
Democracy & Education

Recentering Civics

A Framework for Building Civic Dispositions and Action Opportunities

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Abstract

Many civic education initiatives have developed across the United States in order to help prepare students for civic engagement in school-based settings. At the same time, research shows that quality of school-based civic learning opportunities remains insufficient, inconsistent, and inequitable. In this article, we propose a framework of civic learning dispositions based upon current social studies curricular resources from C3 Teachers. Based on a thematic review of civic dispositions embedded within this *C3 Framework*-aligned curriculum, we offer a framework to demonstrate how civic dispositions and the application of social studies learning (i.e., civic action) can be used in curriculum design to support a reinvigorated application of social studies learning. The framework, then, provides a theoretically informed, practical heuristic for teachers, researchers and curricular designers to both better understand and subsequently support their students' high-quality civic learning in the context of social studies teaching and learning.

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DEMOCRACIES ARE ONLY as good as the people who sustain them. If those people are divided by racism, influenced by fake news and alternative facts, and conflate heritage with history, then our democracy is in danger. Hyper polarization has simplified the complexities of democracy, robbing it of its power to freely exchange ideas based upon multiple perspectives from a plurality of peoples (Klein, 2020). There is a pressing need for students to learn how to evaluate information, create arguments, and take informed civic action on issues they care about (Garcia et al., 2021). Without frequent opportunities to become informed on issues and learn how to apply their learning to authentic civic spaces, students will remain largely ill-prepared to combat the civic challenges before them. Likewise,

without democracy-enhancing analytical lenses, we open the door for students to create antidemocratic arguments and take misinformed (or uninformed) action. Civic dispositions grounded in democratic ideals, however, can provide the lenses to inform and guide students' actions. When these dispositions are agreed upon and explored by students, they can help students simultaneously

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develop a sense of self *and* community. As is made visible in what follows, civic dispositions—if made both the ethos and the telos of social studies instruction—can become the grounding force that enables students’ civic learning to extend beyond classroom walls and into the citizen practices of civic life that sustain democracy. To foreshadow, then, this article lays bare a heuristic for grounding social studies instruction by, and through, civic dispositions.

Many initiatives have developed across the United States that help prepare students for civic engagement in school-based settings, ranging from action civics programs to mandated state civics tests (e.g., programs like Mikva Challenge and Generation Citizen and graduation exams based upon the Naturalization Test from the Department of Homeland Security). Though well-intentioned, we posit that these initiatives are not enough in tackling the dearth of school-based civic learning opportunities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). If schools’ primary purpose is to prepare students for their roles as engaged citizens (Dewey, 1916/2012), then it follows that all students should have routine opportunities to become informed and apply their learning to authentic civic concerns. As a curriculum designer, higher education professor, and district instructional lead, respectively, the authors of this study are united in our belief that present civic learning initiatives are not enough to address the challenges before us. If we are to prepare students for building a democratic society, we need our educators to become more explicit about how the learning and application of social studies is a vehicle toward the preparation of an informed citizenry.

Toward that end, in this article, we propose a set of civic dispositions that can be operationalized by teachers and instructional designers to support students’ civic learning and engagement within existing social studies curricular content—serving as a practical heuristic for amplifying authentic civic learning and engagement. We identified themes by analyzing social studies curricular resources for their civic disposition and examining how that disposition can manifest in an informed civic action task. The purpose of engaging in this conceptual exercise was twofold: (a) identify major categories and elements of civic learning grounded in civic dispositions; (b) demonstrate how these dispositions and application of learning (i.e., informed civic action) can be used in routine, everyday curriculum design. To this end, the framework provides a tool for researchers and curriculum designers alike to construct an informed civic action throughline across social studies curriculum, surfacing opportunities for authentic application of content through civic learning.

Our inquiry in this work was guided by the question: *What democratic dispositional outcomes can civic learning opportunities build toward?* Following, we review the literature that informed this process, including current priorities in civic education and connections to inquiry-based learning, as well as civic education scholarship around civic dispositions and civic action. We explain our research methods for analyzing and categorizing a collection of inquiry units for their civic learning outcome. Then, we describe the framework that emerged from our analysis. We close by describing how this framework provides a new analytical lens for curriculum-building that weaves civic learning opportunities—

grounded in civic dispositions and informed action—throughout social studies content.

Literature Review

Our work aims to build on existing knowledge and conceptualizations around civic education within the context of K–12 social studies teaching in the United States. We describe current opportunities for civic learning application through the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* and inquiry pedagogies, coupled with a brief description of current civic initiatives and their limitations. The *C3 Framework* was created to provide a model for how states can revise their social studies standards to align with more authentic inquiry practices, as well as support practitioners in strengthening their social studies programs (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). The *C3 Framework* is the official framework of the National Council for the Social Studies. The *C3 Framework* has a growing impact on the development of state social studies standards and policies in the United States, including a strong alignment to the social studies standards in Kentucky, where all three authors reside. (Kentucky Department of Education [KDE], 2019; Author 3 et al., 2021). To contextualize our work and curriculum design opportunities, we describe inquiry’s connection to civic learning, civic dispositional development, and civic experiences as the transference of learning to a civic context.

