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 Indicates SS Stories

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The Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies seeks to publish manuscripts in the *Journal* that focus on any of the following:

- Creative ways of teaching social studies at the elementary, secondary, & higher education levels
- Research articles
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Editor's Note

Jessica B. Schocker, *SSJ* Editor

We are happy to share the Fall 2025 issue of *Social Studies Journal*, which includes three compelling articles and three thoughtful SS Stories, all from authors publishing in *SSJ* for the first time. We hope you enjoy these pieces and consider how your work and experiences might be a fit for publication in *SSJ*.

This issue opens with an article by Mary Huffman and Julie Stanley about teaching elementary social studies with Historical Traveling Trunks. Historical Traveling Trunks are full of multimodal primary and secondary sources for students to explore as they learn and develop social studies knowledge and skills both independently and in groups. Knowing the importance of engaging students in doing social studies, we are excited that more social studies teachers and teacher educators will have access to methods for implementing this approach.

Next, Anne Gill offers a research article examining how nine preservice teachers experienced, taught, and felt about student teaching in secondary social studies classrooms during the Fall 2024 semester, which coincided with the 2024 presidential election. Her findings illuminate how divisive political climates shape pedagogical choices and influence both teacher and student well-being. This poignant article is important for classroom practitioners as well as scholars who study the teaching of civics.

Our third and final article is by Heidi Torres, a qualitative case study of two elementary school students who participated in international cross-cultural education She describes their learning as transformative, and details how they overcame ambivalent and resistant attitudes to experience deep learning and meaningful cross-cultural interactions.

Our first of three SS Stories in this issue is written by Penn State University undergraduate and Schreyer Scholar, Madeline Shanafelt. Madeline writes about her experiences growing up in a rural, politically conservative small town in central Pennsylvania, where she and her family were political outliers. Now president of the College Democrats at University Park, Madeline reflects on processing her disappointment after the 2024 election and on how the knowledge she has gained in civics courses has guided her next steps as a citizen and activist.

SSJ Associate Editor Mark Kissling then introduces two short SS Stories written by Mark Goldschmidt and Kyliegha Osamwonyi. Goldschmidt leads a program at Framingham High School in Massachusetts called "Resiliency for Life" (RFL), an extracurricular experience for students who have been repeatedly referred for disciplinary issues. Through the program, students develop academic and social skills that contribute to improved behavior, higher graduation rates, and increased college acceptances. Kyliegha, one of the students who participated in RFL, describes

how she persisted through high school in the face of significant obstacles. Her story is both hopeful and inspiring. In his introduction, Mark Kissling connects these narratives to the discipline and aims of Social Studies education.

As always, I am honored to be part of curating a thought-provoking collection of articles and stories with my colleagues, Abigail Stebbins and Mark Kissling. We value the process of mentoring authors and collaborating with superb peer-reviewers to help bring each issue of SSJ to life. We enjoyed presenting on *SSJ's* SS Stories column at NCSS in Washington, D.C., in early December, and we look forward to future issues of our journal, which will feature exciting themes. We also continue to accept general manuscripts on a rolling basis. Please reach out if you are interested in writing an article or story; we would be happy to provide guidance.

Sincerely,

Jessica B. Schocker, Editor

Journey Through Time: Empowering K-3 Students with Historical Traveling Trunks

Mary Huffman and Julie A. Stanley

Dr. Mary Huffman is an Assistant Professor of Elementary Education at East Carolina University. She has over twenty-one years of experience teaching elementary social studies and language arts in K-12 classrooms. She can be reached at huffmanm23@ecu.edu. Dr. Julie Stanley is an assistant professor of elementary education at East Carolina University. She draws on more than 20 years of experience in elementary classrooms and now prepares new teachers in classroom management through a social-emotional learning lens. Contact her at stanleyju17@ecu.edu.

The historical traveling trunks approach aligns with the urgent need to restore social studies as a central element of elementary education, ensuring young learners develop the knowledge, values, and skills necessary for active participation in a democratic society. Social studies at this level should provide meaningful, developmentally appropriate experiences that engage students with contemporary social realities and global diversity. However, the marginalization of social studies exacerbated by policies like "No Child Left Behind," which established an ongoing trend of prioritizing reading and math, has diminished time dedicated to this essential subject, especially in struggling schools (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017). This narrowing of the curriculum has limited students' opportunities to build social studies vocabulary and background knowledge, which can negatively affect literacy and widen achievement gaps. Traveling trunks counter these trends by offering hands-on, inquiry-based learning rooted in civics, history, geography, and economics, fostering independent and collaborative problem-solving. Rather than reducing

education to test preparation, these trunks immerse students in meaningful explorations that prepare them to navigate complex social, ethical, and economic challenges, ensuring that social studies remains a vital part of the curriculum and empowering students to thrive as engaged citizens in a global society.

Historical traveling trunks are standards-based ELA and social studies integrated tools that teachers can use in a K-3 classroom. These trunks are filled with primary and secondary sources, including artifacts, replicas, and resources for students to explore social studies using all their senses. Historical traveling trunks can be differentiated to meet the needs of students while encouraging students to question, make predictions, and evaluate the results. Additionally, students engage in social-emotional learning by developing self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship-building skills.

Constructivism Theoretical Framework

Imagine a classroom where history is not just studied, it is unearthed, touched, and brought to life. This is constructivism in action, inspired by cognitive theorists like Piaget and Vygotsky. Far from being a static theory, constructivism transforms historical traveling trunks into dynamic educational tools with extraordinary potential. Young learners eagerly explore a trove of artifacts, their curiosity igniting. This hands-on approach epitomizes constructivism: it is not about memorizing facts but about building knowledge through experience, brick by brick (Bruner, 1961). In K-3 social studies, constructivism becomes a thrilling adventure, where students actively engage with history, developing their own understanding.

According to Shah (2019), constructivist learning environments encourage students to engage in exploration, critical thinking, and collaboration, fostering deeper understanding and retention of concepts. In the context of social studies, this approach allows students to make personal connections with historical content, enhancing their ability to interpret and apply knowledge in real-world contexts. Ertmer and Newby (1993) challenged traditional learning models by asserting that knowledge is not passively absorbed but actively constructed. Historical traveling trunks exemplify this philosophy because students are leading their own exploration instead of passively learning in a teacher-directed classroom. When students open these time capsules, they become temporal detectives, piecing together the past using primary sources and replicas, developing insights through investigation and discovery. These trunks create an environment where knowledge is built through exploration and collaboration, not simply handed down. Students develop critical thinking skills by analyzing evidence, questioning historical significance, and forming narratives. More than just names and dates, they practice the skills of historians: synthesizing information, interpreting artifacts, and making meaning. Historical traveling trunks embody constructivism by

transforming social studies into an inquiry-based, hands-on experience. This approach nurtures problem-solving abilities, fosters cognitive engagement, and promotes evidence-based reasoning. By engaging in collaborative exploration, students emerge not just with historical facts but with a deeper, more relevant understanding of the past and its connections to the present.

Constructivism provides the theoretical foundation, but inquiry gives it practical direction. By translating constructivist principles into classroom investigations, teachers move from theory to action, guiding students to question, analyze, and connect ideas through evidence. This progression from conceptual understanding to inquiry-driven practice ensures that historical traveling trunks function not only as learning tools but as engines of curiosity and discovery.

Inquiry & Integration

Integration of content and inquiry investigations flows easily together while developing historical traveling trunks. Integrating social studies standards is essential at the primary school level because there is a push to teach mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) throughout a school day without leaving instructional time for social studies (Bauml, 2023). Integration of content takes place when educators tie multiple learning standards together in one lesson using common content themes (Falkner & Rodríguez, 2024). Therefore, educators can integrate social studies content standards with the reading, writing, and informational text analysis skills throughout this lesson. For example, in Pennsylvania state standards, the first-grade social studies standard 8.3.1.A (Identify Americans who played a significant role in American history) can be integrated with CC.1.2 (Students read, understand, and respond to informational text, with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence) to create a historical traveling trunk. Students could analyze a traveling trunk from Benjamin Franklin and Lewis Latimer or Ellen Ochoa and the Wright Brothers. Students will be able to use ELA document analysis skills to find the connection between these two historical leaders by connecting to their prior knowledge.

While constructivism explains how learners make meaning, inquiry defines how teachers design the experiences that allow it to happen. Through guided questioning and analysis of authentic materials, inquiry gives structure to constructivist learning, transforming curiosity into evidence-based reasoning. A synergistic process emerges, encouraging students to construct meaning from multiple modalities while integrating early literacy engagement and social studies into a K-3 classroom (Johnston et al., 2024). Children who explore a variety of written documents while sharing their ideas with peers emerge with a collection of new questions that furthered their inquiry while activating the love of learning and exploration (Johnston et al., 2024). Young learners also participate in disciplinary literacy while diving into historical traveling trunks. Disciplinary

literacy engages students in skills to critique historical documents and claims, make predictions, and become an active part of their education (Deroo & Galante, 2023; Dobbs et al., 2016). These are all essential elements of historical traveling trunks. Additionally, students should construct meaning instead of memorizing dates. They construct meaning by asking questions, searching for answers, and developing conclusions (Levstik & Barton, 2022).

Historical traveling trunks serve as powerful catalysts for inquiry-based learning, transforming students from passive recipients of historical knowledge into active investigators of the past. This approach aligns seamlessly with both the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) standards and the C3 Framework, establishing foundational skills that support students' development of critical literacy from primary grades through higher education (Swan et al., 2018). Children will also practice necessary 21st-century skills such as communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. At its core, the inquiry process begins with artifacts and replicas that spark curiosity and generate student-driven questions while making connections to prior knowledge, just like historical museums. Historical museums encourage visitors to construct an understanding of the past by making personal connections to the present (Hayden, 1997; Kissel et al., 2019). Traveling trunks bring a museum to the students by including primary and secondary source documents, photographs, and replicas to allow students the same multimodal learning experience (Baron et al., 2014; Kissel et al., 2019). These tangible connections to history invite students to engage in close analysis strategies that mirror the methodologies of professional historians. Through structured yet flexible investigation protocols, students develop sophisticated analytical skills while maintaining their natural enthusiasm for discovery.

Close analysis strategies, including photograph analysis and close reading techniques, provide students with approaches to investigate historical evidence. When examining artifacts from a historical traveling trunk, students begin with careful observation, moving through stages of description, analysis, and interpretation. This systematic approach to inquiry develops critical thinking skills that extend far beyond the immediate social studies classroom. Students learn to:

- Frame meaningful questions about historical evidence
- Evaluate sources for reliability and perspective
- Draw connections between different types of historical documents
- Construct evidence-based arguments about historical events and their significance
- Connect historical insights to contemporary issues

The power of inquiry-based learning through historical traveling trunks lies in its ability to scaffold these sophisticated analytical skills in developmentally appropriate ways. Primary-grade students might begin with guided inquiry questions and structured analysis protocols, while older students can develop increasingly independent investigation strategies. This progression aligns with

the C3 Framework's emphasis on developing questioning skills, applying disciplinary concepts, evaluating sources, and communicating conclusions.

Moreover, inquiry-based learning with historical traveling trunks fosters critical literacy skills that extend beyond traditional subject boundaries. As students engage with primary sources and artifacts, they enhance their ability to comprehend complex texts, evaluate evidence and assess claims, explore multiple perspectives, integrate information from diverse sources, and communicate their insights effectively. This approach not only deepens their understanding of history but also equips them with essential skills for interdisciplinary learning and real-world problem-solving. Beyond cognitive skill development, inquiry with historical traveling trunks also nurtures the social and emotional dimensions of learning. As students collaborate, share interpretations, and confront multiple perspectives, they develop empathy, self-awareness, and respect for diversity, competencies that lie at the heart of culturally responsive social-emotional learning.

Culturally Responsive Social Emotional Learning (CR-SEL)

Historical traveling trunks provide a powerful framework for integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into the K-3 classroom in ways that affirm students' cultural identities and promote equity. SEL emphasizes the development of self-awareness, social awareness, empathy, and relationship skills; competencies essential for both personal growth and civic engagement (Lee & Ward, 2024). When grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy, SEL also becomes a means for advancing educational justice by affirming students' lived experiences and fostering belonging (Jagers et al., 2019; New York State Education Department, 2018).

Through inquiry-based activities with historical trunks, students not only explore historical content but also cultivate the social and emotional skills necessary for understanding diverse perspectives and building meaningful connections with others. Culturally responsive teaching practices, such as using materials that reflect students' racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, help children make emotional connections to the past and develop respect for different communities (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

A central aspect of SEL is perspective-taking, which these trunks foster by immersing students in historical narratives and artifacts. As students analyze primary sources and investigate the experiences of people from varied backgrounds, they develop empathy and critical consciousness (Hurd et al., 2021). This is particularly meaningful for students who may not have encountered experiences such as discrimination or hardship. When guided through culturally responsive inquiry, students begin to recognize how history is shaped by power and identity. Engaging with historical artifacts allows them to step into someone else's shoes, fostering a deeper understanding

of struggles from the past and helping them connect those lessons to contemporary social issues in developmentally appropriate ways (Niman, 2025).

Collaborative exploration of the trunks also nurtures relationship-building and social awareness. Working in diverse groups, students share ideas, ask questions, and clarify misunderstandings through peer interaction. This safe, supportive environment encourages authentic conversations, such as when a student with military family connections recognizes dog tags and explains their significance to classmates. These moments of peer-led learning create opportunities for students to develop mutual respect and social awareness as they learn to value and appreciate each other's perspectives and knowledge (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019).

