writing, the reality is that students can still engage in history without needing to rely on text. We know that photographs and images can help overcome literacy barriers.¹⁴ Let's say you want to highlight women's history with younger learners (see Table 1 in this issue's Pullout). Instead of diving into complex texts, display photographs of suffragists holding protest signs or an image of Rosie the Riveter. Guide students to notice details, asking them scaffolded questions to assist them to interpret what they see. Discuss any questions they raise, all without getting bogged down in heavy reading. Then have them answer a question that requires them to use evidence from the photographs to justify why they think what they do. Pair images with brief, easy-to-understand captions, providing multilingual translations as needed for ELs.

This visual approach still encourages critical thinking and assists students in developing historical inquiry skills because students' ability to interpret historical time and basic chronology begins young.¹⁵ The inclusion of visual sources within micro-inquiries is a great way to lower the entry barrier for students. Non-text-based sources create an opportunity for students to engage in different kinds of tasks that rely on visual cues, tap into their innate curiosity and emotional responses, or allow them to exercise wonder. In the inquiries we present here, teachers have latitude to explore assessment types promoted by groups like Project Zero's "See, Think, Wonder" and the Library of Congress's "Observe, Reflect, Question."¹⁶

While inclusion of *some* visual material is beneficial for all students, we can go further, however, and create rich inquiry experiences that are *exclusively* visual. In the following example, we offer our thoughts about how sources on an inquiry topic reflect our 5 C's approach. Each of these sources is brief in nature and would be used strategically in an inquiry to help students accomplish learning outcomes related to the 5 C's.

Techniques for Emerging Readers and Writers

For students who are beginning their reading journey and are just getting comfortable with reading short texts, small adjustments can go a long way. Providing simplified texts is a good first step. Giving students primary source excerpts rewritten in age-appropriate language can go a long way to assisting students who are emerging readers. Briefly summarizing otherwise long excerpts is also an important piece of the puzzle. While there is certainly value in having students interact with unaltered sources, there is great value in meeting students where they are in their learning journeys, saving more complex texts for literacy-specific exercises.

Using audio supports can also go a long way to making social studies content more accessible.¹⁷ Instead of just giv-

ing students a hard copy or electronic copy of a source, give learners an auditory option by playing a recording of the source or reading it aloud while the students follow along with their own copy of the source.

Finally, all students can benefit from creating an argument by using sentence stems.¹⁸ By giving the students a shell to fill in with their details, you can help to ensure that the mechanics of writing do not get in the way of their emerging skills of argumentation. Guide students' responses with prompts such as, "I think the answer is ____ because _____. This source helped me learn this: _____." Some teachers even find it helpful to include posters around the classroom with sentence starters like this or decks of flip cards that each student can keep at their desk to help them construct responses.

Table 2 in this issue's Pullout is one example of a micro-inquiry on Sojourner Truth that is structured to support emerging readers. In this instance, we relied on adapted text, annotations with vocabulary supports, non-text sources, abbreviated text, and sentence starters to support students with a lower command of language. Teachers can read sources aloud for an auditory option. The inquiry concludes with students answering the compelling question by completing the sentence: "Sojourner Truth faced these challenges in fighting for equality: _____. I know this from _____ source." They will support their response with evidence from the sources provided.

Practical Tips for Teachers

Small-scale investigations like our micro-inquiries can make a big impact in elementary classrooms. In comparison to larger scale inquiries, educators working with micro-inquiries have said that they can more easily conceptualize what this will look like in their classrooms and how students will experience it.

It all starts with choosing sources that are clear and appealing, but the activities that students use to interact with the sources should also be compelling and punchy to encourage student engagement and keep the inquiries moving along. Images, simple texts, or brief audio clips are often the perfect thing for younger learners or those who need extra support to find their way through the content.¹⁹ This allows the emphasis to stay on critical thinking and analyzing sources, not on tackling dense material. Guiding questions also play a key role. A protocol like "See, Think, Wonder" from Harvard's Project Zero can spur students to observe carefully, think deeply, and pose thoughtful questions.²⁰ It offers structure without stifling curiosity, helping younger learners stay motivated throughout the process.