Inquiry Civic Learning

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) imagined schools as laboratories of democracy, where students’ role as engaged citizens is actively developed—good citizenship being one of the primary purposes of education. The publication of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* has reaffirmed social studies’ education’s contribution to students’ preparation for active and engaged citizenship through inquiry learning. The opening statement of the *C3 Framework* describes the goals of social studies education and emphasizes the urgency with which learning must address these goals:

Now more than ever, students need 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. (NCSS, 2013)

At the heart of inquiry learning is the belief that students do not become engaged citizens through diffusion but rather through educating with a deliberate focus on developing students’ civic knowledge, democratic skills, dispositions, and applying those learnings in a democratic experience (Levinson & Levine, 2013; NCSS, 2013; Swan et al., 2018). Within the *C3 Framework* is an explicit call for application of learning through civic engagement in all social studies disciplines within its fourth dimension, Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action. The writers of the *C3 Framework* created the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint, which further embeds civic action within inquiry learning. Designed to operationalize inquiry design processes, each inquiry

blueprint represents a unit of study, where students engage in an inquiry process. Each blueprint includes a summative application of the content to an authentic out-of-classroom context through the Taking Informed Action task. Taking Informed Action tasks have three steps to prepare students for informed civic action. The steps ask students to: (a) understand the inquiry's issue or concept by investigating it in a modern context; (b) assess the importance and/or impact of the issue; and (c) act in ways that allows them to share their learning in a real-world context (Grant et al., 2017). It is important to emphasize that civic action as discussed by the *C3 Framework* is not action for action's sake. Not all civic actions are inherently democratic, as has been made more visible by the mainstreaming of misinformation in the information age (Hodgin & Kahne, 2018). Instead, inquiry with a civic learning application grounds action in the rigorous processes that discern fact from fiction through grappling with complex, sometimes competing ideas, and applying that learning to tackle current challenges.

Civic Learning Opportunities

Despite the growing influence of the *C3 Framework* (New et al., 2021), routine opportunities for civic engagement are not well established in schools. Civic literacy and civic participation in K–12 and collegiate schooling have both declined, alongside a decline in both requirements and opportunities for students (Baumann & Brennan, 2018). Teachers who report using inquiry often neglect the civic action component (Thacker et al., 2016) or assume that students are learning civic lessons but do not provide civic engagement opportunities (Muetterties, 2020). Statewide and national trends show that not only are civic learning opportunities often insufficient to develop students' civic competencies, they are also inequitably distributed (Gould et al., 2011). Compounding the problem is the reality that much current discussion on civic education focuses on content demands, notably in the form of citizenship tests (Fraker et al., 2019; Hess et al., 2015), which does not necessarily lead to students meaningfully applying content to their civic lives (Barton & Levstik, 2008; Noddings, 2013), developing civic dispositional commitments (Parker, 1989), or critically assessing previously held beliefs (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Though there are many models of action civics that challenge content-focused civic initiatives and have been found to positively impact students' civic and political competences (LeCompte et al., 2019), these programs are typically used as add-ons to the curriculum and/or within the out-of-school/after-school hours.

Civic Dispositions

Grounding curriculum in civic dispositions presents a pathway toward increasing civic learning opportunities. Across relevant scholarship, high-quality civic education is often described as the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and experiences students need to effectively participate in civic life (e.g., Campbell, 2012; Obenchain & Pennington, 2015). For this study, we conceptualize *civic dispositions* as the lens through which students apply skills, make sense of, and develop knowledge in order to apply that learning in an authentic civic experience. Thus, civic dispositions reflect shared commitments to civic principles needed to live in a

democratic society, beyond partisan divides. These principles include democratic values, individual rights, and social responsibilities (Campbell, 2012; Pearson & Waterson, 2013). Maintaining a functional democratic system requires these dispositions be nurtured and intentionally developed in schools (Parker, 2003). Cognizant that democracy is messy, civic dispositions can ground social studies learning toward democratic outcomes, providing the path to navigate the messiness that is life in a democratic republic.

Using civic dispositions as a lens for social studies learning helps determine both the purpose for teaching and how we teach. According to Barton and Levstik (2004), studying history and its outcomes can support the development of dispositional commitments by providing models of civic virtue, opportunities to analyze in order to make value and moral judgments, and opportunities to respond morally to the past. Civic dispositions have also been found to help scaffold and focus historical argumentation, as well as demonstrate the needs of building disciplinary literacy within social studies (Monte-Sano, 2008; Reisman & Wineburg, 2008). Because argumentation is a core process of communicating understanding in social studies (Underberg & Norton, 2017), it is essential to be explicit about the lenses that frame that communication.

Taken together, social studies learning experiences ought to also consider the type of democratic dispositions that are inherent in the knowledge and skills students are being asked to develop and embody through their learning. From our vantage point, civic education (and social studies) divorced from democratic dispositions is just as dangerous as science divorced from ethics and morality. We do not suggest that these dispositions reflect a particular partisan (liberal or conservative) mindset, nor do we suggest that civic dispositions are “neutral.” The importance of careful framing of learning through democratic dispositions is well captured by Westheimer's (2015) views of democratic and authoritarian patriotism. Without a particular dispositional lens, the knowledge, skills, and resulting civic action can move toward radical extremes rather than democratic ideals. A citizenry guided by democratic patriotism focuses its conversations on questioning, valuing disagreements, and reinforcing principles of equality, justice, tolerance, and civil liberties even during times of national crises. A citizenry guided by authoritarian patriotism focuses on unquestioned loyalty to the state, state actors, and symbols leading to a nation of followers. Thus, intentional and consistent framing of civic learning through and toward a democratic dispositional lens shapes educational experiences toward democratic ends, rather than leaning into hyper-partisan fractures.

Civic Experiences

Civic dispositions are both developed and demonstrated through tangible interactions with others in civic spaces—in other words, through civic experiences. Civic experiences, or civic action, can take many forms, including using instructional strategies that promote democratic discourse, critical source analysis, and opportunities for out-of-classroom application (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Levine, 2012). Many scholars' assessments of engaging in civic experiences, or being a citizen, draw upon Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) taxonomy (e.g., Castro & Knowles, 2017; Castro &

Muente, 2015). Their taxonomy reflects a spectrum of civic participation, from the smaller acts of responsible behavior (“personally responsible”) and active participation (“participatory”) to transformative behavior (“justice-oriented”).