Over time, engaging with historical trunks helps students internalize values related to empathy, diversity, and inclusion. These experiences build the foundation for long-term social and emotional competence that extends beyond the classroom, shaping how students interact with others throughout their lives. As they grow, students who have developed an appreciation for diverse experiences and perspectives will be better equipped to form positive relationships, contribute to inclusive communities, and practice responsible citizenship. This culturally sustaining approach aligns with emerging CR-SEL frameworks that integrate culture, identity, and equity into the development of core SEL skills (Meland et al., 2024).

These outcomes illustrate why traveling trunks serve as more than thematic lessons; they are intentional frameworks for culturally responsive, emotionally intelligent teaching. The following section describes how educators can structure and implement these trunks in practice to achieve these outcomes.

What Are Historical Traveling Trunks?

Historical traveling trunks are dynamic, interdisciplinary tools that seamlessly integrate social studies and ELA, engaging students by bringing history to life. Grounded in state learning standards and tailored to meet students' diverse needs, these trunks are carefully curated by educators to provide an immersive experience. Each trunk centers around two historically significant figures, with selected artifacts or replicas that offer a comprehensive portrayal of their roles in history. The historical figures are chosen to align with state social studies standards, highlight diverse figures, and uncover local leaders. Multicultural instructional strategies can be used to choose a figure by integrating a variety of key concepts and principles showcasing multiple perspectives and similar cultural backgrounds as students within your classroom (Alenuma, 2024). Items such as bonnets, coins featuring the Statue of Liberty, miniature American flags, military dog tags, monument replicas, and vintage clothing serve as tangible links to the past, transforming abstract historical concepts into meaningful, hands-on learning experiences (see Figure 1 for an example).

Following the division of the class into two groups based on students' learning needs, one for advanced learners and another for on-grade-level and below, only five minutes of direct teacher-led instruction is required to establish classroom expectations for the inquiry-based investigation. From there, students take charge: they question, explore, collaborate, and draw their own conclusions. The educator shifts to a guiding role, while each student takes the lead by examining a unique historical artifact from the traveling trunk, transforming the learning process into an active, student-driven experience.

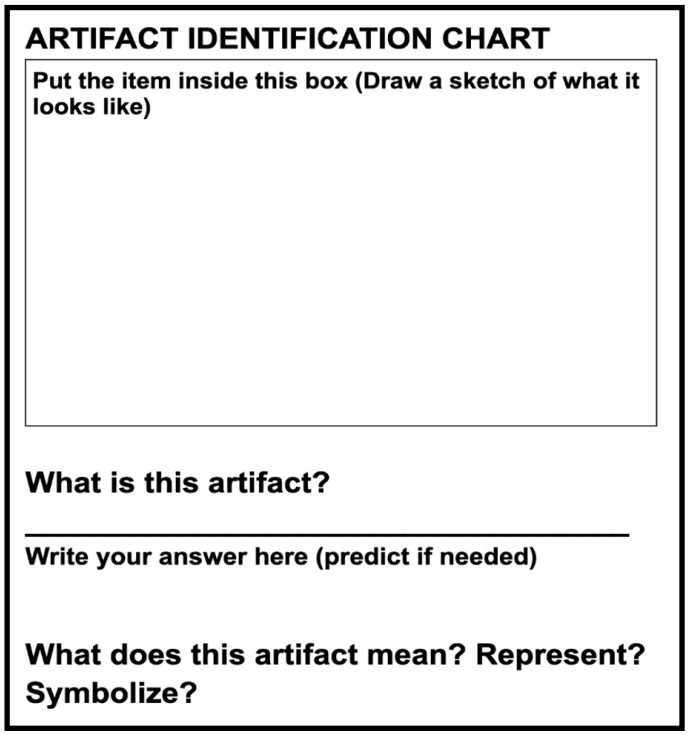
Figure 1. Historical Traveling Trunk Example

Note. All photographs in this article were taken by the authors.

Students take ownership of their learning as they begin by closely examining a historical artifact using tools like magnifying glasses or inspector glasses. Through careful observation and a quick sketch on a graphic organizer, they uncover subtle details and hidden clues, sparking a series of inquiry-driven questions (see Figure 2). Drawing on the evidence they have gathered, students craft thoughtful predictions about the artifact's identity and its significance, considering how the owner of the historical trunk might have used it. This process not only fosters critical thinking but also deepens their engagement with history, turning them into active investigators of the past.

A new dimension of inquiry is introduced as the teacher distributes a variety of primary sources such as photographs, documents, letters, political cartoons, artwork, and newspaper clippings, each tailored to the influential figure under study. Students individually analyze these sources, which may include maps highlighting the person's hometown or areas of historical significance, photographs capturing key moments in their life, and relevant newspaper clippings or political cartoons (see Table 1 for example materials). To encourage active engagement, these documents are enclosed in plastic sheet protectors, allowing students to mark and circle evidence directly on the sources. This hands-on analysis deepens their understanding of the historical context and the individual's impact, fostering critical thinking and analytical skills.

Figure 2. Artifact Identification Chart



Note. This graphic organizer was produced by the authors in 2024.

Next, students engage in a matching game, requiring them to make critical connections between a historical artifact and a primary source document. Each artifact corresponds to a document, and students collaborate in discussions when multiple peers believe their documents align with the same artifact. Through evidence-based debate, they present and defend their reasoning, honing their skills in argumentation and analysis. These activities cultivate essential competencies, such as critical thinking, persuasive communication, and evidence-based reasoning, that are foundational for informed civic engagement throughout their lives.

After successfully matching artifacts with their corresponding documents, students are guided to synthesize the primary source evidence and predict the identity of the traveling trunk's owner. This process sparks another rich discussion, during which students engage in thoughtful dialogue, utilizing academic vocabulary such as evidence, primary sources, artifacts, and conclusions. To foster public speaking and collaborative learning, group representatives present their findings to peers analyzing a different trunk, teaching them about their historical figure by drawing on evidence from both artifacts and documents. This peer-to-peer exchange deepens understanding, allowing students to learn about both historical figures during the presentations. By taking active

roles in this inquiry-driven, collaborative process, students are not just absorbing information but constructing and expanding their knowledge through critical thinking, communication, and collective discovery.

Table 1. Sample Materials for Traveling Trunks Differentiated by Grade Level

Grade Level and Theme	Materials for Traveling Trunks
Kindergarten Standard: Understand cultural practices in local communities and around the world	• Bible • Torah scroll • Passport • Prayer rug • Picture of a church • A necklace with the Star of David • Cultural food to taste
1st Grade Standard: Explain the various ways people impact the physical environment in different regions around the world	• Protesting posters • "Save the Environment" shirt • Flyer with the recycling sign • Photo with a sea turtle trapped in trash • Safari hat • Passport • Airline tickets • Fishing net • Vial with water (water sample) • Photo with trees cut down • Big work boots • A 1-sentence motivational saying about the environment • A newspaper clipping about the damage to the environment • A newspaper clipping about people helping to save the environment
2nd Grade Standard: Summarize contributions of various women, indigenous, religious, racial, and other minority groups that have impacted American history. *Choose someone significant from your state such as John Lewis	• A walking stick • A model of the Edmund Pettus Bridge • A replica of the Congressional Medal of Honor • A t-shirt with the saying "get into trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble" • A copy of his book *March* • A photo of him doing the Freedom Rides • A freedom rider pin • Handcuffs • The symbol for the U.S. Senate

Note. Table 1 was produced by the authors in 2024.

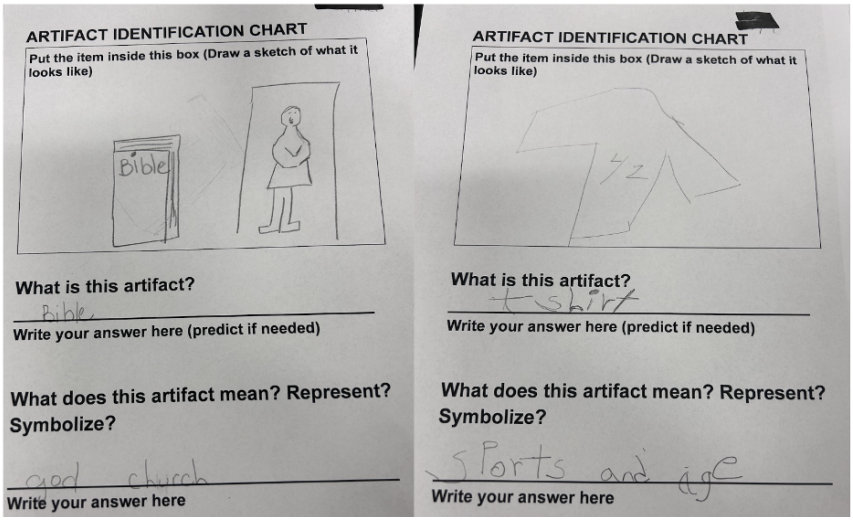
Historical Traveling Trunks in Action

The following second-grade lesson on the American Civil Rights Movement serves as an illustrative example of how historical traveling trunks can enhance primary social studies instruction. Through hands-on analysis of artifacts and primary sources, young learners immerse themselves in key moments in the lives of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Jackie Robinson in the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrating how traveling trunks can meet diverse literacy needs while fostering critical thinking, empathy, and collaboration in early education settings.

Throughout this sample lesson, some of the artifacts and documents had to be read and analyzed. Therefore, the two trunks had differentiated materials. One traveling trunk was carefully curated for students reading at or below grade level. To support students at a lower independent reading level, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s traveling trunk was developed to capitalize on students' potential familiarity with his legacy. This trunk featured carefully chosen artifacts and replicas, including an "I Have a Dream" pin, a miniature Bible, a peace sign necklace, a pair of handcuffs, a protest sign, and a scale model of King's monument in Washington, DC. These tangible objects allowed students to connect with the past in a meaningful way, fostering deeper understanding and engagement with the life and impact of Dr. King.

The other trunk contained resources that required more inferencing skills, nuanced prior knowledge, and deeper analysis. Jackie Robinson's trunk was designed with the needs of higher-level learners in mind. The artifacts included a miniature American flag, military dog tags, a t-shirt emblazoned with the iconic number 42, a baseball, and a small baseball bat. Students demonstrated keen observational skills as they analyzed their artifacts, quickly making connections between the items in the trunk. These authentic, spontaneous discussions were driven by curiosity and inquiry, with students actively engaging in hands-on exploration. As they rolled the artifacts in their hands and sketched them on their artifact identification charts (see Figure 3), many began posing thoughtful questions to peers, exploring how and why each item was used by Robinson. This dialogue allowed students to step into the shoes of the historical figure, deepening their understanding of his life and legacy.

Figure 3. Student Work Samples of Artifact Identification Chart



Throughout this sample inquiry, educators facilitated and extended student thinking using higher-order questions from Bloom's Taxonomy, such as:

- When do you think this artifact was used in history? Could it still be used today?
- What might this artifact symbolize in the context of Jackie Robinson's life and career?
- How would Robinson have used this artifact in his work or during play? What evidence supports your interpretation?

By prompting students to consider these questions, teachers helped cultivate deeper critical thinking, allowing students to explore not only the artifacts but also the broader historical and symbolic significance of the items.

During the next phase, students engaged in primary source document analysis. They donned "investigator glasses" to sharpen their focus on the intricate details within the documents (see Figure 4). These glasses, purchased in bulk from a party store, added a playful yet purposeful element to the lesson—enhancing student engagement. While examining materials, including photographs, newspaper articles, documents, and speeches, students circled key evidence. Through dynamic peer discussions, cross-referencing circled content, and drawing on their prior knowledge, students collaboratively pieced together the connections between the artifacts and primary sources. This process enhanced their historical comprehension and critical thinking abilities, ultimately enabling them to make a prediction about the identities of the trunks.

Figure 4. Student Analysis of Primary Source Documents

Next, the group was primed to connect their primary source documents to the physical artifacts initially presented when they first opened the traveling trunk. The artifacts were laid out alongside the artifact identification chart (see Figure 2), and with minimal guidance, students seamlessly matched each primary source document to its corresponding artifact (see Figure 5). What followed were rich debates, with students presenting evidence to support their claims and

collaborating to ensure that each artifact was paired with a primary source. Within minutes, all the artifacts were correctly matched, showcasing the students' analytical skills and teamwork. The group celebrated their success with high-fives and fist bumps, recognizing their collective achievement in mastering the historical investigation.

Figure 5. Artifact and Primary Source

The culminating moments of the historical trunk investigation revealed not just academic growth, but profound social-emotional development. As students gathered to present their conclusions about the trunk's owner, time period, and purpose, they demonstrated mastery of both historical analysis and essential SEL competencies. Their use of academic language, incorporating terms like artifact, primary source, evidence, proof, and analysis, reflected their growing confidence and self-awareness as historians. More importantly, the collaborative nature of their investigation fostered crucial relationship-building skills as they debated interpretations, compromised on conclusions, and supported their peers' insights.