It is important not to get lost in the details of novel, unique, or catchy activities to analyze sources. The sources themselves should generate the excitement, not necessarily your activity. The goal is that students interact with sources to extract understanding. To meet this goal, guiding questions and straightforward discussion-based activities are completely

valid. Relying on sources as the hook creates space for more straightforward student tasks that teachers can readily understand and recognize.

Concise tasks such as argument trees or sentence starters allow students to organize their ideas efficiently—and make quick work of evaluation for teachers. Keeping assessment streamlined means these investigations can happen more regularly without piling on extra grading for teachers. Finally, strong scaffolding and clear directions are essential. We encourage teachers to model expected responses to demonstrate the ways source analysis can occur.

Conclusion

In the twelve years since the publication of the C3 Framework,²¹ we have learned a great deal about how to make inquiry more manageable, practical, and beneficial for students. Drawing upon the strong foundation laid by the IDM and its variations, we are excited to bring another interpretation into the mix. By leaning into what we know works for students—rigorous instruction that teaches students to explore multiple perspectives—micro-inquiries present an opportunity for teachers who want to maintain best practices around social studies pedagogy and content while still complying with state and district expectations.

In contrast to larger more complex inquiries, micro-inquiries help make rich social studies content accessible for *all* learners. Modifications like visual sources, simplified texts, and read-alouds help students overcome literacy barriers that are so common within the social studies. Moreover, the condensed fifteen-minutes-or-less nature of micro-inquiries means that the challenge of time is no longer the limiting factor when integrating rigorous social studies in the elementary classroom. Once these barriers are removed, teachers are free to experiment with inquiry more often, encouraging and developing skills like curiosity, critical thinking, and argumentation. ■

Notes

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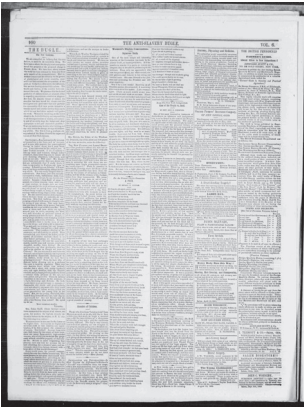
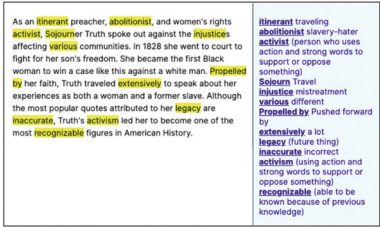
Table 1. All-Photo Inquiry: Women's Suffrage

Compelling Question	Who were the suffragists?
C3 Framework Standards	• D2.His.4.3-5. Explain why individuals and groups during the same historical period differed in their perspectives. • D3.1.3-5. Gather relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, structure, and context to guide the selection. • D4.1.3-5. Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.
Grades	3–5
Compelling Source	 <i>The First Picket Line—College Day in the Picket Line, 1917, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/97500299.</i> Connection to Question: This source illustrates the determination of women, particularly young, educated activists, to demand the right to vote by constitutional amendment. It highlights their fight against President Wilson to push for equality and suffrage.
Context Source	 <i>Suffragists Marching, Probably in New York City, 1915, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/97500064.</i> Connection to Question: This source provides context for the organized and public nature of the suffrage movement. It demonstrates how women used marches to collectively organize and advocate for suffrage and inclusion in political life.

Table 1. All-Photo Inquiry: Women's Suffrage (continued)