There is a wealth of research demonstrating how experiences participating in civic life help students become engaged citizens and also contribute to developing civic dispositional commitments (e.g., Hahn & Alviar-Martin, 2008; Obenchain et al., 2016). Youniss and Yates (1997) found a relationship between youth participating in service-learning and positive civic outcomes, including: broader social trust, respectful engagement, development of collaborative action/engagement skills, and political-moral understanding. Engaging in discussions of current and controversial issues has been shown to promote engagement with political issues and elections (Kahne et al., 2013). Curriculum that is tied to developing and using argumentative reasoning skills has been found to enhance the quality of students’ arguments and their awareness of the relevance and importance of evidence (Kuhn & Crowell, 2011). Focusing on consensus-building while teaching argumentative discourse can support students in discussing and incorporating viewpoints different from their own (Felton et al., 2015).

In sum, civic learning and supporting democratic practices is a central purpose of modern schooling, reaffirmed by the *C3 Framework’s* inquiry arc, particularly the Taking Informed Action component. Teaching with, and for, civic dispositions provides a bridge between social studies curricular goals and high-quality civic learning—the type that prepares current and future generations for participation in, and contribution toward, a healthy democracy. However, support is needed to enhance civic learning opportunities throughout curriculum. To prepare students for sustained engagement in civic life, frequent and direct connections should be made between authentic civic questions and various curricular contexts.

Methods

Our goal in this study was to construct a framework to help social studies teachers surface a civic dispositional throughline in their curriculum, building opportunities for rigorous, authentic, action-oriented social studies learning and thereby reflecting the democratic spirit of schooling. We used existing inquiry-based social studies curricular materials and identified themes based upon the civic disposition and action task (i.e., civic experience). Our purpose in constructing this framework was to: (a) identify major categories and elements of civic learning grounded in civic dispositions; (b) demonstrate how these dispositions and application of learning (civic action) can be used in curriculum design to incorporate civic learning across social studies content, rather than be seen as an add-on or capstone.

To answer our guiding research question—*What democratic dispositional outcomes can civic learning opportunities build toward?*—we used the C3 Teachers inquiry database, consisting of 120 inquiry blueprints.¹ Inquiry blueprints are modular curricular resources for inquiry-based learning, using a distinct “blueprint”

structure that demonstrates alignment between the questions, tasks, and disciplinary sources. This collection’s inquiries were created by scholars, practitioners, and other collaborative endeavors, vetted by the authors of the *C3 Framework*. The inquiries range in grade level (kindergarten to 12th grade) and in social studies discipline, from economics, history, and geography, to global studies and traditional civics topics. As aforementioned, this curricular collection was selected for this research as the materials are tightly aligned to the *C3 Framework* (NCSS, 2013), which is the official social studies framework for the National Council of the Social Studies and a growing model for states as they revisit their social studies standards (New et al., 2021).

As the *C3 Framework* and complementary C3 Teachers curricular materials are designed to support students’ preparation for civic life, surfacing the dispositional themes that already exist within the C3 provides greater instructional clarity for drawing out civic learning dispositional themes within a widely used resource, while also presenting a helpful framework for teachers designing their own civic learning experiences. In other words, while it is the case that C3 itself was designed to support rigorous civic learning that culminates in taking informed action, we recognize that more pedagogical support is warranted regarding making visible the civic dispositional themes therein—and it is for this reason, in part, that we pursued the present methodological approach.

We used Braun & Clark’s (2006) phases of thematic analysis to develop themes that best characterize the different resources. This process involved familiarizing ourselves with the curricular materials, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining the themes, and defining the named themes. Each inquiry’s themes were identified by an iterative process of considering the analytical lens employed in the inquiry exploration along with the way in which learning was applied to a civic context. We started with preliminary codes—*freedom* and *fairness*—based on a strong scholarship base of their preeminence in social studies curriculum as well as civic learning programs (e.g., Davis & Epstein, 2015; Levinson, 2014; Levstik & Barton, 2008; Van-Sledright, 2008). As we began initial coding, we further developed these codes by identifying sub-themes. For example, from our initial code of *fairness*, we found associated themes in inquiries that addressed questions of wealth, societal privilege, needs and wants, discrimination, etc. (These codes and themes are captured in the “Associated Ideas” column of Table 4.) Using these themes, we began organizing the inquiries, looking for complementary ideas (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, we put inquiries with the following themes—*intercultural dialogue*, *belonging*, and *diplomacy*—in one code. Because all three focus on understanding others and working together for a common purpose, these themes would eventually be labeled as *community-building*. From this organizational task, we determined a code title to best capture the different themes. Though some inquiries aligned more closely and authentically to the noted themes’ democratic ideals than others, all inquiries could nonetheless be categorized with relative ease.

1 C3 Teachers houses over 300 inquiries; however, only inquiries in the searchable database were included, as those resources were created,

reviewed, and/or vetted by the C3 Teachers creators. The collection was accessed in 2019.

Table 1: Number of Inquiries per Grade Levels

Grade Range	Number of Inquiries
K-2	20
3-5	20
6-8	32
9-12	48
Total	120

Table 2: Number of Inquiries per Subject

Topic/Subject Area	Number of Inquiries
US History	41
World History	29
Government/civics	27
Global Studies	16
Economics	12
Geography	10

Note. Some inquiries were tagged in multiple topic/subject areas, resulting in the total count discrepancy.

Table 3: Number of Inquiries per Disposition

Theme	Knowledge	Fairness	Community	Care	Freedom	Democracy
Total Number	24	18	29	19	10	20

n=120

Deductive categories were inspired by scholarship from the discipline of moral psychology, particularly from Moral Foundations Theory. According to Moral Foundations Theory, all cultures share a common intuitive ethics, upon which they construct their unique moral codes, traditions, and institutions (Haidt, 2012). In other words, all people are united by a common moral ethic, but interpretation and associated practices reflect cultural variability. It follows, then, that all partisan persuasions may well agree on the importance of those values, but both weigh and interpret them differently. The six foundations² are: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and liberty/oppression. Though Haidt did not position the moral foundations as civic virtues, the six foundations provided inspiration for exploring civic dispositions for three reasons: (a) the belief that democratic education and moral development are

complementary, but not equivalent (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Parker, 2003; Westheimer, 2015); (b) the desire to ground the framework on broad concepts that could unite all students but allow for interpretive differences; and (c) the foundations' ability to be broadly applicable but nonetheless allow for cultural variability (Haidt, 2012). The moral foundations theory categories, thus, served as inspiration and another analytical lens for considering how to interpret our data and determine categories that could unite, rather than divide, stakeholders.

