Social Studies Evidence-Based Practices Brief

What are evidence-based practices?

Evidence-based practices are instructional strategies and approaches grounded in rigorous research and demonstrated to improve student learning outcomes. They rely on data from well-designed studies to determine whether a practice is effective, rather than intuition. Using evidence-based practices means intentionally selecting methods that have been shown to be effective, implementing those practices with fidelity, and continuously monitoring student learning so adjustments can be made if needed.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) references tiers of evidence, which provides districts and schools with a framework for determining which programs, practices, strategies, and interventions work in which contexts and for which students. This handout, ESSA Tiers of Evidence (REL Midwest, 2019), provides additional information about the ESSA tiers of evidence and the kinds of studies necessary to determine those evidence tiers.

Why is the use of evidence-based practices important?

The use of evidence-based practices is essential not only for classroom instruction but also for improved student learning, as it ensures that the teaching methods used are proven to support student learning rather than relying on trial and error. When educators use practices and strategies grounded in high-quality research, they are more likely to meet students' diverse needs, reduce achievement gaps and use instructional time effectively.

Introduction

This practice brief provides a snapshot of evidence-based practices in social studies. When implemented well, these practices have the potential to elevate and advance student learning in social studies.

Highlighted practices include, but are not limited to:

- Connecting to Prior Knowledge
- Eliciting Student Questions
- Explicit Teaching of Disciplinary Literacy
- Substantive Conversations
- Notetaking, Summarization and Concept Mapping
- Arguing from Evidence
- Explicit Vocabulary Instruction
- Building Reading Comprehension

Listed resources are examples intended to support educator understanding and implementation and are not intended as an endorsement of a specific program or product.

Practice: Connecting to Prior Knowledge

Overview

Iowa's social studies standards spiral in complexity, introducing concepts at one grade level and often building on those concepts at later grade levels. With an effect size of .93, knowing and using a student's prior knowledge has powerful implications (Hattie, 2021).

What are teachers doing?	What are students doing?
• Analyzing prior grade-level standards to understand better what students should have learned in a prior grade level • Explicitly planning to pre-assess student knowledge at the beginning of a new unit and adjusting instruction based on what students already know ○ This helps teachers identify misconceptions that need correction and supports differentiation of new content and concepts	• Reflecting on what they already know about a given topic or concept • Making connections to what they might already know and building upon their understanding with the introduction of new content or concepts

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Iowa Academic Standards for Social Studies (Iowa Department of Education, 2026)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Anticipation Guides (The Teacher Toolkit, n.d.)
- The Anticipation Guide: Motivating Students to Find Out More about History (Social Education, 2004)
- KWL Charts (The Teacher Toolkit, n.d.)

Practice: Eliciting Student Questions

Overview

Social studies instruction is inherently about questions. In a high-quality social studies classroom, students should analyze multiple sources to develop an argument in response to the historical question being studied. Throughout this process, students need to ask questions about the sources being analyzed. Eliciting student questions has an effect size of .46 (Fisher, Frey & Hattie, 2016).

What are teachers doing?	What are students doing?
• Designing units and lessons around questions • Modeling how to ask strong questions, based on the sources being studied • Creating a classroom culture of curiosity and wonder • Using strategies like question stems and protocols, such as the Question Formulation Technique • Prompting students to ask more complex questions, moving from factual to evaluative questions • Integrating the use of primary and secondary sources to spark questioning	• Asking questions about the sources being studied • Generating their own questions • Expressing curiosity and wonder • Collaborating with peers to improve questions • Refining questions to move from factual to evaluative questions • Using their own questions to guide research, discussions, and other class investigations

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Eliciting and Interpreting Student Thinking in Inquiry-Based Classrooms (Teaching Works,n.d.)
- Inquiry in Social Studies (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Question Formulation Technique (Right Question Institute, n.d.)

