

How Do We Shape Our Environment? An Inquiry from the New York State Social Studies Toolkit

S. G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee

It is no secret that social studies in elementary schools has been given low priority in recent years.¹ There is good news at the start of 2016: a new federal education law (ESSA) creates new opportunities for social studies subjects to be supported and taught. A new energy is developing as well around the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* as state departments of education begin to revise their state standards and see the potential of literacy through social studies.²

Educators in New York State revised their state social studies standards in 2014. The New York State K-12 Social Studies Toolkit is a curriculum and instructional resource that bridges the gap between the state standards and teachers' classroom practices. The Toolkit project, which we directed, is open source and online, so it's available free to teachers across the country and around the world, as well as in New York State.

Based on the Inquiry Arc from the C3 Framework, the Toolkit inquiries are represented through the Inquiry Design Model (IDM), which features a blueprint that begins with a compelling question and moves students through the elements necessary to address that question in a thoughtful and informed fashion.

We would like to invite readers of this environmentally themed issue of *SSYL* to download the free second-grade Toolkit inquiry on geography, humans, and the environment. The compelling question for the inquiry is “How do we shape our environment?”³ The initial image—a split picture showing what Manhattan probably looked like in 1609 and what it looked like in 2009—illustrates the idea that humans can have a profound effect on their environments. This idea is reinforced by a staging activity around a time-lapse video showing how a city can emerge from a forest.

The inquiry takes students through a series of supporting questions that encourage them to dig deeply into the ways in which people interact with their environment over time and

how such interactions may improve and/or harm their communities. To address one supporting question, students study how we modify our environment over time; to address another, students and their teachers examine the pros and cons of a local community development project.

To show how they are making sense of the inquiry, students go through a sequence of formative performance tasks that increase in complexity. Early in the inquiry, students complete a graphic organizer, showing how people have modified the environment of a location in New York State (this task can be easily adapted to any community or grade level); at the end, they demonstrate their ability to assess the impact of a local project (in this case, the Tappan Zee Bridge) in a pictorial essay.

Each of the Toolkit inquiries features sources from which students can pull information to address the formative tasks and draw evidence in support of their arguments. In this inquiry, students use a range of images (pictures, maps, and videos) as the main sources through which to build their understandings and their ability to work with sources.

While many of the Toolkit inquiries list the Taking Informed Action pieces at the end, the inquiry on geography, humans, and environment embeds them throughout. As students are working on Formative Performance Tasks 1 and 2, they build their capacity to understand the issues relevant to the ways that humans interact with their environments. Formative Task 3 asks students to assess the impact of the construction of the Tappan Zee Bridge. And, in examining the pros and cons of a local community project and inviting a local official to discuss the class conclusions, students have an opportunity to take informed action.

The Summative Performance Task asks students to construct an evidence-based argument that responds to the question, “How do we shape our environment?” Students' arguments might be expressed in a variety of ways—a poster, a bulleted list, or a conversation with their teacher. The form in which

students express their ideas and the reasons behind them are less important than the opportunity to do so.

The Toolkit inquiries are published on the C3 Teachers website (c3teachers.org/inquiries) in PDFs and as MSWord files so that teachers can adapt the materials to their particular students and contexts. The IDM Blueprint Generator is a companion tool to support teachers as they create their own inquiries and provides an online student interface for these teacher-created inquiries (c3teachers.org/generator).

We hope you will take advantage of this free, online resource as you plan classroom lessons about geography, humans, and the environment. 🌍

Notes

1. Paul G. Fitchett and Tina L. Heafner. "A National Perspective on the Effects of High-Stakes Testing and Standardization on Elementary Social Studies Marginalization," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 38, no. 1 (2010): 114-130.

2. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S. G. Grant. "A Study of Social Studies Coordinators' Views of the Common Core," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* (2015): 1-17, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885985X1500039X.
3. This inquiry is available free online at www.c3teachers.org/inquiries/geography-humans-environment.

S. G. GRANT (*Binghamton University*), **KATHY SWAN** (*University of Kentucky*), and **JOHN LEE** (*North Carolina State University*) are professors of social studies education and worked as the lead writers of the C3 Framework. Over the past year, they co-created the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) as they collaboratively directed the New York State Toolkit Project. Grant, Swan, and Lee founded and co-direct C3 Teachers (c3teachers.org), a site dedicated to implementation of the C3 Framework in classrooms, schools, and states.

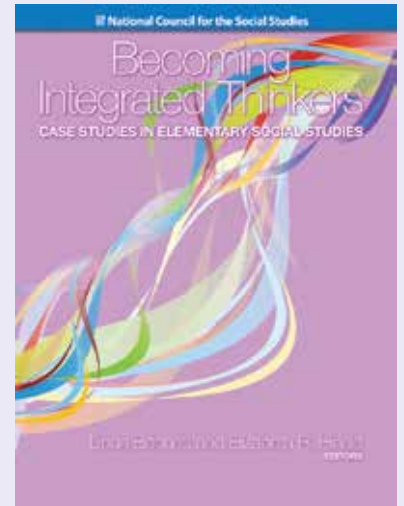
Becoming Integrated Thinkers: Case Studies in Elementary Social Studies

Edited by Linda Bennett and Elizabeth R. Hinde
National Council for the Social Studies, 128 pp., 2015

At a time when social studies is being curtailed in elementary schools, the contributors to this book show that it is still possible to teach social studies very well. The key strategy is one of effective integration, which requires significant planning and pedagogical knowledge, but has a tremendous payoff.

The contributors to this book identify the foundations of effective integration, outline strategies for achieving this goal, and present case studies of successful integration at different elementary grade levels. The book includes model lessons that advance the objectives of the recently published C3 Framework, as well as those of the national social studies standards and the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy. This book is a vital resource for elementary teachers, teacher educators, teacher candidates, curriculum directors, and professional development supervisors.

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