Findings

Our analytical process led to the creation of six comprehensive thematic categories: *knowledge-building*, *fairness-building*, *community-building*, *care-building*, *freedom-building*, and *democracy-building*. By defining civic engagement as

Table 4: Civic Learning Categories

Outcome	Disposition	Definition	Associated Ideas
<i>Civic learning is building toward . . .</i>	<i>Students demonstrate a commitment to . . .</i>		
Knowledge	Pursue accuracy and understanding	Students seek truth and increased access to accurate information, for self and others.	Increasing access to information; dispelling false information (information literacy, preserving the past [e.g., oral histories]); lifting marginalized voices; increasing digital and media literacies

EXAMPLES*

- **How did slavery shape my state?** (local history, 4th grade) *Students evaluate the ways in which their state's slavery history is/isn't captured in public monuments/memorials (e.g., statues, plaques, state historical societies).*
- **Why is the Affordable Care Act (ACA) so controversial?** (economics, 12th grade) *Students evaluate different sources of information about the ACA and create a student-facing pamphlet that describes competing perspectives, accompanied with a list of credible sources for further information.*

(continued)

2 There are five primary moral foundations. The sixth foundation, liberty/oppression, is frequently included, but Haidt (2012) has said it is a candidate for "foundationhood" but not definitively a member.

Table 4: Civic Learning Categories (continued)

Fairness	Ensure equity and justice	Students address questions around equity, justice, and fairness for groups and individuals.	Access to opportunities, wealth, privileges within a society; needs and wants; social justice; discrimination; social movements
<i>EXAMPLES</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the real cost of bananas? (economics, 5th grade) <i>Students survey the availability of fair-trade products in their local area, as well as gather perspectives on the issue. Students share their informed perspective with a local service organization.</i> • Did the Constitution establish a just government? (US history, 11th grade) <i>Students evaluate the impact of constitutional amendments toward establishing a more just government. They select a proposed amendment that students believe will make the Constitution more just and contact an individual or organization promoting that amendment to see how the students can participate.</i> 			
Community	Foster community	Students expand understanding and cooperation with others.	Cross-cultural relationships/connections; consensus and dialogue; diplomacy; global citizenship (e.g., cosmopolitanism); respect; school community/belonging
<i>EXAMPLES</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should we call it the Silk Road? (world history, 9th grade) <i>Students evaluate ways in which different cultural traditions impact their local culture and create a web page (or social media page) to encourage dialogue with other students through a classroom exchange program (e.g., Skype Classroom).</i> • Did the American Dream come true for all immigrants? (US history, 4th grade) <i>Students explore the experiences of prominent immigrant groups in their local/regional community to create a digital information session for children emigrating to their community.</i> 			
Care	Promote the common good	Students act responsibly to promote the common good.	Safety; protection from harm; social responsibilities; empathy; environmental stewardship; development; human rights
<i>EXAMPLES</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are we? (geography, 3rd grade) <i>Students host an environmental fair or Earth Day celebration to share information about “human footprints” with the local community.</i> • How did sugar feed slavery? (US history, 5th grade) <i>Students create and act out a television commercial raising awareness of inhumane production practices for popular consumer products today.</i> 			
Freedom	Protect freedoms for self and others	Students address personal freedoms, individual rights, and oppression.	Individual rights/freedoms; liberty; oppression; exercise of authority and power; individual agency
<i>EXAMPLES</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does religious freedom exist? (world history, 6th grade) <i>Students conduct an interfaith gallery walk or create a display of major religions that informs and addresses the concept of religious freedom.</i> • Are students protected by the First Amendment? (civics/government, 12th grade) <i>Students evaluate the school’s current cyberbullying and social media policies and the extent to which they align with recent First Amendment legislation.</i> 			
Democracy	Engage in democracy	Students foster democratic processes and systems.	Democratic participation; representation; individual and group agency; self-determination
<i>EXAMPLES</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the internet good for democracy? (civics/government, 12th grade) <i>Students invite a political campaign advisor to participate in an informed conversation regarding the role of Twitter in political campaigns.</i> • Do we have to have rules? (civics, 2nd grade) <i>Students write a letter to the school principal requesting a meeting to discuss any school rules that could be revised to better reflect all students’ values.</i> 			

* The inquiry examples come from the C3 Teachers inquiry database.

growth-oriented (i.e., building toward democratic outcomes), the framework’s six themes ground our work in dispositional outcomes aligned with Deweyan impetus to have students actively tend to democratic civic life (Dewey, 1916). See Table 4 for descriptions of each category.

Following, we describe each of the six themes that emerged from our curricular analysis by providing: a definition, including what each theme is building toward and complementary civic dispositions (or commitments); sub-themes and related ideas; related scholarship; and examples from the C3 Teachers inquiry

collection. Again, it is these six themes that emerged most prominently (and most frequently) from our inductive and deductive analysis of the data—taken together, they serve as a powerful framework to guide instructional pedagogy for social studies inquiry in ways that are supportive of democratic education.

Knowledge-Building

When students engage in knowledge-building civic action, they demonstrate a disposition committed to pursuing accuracy, truth, and increased access to factual information. What sets this theme apart from other civic themes is that it does not position the pursuit of knowledge as being for the sake of knowledge alone. Instead, the knowledge-building theme reflects a commitment to promote access to accurate knowledge, for themselves and others. Common sub-themes that emerged include: digital literacy (also often termed information or media literacy); truth and transparency; access to factual information; dispelling or fighting false information; promoting knowledge and knowledge-seeking; preserving the past (e.g., oral histories, engaging in disciplinary practices); and challenging false representations of history (e.g., dominant historical narratives, public memorials).