Contrast Source	 A black and white photograph showing a group of men and women standing on the steps of a building. The men are dressed in suits and hats, and the women are in long dresses and hats. A sign in the background reads "WOMAN SUFFRAGE PARTY" and another sign in the foreground reads "WOMAN VOTER MONTHLY MAGAZINE 5 CTS.". Men's League for Woman Suffrage in New York, 1915, Library of Congress http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ggbain.14075/. Connection to Question: This source challenges a narrow interpretation of suffragists as solely women advocating for their own rights. It demonstrates that the suffragist movement included male allies who recognized the importance of women's suffrage and lent their voices to the cause of gender equality.
Complexity Source	 A black and white photograph showing a group of nine African-American women standing in a line on a street. They are all wearing long, light-colored dresses and hats. The woman on the far left is holding a large banner that reads "BANNER STATE WOMAN'S NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION". Nine African-American Women Posed, Standing, Full Length, with Nannie Burroughs Holding Banner Reading, "Banner State Woman's National Baptist Convention," 1905–1915, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3c06646. Connection to Question: This source adds complexity by highlighting the intersection of race and gender in the suffrage movement. For Black women, the fight for voting rights was part of a broader struggle against systemic oppression, illustrating that the suffrage movement's goals and challenges were not uniform. The image connects to the fight for Black women's suffrage by showcasing their leadership in grassroots organizing and emphasizing their role in broader movements for social justice and equal rights, including the right to vote.

Table 2. Micro-Inquiry on Sojourner Truth for Emerging Readers

Compelling Question	What challenges did Sojourner Truth face in fighting for equality?
C3 Framework Standards	• D2.His.10.3-5. Compare information provided by different historical sources about the past. • D3.2.3-5. Use distinctions among fact and opinion to determine the credibility of multiple sources. • D4.1.3-5. Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.
Grades	3–5
Compelling Source	Excerpt from a speech given by Sojourner Truth in its original and in age-appropriate rewritten language. • Original: “As for intellect, all I can say is, (e) if women have a pint and man a quart - why can’t she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, for we cant take more than our pint’ll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and dont know what to do.” • Rewritten: “On the topic of intelligence, if women aren’t as smart as men, if a woman’s brain is smaller, why not let her fill it up with what she can? You don’t need to fear that we will take too much—we can only take what we can handle. It seems like some men are really confused and don’t know what to do about it!”  “Women’s Rights Convention: Sojourner Truth,” <i>Anti-Slavery Bugle</i> (New-Lisbon, OH), June, 21, 1851, <i>Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers</i>, Library of Congress, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1851-06-21/ed-1/seq-4/. Connection to Question: This source highlights one of the key challenges Sojourner Truth faced: addressing and dismantling societal beliefs that underestimated women’s abilities, particularly those of Black women. In this speech, she confronts the idea that women, especially enslaved or formerly enslaved women, were intellectually inferior and unworthy of equal rights. By using the metaphor of a pint and a quart, Truth illustrates her point in a way that is easy to understand while directly challenging the bias and fear of granting women equal opportunities. This demonstrates her ability to use powerful rhetoric to overcome prejudice and advocate for justice.
Context Source	A brief biography of Sojourner Truth outlining her early life, her escape from slavery, and her activism in abolition and women’s rights.  Created from www.rewordify.com using text from National Women’s History Museum, <i>Sojourner Truth</i>, January 24, 2019, www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/sojourner-truth. Connection to Question: The biography provides important background on the systemic oppression Truth endured as an enslaved woman and her courageous fight for justice. Her court battle to free her son demonstrates the legal and societal barriers she faced as well as her determination to fight against those systems. This source connects to the question by showing how her personal experiences of injustice shaped her activism and underscored the challenges of navigating a system designed to exclude women and People of Color.

Contrast Source



Harris & Ewing, *National Anti-Suffrage Association*, 1914, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/97500067.

Connection to Question:

The image of men standing outside the “Headquarters, National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage” represents the societal resistance to gender equality that Sojourner Truth encountered. It provides a visual example of organized opposition to the very rights Truth advocated for, including the idea that women, especially Black women, were unfit to participate in the political sphere. This source illustrates the widespread institutional and cultural resistance that Truth had to overcome.

Complexity Source

“We educated, virtuous white women are more worthy of the vote”

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton

“For Stanton, All Women Were Not Created Equal,” *NPR Morning Edition*, July 13, 2011, www.npr.org/2011/07/13/137681070/for-stanton-all-women-were-not-created-equal

Connection to Question:

This quotation illustrates a key challenge Sojourner Truth faced: opposition not only from societal racism and sexism but also from within the women’s suffrage movement. Truth had to contend with leaders like Stanton, whose exclusionary views marginalized Black women and their fight for equality.