Discussion

The Civil Rights trunk investigation illustrates how inquiry, constructivism, and culturally responsive SEL intersect in a single lesson. These practices come together in the discussion that follows, which highlights what students gained, academically, socially, and emotionally, from this integrated approach. Within a focused forty-minute lesson, students did more than simply investigate historical artifacts. They actively constructed meaning through hands-on exploration and social interaction, embodying the core principles of constructivist learning theory. Each discovery and connection became a building block in their understanding as they engaged in learning experiences that exemplified the power of integrated SEL and social studies instruction. As they posed questions and made predictions, students not only practiced self-management and responsible decision-making but also demonstrated how knowledge is actively constructed rather

than passively received. Their collaborative analysis of primary sources required perspective-taking and empathy, particularly as they considered the lives and experiences of historical figures different from themselves.

The implementation of historical traveling trunks demonstrates how educators can thoughtfully address both literacy and social studies standards within time-constrained instructional schedules. As schools face increasing pressure to prioritize ELA instruction, these carefully curated collections offer a solution that doesn't require choosing between content areas. Instead, they create rich opportunities for authentic integration that strengthen disciplinary understanding and literacy development. Historical traveling trunks transform ordinary classrooms into dynamic learning laboratories where students develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and historical understanding while meeting cross-curricular standards, making them an invaluable tool for educators.

Implications and Next Steps for Educators

Historical traveling trunks offer more than engaging lessons; they serve as a pathway to equitable, inquiry-driven, and socially conscious teaching. By combining artifacts, primary sources, and reflective dialogue, the trunks position young learners to understand history through multiple perspectives while practicing empathy and critical thinking. Educators can begin by creating or adapting a single trunk aligned with local standards and community history, gradually expanding to include diverse voices and cultural experiences. Professional collaboration, partnerships with museums or cultural centers, and integration of culturally responsive SEL strategies ensure that the trunks continue to evolve as living tools for inclusive and meaningful social studies instruction.

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Pre-Service Teachers' Reflections on Teaching the 2024 Election & Implications for Educator Preparation

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of nine pre-service social studies teachers who student-taught during the Fall 2024 semester. The purpose of this study was to explore their emotions, experiences, and reflections on teaching the 2024 Presidential Election to further understand the realities facing social studies education during a highly divisive period in American history. Findings identified four overarching themes offering insights into the realities of election instruction for PSTs: emotional responses to the instruction, perceived barriers to election discourse, a need for school support, and the importance of a supportive classroom environment. This research highlights the importance of equipping future educators to foster democratic discourse in increasingly polarized classrooms.

Introduction and Context of the Study

In recent years, the teaching of social studies has become increasingly polarizing and subject to intense political debate (Khane & Rogers, 2024; McCarthy, 2021). Across the United States, social studies educators have been accused of indoctrinating students (American Historical Association, 2024), teaching "divisive concepts" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2021), and rewriting history (Bracken et al., 2022). Consequently, classroom teachers are hesitant to include relevant topics in instruction for fear of them being misconstrued as controversial (Pace, 2021).

However, best practices in social studies education support the inclusion of topics, both historical and contemporary, that help learners develop into "informed, active, and responsible community members" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023, Conclusion section). Teachers can foster learning environments that do this by including multiple viewpoints in their instruction (Boys et al., 2018), encouraging discourse on classroom topics (Facing History & Ourselves, 2024), preparing students for active citizenship (Frenkiewich, 2023), integrating controversial issues as core pedagogy (Hinchliffe, 2010; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016), and promoting critical literacy (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023; Wolk, 2003). Within this challenging context, these pedagogical practices stand out because they not only support but necessitate the teaching of contemporary political events, such as elections.

In this study, I explored how pre-service student teachers (PSTs) placed in secondary (7-12) social studies classrooms experienced teaching about the 2024 election. The following questions guided this research:

1. How do pre-service social studies teachers navigate teaching the 2024 Election in secondary classrooms?
2. What are the attitudes and emotions of pre-service teachers toward integrating discussions about the 2024 election within secondary school classrooms?
3. What resources and strategies do pre-service teachers need to create classroom spaces that are supportive of these discussions?

By exploring these questions, I aimed to understand how PSTs navigated teaching a highly charged and potentially divisive subject. Ultimately, this study aimed to provide strategies and considerations for PSTs to confidently address contemporary events, such as elections, even amid concerns of politicization and accusations of indoctrination.

Challenges Facing Social Studies Education

Social studies education has become increasingly politicized, with curriculum debates and book bans reflecting broader societal tensions (Khane & Rogers, 2024; Markham et al., 2025;

Spector, 2023). With its focus on power, inequality, and historical narratives, social studies is especially susceptible to scrutiny.

Despite accusations of indoctrination, most history educators prioritize critical thinking and civic engagement (American Historical Association, 2024, p. 132). However, efforts to restrict "divisive concepts" limit critical engagement with topics like race, equity, and civil rights, undermining civic education (National Council for the Social Studies, 2021, What is at Stake section, para. 1). Although controversial issues enhance civic learning, many educators avoid them out of fear of backlash or lack of support (Kawashima-Ginsburg & Junco, 2018; Pace et al., 2022). Recent political rhetoric and executive orders have intensified pressures on educators, contributing to self-censorship and complicating election instruction for PSTs (Executive Order 14190, 2025; Executive Order 14253, 2025). Over the last few years, states have introduced or enacted legislation that bans teaching about divisive concepts in schools (Florido, 2021). Even in states without state restrictions, educators are still reporting that they are self-censoring and avoiding teaching socio-political topics out of fear of backlash and repercussions (Walker, 2024). This climate of apprehension is widespread: A July 2024 EdWeek Research Survey found that 58% of teachers reported that they would not be discussing the election in their classroom, and a 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey noted that "65 percent of teachers nationally reported deciding to limit discussions about political and social issues in class" (Woo et al., 2024).

Challenges Specific to Pre-Service Social Studies Teachers

When considering challenges facing social studies education, it is also relevant to consider the challenges facing those newest to the field, specifically pre-service teachers. Prior research shows PSTs benefit from structured opportunities to practice teaching controversial or traumatic histories (Nganga et al., 2019; Yonas, 2025). These findings highlight the need for explicit pedagogical training in teacher education programs to prepare PSTs for navigating sensitive issues in social studies classrooms.

The Goal of Social Studies Education

The National Council for the Social Studies, the largest professional organization for social studies educators, defines the goal of social studies as "the promotion of civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). From this defined goal, multiple researchers have contributed best practices that support students in developing civic competence.

Teaching with Contemporary Issues

Connecting the past to the present is one way to create critical classroom spaces and help students develop civic competence and engage with social studies. For Wolk (2003), a fundamental purpose of social studies education is to ensure that students are knowledgeable about events and issues occurring both locally and globally. Integrating current events into history instruction helps students connect learning to their lives (Ogle et al., 2007). According to LeCompte et al. (2017), classroom discussions about current events foster meaningful dialogue and relevance. Integrating contemporary events ensures that social studies instruction remains relevant, directly addressing the perennial student question, "Why does this matter?" but critically, it encourages students to reflect on their civic roles.

Additionally, providing students with opportunities to engage with current events helps create informed members of society (Facing History & Ourselves, 2022, p. 1) who possess the knowledge and dispositions to be engaged participants both in and out of the classroom. Combining critical literacy with current events empowers students to act on social issues (Pescatore, 2007). Teaching contemporary issues like elections allows students to explore political, social, and economic dimensions, deepening civic understanding.

The Importance of Election Education

The 2024 Election was an opportunity for classrooms to serve as platforms for meaningful civic engagement and political discourse, equipping students to critically see and interact with the world around them. Research supports teaching elections to boost student participation and civic interest (see Dunn et al., 2019; Fitchett et al., 2024; Levy et al., 2016) and help students build civic responsibility and feel their vote matters (Syvertsen et al.,2009). However, since the 2016 Presidential Election, social studies classrooms across the United States have become more polarized, with teachers limited in discussions on divisive topics (Meckler & Natanson, 2022; Stoddard & Hess, 2024; Walker, 2018). Yet, it is precisely this political polarization that makes classroom spaces crucial for cultivating critical engagement with election-related topics. Research suggests schools can counter political division by fostering civil conversations and democratic skills (Hlebowitsh, 2024). This is crucial because classrooms are a unique setting in that they offer students opportunities to evaluate evidence, form opinions, and engage with peers from diverse backgrounds (Pace et al., 2022). Classrooms should promote dialogue across viewpoints and encourage civic action (Learning for Justice, 2007).

Given these complexities, we must consider how we prepare pre-service social studies teachers to navigate the challenges of fostering critical inquiry and addressing contemporary issues amid a politically divisive period. Understanding how PSTs navigate student teaching during the dynamics

of teaching during an election cycle, specifically, what topics they choose to address or avoid, which may be influenced by school district policies, mentor teacher guidance, or their own comfort level, will have significant implications for how we support and prepare PSTs to teach in an increasingly polarized world.

Theoretical Background of the Study

Central to this research is the belief that education is never neutral, and teaching is inherently political (Crowley & King, 2018; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2024a; Giroux, 2024b; Wolk, 2003). The framework guiding the study is Critical Literacy, which offers a lens for both classroom practice and scholarly inquiry. Critical literacy in the social studies classroom emphasizes that teaching is inherently political, and educators must create spaces that connect learning to students' lives and current events to foster informed, engaged citizens (Freire, 1970, foreword by Shaull, p. 34; Wolk, 2003).

Student Teacher	Placement	Subject Matter
Angelica	Middle School - 7th grade	Ancient World History
Joshua	Middle School - 8th grade	U.S. History
Lincoln	Middle School - 8th grade	U.S History
Nate	Middle School - 8th grade	U.S. History
Peter	High School - 9th grade High School - 11th grade	World History Modern U.S. History
Patricia	Middle School - 7th grade	Ancient World History
Raul	High School - 10th grade High School - 12th grade	AP Modern History Honors Political & Economics issues
Sarah	High School - 11th grade High School - 12th grade	U.S. Government Economics
Wells	High School - 11th grade	Global Citizenship

Foundations of Critical Literacy

Current theories of critical literacy draw on the works of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and theorist, specifically his problem-posing model, which positions teachers and students as co-investigators through inquiry (Freire, 1970). Freire contrasted this approach with the traditional banking model of education, where, in a passive classroom, teachers are viewed as the sole source of knowledge, and students receive information (deposits). The banking model encourages students

to be passive and, in turn, adapt to the world around them. However, problem-posing education is a liberating praxis that empowers students to critically examine and actively respond to real-world challenges (Freire, 1970).

To embrace this problem-posing philosophy, classrooms must move beyond rote memorization (Wolk, 2003) and instead promote inquiry and analysis (Fantozzi, 2012). In practice, particularly within the social studies curriculum, critical literacy encourages students to question dominant power structures (Freire, 1970; Lewison et al., 2008) and analyze complex social issues (Pescatore, 2007). This approach, as Giroux (2024a) advocates, promotes a vision of education that supports a vibrant democracy, rather than simply training students for the workforce.

Crowley and King (2018) argue, "social studies should be a natural home for critical theory and critical pedagogy" (p. 15), and critical literacy offers a framework for enacting critical practices in the classroom. A critical approach aligns with the NCSS's goal of civic competence by enabling students to question and understand the role of power in society while promoting inquiry and analysis into real-world issues. Within the context of the secondary social studies classroom, PSTs are not just responsible for delivering content but must also create spaces for students to discuss and explore contemporary issues in ways that empower them to evaluate society and critically analyze the world around them (Freire, 1970; Wolk, 2003).

The National Council for the Social Studies posits that social studies classrooms should serve as spaces where students analyze and discuss historical and current issues to promote inquiry and create informed citizens (Pugh et al., 2023). Drawing on critical pedagogy, PSTs can support this vision of social studies education by recognizing that creating an informed citizenry requires a deep understanding of democratic values and human rights (Giroux, 2024b). Giroux (2024a) asserts that educators must affirm the function of education by connecting the classroom to larger social issues that promote civic awareness and engagement. These values and social issues should always be critically examined, but an election season provides an especially crucial opportunity to do so.

Applying the Critical Literacy Lens

While the context of the 2024 Presidential Election presented a strong potential for critical inquiry in the classroom, the PSTs in this study were not given explicit parameters or messaging about specific critical literacy practices. Instead, I examined their pedagogical experiences and reflections through a critical literacy lens. A critical literacy lens posits that educators have a crucial responsibility to help students move beyond passive learning through inquiry and analysis (Wolk, 2003). The application of this lens focused specifically on how PSTs engage with issues of power, neutrality, and the status quo. In the context of this research, I am "reading the classroom" as the primary text, applying a critical literacy approach to interpret how PSTs navigated the complexities

of their teaching environment and attempted to facilitate civic discourse. This approach allowed for an exploration of the underlying power dynamics, assumptions, and pedagogical choices that shaped their experiences when their actions were not explicitly framed in critical theory by the participants themselves.

Materials and Methodology

Author Positionality

As in all research, understanding the researcher's positionality is crucial. I am a cis, white woman who took on an insider perspective as both the researcher and course instructor for the PST participants. I recognize the inherent power dynamic and potential bias that arose from this dual role. Therefore, data collection was managed separately from course requirements, all participation was voluntary, and all identifying data were stored securely and analyzed after final course grades were submitted.