The knowledge-building civic theme provides space for students to apply disciplinary, critical, and information literacies to uncover and evaluate knowledge and consider how they contribute to dialogue: how history is documented, the ways in which dominant narratives overshadow marginalized voices, and their agency toward fixing any gaps. Such skills should be privileged in contemporary social studies instruction, given the preponderance of historical narratives that have served to silence marginalized groups (e.g., Loewen, 2008; Shear, 2015; Takaki, 2008; VanSledright, 2002). By uncovering and elevating hidden histories, students' civic actions position them to build and expand inclusive historical knowledge. Likewise, knowledge-building allows students to bring source literacy into a civic space. Evaluating and making use of sources is a foundational disciplinary literacy (e.g., Monte-Sano, 2016; Wineburg, 1991). Opportunities to elevate credible information and dispel inaccurate information has been documented to promote both increased online political engagement and exposure to diverse viewpoints as well as to increase the likelihood that students themselves will correctly distinguish between accurate and inaccurate online content (Kahne et al., 2012; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). When students scrutinize (and apply) sources of information as a form of civic action, students have a pathway to build their own disciplinary knowledge while sharing that knowledge with others.

This theme emerged 24 times across our thematic analysis. An illustrative example of this civic theme can be seen in a fourth-grade inquiry on the history of slavery, where students explore state history through a question—*How did slavery shape my state?*—and then evaluate public memorials in their community and the extent to which they tell the state's history of slavery (C3Teachers.org, 2016). In the inquiry, students examine public discussions about two statues of enslavers placed on a former slave auction site. Students consider what stories are told, and not told, at the site and then write recommendations as to what should be

done to better tell these histories. A similar inquiry could ask students to evaluate their textbook and contact the publisher about proposed revisions. Both action tasks position students to surface hidden histories and build individual and community knowledge—important elements of healthy participation of life in a democratic republic.

Fairness-Building

Students engage in fairness-building tasks when they demonstrate a disposition committed to ensuring equity and justice. They address questions about equity, justice, and fairness for groups and individuals. This theme often takes a critical stance in that students apply the lens of fairness to consider distribution and access to wealth, opportunities, and privileges within society. It also includes questions around needs and wants, problematizing what is and should be “fair.” It is important to note that this stance is not definitively a critical stance, as *fairness* can be interpreted in many ways (Haidt, 2012).

Much civic learning scholarship advocates for civic learning opportunities with attention to social justice, discrimination, and social movements, as well as service-learning—all of which has been found to contribute positively to students' academic success (e.g., Dee & Penner, 2016; Mirra, 2018). Though many teachers today have expressed fear about teaching politics or being too political with their social studies teaching (DiGiacomo et al., 2021), avoidance of questions around inequity and global responsibilities leave individualist ideas and inequitable systems unchallenged (Andreotti, 2011; Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Clay and Rubin (2020) have argued that students' own lived experiences provide ample fodder for civic learning through a critically relevant civics lens that allows students to use their out-of-school resources to navigate and take action against injustice in their own lives.

The fairness theme emerged 18 times in our analysis. An example of this civic theme can be seen in an 11th-grade inquiry on the U.S. Constitution, framed by this compelling question: *Did the Constitution establish a just government?* Students research the efforts since 1787 to make the Constitution more just through the amendment process (C3Teachers.org, 2015a). They evaluate the extent to which proposed amendments could have contributed to a more just Constitution. Students act by contacting an individual or organization promoting the amendment to see how they can participate. Through this action task, students are evaluating policy with an explicit lens of “justice,” providing a pathway to foster a more fair society.

Community-Building

In civic action tasks that are community-building, students demonstrate a disposition committed to fostering community by expanding their understanding and cooperating with others. These tasks include learning from, and listening to, one another through discussions or shared dialogue; building relationships across difference; and fostering community understanding.

Building community can be local or global in scope. On a smaller scale, a community can include the school or classroom

climate. Because high-quality civic learning opportunities encourage teamwork, collaboration, problem-solving, and respectful dialogue with peers, instilling a culture of civic learning can support schools in building a positive school climate. Studies have shown how students who attend schools with positive school climates can develop a positive sense of belonging, connection to peers, trust in institutions, and, eventually, healthier engagement in the broader society and its democratic system (Flanagan et al., 1998). As a microcosm of larger society, these civic tasks also offer an opportunity to address racial/ethnicity-based divisions within a school community (Tatum, 2003). Likewise, the importance of fostering democratic practices, including deliberation and civil discourse, where students engage in collaborative discussions, contributes to building respectful democratic community spaces (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Levine, 2013).

Several inquiries demonstrate community-building on a global scale, reflecting tenets of global citizenship, such as international cooperation, diplomacy, cosmopolitanism, and commitments to pluralist understandings (Appiah, 2006; Noddings, 2013; Nussbaum, 2009). These inquiries ask students to take action concerning international relationships, bridging the diplomatic tensions of the past to those in the present.

This theme emerged 29 times in the analysis. A ninth-grade inquiry on the Silk Road illustrates how the civic theme of community-building can connect the historical content to modern civic spaces. The compelling question—*Should we call it the Silk Road?*—raises the question of the larger cultural exchanges that emerged from the Silk Road, surfacing questions around globalization and the creation of a global community (C3Teachers.org, 2015d). The action task has students apply their learning by encouraging additional international dialogue through a Skype (or similar) classroom connection. The cultural exchanges discussed in the inquiry should be carried forward in the action task, where students connect with others and grow in their understanding of a global community.

Care-Building

In tasks that are care-building, students demonstrate a disposition committed to acting on their social responsibilities by helping others, mitigating harm, and promoting the common good. These tasks can include addressing safety and harm experienced by individuals and communities, as well as tasks related to environmental stewardship, development, sustainability, and human rights.