Practice: Explicit Teaching of Disciplinary Literacy

Overview

Disciplinary literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, listen, view and think critically in a way that is meaningful within the context of a given field. “Disciplinary literacy emphasizes the specialized knowledge and abilities possessed by those who create, communicate, and use knowledge within these disciplines” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

What are teachers doing?	What are students doing?
• Designing units and lessons so that students are investigating and building evidence-based conclusions over time, not just receiving information • Engaging students in reading, writing, speaking and listening in ways that model the characteristics of experts in a field, such as historians, geographers and economists	• Reading, writing, speaking and listening in ways that model the characteristics of what experts in the field of social studies would do • Analyzing primary sources, for example, by sourcing, putting in context and corroborating information in the text

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- What is Disciplinary Literacy and Why Does it Matter? (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012)
- What is Disciplinary Literacy? (Annenberg Learner, n.d.)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Elementary - Think Like A (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.)
- Middle School - Think Like A (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.)
- High School - Think Like A (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.)
- Historical Thinking Chart (Digital Inquiry Group, n.d.)

Practice: Substantive Conversations

Overview

Students discussing what they have learned and engaging in substantive conversations about it has an effect size of .82 (Fisher, Frey & Hattie, 2016). This is much more than a teacher asking a question and a student answering. Substantive conversations involve students engaging in rich conversations with their peers. The use of substantive conversations has also been shown to deepen understanding of complex texts (Frey et al., 2013), and increased opportunities to discuss what students read also lead to increased overall academic achievement (Hoffer, 2020; US DOE, 2013).

What are teachers doing?	What are students doing?
• Facilitating rich student conversations about engaging topics centered on complex and relevant texts • Scaffolding discussion strategies to help students build their confidence by engaging in productive discourse • Modeling positive discourse practices using evidence-based strategies	• Engaging in conversations with peers based on complex and relevant texts • Practicing positive discourse strategies to engage in productive discussions

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Implementing Norms and Routines for Discourse (Teaching Works, n.d.)
- Leading a Discussion (Teaching Works, n.d.)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Discussion Protocols (Harvard University Teaching and Learning Lab, n.d.)
- Discussion Guide (OER Project, n.d.)
- Strategies for Discussion (New Mexico Public Education Department, n.d.)

Practice: Notetaking, Summarization and Concept Mapping

Overview

When done effectively, taking notes (effect size .51, Hattie, 2021), summarizing (effect size .74, Hattie, 2021), and concept mapping (effect size .64, Fisher, Frey & Hattie, 2016) have been shown to improve student learning dramatically. Students learn best by arranging new information in relation to information they have already mastered. This is especially critical in social studies when students are trying to process complex information.

What are teachers doing?	What are students doing?
• Explicitly teaching different notetaking strategies, summarization and concept mapping strategies and when it is the best time to use them • Modeling how to distinguish between essential and less important details • Demonstrating how to summarize information concisely using their own words • Modeling how to extract, organize and summarize information from sources	• Selecting and using notetaking, summarization and concept mapping strategies when appropriate • Distinguish between essential and less important details • Summarizing information in an organized and concise way • Analyzing sources to best extract, organize and summarize information

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Note-taking: A Research Roundup (Cult of Pedagogy, n.d.)
- Cornell Notes (Cornell University, n.d.)
- Hexagonal Thinking (University of New South Wales, n.d.)
- Hexagonal Thinking (Cult of Pedagogy, n.d.)
- How to Teach Students to Get the Gist in Social Studies (University of Texas at Austin, n.d.)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Cornell Notes Template (University of Denver, n.d.)
- Hexagonal Thinking Templates (Ditch That Textbook, n.d.)
- Quick Summarizing Strategies (Reading Rockets, n.d.)

Practice: Arguing from Evidence

Overview

Teaching argumentative writing skills (Akbas, Sahin, & Meral, 2019) highlights disciplinary practices. Writing historical arguments is critical in social studies, and its process is unique (Monte-Sano, 2012).