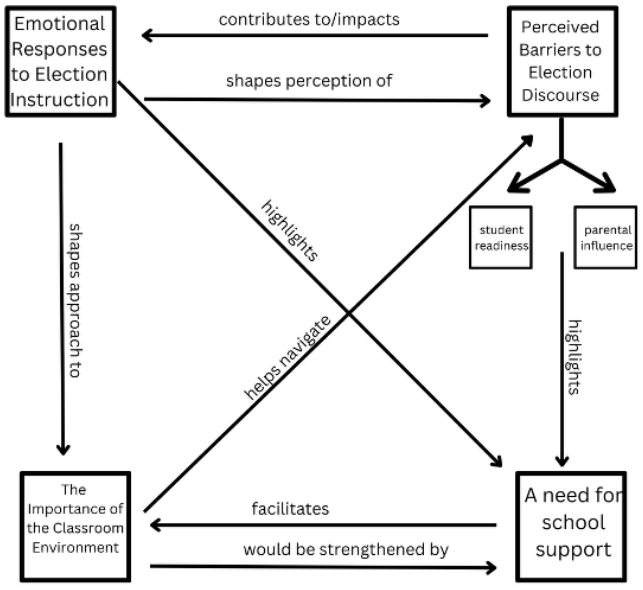
Participants

Participants (n = 9; 3 female, 6 male) were a convenience sample of undergraduate history majors pursuing a secondary (7-12) elective social studies certification at a large, public four-year university in eastern Pennsylvania. Because the goal of this research was to understand the perspective of PSTs who taught during the 2024 Election, my students enrolled in student teaching were the ideal sample. See Table 1 for details on their student teaching placements, including subject matter and grade level. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

Table 1. Fall 2024 Student Teaching Placements and Subject for Secondary Social Studies PSTs

Data Collection & Analysis

I analyzed the data using the thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). I began with descriptive coding to generate a comprehensive set of initial codes across all data forms (Miles et al., 2014). These initial codes (n=24) were supported by 258 "data extracts" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 21). I sorted and combined codes to identify four overarching selective themes that addressed the research questions and created a concept map (see Figure 1) to visualize the interconnected relationships among these themes (Daley, 2004).



Concept Map: PSTs and 2024 Election Instruction

Findings

I collected data regarding PSTs' perceptions and experiences of teaching the 2024 Election before, during, and after the experience and used thematic analysis to categorize data into four overarching selective themes. These themes offer insights into the realities of election instruction: 1) Emotional responses to election instruction; 2) Perceived barriers to election research; 3) A need for school support, and 4) The importance of classroom environment. The primary findings are organized in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Qualitative Findings on PSTs Experiences with Election Instruction

Theme	Key Finding	Participant Voice/Quotes
Emotional Responses to Election Instruction	PSTs were initially hesitant to incorporate election-related lessons into their instruction and expressed anxiety and fear. However, as the semester progressed the PSTs found value in incorporating election discussions and were willing to engage with the topic in their classrooms.	Patricia: "I have avoided the talk of politics for my whole life after seeing politics tear people apart," Wells: "My first instinct was to find a way out of it, as covering such a contentious and fresh issue was a daunting proposition." Joshua : "Wary, I'd rather not [teach the election] if I'm being honest." Sarah: "The election is not a topic to avoid; it is a topic to embrace"

Perceived Barriers to Election Research: ***(Subtheme) 1 Student readiness***	PSTs working with students across all age groups reported that the age of their students impacted their ability to engage in election discussions in the classroom. PSTs felt that the developmental age of students, inability to participate in elections, and limited prior knowledge hindered their capacity for in-depth lessons about the election.	Joshua: "But like also I'm dealing with eighth graders. So politically, they're not like entirely aware." Peter: "But they're also 14 years old and I don't expect a bunch of 14-year-olds to be as engaged with the presidential election." Sarah: "I think also just because a lot of them are not eligible to vote yet, there's a little bit more apathy with that generation still." Patricia: "I think it's that they don't have enough context to formulate an opinion that would be reasonable to either end."
Perceived Barriers to Election Research: ***(Subtheme 2) Parental influence***	This finding encompasses two points. First, PSTs felt that students' understanding of the election was already shaped by their parents. The second point of this subtheme is that PSTs feared parental backlash for discussing the election	Joshua: "They probably don't know much at all except what their parents tell them." "Even if I say something that's objectively right and we all agree on it, there's really nothing stopping that student from mishearing or misunderstanding what I'm saying and then repeating that to a parent. Peter: "their only perspective on these topics and what they believe is coming from their parents." Nate: "it's been more important to my mentor teacher that we remain neutral... and in our district, there are parents and students who have different political views"
A Need for School Support	PSTs indicated the impactful role of their host school districts in shaping their experiences while student teaching social studies courses during the 2024 Election. PSTs reported a need for school support when teaching election-related topics. All PSTs communicated that their schools did not host election activities, such as mock elections or election simulations, to promote civic engagement or deepen students' understanding of the voting process.	Angelica, Patricia, Sarah, and Peter were directed by their mentor teachers to remain "apolitical", "neutral", "nonpartisan," and "unbiased." Peter: "Schools are trying to avoid it [talking about the election]." Sarah: "I think a professional development day or meeting among the social studies department would be useful. I would have liked to see how other teachers were approaching the topic." Angelica: "We're not allowed to talk about it [the election]. Like, our principal has sent out multiple emails." "When whoever wins, when they get inaugurated, we're not allowed to teach about it."

The Importance of Classroom Environment	Despite initial perceived barriers, PSTs found that the deliberate creation of inclusive and open classroom spaces was a critical factor in fostering meaningful civic conversations.	Sarah: "[students were] genuinely curious instead of being like combative." Raul: "The main goal that I have been trying to replicate from my mentor teacher is that the classroom is a safe place to express ideas and opinions." Patricia: "we want the students to feel that there is an open environment for their thoughts and opinions." Peter: "they have a relationship with me, and we have procedures in place."

Discussion

My findings show that teaching the 2024 Election was a multifaceted and complex experience for PSTs. PSTs faced navigating not only the inherent demands of student teaching, but also an additional layer of complexity defined by the Election of 2024. One element of this complexity was the emotional responses of PSTs when faced with teaching the Election of 2024. Pace (2021) defines controversial issues as "contemporary political issues and contested histories" (p. 229), and for the purposes of this research, the 2024 Election falls within the definition of a controversial issue. Understandably, PSTs reported anxieties around teaching the election, a sentiment that is relevant given the current educational climate. The wariness of the PSTs who participated in this study, however, reflects a broader, pervasive climate of apprehension among educators nationwide (Walker 2024; Woo et al., 2024). As noted by many critical theorists (Freire, 1970; Wolk, 2003), education is never neutral, and the PSTs' anxieties highlight the fear of the consequences of non-neutrality in practice.

From a critical literacy perspective, avoiding topics in the classroom to remain neutral may inadvertently reinforce dominant narratives and power structures (Giroux, 2024b). Therefore, the initial avoidance demonstrated by PSTs, even if rooted in anxiety, inadvertently upheld the status quo by denying students opportunities to critically examine power and diverse perspectives. As the semester progressed, the emotions of the PSTs evolved as they realized the importance of including the topic and their active role in ensuring its inclusion in the classroom. The willingness to engage represents a move away from neutrality and a rejection of structural systems, like schools, that prefer sanitized, non-controversial content. The slight shift amongst the PSTs signals an alignment with the active pedagogical approach of critical literacy, which emphasizes that educators must empower students to critically evaluate society and respond to real-world challenges (Freire, 1970; Fantozzi, 2012; Wolk, 2003). By embracing the teaching of contemporary events like the 2024

Election, PSTs moved towards creating critically engaged and civically competent classrooms, thereby preparing students for active participation in a democratic society.

This research also underscores the importance of identifying barriers that PSTs may perceive when faced with including and/ or discussing topics deemed as "controversial" in the classroom. PSTs in this study perceived that student readiness and parental influence were barriers that shaped their perceptions about teaching the 2024 Election before they even began. These initial perceptions had negative implications for classroom civic engagement. Pace (2021) cautions that students not having equal access and opportunities to discuss controversial issues contributes to the "civic opportunity gap" (p. 229) or civic empowerment gap (Eren & Hamarat, 2025). Such a gap could deprive students of opportunities to develop critical analysis and democratic dispositions that are necessary for informed civic participation.

Additionally, the inclusion of controversial issues and engagement of students in discussing these topics in the classroom creates opportunities for students to "critically analyze sources, discuss different perspectives, and develop positions on significant questions" (Pace, 2021, p. 229), all essential tenets of critical literacy and characteristics of civically engaged citizens. By assuming students were not ready to talk about the election due to their age, their ability to participate in the electoral process, and their lack of background knowledge, PSTs initially prevented their students from having structured opportunities for civic discourse. From a critical literacy stance, assuming a lack of readiness and avoiding the discussion of an entire election based on this assumption prevents students from meaningful opportunities for evaluating society (Wolk, 2003), engaging with social and global issues (Pohl & Beaudry, 2015), and fostering critical inquiry (Fantozzi, 2012).

In addition to perceived barriers regarding student readiness, PSTs were also concerned with how parental influence could shape or impact their teaching of the election. This apprehension highlights a persistent tension between parents, teachers, and school curricula. A 1978 law review (Hirschoff, 1978), highlights how parents have long sought to assert control over the public school curriculum, particularly when they feel that teachers are presenting values that clash with those instilled at home. The legal analysis noted that the mere exposure of a child to views differing from their parents may discredit home values.

This enduring apprehension also aligns with contemporary research; Eren and Hamarat (2025) highlight the challenges faced by teachers when home beliefs and values conflict with what is being taught in the classroom. The fear felt by PSTs in this research reflects a documented reality of the teaching experience. Hassrick and Schneider (2009) similarly found that teachers felt undermined by parents who engaged in "parent surveillance," which ultimately constrained teachers from addressing more sensitive topics that could deviate from parental expectations. From a critical literacy perspective, this common and historical role of parents in the curriculum represents an

external power dynamic that can suppress critical inquiry in the classroom and maintain the status quo (Soares & Wood, 2010; Hall & Piazza, 2008; Herbeck & Beier, 2003). This becomes particularly salient when considering classroom lessons about elections, which, if truly critical, should aim to empower students to analyze diverse perspectives and challenge ingrained beliefs, rather than merely reflecting or reinforcing familiar viewpoints.

PSTs also reported a need for institutional support, specifically articulating a desire for support from school administration or more localized department guidance. This finding aligns with research from Kawashima-Ginsburg and Junco (2018), who assert "unequivocal and explicit support from principals to frame school as an active site of rigorous discourse about wide-ranging social and political issues has enormous, yet often overlooked, potential to advance civic learning (p. 327). In this study, PSTs felt limited by their school districts. The school districts did not host election events and instead discouraged any discussion of the election in the classroom. Due to the lack of support, PSTs were hesitant to fully engage their students in election-related lessons. As a result, PSTs missed opportunities to bring in diverse perspectives and develop critical literacy skills by having students interact with real-world current events.

Beyond perceived barriers (both emotional and external), PSTs also described and shared how they felt the classroom environments they co-created with their students helped support productive election discussions. This aligns with best practices in facilitating dialogue and discussions in the classroom. Facing History & Ourselves (2024) recommends that the first step in promoting effective civil discourse in the classroom is to "get to know students and prioritize relationships (p. 9), while other research (Pace, 2021; Reynolds et al., 2020; Schmidt & Pinkney, 2022; Silva, 2020) encourages collaboration amongst students and teachers when creating expectations and norms for classroom discussions to build a culture of belonging. From a critical literacy orientation, the actions of the PSTs helped address the often top-down model of classrooms, where the teacher is the sole authority. Because of the environments the PSTs created, they opened their classroom where students were not just passive recipients of information but rather active participants in making meaning.

Implications for Practice

In an October 2024 Substack, educator Natalie Wexler posited, "Should teachers steer clear of current political issues in the classroom—or is it educational malpractice to act as if those issues don't exist?" It was evident that the PSTs in this study grappled with this exact issue throughout the study. Their struggle was evident in the ways that they did and did not address the election in their student teaching placements. Yet, even in the face of scrutiny, social studies and history courses should provide students with opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives and current events

(Ogle et al., 2007; Wolk, 2003). While the study has a small sample size, the findings do offer insights into the structural and pedagogical barriers that PSTs may face, underscoring a need for intervention.

To altogether avoid the inclusion of political issues or controversial issues in the classroom is a disservice to students who deserve to be equipped with the skills to critically analyze the world in which they are a part. Therefore, I suggest two implications for pre-service teacher education that would prepare them to push back against actual and perceived barriers and create classrooms that serve as sites of rigorous and critical engagement.

Practice Teaching Controversial Issues

Throughout this study, the PSTs never pointed to their methods coursework or teacher preparation program as a barrier to teaching the election. However, to combat the emotional and structural barriers faced by PSTs, reframe methods coursework to include explicit pedagogical support for teaching controversial issues.

Pace (2021) found that PSTs approached teaching controversial issues with the pedagogical tools they learned in their undergraduate methods coursework. To that end, Pace (2021) developed an eight-part Teaching Controversial Issues Framework to support PSTs and in-service teachers when introducing controversial issues in the classroom. Pace's (2021) framework, detailed in Table 3, can be paired with in-class opportunities for students to not just design lessons, but practice teaching controversial issues in a low-stakes environment and receive peer feedback. This approach would help alleviate some of the anxiety and emotional concerns associated with teaching controversial issues before working with students. Furthermore, mentor teachers and school districts should be encouraged to adopt this framework with a focus on communicating with parents and articulating the school's stance on political discussion.

Table 3. Teaching Controversial Issues: A Framework for Reflective Practice (Pace, 2021, p. 229)

Element
Cultivate a Supportive Environment through community building, norms, openness to dissent, individual affirmation and humor.
Prepare Thoroughly with attention or student identity and development, teaching contexts, subject matter, purposes and methods.
Think Through Teacher Stance including pedagogical roles, positions on issues, and pros and cons of disclosing teacher views.