Promoting care of others framed as “the common good” is frequently identified as a purpose of social studies education (e.g., Beane & Apple, 2007; Barton & Levstik, 2004; NCSS, 2013). Commitment to human rights, specifically, fosters empathy and challenges inequitable systems (Lévesque, 2008; Nussbaum, 2009; Parker, 2018). The care-building theme also extends to caring for the environment through environmental stewardship. Environmental concerns are particularly pressing civic issues where students can consider the interplay of political policy, justice-orientations, and ecological crises (Fry & O’Brien, 2015; Kissling & Bell, 2019; Mitra & Serriere, 2015).

The care theme emerged 19 times across our thematic analysis. Using a compelling question—*How did sugar feed slavery?*—a fifth-grade inquiry connects the history of enslavement in the western hemisphere to modern human rights issues (C3Teachers.org, 2015b). To stage the inquiry, students complete a think-pair-share to determine if popular consumer products they use may be produced through inhumane means. After exploring the ways in which sugar production and slavery grew, or the way sugar “fed” the growth of slavery in the inquiry, students determine the severity of the potentially inhumane production practices for the popular consumer products they identified then create a commercial to raise awareness of inhumane production practices. Students, and their audience, can decide to support or stop use of the product.

Freedom-Building

Freedom-building civic action tasks have students demonstrate a disposition committed to protecting freedoms for self and others. Students address issues around individual rights and oppression. These tasks can include problematizing ideals (e.g., freedom, liberty) while also considering individual and group agency and relationships with authority and power.

Freedom is a powerful theme of social studies, particularly in United States history education (VanSledright, 2008). Freedom can be considered in terms of government overreach (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006) as well as in inequitable forms of citizenship where members of society do not all have equal access to freedoms, either as encoded in law or in social practice (e.g., Banks, 2017; Bell, 1992). In this inquiry collection, the freedoms listed in the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights frequently serve as a framework for the informed action tasks, including a consideration of students’ freedom of speech, religion, and privacy. It is important to note that freedom-building tasks position students as advocates for themselves and others. An uncomplicated form of freedom-building focused solely on the individual can reinforce perspectives that champion only one’s own individual rights but does not necessarily emphasize responsibility to combat the status quo and ensure rights for all (Gaudelli, 2009; Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006).

This theme emerged 10 times in the analysis. A ninth-grade world history inquiry—*How “magnificent” was Suleiman?*—demonstrates the freedom-building theme’s application to a global context (C3Teachers.org, 2015c). Students explore the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century, considering the positive and negative impacts Suleiman had on the region. One important theme of the inquiry relates to the level of religious freedom and autonomy afforded to minority groups. In the informed action task, students can apply their knowledge of the relationship between religion and governments by researching this relationship in modern-day Turkey. This exploration can include the role of religious freedom in Turkey’s bid for membership in the European Union. Students act by crafting a class position statement concerning this freedom issue and sharing it with the European Commission, the European Union’s executive body, which is responsible for the decision. In so doing, what freedom means and how to

cultivate and ensure it moves from an abstract social studies term to a process that students engage in and work together toward.

Democracy-Building

Students engage in democracy-building when they demonstrate a disposition committed to fostering democratic processes and systems. These themes include democratic participation, representation, individual and group agency in political processes, self-determination, and global democratic practices. Contexts for democracy-building can be at various levels, from school-based practices to global democratic bodies (e.g., the United Nations). Democracy and democratic practices are at the core of the dispositions of this article. All the other themes presented in this research (i.e., knowledge, fairness, community, care, freedom) are part and parcel to a democratic education and associated democratic dispositions. What distinguishes democracy-building tasks in this category is the explicit central focus on building and maintaining well-functioning democratic systems and processes.

Though there is overlap with other themes, we find it valuable to call out democracy-building as a discrete category to emphasize democratic systems and governing structures. Tasks may promote freedom or fairness more broadly, but democracy-building tasks focus explicitly on ensuring seats are at the political table. This is important because studies have shown that students need practice engaging in democratic processes, including formal democratic institutions (Kahne & Sporte, 2009; Niemi, 2012; Westheimer & Kahne, 2003). Likewise, students who engage in governance activities are more likely to participate in future civic and political action (Reichert & Print, 2017). In addition, Midgagh (2015) found that when students had opportunities to learn how to become involved in politics, they were significantly more likely to report feeling more engaged in school.

The democracy theme surfaced 20 times in our analysis. To further explain the distinguishing features of this theme, consider the 12th-grade inquiry: *What ended apartheid?* (C3Teachers.org, 2015e). Democracy-building is woven throughout the inquiry, as students evaluate political participation by investigating who brought change to South Africa: Nelson Mandela, South African organizations, or international organizations. Political participation is the central focus. The action task continues the theme by having students assess how the South African government, citizens, or other organizations responded to a modern challenge of post-apartheid life. Students take action by creating a position statement about what United States citizens can do to respond to the challenge and support democratic practices. This task reflects several of the civic themes. Though students are considering current challenges in post-apartheid South Africa—surfacing questions around care, fairness, freedom, and community—they are not tasked with evaluating how harmful, unfair, free, or divisive the challenge is. Instead, they are evaluating the challenge through a lens of democratic practices. Thus, this inquiry is categorized as democracy-building as the action task centers students' evaluation around healthy and democratic political participation.

Application of Framework

Using the C3 Teachers inquiry collection, we identified six thematic categories, representing civic dispositional and civic learning outcomes. Using these themes to connect curricular content to authentic civic concerns, coupled with rigorous content learning, supports transference of knowledge to authentic, informed civic action opportunities. As noted, we frame these themes as building to emphasize the collective practices and a growth-oriented approach to civic engagement. These themes are civic values that all citizens can (ostensibly) agree upon, though interpretations vary greatly—providing a common understanding or metric from which students can evaluate civic concerns, beyond partisan rhetoric and talking points.