What are teachers doing?	What are students doing?
• Framing units and lessons around the use of questions that require evidence-based arguments • Modeling how to construct arguments (claim, evidence, reasoning) using examples from the content being studied • Modeling how to develop counterclaims • Modeling how to evaluate sources for credibility, reliability and relevance to the historical question • Providing structured opportunities for discussion (structured academic controversy, debates) • Scaffolding the use of evidence (sentence frames, graphic organizers) • Providing feedback to students about their arguments	• Developing claims based on historical questions being studied • Using evidence from primary and secondary sources to support their claims • Analyzing sources for credibility, reliability and relevance • Engaging in discussions, debates and structured seminars • Citing specific evidence and explaining how it supports their reasoning • Considering and responding to counterclaims • Listening to others, questioning ideas respectfully and refining their own thinking based on new evidence (if applicable).

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Read, Inquire, Write (Regents of the University of Michigan, 2026)
- Using the Claim, Evidence, and Reasoning (CER) with Primary Sources (Library of Congress, 2022)
- About Claims and Evidence (Core Knowledge, n.d.)
- Structured Academic Controversy (Teaching History, n.d.)
- Structured Academic Controversy (Center for Civic Education, n.d.)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Structured Academic Controversy Handout (n.d.)

Practice: Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Overview

Vocabulary instruction in social studies should involve teaching students specific strategies for deciphering the meaning of new words they will encounter within a unit. This has an effect size of .63 (Hattie, 2021). According to Marzano (2004), 55% of the words students encounter in their K-12 experience will come from social studies.

What are teachers doing?	What are students doing?
• Selecting high-leverage, discipline-specific vocabulary words • Explicitly teaching word meanings using examples and non-examples • Connecting new vocabulary to prior knowledge and the historical context of what is being studied • Providing structured opportunities for academic talk using targeted vocabulary	• Making connections between new terms and what they already know • Classifying, comparing and organizing vocabulary to show relationships • Using vocabulary in academic discussion opportunities • Reflecting on their understanding of new vocabulary and refining their understanding based on feedback

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Doing What Works (West Ed, n.d.)
- Word Walls in Social Studies (National Council for the Social Studies, 2020)
- Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices (What Works Clearinghouse, 2008)
- Explicit Vocabulary Instruction (Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, n.d.)
- Explicit Vocabulary Instruction (Iowa Reading Research Center, n.d.)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Frayer Model (The Teacher Toolkit, n.d.) and Social Studies specific example (Vanderbilt, n.d.)

Practice: Building Reading Comprehension

Overview

Background knowledge about a topic is associated with increased reading comprehension (Smith, Snow, Serry & Hammond, 2021). In addition, according to the Fordham Institute, increased time spent on social studies in elementary classrooms led to increased reading comprehension scores (Tyner & Kabourek, 2020).

What are teachers doing?	What are students doing?
• Engaging in social studies content and pedagogy while addressing social studies topics • Assessing and activating prior knowledge • Selecting and sequencing texts that gradually build knowledge on a topic • Teaching comprehension strategies (questioning, summarizing, annotating) within content-rich reading • Integrating reading, discussion, and writing to reinforce knowledge building • Encourage metacognition and how knowledge supports comprehension	• Reading multiple texts to deepen understanding of a topic • Using new vocabulary and concepts to understand texts better • Using what they know to make connections, predictions and inferences • Applying strategies while reading to monitor and clarify understanding • Reflecting on how what they know helps them build understanding across units and lessons

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Examining Vocabulary, Reading Comprehension, and Content Knowledge Instruction During Fourth Grade Social Studies Instruction (Capin, Stevens, Stewart, Swanson, & Vaughn, 2020)
- Social Studies Instruction and Reading Comprehension: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Tyner & Kabourek, 2020)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Secondary Reading Instruction: Teaching Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension in the Content Areas (Vanderbilt University, n.d.)
  - Module 1
  - Module 2

Works Consulted

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