Communicate Proactively with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators about issues that will be studied.
Select Authentic Issues and frame questions to promote student engagement and inquiry, progressing from cooler to hotter issues.
Choose Resources and Pedagogies that challenge assumptions, include diverse voices and perspectives, and foster participation.
Guide Discussion with tools for analyzing sources, exchanging ideas, moving from small groups to whole group and attending to equity.
Address Emotions by creating space for processing them, using de-escalation moves as needed and developing self-awareness.

Embed Critical Literacy Pedagogy Through Practices

This study underscores the need for a more explicit and embedded critical literacy pedagogy in teacher preparation programs. Critical literacy is often approached as a theory and not an instructional methodology (Behrman, 2006), which aligns with the findings of Lee's (2011) research. Lee's study revealed that in-service teachers are not seeing critical literacy practices within their school districts. Additionally, Lee (2011) shared that PSTs received little support from their mentor teachers regarding implementing critical literacy practices because the mentor teachers did not understand critical literacy as a practice.

I suggest that teacher preparation programs support PSTs in their understanding of critical literacy as an essential social studies pedagogy by incorporating Wolk's 2003 "teaching for critical literacy" (p. 101) practices, ensuring that PSTs actively engage with it as an instructional practice, not just theory. Reviewing specific teaching examples for critical literacy will support PSTs in understanding their position as classroom teachers regarding issues of agency and power, particularly concerning the pedagogical choices they make. Table 4 presents a framework based on the critical literacy practices identified by Wolk (2003) that can be used to integrate critical literacy practices into lesson planning.

Table 4. Critical Literacy Pedagogy Framework for Lesson Planning

Critical Literacy Practice (Adapted from Wolk, 2003)	Planning Question	Intended Outcome/Goal
Question the Content	Who created this text or resource? Whose perspectives are included? Whose perspectives are missing?	To deconstruct dominate narratives and expose power dynamics (Freire, 1970; Lewison et al., 2008).
Connect Materials to the Lives of students	How does this issue directly impact my students and their families/ communities?	To make classroom content relevant and validate students' existing knowledge and experiences (Freire, 1970; Wolk, 2003).
Incorporate Current Events	Which real-time event can be used to anchor this historical or political concept?	To develop critical media consumption and promote engagement with contemporary events (Giroux, 2024a; Pescatore, 2007).
Facilitate Discourse	How will I structure the discussion to ensure all voices are heard and classroom norms are maintained?	To cultivate democratic skills, tolerance for varied perspectives, and civil exchange (Hlebowitsch, 2024; Pace et al., 2022).
Reflect and Act	What opportunity will students have to produce their own voice or take action?	To transition students from passive recipients of information to active participants in a democratic society (Freire, 1970).

Note. This framework for critical literacy lesson planning is adapted from the critical literacy practices defined by Wolk (2003). The intended outcomes are a synthesis of key theoretical and pedagogical tenets of critical literacy, including deconstructing dominant narratives (Freire, 1970; Lewison et al., 2008), promoting engagement with contemporary events (Giroux, 2024a; Pescatore, 2007), fostering civic discourse (Hlebowtitsch, 2024; Pace et al., 2022), and enabling the reflection necessary for thoughtful participation in a democratic society (Freire, 1970).

This approach is needed because, as Rubin (2024) cautions,

> Whether we talk about it in school or not… Kids are coming in with their experiences, their connections to particular ideas, their communities, and rather than trying to create classrooms where none of that matters, we should be thinking about how we shape a classroom environment where we honor everyone's individual experience, listen to each other across difference, and engage in discourse across topics where we don't necessarily agree (para.11).

Failing to discuss a national election limited students' access to perspectives and important contemporary events. Integrating a specific and actionable critical literacy pedagogy within methods courses will assist PSTs in developing the lessons and approaches that honor the experiences of all students and make room for productive discourse, rather than simply avoiding controversial issues.

While none of these aforementioned practices will fully mitigate every barrier, they will build teacher agency and provide PSTs with the professional dispositions and pedagogical considerations necessary when faced with teaching contemporary and controversial issues, like elections. This preparation is needed for realizing the democratic and civic goals of social studies education, which aims to empower students to engage thoughtfully with the world around them.

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Transformative International and Cross-cultural Education in Elementary Social Studies: The Case of Shawe and Finley

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Abstract

This article describes the effects of international cross-cultural education on two elementary students involved in a world cultures curricular unit, one who was initially resistant to the unit, and another who was nervous and afraid of engaging in it. For these students, their participation led to changes in behavior and attitudes that suggest they had transformative experiences as they engaged with the curriculum. This qualitative case study focuses on their development through the course of the curricular intervention, using transformative experience theory to make sense of why these children grew so significantly. Findings indicate differences between the children's initial attitudes and behaviors and those exhibited after participating in the world cultures unit, including interest in participation instead of resistance, comfortableness, and eagerness in engaging instead of fear and nervousness. In addition, both children demonstrated growth in skills and dispositions necessary for positive cross-cultural interactions, as well as a reduction in nascent xenophobic attitudes and behaviors. Exploring these students' development can help educators begin to understand how and why some learning experiences can be transformative, and provides insight into how social studies educators might create more effective international, cross-cultural experiences for young citizens of the world.

Transformative: causing a major change to something or someone, especially in a way that makes it, him, or her better (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2023).

What makes an educational experience transformative? I contemplated this question as I read and analyzed the data I collected from Shawe's and Finley's (pseudonyms) engagement in the world cultures curriculum I had constructed. Their actions, attitudes, and views of themselves and people from other cultures had certainly changed over the course of the unit and seemed to me to indicate that they had some kind of transformative experience. I became increasingly curious about what that meant for them as learners and as young citizens of the world.

Thus, this study investigated the transformative effects of these two children's involvement in a world cultures curriculum designed to encourage the development of skills and knowledge needed for positive cross-cultural understanding and engagement, including the disruption of bias and stereotypes, potentially diminishing the development of xenophobic beliefs and attitudes. This article focuses on their development through the course of the curriculum, using transformative experience theory to make sense of the children's evident growth beyond a mere cognitive grasp of the curriculum's concepts. The research questions guiding this study were: In what ways did Shawe and Finley show shifts in initial attitudes, ideas, and behaviors after experiencing the curriculum? What evidence is there to indicate this experience was transformative?

Exploring Shawe's and Finley's development provides insight into how and why some learning experiences can be transformational, thus helping elementary social studies educators consider how they might create more effective international, cross-cultural experiences to disrupt bias and nascent xenophobia in young children. In experiencing positive transformative social studies, children can take what they have learned in the classroom into their daily lives, affecting the way they engage with the world and others as active young citizens, one of the primary goals of social studies education.

Children's Development of Cultural Awareness and Understanding

Cultural and ethnic awareness develops early, well before children enter elementary school (Connolly, 2011; Nesdale, 2007). This awareness includes assigning people to national groups, about which children develop certain attitudes or beliefs (Barrett, 2007; Bar-Tal, 1996). Developing this ability to categorize can contribute to the emergence of stereotypes and biases (Killen and Rutland, 2011) as children can adopt fairly rigid ideas about who belongs to which group. Indeed, as early as five some–but not all–children develop stereotypes (Barrett, 2005, Bar-Tal, 1996), express bias toward their own ethnic or national group (Nesdale, 2007), or exhibit prejudice (Brown, 2010; Killen & Rutland, 2011).

However, children's development surrounding cultures is highly contextualized and significantly influenced by their socio-cultural environment, thus resulting in considerable variance. Barrett's work (2007) surrounding children's understanding of culture suggests that their construction of cultural cognition is influenced by multiple elements, including external societal and social, as well as internal motivational and cognitive factors. One encouraging finding in the literature is that schools can positively affect children's cultural attitudes, beliefs, and understanding (Cameron et al., 2006; Torres, 2019). It is in this space that powerful and meaningful social studies education has the potential to go beyond some level of impact to being truly transformative.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Pugh's (2011) transformative experience theory (TET). Based on ideas that education should expand and enrich everyday experiences outside the school context, Pugh describes transformative experiences as those where "students actively use curricular concepts in everyday life to see and experience the world in a new, meaningful way…represent[ing] the phenomenon of school learning transforming everyday experience" (p. 107).

Transformative experiences are comprised of three interrelated characteristics. First is the *motivated use* of school content in everyday experiences outside of the school context. In motivated use, students "are engaging with the content as an idea" (p. 112). They use their agency to apply it to new contexts where they are not required to do so, but are motivated by interest, as "a possibility that needs to be acted upon and experienced in everyday life" (p. 112). Second is the *expansion of perception* where individuals use content and knowledge they have gained in school to see events, objects, people, or an issue in new ways. This new awareness modifies their original understanding, while incorporating it into existing schema, thus reshaping their ways of perceiving the world and their places in it. Third is *experiential value*, where students become aware of the worth of what they have learned in the classroom, and appreciate how the new ideas and content enrich their lives outside of school. This awareness and appreciation extend both their interest in and application of in-school learning to related everyday experiences. When these three characteristics are present after a student engages in an experience, that experience can be described as transformative, affecting the child's way of seeing, engaging with, and being in the world (Heddy & Pugh, 2015).

Research related to transformative experience suggests that incorporating particular design principles into the selected curriculum and pedagogical strategies produces transformative experiences for some students (Alongi et al., 2016; Herrick et al., 2022; Pugh et al., 2017). These principles include framing content as ideas, scaffolding students in understanding how to see things in the world through the content they are learning (referred to as "re-seeing"), and teachers

modeling their own passion for the subject as well as sharing their own personal transformative experiences (Pugh et al., 2017). Guided by TET, this study sought to understand how the curriculum served as a transformative experience for Shawe and Finley, leading to changes in their behavior and attitudes.

Transformative Experiences in the Elementary Classroom

Turning to the literature on transformative experiences in schools, the majority of research using TET has been done in science classrooms. Little research has been done around transformative experiences using TET in elementary social studies; thus, no relevant studies on this topic were found in the literature. The only social studies-related project found took place in two high school government and history courses. Using Pugh's (2011) three characteristics of transformative experience—described above in the theoretical framework for this study—Alongi et al. (2016) developed a curricular intervention to measure, among other things, whether it had a transformative effect on students in the classes where it was implemented. Researchers found that some, though not all, students did have transformative experiences through engaging with a curriculum specifically designed to foster transformation. The relevance of these findings to this current study is that it suggests high-quality, thoughtfully designed social studies curriculum has the potential to be transformative, though not all students might experience the curriculum in a transformative way.

Similarly, a 2017 study conducted by Pugh et al. in a sixth-grade science classroom found that students engaged in a transformative-focused curriculum exhibited higher levels of transformative experience and substantially greater learning and cognitive depth of understanding than those in a standard, conventional curriculum. Many students not only exhibited the three characteristics of transformative experience but could provide examples of them in their everyday lives. These studies suggest that the incorporation of pedagogies that scaffold students' development of the characteristics of transformative experience leads to deeper learning, encourages students to apply their academic learning beyond school, and enhances awareness of and interactions with the wider world.

However, as Alongi et al. (2016) indicate, not all students will experience the curriculum in the same way, nor have transformative experiences. In Girod and Wong's (2002) study on aesthetic and transformative experiences in fourth grade science, outcomes fell along a spectrum. Some of the students had what could be described as transformative experiences, which promoted their interest and application of science from solely in class into their everyday contexts, helped them understand the world in a new way, and engaged in thinking and actions they had not previously considered. For other children, even if they were conceptually successful in mastering ideas and

facts, completing the unit with a strong grasp of content, they did not take away anything personally meaningful or transformative that shifted their thinking about themselves, the world, or science and its application in everyday contexts outside of school.

A more recent study (Herrick et al., 2022) focused on a fifth-grade science unit about climate change that included aspects that intersect with social studies, such as the focus on an important global societal issue and outcomes supporting informed and engaged citizenship. In this project, students used photovoice to engage in science learning around the topic of the climate crisis. Researchers found that scaffolding students' understanding while using photovoice to engage in analysis, reflection, and discussion did indeed foster transformative experiences. Many students were able to articulate the three characteristics, while also engaging in "re-seeing" their environments, which the researchers described as "deep noticing, which added new ways to see familiar objects" (p. 107). Several students even expressed interest in becoming climate activists, applying what they had learned to transform their communities through educating others. The development of agency and activism in the students, with a desire to contribute as citizens to their local community and the wider world, intersects with the goal of social studies to help students develop into informed, active, and engaged citizens within their local and wider communities, and demonstrates how transformative education can help to meet the aims of social studies and citizenship education.

While the above studies explicitly combine classroom practice and TET, most of them do not address social-studies-specific aims or curricular contexts. Other research situated in the field of social studies addresses what could be interpreted as transformative experiences within elementary social studies but does not use TET as a lens for interpretation. For example, Swalwell's and Payne's (2019) work around critical civic education in early childhood, some of which took place in two different first-grade classrooms, focused on young children as civic beings with agency who can take action on issues that concern them and the communities of which they are a part. Results indicate that the three interrelated characteristics of transformative experience (motivated use, expansion of perception, and experiential value) were evident in curriculum design and in students' responses to their experiences.