Our hope with this framework is to offer a tool for teachers and instructional designers to employ a pedagogical shift for the relationship between students, civic learning, and curricular content: Rather than content as something needed to be known for an exam or other academic assessment, content can be the springboard for taking informed civic action toward building a better world. Civic dispositions, then, both guide and are the aim of learning by providing new meaning to arguments and actions that students take within and beyond the four walls of their classrooms. To demonstrate application of this civic dispositions framework, we describe two examples that apply these dispositional themes to curriculum design. First, we provide ways in which different civic themes can apply to an ancient history unit, surfacing multiple ways democratic dispositions can be emphasized and frame students' civic action tasks. Second, we show how a civic theme can be looped across units in a course, creating a consistent thread of informed civic action throughout the academic year.

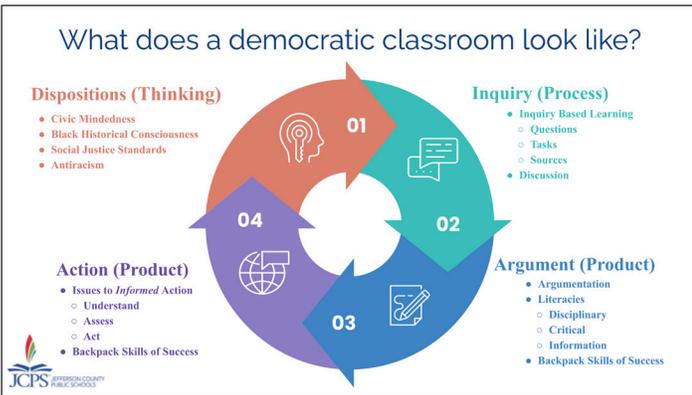
For the purposes of exploring how the framework might be applied in practice, we draw upon the social studies curriculum framework for developing democratic classrooms used by Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) in Louisville, Kentucky. The curriculum operationalizes Kentucky's social studies standards, which are aligned to the *C3 Framework* (DiGiacomo et al., 2021). Learning is structured around dispositional mindsets, inquiry processes, argumentation, and then application through action. Each unit includes a Taking Informed Action task, providing teachers an example task that applies the unit to an authentic modern civic context.³ See Box 1 for a graphical representation of how teachers in JCPS are asked to structure their students' social studies learning.

Knowledge-Building, Fairness-Building, and Community-Building in World History

Using a 6th-grade world history unit from the Development of Civilizations (3500 BCE-600CE) course, we demonstrate the ways our framework can help surface multiple authentic civic learning opportunities that complement content-specific learning. According to the Kentucky Academic Standards, in this course,

3 Many inquiry units in the JCPS curriculum were built upon inquiries in the C3 Teacher collection.

Box 1: Developing Democratic Classrooms



sixth graders “investigat[e] the emergence and development of civilizations in River Valley Civilizations . . . and Classical Empires between 3500 BCE-600 CE” (KDE, 2019, p. 97). Through understanding the ancient world, “students develop an appreciation for the foundations of the modern world” (KDE, 2019, p. 97). The chosen unit’s materials address the standards’ noted themes and concepts by focusing on the development of governments, laws, hierarchies, and religion through comparing Egypt and Mesopotamia, framed by this compelling question: *How did power shape the development of civilizations?*⁴

Following, we describe different examples of how civic action tasks for this inquiry topic can use three civic learning dispositions: knowledge-building, fairness-building, and community-building. Students may have opportunities to consider the past in consideration of all six of the civic dispositional themes, as these dispositions are not wholly distinct from one another. For this work, the examples described show how emphasizing a dispositional theme demonstrates distinct approaches to civic action using the inquiry unit’s content.

For a knowledge-building action task in this unit on Egypt and Mesopotamia, students would consider what they know and don’t know about their community’s past, particularly focusing on the theme of power from the inquiry. To act, students could first examine artifacts or local histories of their region, considering what they say (or don’t say) about how people lived in different historical periods. Students could then evaluate how well an organization (e.g., museum) explains the artifact in terms of discussions of power, whether economic, social, or political. Finally, students can take action by writing the organization and sharing their informed perspective about the needed revisions, if any.

For a fairness-building action task, students could connect the inquiry’s theme of power to rules and laws. In this unit, students explore legal systems (e.g., Hammurabi’s Code) and consider how fair or just these systems were. To apply this content to a modern issue, students could evaluate the fairness of school rules or local/state/federal laws. In a school context, students can review the

school rules and determine the positive and negative consequences of a rule. Using the rule’s consequences, students then assess whether the rule is fair and just. If the rule is deemed beneficial and fair, students could create a school campaign to share why it is beneficial and encourage fellow students to follow the rule. If the rule needs revision or is deemed detrimental and unfair, students can ultimately write and share out a suggested change to then share with stakeholders (e.g., classmates, administrators, district leaders).

For a community-building action task, students could consider how ancient civilizations maintained social divisions and use that learning to break down the barriers that divide communities today. In this unit, students explore the ways that ancient civilizations exercised power by physically dividing people and/or controlling their actions. These divisions could be palaces, reserved for elites; walls to enclose areas; as well as rules and customs about sacred spaces. To apply this content to their own lives, students could first discuss the spatial divisions within the school building (e.g., what groups of students sit in different areas of the lunchroom, hallways designated for different grades or student groups). Students could then evaluate the extent to which these official or unofficial divisions impact the school community or promote division. To act, students might ultimately organize a school activity (e.g., mix-it-up lunch) to encourage students to create and maintain more inclusive spaces for all students.

By using a dispositional theme to frame the curriculum design, the unit’s content is now purposeful, oriented toward a democratic outcome. This simple, yet powerful, pedagogical move positions social studies learning toward a democratic purpose and positions students to civically engage in an informed, meaningful way.