Likewise, a series of studies in a fifth-grade classroom oriented around critical civic education invited the students to engage in powerfully transformative work. Across three studies, this included understanding individual development and identity, perspective recognition, and how to use disciplinary tools to engage in inquiry (Payne & Green, 2018); learning about and using cultural citizenship while incorporating children's civic assets, agency, and action (Falkner & Payne, 2021); and finally, engaging in learning around contentious political issues while including students' own politicized funds of knowledge (Payne & Journell, 2019).

This focus on transformative, student-centered, critical social studies was also central to work around cultivating student voice and agency in both kindergarten (Serriere, et al., 2017) and fifth grade (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). For the fifth-grade participants, researchers noted that alongside the development of feelings of agency, competence, and belonging was a sense of civic efficacy, all of which connect to the characteristics of transformative experience. Work with the kindergartners suggested the development of agency, perspective taking, and growth in their development as civic agents.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate ways transformation can be enacted in early childhood social studies through powerful pedagogical choices that encourage young children to critically and deeply engage with social studies disciplinary concepts, as well as topics around culture, identity, and social issues. More specifically, they exemplify how carefully designed curriculum can provide powerful and transformative experiences that advance social studies aims focused on developing young actively engaged citizens. However, connections to transformative experiences as defined by TET are inferred and implicit. This current study contributes to this body of knowledge in focusing on transformational teaching and learning within a global cross-cultural curricular context, an area not often addressed in elementary social studies, and through the direct use of TET to make sense of outcomes.

Bringing the two bodies of literature together, they illustrate that transformative engagement and experiences are different from mastering concepts and skills solely to excel academically and conceptually. Transformative experiences involve thinking about and applying learning to everyday life outside of school, "re-seeing" and experiencing the world differently, transforming perspective, identity, and ways of being, and enriching students' lives and daily interactions. To promote transformative experiences, the research suggests the importance of incorporating one or more pedagogical strategies that foster it in the design of curriculum. Results also indicate that outcomes will not always be the same for all students; while the same unit of instruction and strategies may be used with everyone in a class, other factors including sociocultural influences and identification with the subject area can affect whether students have a transformative experience. Nevertheless, the possibility, as demonstrated by the literature, is there. This current study, then, can give further insight into transformational experiences in schools through an under-explored topic in elementary social studies.

Methodology

This qualitative case study emphasizes student voice and perspectives as their right to be heard in the research, and in their own words (Thomson, 2008). The emergence of this project's focus from the data is in line with my inductive qualitative approach to research (Thomas, 2006),

allowing results to arise from raw data, leading to particular lines of inquiry. As stated earlier, the research questions guiding this study were: In what ways did Shawe and Finley show shifts in initial attitudes and behaviors after experiencing the curriculum? What evidence is there to indicate this experience was transformative?

Findings related to these questions surfaced during the project, which took place in a small Title 1 school located in a rural Midwestern community. I collaborated with two third-grade teachers to teach a curriculum focused on world cultures, designed to promote the development of cross-cultural understanding and engagement. Both Shawe and Finley were students in Mrs. O'Hara's (pseudonym) class of 14.

As a scholar-educator deeply committed to practice and empirical research in classrooms, with over 15 years of experience as an elementary educator and curriculum developer, I approached this research from the stance of a participant-observer (Glesne, 2011), both creating and teaching the unit. While there are limitations to this stance, the benefits of understanding the phenomena of interest from a teacher's perspective, and the ability to maintain the fidelity of the unit and of the research goals outweighed the drawbacks of taking this position.

The curriculum was focused on teaching about national cultures associated with nation-states around the world. For this study, culture can be thought of as the framework that describes the different ways of believing, understanding, valuing, and feeling that diverse social groups develop and express through a variety of visual, aural, written, or oral media (Bennett & Frow, 2008). National cultures are one kind of social group, and one of the most accessible to young children learning about cultures. The unit was grounded in scholarship from the fields of cultural cognition and global education, with an emphasis on providing direct contact experiences with international collaborators (Merryfield, 2003; Torres, 2021) who came to the class to interact with the students. Children began the unit learning about both the visible and invisible elements that constitute cultures (Abdullahi, 2010; Merryfield & Wilson, 2005), exploring similarities and differences between them through cultural universals (Alleman et al., 2007).

The next section of the unit was designed to show how geography and history influence culture, to explore and disrupt stereotyping and biases, encourage respect for people with different ethical frameworks, and understand cultural diversity and assets both within and across cultures. Students applied their learning through interactions with people from seven different national cultures who came to the school at different times to teach about their cultures and engage directly with students. The final part of the unit explored concepts of global interdependence, the unequal distribution of resources globally, and the ramifications of some regions or countries having many more resources than others. Students were able to consider and discuss how unequal power

relationships affect different people and their cultures in different areas of the world. Table 1 outlines the curriculum in more detail.

Although the curriculum was not originally developed with the design principles that foster transformative experience in mind, they were nevertheless part of the unit in how it was organized and the pedagogical strategies included. For example, content was framed through several big ideas, including those mentioned above. Students' re-seeing was scaffolded through the use of familiar examples from their own experiences to think about stereotyping and biases and through their interactions with people from different cultures. As a Third Culture person with many personally transformative cultural experiences and a strong passion for cross-cultural engagement, I not only shared personal experiences and my love for other cultures but introduced them to some of my colleagues who were personal friends from across the globe.

I worked with multiple data sources including observations, interviews with the classroom teacher, interviews with Shawe and Finley before and after they experienced the curriculum, informal conversations with them that arose organically during the course of the unit, videotaped lessons, work samples from the children, and my field notes. Participants' responses were transcribed and analyzed through inductive qualitative analysis (Thomas, 2006) and a system of qualitative coding that included Eclectic and Focused coding (Saldaña, 2021).

Initial rounds of coding brought into focus the students' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors prior to experiencing the curriculum, as well as the shifts they made during and at the end of the unit. I then returned to the data again to search for evidence of transformative experiences using the lens of Pugh's (2011) three interrelated characteristics. Codes were then collectively reconsidered, combined, and refined to shed light on the topic being investigated. Following are the results of this analysis.

Findings

Findings are organized to trace Shawe's and Finley's development across time, beginning in the first section with their initial attitudes, ideas, and behaviors before the unit. The second section describes specific data—in the children's own voices when possible—that emerged during and at the end of the curricular unit that demonstrate the changes the children made, which, I would argue, can be considered transformative.

Students' Initial Attitudes, Ideas, and Behaviors

Shawe and Finley attended a very small neighborhood school in the center of town where many children still walked or rode their bikes to school, unaccompanied. Situated in a community

that was predominantly white, they and their classmates had very little opportunity to meet people from other cultures outside of the U.S. context.

Shawe was known for his quirky personality and misbehavior. He had a history of challenging social interactions with both teachers and other students at school. Often off-task and unengaged, he was something of a loner when he was not playing around with other students in class, disrupting the order and flow of lessons. He was not really connected to the adults with whom he had to interact and would often get into power struggles to try to get his way and avoid doing things he did not want to do.

Shawe was initially resistant to learning about other cultures. At the beginning of the unit, he declared that he didn't want to learn about any cultures that "didn't have better homes and weapons than us." His cultural "knowledge" consisted of stereotypes and deficit views of other people and places as exemplified in his description of Africans as impoverished, dirty, and lacking any modern technology. He shared his incorrect ideas about cultures with authority, even getting into a bit of an argument with another student over how he could tell the ethnicity of someone based on physical features. During most lessons, including when international collaborators first came to the class to share about their cultures and interact with the children, Shawe would sit at his desk, far from the group, his head down, unengaged.

In contrast, Finley was a well-behaved, quiet, shy, and somewhat nervous student. Finley struggled academically, particularly with literacy, and her teacher indicated that she probably would be identified with a learning disability eventually. While she never said much, she always seemed interested in what we were doing, and would sit quietly with the group, listening and participating in activities. Unfortunately, as a struggling learner, Finley often missed lessons because she was part of a reading remediation program which she had to attend at the end of the day. Because of her absences and quiet nature, I did not discover until much later that Finley initially was afraid of and somewhat confused about our topic of study, particularly the idea of meeting people from other cultures. As she explained, "On the first day I was kinda scared to learn about new countries and new people and I kinda didn't know what to write in my travel journal…I felt shy…and kinda scared." She worried about what the "new people" were like, and how they might treat her and the other students as young Americans. Thus, in contrast to her participation at other times, when the visitors first came to teach, she would stay on the periphery, not interacting with anyone, just watching.

The children's initial behaviors suggest a nascent form of xenophobia, which includes fear, mistrust, and dislike of strangers perceived as "foreign." The children's statements and perceptions of people from other cultures also indicate a negative bias, one characteristic that contributes to xenophobic attitudes and actions.

Shifts in Initial Attitudes, Ideas, and Behaviors During and After the Unit

As the unit progressed, both children began to exhibit changes in their attitudes, ideas, and behaviors. Whereas Shawe initially refused to engage, eventually he joined the group for most activities and discussions. At first he was rather disruptive, but then he began paying more attention, demonstrating interest in the cultures under study with participation, questions, and comments. When later international guest teachers came to the school, he was polite, at one point even hugging Faith and Joy, the South Sudanese guest teachers, which was highly significant for him considering his regular interactions with adults in the school setting. By the time the last group of visitors from South Korea came, he actually made a point of going up to one of them when they arrived to thank her for coming, taking the initiative to engage cross-culturally.

At the end of the unit, he told me he had liked learning about the different countries, and that he also liked that different people came to visit because, "You got to know about their cultures." From not wanting to learn about any cultures, Shawe developed not only an enjoyment in learning about different cultures, but in learning from people from those cultures. In his development of an interest in learning about cultures, he also came to understand the importance of cultures to those who lived them. As he explained, "Cultures are important to people and they want to keep it....Sometimes you have to respect a culture, and if you make fun of their culture, they might not like you." By this time in the semester, Shawe wanted to be seen as respectful toward other cultures, able to adopt behavior norms and develop cross-cultural friendships. When talking about meeting people in Madagascar, he said he would "behave just like them. If I behave just like them, they wouldn't really recognize me as a different person, or person who makes fun of different kinds of cultures. Usually, if you act like them, they probably will appreciate you, and then probably they'll become friends with you." In this comment, Shawe not only showed that he understood the importance of adopting behavior norms—at least while in another culture, in order to develop positive cross-cultural relationships—but that he wanted to do so if he visited another culture.

When asked, Shawe credited the curriculum with changing him, saying, "It's teaching me about...different cultures of what they should do that is good in their country and what is bad in their country. Like in South Korea, you have to take off your shoes." Based on what he had learned, he even had advice for other people in regard to positive behavior in another culture, and the way to fit in:

> The most important thing is that, stay calm and try to do your best to see what other people are doing. After you're done seeing what people are doing, act like you're one of them and just be normal, like them. Try to stick with what the people are doing and maybe you'll find your way to become part of the city or something like that.

Taken together, these examples show a significant shift in Shawe's attitude toward and understanding of cultures, engaging more respectfully, and at a deeper level than he had initially.

Shawe's shift in understanding and behavior also extended to ideas related to bias. In his final interview, he declared bias was "stupid," particularly related to sports and fan violence, one of the examples I had used in a lesson. As he said, "The reason why I think it's stupid is because people are injuring each other and all people were made mankind . . . so like everyone in the world is like brothers and sisters." He also was able to understand and describe the mental pressure that bias can create, sometimes pushing people to abandon their own ideas just to conform to group norms, hurting the person and affecting how they see their own culture. As a high-context communicator–where the listener has to gather what the speaker is trying to say through inference and context–Shawe shared most of his ideas through stories. Thus, he used a sports analogy about two American football teams, the Broncos and Colts, when he explained this idea of group pressure to conform:

> You do not want to ruin their culture, because if you do, they're going to think that other people are better. Like if you ever said, "Go Broncos!" [and someone said] "Hey! That's not cool. Dude! Did you know that Broncos are stupid and they don't know how to win?" You'll think that and then you'll automatically just change and you'll vote for the Colts even though that's not your favorite team.

Shawe also exhibited a growing understanding of global inequalities. As part of the curriculum, he learned about the inequitable distribution of resources globally and unfair labor practices. The unfairness inherent in these topics outraged Shawe and led to a developing sense of social justice, where he wanted to be a change agent. In his final interview, he commented on unfair wages, saying, "Bosses, they have to stop being greedy about their money . . . the only thing I'm trying to say is that people should get paid more." When I commented that maybe he would grow up and help change this, he answered,

> I'm probably going to. . . . I hope I get voted to be the president. I'll make new laws that will actually be kind and a little bit fair. . . . Like the United States will have to be peaceful and not selfish in a way. Also, there has to be a rule where bosses have to pay more and stop being so greedy and selfish for what they are doing. . . . I just want to make a better difference from what would happen that's cruel in this world.

From beginning the unit disengaged and resistant, to wanting to be a change agent who engages respectfully with people from other cultures, Shawe demonstrates multiple shifts in behavior, attitudes, and thinking about cross-cultural topics. He exemplifies that even students who initially are uninterested in and opposed to cross-cultural learning and engagement can begin to make

connections, develop an ability to cross-culturally engage positively, gain awareness, and even expand their vision of the kind of people they want to be now and in the future.