Care-Building across a U.S. History Course

For the fifth-grade course of study centered on U.S. history, 5th Grade: Colonization to Constitution 1600–1877, students examine “the conflict and compromise that resulted from migration and settlement to understand the tensions and factors that led to the fight for independence and the establishment of the United States” (KDE, 2019, p. 84). In the JCPS curricular resources, each unit’s civic application task can be readily framed around care-building, the dispositional commitment to ensure equity and justice. Returning to care as a theme across each unit’s civic task surfaces questions around equity and justice across space and time, providing multiple opportunities to problematize care and harm in modern concerns. By looping this theme across units, students are not only transferring knowledge to multiple contexts, they are building their competencies toward multiple forms of civic participation (Parker & Lo, 2016; Swan et al., 2019). Again, these examples show elements of all the civic themes; however, they demonstrate how a care-building focus can frame civic action across the course content.

In the first unit of study for the JCPS district, this compelling question—*if we live in the present, why should we care about the past?*—frames students’ explorations into the ways in which the past informs the present and how the present shapes

4 The curricular materials provided by JCPS is not a comprehensive curriculum, meaning it is not composed of individual daily lesson plans or prescribed instruction. Rather, it provides standards-aligned materials to support teachers’ curriculum construction.

investigations of the past. This first unit is meant to be an overview of the time allotted for fifth grade, with examinations of the past and present. The JCPS curriculum's suggested civic action task has students explore the causes and effects of a major event in the local community. This event can be of the recent past, as well as an historical event students want to address (e.g., the city's founding; community's history of enslavement; local civil rights movement). Students can evaluate the consequences of the event, including who benefitted, who was put at risk, and whether the event contributed to the community's common good. Based on this assessment, students could then invite a local politician or community leader to class to discuss the event. If the event is not being addressed at the community-level, students might discuss with the speaker ways in which they can surface this history and/or students' role in fostering the common good of the whole community.

The third unit tackles American colonization with this compelling question: *How can power lead to oppression? (1650–1763)*. The civic action task proposes that students research a modern-day example of how one of the inquiry's featured marginalized groups address oppression, legal/social limitations, or unfair conditions. To assess the issue, students evaluate the care or harm incurred by the group and how advocacy or civic organizations are addressing the concern. Students act by sharing the organization's message (or their own message), describing it through the lens of promoting the common good.

In the fifth unit, students answer this question: *How does conflict lead to change? (1774–1776)*. Students learn about a recent protest movement in their community/region. Using language from the Declaration of Independence ("life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"), students assess the protest movement by considering their message through the lens of care of all community members. Students could then take action by creating a public service announcement about the issue, sharing their informed perspective on the school website or on the morning announcements.

By applying the care-building lens to this course curriculum, the study of history is positioned clearly as a means to consider how citizens act responsibly to promote the common good. Connecting past to present, then, affords students an authentic way of applying inquiry learning to modern concerns, preparing them for responsible democratic participation.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. First, our analysis used the *C3 Framework* and the *C3 Teachers* inquiry collection as its primary source of data to conceptualize the democratic principles embedded within, and as a potential heuristic for, amplifying authentic civic learning and engagement. To be sure, the *C3 Teachers* collection is but one of many contemporary social studies curricular resources available for teachers. Subsequent studies would do well to look across multiple sets of curricular resources, including those made and enacted by teachers, with similar guiding questions. The available resources at *C3 Teachers* are limited in that they are not externally vetted, nor are they a comprehensive

curriculum—though the subject options are numerous, they do not reflect all that would be taught in a social studies classroom.

Next, we see a grave need for empirical studies that investigate—ideally through ethnographic, observation based-methods—how students experience social studies teaching that leads with civic dispositions as the ethos and telos of inquiry. The question of student experience, to be clear, remains outside of the scope of the present work. However, it has been our hope in this article to offer the civic dispositions framework as a pedagogical heuristic for how to bridge civic inquiry, learning, and action toward more democratic ends.

Conclusion

We embarked on this research at a time when there is a need not just to know things but to think about what we know, how we view the world, and what we do with what we know. The purpose of this study was to examine if, and how, existing social studies curricular resources could support democracy-enhancing civic learning and engagement. In offering a framework of civic dispositions, this work seeks to operationalize civic learning by connecting classroom learning to an authentic civic concern, making social studies a routine opportunity for civic engagement. If adopted, this framework has the potential to not only address how civic learning can appear in curriculum, but also serve as a tool for teachers to support students in applying what they learn through civic experiences—designed to lead to a more humane and democratic world.

We leaned on the Taking Informed Action component of *C3 Framework*—aligned materials, where the "informed," fortunately, does a lot of heavy lifting. To be sure, people "take action" all the time in ways that are antidemocratic. Likewise, encouraging students to take action on things that are important to them, without emphasizing the process of being informed, can reinforce the promotion of ignorance (and misinformation), rather than building and acting upon sound knowledge. Though teachers may not be able to completely divorce classroom content from partisanship (whether well-intended or not), this framework, inspired by the unifying values identified in Moral Foundations Theory, provides a means to connect learned classroom content to modern concerns by focusing on the democratic values that unite us, rather than divide us.

That is not to say that learning grounded in these dispositions will necessarily result in unified opinions, nor will they completely eliminate students' predisposition to rely on the easily accessible (mis)information on the internet and their social networks. However, what the themes do provide is a reminder of the shared dispositional values and ethics that are to be expected of individuals living in a civil democratic society and, likewise, connect those dispositions to the necessary rigorous process that informs how we interpret and assess "the facts," whether in the ancient past or in modern contexts. Rather than avoid everything that may appear controversial or outwardly political, teachers would do well to focus on how civic dispositions allow students to take these topics head-on and draw upon their knowledge to do so. In so doing, students can focus on their shared dispositional commitments, rather than on partisan rhetoric or party affiliation.

We respect the autonomy that teachers have, especially in a locally controlled state as our own, to design and enact curriculum in ways that are responsive to their students' needs. At the same time, we posit that by intentionally reorienting and situating social studies learning by, and through, civic dispositions, a more pluralistic and inclusive society is within reach. Despite the hyper polarized political climate that characterizes the current moment in our history, we argue that building toward knowledge, fairness, community, care, freedom, and democracy, are ideas that, perhaps, we can all support.

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