In contrast to Shawe's resistant stance, Finley began the unit nervous and a little afraid, but as time went on, she became increasingly comfortable learning about cultures, becoming more engaged in the content and activities of the unit. She wrote pages and pages of notes in her travel journal, asked questions, and made sure to get all the materials she had missed when she left early for reading. I noted that she sometimes carried her journal around with her, and she even brought it with her to our final interview, referring to it several times during the course of the conversation. After overcoming her initial fear, she became especially interested in the international visitors, moving to the front and center of the group when they came, walking with them around the classroom, taking the initiative to ask them questions, and jotting down notes on what they told her. By the end of the unit, she was talking about how she wanted to travel abroad to visit one of the people she had met, and how she would like to learn more about him and experience his culture, indicating a desire to continue to engage cross-culturally and to connect relationally.

Like Shawe, she had also taken a special interest in the topic of bias, and was one of the few children who had been able to identify her own bias, telling me, "When Michael said the South Korean people...were Japanese? I actually thought that, too, because I watch a lot of Japanese movies... and they have that hair. When I thought that, then I knew I had bias for saying that they looked like Japanese, and I thought they were from Japan." She was also the only child who observably demonstrated a nascent sense of the intersections of prejudice and power. In a conversation about respecting people's worldviews, Finley talked about how biased theists could oppress atheists:

> What people do when they have bias, and they really like God. . . . They start yelling at [atheists], and making them believe in God. And even if they don't believe in it, they make them . . . and I think it's not fair. . . . Because if they're making them do it, they're being bossed. And maybe the people don't know if there's a God or not. If they live their lives, or if gods help them.

Not only did Finley point out the issues of power between a majority and minority group, she also pointed out the injustice of making people conform against their wishes. She also tried to make visible the perspective of the oppressed group, showing her developing ability to express a different perspective to help other people consider an alternate view.

The new ideas and experiences Finley engaged with during the unit—as well as her growing desire for and interest in cross-cultural engagement—became catalysts for imagining her future. A day or two before the end of the semester, she came to class, carrying a project she had made at home: 11 passports, one for each place she wanted to go. She had taken her agenda and pored over

the maps in it, choosing places she wanted to travel, and made a passport, complete with her picture and a passport stamp in each. This project was not a class assignment; rather, it arose purely out of the interest she had developed in other cultures.

The project was just the beginning of the expanded vision of a future she imagined for herself. As we met for our final interview, she also told me about how she wanted to change what she wanted to do when she grew up. We had spent some time learning about unfair labor practices around the world, in order to teach our interconnectedness and the idea that our choices affect other people's lives, and that we could take action to change things. During our interview, she shared her vision of running a store that paid the workers fairly:

> I wanted to be, like, not really a boss, but a person that will help people. Kinda like a president that will help people. Like, if I run the store I will give the people that made the thing, if they're not too far, I would go there and give them the money that the person gave it, and I would split the money, so we all had the same amount. Because I wanna be fair. If you only had 100 dollars, and only two people got 80 and then 20, then the only people got 10, that wouldn't be fair.

Combining these last two actions with her insights on her own bias, and her desire to engage in cross-cultural friendship through visiting her new friend's home culture, Finley has developed a different vision of herself than the girl who was frightened of meeting people from other countries and felt scared because she didn't know what to write in her travel journal. Here she sees the possibilities of being an ethical businesswoman, working for fair labor practices and justice for workers, as well as a world traveler who wants to experience other places and cultures. Finley shows that, for some students, a curriculum such as this generates interest, engagement, and strengths that otherwise can remain hidden, and gives students like her a different concept of self and her own potential. She exemplifies the power of cross-cultural education to not only help prepare students to be global citizens, but also to invite students to consider multiple ways they may want to live, thus broadening not only their perspectives, but enlarging the possibilities for their own futures.

For both Shawe and Finley, the findings also indicate a reduction in elements that contribute to the development of xenophobia, including negative views and attitudes of people from other cultures, fear, stereotyping, biases, and resistance to engagement with others perceived as "foreign." Although the reactions and responses to the curricular intervention were particular to each child—which is consistent with research around cultural cognition and variance between children's understanding (Barrett, 2007)— overall the outcomes demonstrate the curriculum operated as a transformative experience for both children, disrupting misconceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that can lead to xenophobia.

Discussion and Conclusion

Looking at Shawe and Finley collectively, the impact of their experiences during the social studies unit illustrates the potential of a world cultures curriculum to be transformative. The examples highlight their growth and change, making them aware of biases and beginning to disrupt their own, helping them develop comfort and interest in cross-cultural engagement, as well as respect for other cultures and the people who embody them, all of which contribute to their individual intercultural competence and a decrease in nascent xenophobia.

Returning to Pugh's (2011) theory, I argue that Shawe's and Finley's experiences can be described as transformative because they include the three characteristics of transformative experience and they did affect the students' ways of seeing, engaging with, and being in the world (Heddy & Pugh, 2015). In the case of motivated use, which focuses on applying school content to situations beyond where it is required, Finley's creation of the passports is a clear example of applying in-school learning to everyday out-of-school experiences solely motivated by her own interest. Shawe's motivated use is a bit more inferential. I would argue that his application of the content to his vision of his future self as a traveler and as the president is a form of motivated use. He used his agency and interest to apply his learning to a context outside of school where he was not required to do so, envisioning a new future for himself, and exemplifying what Pugh (2011) described as "a possibility that needs to be acted upon and experienced in everyday life" (p. 112).

Shawe's recognition of bias and its effects, as well as his new awareness of the injustices of unethical labor practices, come into play with this new vision for the future and represent his expansion of perception. As the definition of expansion of perception describes, he used content and knowledge he gained in school to see people and issues in new ways, which reshaped his way of perceiving both the world and his future in it. Likewise, Finley's recognition of bias more broadly, as well as her own bias specifically, and the intersections of power and prejudice is a powerful example of her shift in perception.

Finally, in regard to experiential value, where students become aware of the worth of what they have learned in the classroom and appreciate how the new ideas and content enrich their lives outside of school, Shawe's declaration of what he liked about learning about culture and the importance of learning about it indicates experiential value. Finley's example of experiential value intersects with motivated use for her future as a traveler and as an ethical businesswoman, where the value of what she has learned is implied through its motivated use to plan her travels (with her passports), and with her statement at the end of the unit where she wanted to change what she wanted to do when she grew up, based on what she had learned. These examples illustrate the interconnected and overlapping nature of the three elements and the complex process of how they

come together in individual students to create meaningful transformative experiences, different for each learner.

This individual process also connects back to the idea of cultural learning being a highly contextualized sociocultural activity, influenced by multiple elements, including external societal and social, as well as internal motivational and cognitive factors (Barrett, 2007). These varied sociocultural and individual factors suggest reasons why Finley and Shawe had transformative learning experiences with the curricular unit, and why other students might or might not. The important implication here is that a well-designed and executed curriculum can lead to transformative experiences for students, even if not everyone, and that schools can make an impact on young children's understanding of other cultures, and their subsequent attitudes and behaviors. This result is consistent with earlier studies such as those described in the literature review where some students also had transformative experiences with the curriculum, but that students experienced the curriculum differently and in different degrees (Alongi et al., 2016; Girod & Wong, 2002; Herrick et al., 2022; Pugh et al., 2017).

Turning to the curriculum, I suggest that the inclusion of the three design principles that foster transformative experiences, and the particular focus on making the content and learning applicable outside of school made this intervention conducive to being transformative. From the beginning, the aim of the unit was application to real life, and to invite an interest and enthusiasm for cross-cultural engagement and understanding, and was therefore organized accordingly. In regard to the three principles, students had repeated opportunities to frame the content as ideas they could apply to outside-of-school experiences, re-see what they previously understood about the world, and engage with me and people from other cultures who were passionate about and committed to cross-cultural engagement and understanding. All these elements, I suggest, contributed to the success and transformative nature of the unit.

There are clearly limitations to this work: the intervention took place in one elementary classroom in a specific context, and the research focuses on two students in that specific sociocultural space. However, research on cultural cognition and transformative learning acknowledges the importance and limitations of context, and there are important ideas that can be learned from Finley's and Shawe's case. Given the dearth of empirical studies related to global education in elementary classrooms, and even fewer studies of international, cross-cultural education that consider the potential transformative nature of the experience, this study makes an important contribution related to learning about other cultures in social studies education. Further, it provides encouraging evidence that schools which provide well-constructed social studies interventions have the potential to be transformative for young citizens and increase their ability to engage cross-culturally, as well as reduce nascent xenophobic attitudes and behaviors.

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Table 1. Outline of the World Cultures Curricular Unit

Topic/Concept	Key Ideas	Key Activities	Cross-cultural Engagement
Introducing culture through cultural universals	Defining culture, cultural universals; cultural similarities and differences to satisfy human needs	Exploring cultural universals through literacy, including research and Venn diagrams	Children's literature introducing lived experiences of children around the world through cultural universals
Deeper exploration of aspects of culture	Surface and internal culture (i.e., visible and invisible elements that constitute cultures)	Inquiry stations	Artifacts, texts, video, and performance as elements of culture
Key idea 1: Culture is influenced by geography and history	Cultures change over time; history and geography act as significant influences	Exploring exemplars of this idea through multiple forms of text	Cultural consultant from Canada sharing primary source images and artifacts, facilitating correspondence between students in US and Canada to teach about cultural history and diversity in Canadian context

Key idea 2: Stereotypes and exotica	Defining the concepts and how they can be harmful; exploring cultural assets to disrupt them; Africa is NOT a country	"Assumption/ correction chart" of Africa-what they thought they knew versus what they learned through inquiry and cross-cultural engagement	1. Cultural consultant panel from three African countries representing the diversity of the continent 2. Cultural consultants from South Sudan sharing culture through music, dance, foodways while also presenting multiple ethnic cultures within their country
Key idea 3: Respecting other religions and worldviews	Introduction to different religions and worldviews; respectful disagreement (cultivating respect for those whose ethical frameworks differ from their own)	Constructing a compare and contrast chart through research into different belief systems	Cultural consultants from Turkey actively engaging children through primary source texts, a game, centers, discussion, and dancing
Key idea 4: Bias	Defining the term and its connection to stereotyping; effects of bias and ways to reduce it	Engaging with/ analyzing exemplars of bias, Socratic seminars	Cultural consultants from Korea designed an experiential simulation of "traveling" to Korea to "visit" different sites in town and engage in different cultural practices
Global interconnectedness and interdependence	Defining terms, considering effects; unequal distribution of resources and ramifications	Simulation on distribution of resources, activities around global food chain and an exemplar of unfair labor practices	
Final project representing learning	Review of key ideas of unit and student self-selection of topic for their final project	Projects designed by students to represent a personal key takeaway from the unit	Cultural consultants returning for project presentations and to be honored at a cross-cultural celebration

Media Literacy in Civic Education: Teaching Students the Skills of Being a Citizen

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At the start of the 2025 spring semester of college, I struggled with accepting the fact that Kamala Harris lost the presidential election to Donald Trump. At the time, I held a vice presidential role in the College Democrats at Penn State, so that fall, I worked extremely hard on her campaign. Yet, she lost. I felt scared for the direction the nation was headed, and selfishly, I wondered what I was going to do with my career. I always wanted to work for the Department of Education and conduct research, both of which seem unimportant to the Trump administration.

In the face of these fears and uncertainty, I needed answers for why the nation voted this way. However, this was not a far stretch for me to understand. I grew up in Blair County, Pennsylvania, where 71.4% of citizens voted for Donald Trump in 2024 (CNN, 2024). However, from a very early age, I knew I was a liberal. My parents instilled these more liberal ideas in my brothers and me, and I really latched onto these ideals at school. I remember absolutely loving social studies (specifically Mrs. Desort's fourth-grade unit on the Civil Rights movement). I partook in civil discourse with my peers who disagreed with my beliefs since around 2016, when Trump was elected for his first term;

I was, of course, in the minority opinion. So, I could somewhat understand how Trump won again. Blair County is not very wealthy, so I understood why Trump's rhetoric about tariffs was appealing, even if there was not a clear plan and economists were denouncing the idea.

I still wondered, did people not understand that tariffs were not going to work? Through reflection and conversation, I realized the Democrats failed with their messaging, but this answer ceased to satisfy me. This curiosity prompted conversations and continuous NPR reading and listening. This led to a lightbulb moment: a majority of people can no longer separate truth and falsities in news, specifically on social media. In a time where creating and accessing news via social media proves easy, deciphering the validity of information becomes even more of a challenge. Thus, I believe all schools should require a component of media literacy into their curriculum. I delved into this topic during the same semester I felt lost through a class I took at the time, Youth Participation in Education Change with Dr. Dana Mitra. She encouraged me to investigate the questions I had through this class, which led me to submitting to this journal.

While social media offers a place for people to deliberate and civically engage, this becomes dangerous with over-reliance and blind trust in creators on social media. Young people must learn critical thinking skills to determine if certain pieces of information are true or not. Current studies find alarming information about people that rely on social media for their news. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that people reliant on social media for news had lower political knowledge than those that use other sources (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Current curricula in American schools do not do enough to address the issue of media literacy. State legislatures determine school standards, so states vary on requirements for media literacy. A majority of states (31) do not have any legislation that addresses media literacy education, including Pennsylvania (Media Literacy Now, 2024). A failed bill in 2024 would have required the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to create a curriculum that would teach the skills of media literacy (Pennsylvania General Assembly, 2023). The PDE announced media literacy as an important topic to cover in schools, but offered no guidance on implementation. States that have legislated media literacy requirements are not very helpful either, as their guidance is often vague and does not offer support to the schools.

For example, California requires the State Department of Education to make a list of resources and instructional materials about media literacy available (Media Literacy Now, 2024). While these kinds of efforts are a step forward for the implementation of media literacy, they are not that impactful because they are vague and do not offer support to teachers and students in the process. Most states do not have any truly successful media literacy outcomes due to these issues.

In the creation of media literacy curriculum, civic engagement and citizenship must be top of mind. Being a citizen in the 21st century requires different skills than it did before the digital age,

especially with the rise of social media. Therefore, citizenship should be taken into account with media literacy.

Citizenship

In order to cultivate an active and engaged citizenry, media literacy must be taught in schools. This will inspire and enlighten students and citizens of the U.S. to get more active in current events, including finding the correct sources to trust when searching for information. I believe that this knowledge and awareness will lead to better civic outcomes. In the course I took, Youth Participation in Education Change, citizenship was a topic of one of our weeks, which got me thinking about how schools play a key role in developing citizens.

Citizen Type	Personally Responsible	Justice-Oriented
Definition	"citizen that acts responsibly in his or her community" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)	citizen that looks for larger, institutional problems that create inequality (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)
Example	donating to a food drive, obeying the speed limit (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)	questions why people don't have simple access and financial comfort to afford clothing, in general (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)
Curriculum Involvement	suits itself in better fit of civic curriculum that merely focuses on the structures and institutions in the United States	civic curricula includes digital literacy, that sparks curiosity and advocacy work that goes beyond understanding the structure of the government

Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) article describes different versions of a citizen people can embody: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented. The table details the two types of citizenship I focus on: personally responsible and justice-oriented.

The skillset students gain with media literacy curriculum transitions personally responsible students to justice-oriented citizens because they go beyond simply learning basic institutions and structures of the government. They gain the ability to form their own opinions and ideas around certain issues. This includes digital resiliency, increases in civic participation, critical thinking skills, and algorithmic literacy.

One of the key skills gained from media literacy is digital resilience, which denotes the ability to evaluate the validity and bias of online content and recover from online adversity. Media literacy curriculum develops this skill, as it equips students with the ability to understand the contextual

relevance of a post, or how to manage the content they watch to ensure they understand topics from multiple points of view. Students will be able to recognize how the creator's biases shape the way they may report on a certain topic (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). This skill proves its importance because citizens make better-informed decisions and form stronger opinions if they understand multiple perspectives on the same issue, and how people's identities impact their positionality.

Additionally, media literacy curriculum increases student civic engagement. A study conducted in 2012 by Culver and Jacobsen explains that students learning skills of media literacy have more agency in democratic processes. The program studied included education on how to ethically create social media content. This improves students' abilities to communicate and slows down misinformation by teaching future creators how they can produce truthful and meaningful content.

The critical thinking skills gained through media literacy studies are perhaps the most important takeaway. Situating news sources into context, recognizing misinformation, exploring differing perspectives, and evaluating the veracity of evidence are extremely important skills for media literacy. Further, the ability to question powerful institutions and assess the accuracy of a source are major components of justice-oriented citizenship. This task became more difficult with Artificial Intelligence (AI). People easily manipulate content viewers with AI by computer generating realistic images. However, media literacy helps give students the skills to decipher AI content.

Algorithmic literacy should also be addressed in media literacy curricula. Awareness that algorithms cater to the user's preferences allows students to understand they often are not fed information that would challenge their beliefs or with varying perspectives. The algorithm creates a false sense of reality because all of the content reinforces the beliefs of the user. Additionally, ownership of social media platforms affects what content is shared on their app. People can combat these issues by understanding algorithms exist and searching for perspectives that challenge their beliefs, which comes with algorithmic literacy.

These skills lend themselves well to the emergence of justice-oriented citizenship. Civic education can create educated and active citizens. Expanding civic education to include media literacy will create citizens concerned with advocacy and equality. Therefore, the incorporation of media literacy into civics curricula will encourage the emergence of justice-oriented citizens.

In my experiences in Central Pennsylvania, I did not have any type of media literacy curriculum or lessons. What I learned about media literacy was from my parents, not the school. Not all children are lucky enough to have parents with the time or interest to ensure their children develop these skills. Therefore, it is vital that all children are given the chance to build media literacy skills at school.

Conclusion

The news cycle in the U.S. has moved on from Walter Cronkite's CBS Evening News, where most US citizens would get their news from one trusted source. Now, people often consume news on social media platforms, where thousands of creators give their own opinions on different issues on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Those opinions and, often, false news reporting are readily available for people all across the U.S. This creates major obstacles for a functioning democracy.

In order for the United States to have a flourishing democracy with active participants, civic education curricula must include media literacy education. This not only allows for a rational understanding of news, but also creates ethical and moral creators of news on social media platforms. With media literacy, polarization will lessen and more people will participate in political processes, like getting involved with local elections, voting, or working with different organizations. I feel like the U.S. is in danger right now with the current administration. One way to combat this is by teaching students media literacy so that they can make informed decisions, including about how they vote.

Teaching media literacy would have been extremely beneficial for a lot of the students I went to school with as a kid. Hollidaysburg does not have a lot of resources for media literacy education, and I'm sure that curricular gap is not unique. Therefore, all schools should consider implementing media literacy to cultivate a citizenry of educated and critically thinking people.

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Editorial Introduction for Mark Goldschmidt's "Resiliency for Life: A Program at Framingham High School and an Essential Skill"

Mark Kissling, *SSJ* Associate Editor

I taught in the History and Social Sciences department at Framingham [MA] High School (FHS) for three years, from 2004-2007. One of my joys at FHS came through a novel collaboration with another teacher named Mark from the English department. Together, we created an American Studies course, which was a fusion of English and U.S. history. The first time we taught it, the course was a semester-long elective. The second time, it was the entire year and fulfilled students' junior-year English and Social Studies requirements. Unfortunately for our collaboration, I left FHS the following year to pursue a doctoral degree in social studies education at Michigan State University.

In the months before I left FHS, I received a blue fleece pullover from the school's Resiliency For Life (RFL) program. The pullover was a gift of programmatic gratitude because I taught a handful of RFL students and filled out frequent progress reports for them. These reports served as a mechanism for continuously monitoring what kinds of academic support, if any, the students needed. Almost two decades later, I still proudly don my blue pullover.

In November of 2024, I attended the annual meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies in Boston, a mere 20 miles east of Framingham and FHS. While there, wearing my pullover, I met up with Mark, who continues to teach at FHS, now within the RFL program. Much of our focus was RFL and the program it has grown to be. At the end of our conversation, I asked Mark if he would consider writing for *Social Studies Journal*'s "SS Stories" column.

In Mark's story, as well as in the ensuing story of former RFL student Kyliegha, the subject of Social Studies is not explicit. Yet, the work of RFL, as I see it, is entirely aligned with the purpose of cultivating effective citizens and communities, which I understand as the primary purpose of social studies education. RFL is implicit social studies education while not being Social Studies. Further, as I've read and re-read Mark's and Kyliegha's stories, I've found myself thinking about the scale of social studies education. So often 'we' who think about social studies calibrate our focus on the unit of a particular course and/or a classroom. RFL, though, has me thinking more broadly, about a focal unit for social studies education at the level of a program, if not an entire school.

Mark writes, "When people ask me what I teach, I like to say 'life' because the [RFL] program strives to convey skills far beyond the classroom and to live the truth of its name, Resiliency for Life." At FHS Mark is not formally known as a Social Studies teacher–and yet don't Social Studies teachers, more than anything, strive to teach life?

Resiliency for Life: A Program at Framingham High School and an Essential Skill

Mark Goldschmidt

Mark Goldschmidt is the coordinator for the Resiliency for Life Program at Framingham High School in Framingham, Massachusetts. In the photo above, he is pictured with 2024 RFL graduate Wood Jacques, who is now at MassBay Community College on a track to go to medical school. Mark can be reached at mark.goldschmidt.2170@gmail.com.

In September of 1992, I began teaching English and American Studies (co-taught with a US History teacher) in Marlborough, MA, near my hometown of Framingham. In 2004, I moved to teach English at Framingham High School (FHS). When I was invited to chaperone an overnight ski trip with the school's Resiliency for Life (RFL) Program, I witnessed the incredible family atmosphere and heard the success stories that the program fostered, and I was hooked.

Ahead of the 2007-2008 school year, I applied for and received an open RFL teaching position. Eighteen years later, and through some programmatic shifts, I serve as RFL's coordinator and sole teacher alongside a social worker and trilingual academic monitor. I plan to retire (or "graduate," as I call it) in June of 2026. When people ask me what I teach, I like to say "life" because the program strives to convey skills far beyond the classroom and to live the truth of its name, Resiliency for Life. I have come to believe that there are no more important skills that we can convey to our

students in order for them to achieve their goals. Further, I believe that all medium to large schools–and not just high schools–should have a program like Resiliency for Life.

Carmen[1] and RFL

It's 8:12 p.m. on a Tuesday in March, and I get a text message from one of my students. I am immediately concerned, but a quick glance at the message leads me to feel the complete opposite. I see a screenshot of her grades: an A in Introduction to Dance; B's in Modern World History, Geometry, and ESL Language and Literature; a C- in ESL Literacy class; and an A+ in Biology. I almost fall out of my chair. Even though it's a text message, I can visualize Carmen beaming with pride on the other end of the phone.

Carmen arrived in the United States from the Dominican Republic in 2023, so English is not her first language. She started school in our district at the beginning of her seventh grade year. In eighth grade, as she looked ahead to high school, her middle school support team referred her to RFL because she had struggles with emotional regulation and low self-esteem, which, in turn, led to academic struggles that became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When Carmen texted me, we were in the school year's third quarter. She had four low F's in each of her first two quarters, including a 44% and 16% for her first two quarters in Biology. Carmen has been bullied for her weight, which has caused some mild PTSD. For that reason alone, her A in Dance class this semester is much more impressive than it might seem on the surface. She is allowing herself to be vulnerable with a new skill set and for others to watch her perform physical movements.

Things did not go nearly as well in Carmen's first semester physical education class, which she often tried to avoid and stormed out of several times because she reported that boys in the class were teasing her. Thankfully, she took advantage of the opportunity to come to RFL's room and see our social worker for immediate relief and emotional skill building at those times. Likewise, as her parents moved toward a divorce, Carmen became very proactive and trusting with the social worker to help work through her feelings so that they didn't impact her in school.

Carmen is entrenched in the small and supportive RFL community of 50 students within the very large 2,500-student population of FHS and seems to be starting to thrive. RFL helps to make a big school feel small, and the staffing structure, including our trilingual aide, helps Carmen feel at home.

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[1] A pseudonym

What is Resiliency For Life?

Back in 1999, the FHS in-school suspension teacher approached the school administration with a concerning trend. The same students were being sent to him repeatedly for the same behaviors. Not only was this causing them to miss a tremendous amount of classroom learning time, putting them further and further behind, but also the recidivism clearly showed that this intervention wasn't effective. He urged the administration to create a program that could help prevent this problem. RFL was born.

RFL's prototypical student is one who struggles academically because they are struggling emotionally. We usually see this in a more implosive rather than explosive way, rooted in anxiety, depression, trauma, and/or immigration or family challenges. The fact that we have two academic positions—teacher and trilingual academic monitor—alongside a full-time social worker addresses those students strategically.

Most RFL students are referred to us by middle school support staff when they are in the second half of eighth grade. Some are referred by their high school support teams when we have openings throughout the school year. We meet with the staff referring them to get bullet points about each student—strengths, struggles, willingness to accept emotional and academic help, why they think the student is a good fit for us, etc. Then we interview the student and parent or guardian in person for about an hour to learn more about them and how we might best work together. This conversation has been a critical component of working with our students and enlisting the support of their caregivers.

Ultimately, RFL is a voluntary program, and we explain this to each prospective student. We do ask that they stay with us for at least one semester since it can be a big adjustment, but if a student chooses to leave, there is no resistance from us. Sometimes, if a student doesn't seem ready to accept our type of support or make necessary changes in order to achieve the goals they have set for themselves, we need to remove them from the program to make room for another student who will. It generally takes over a year together and many attempts at interventions with caregivers to get to this point, however. In other instances, we mutually decide that there may be another program or setting that is better suited to address the student's needs and goals.

In a typical year, about 30-40% of RFL students have IEPs, but we are not a special education program. Additionally, on average, about 20% of our students are learning English as a second or third language. Many of our students were born in Brazil, Central America, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, so the fact that our academic monitor is fluent in English, Spanish, and Portuguese helps us provide a welcoming environment to all of our students and their caregivers.

It is also critical that RFL has a dedicated and private classroom space and an adjacent private office for the program's social worker. This gives our students a place to go for academic and

emotional support. Several of them struggle with ADHD and need to take movement breaks, so our space is ideal for a reset. Many of their families face food insecurity, so our food services provide snacks to help our students focus on academics rather than hunger pangs. Sometimes our students implode or explode with depression or anxiety, and they know they can come unglued in our safe setting. We also have developed a nice sense of community where all of the students know that the other students in the program have similar struggles, so they are willing to accept academic or emotional support from each other.

And not to be overlooked, in 2018, RFL was allowed to get a certified assistance dog for the classroom named Nala, who is a wonderful additional resource for students who are upset or school-avoidant.

For Dresens, education priority led to Bucknell

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Who's running on the Nov. 5 ballot

Framingham High assistance dog comforts students

Nala, the Resiliency for Life "Assistance Dog For the Classroom," was featured on the front page of the local newspaper.

A Day in RFL

On a typical day, FHS students arrive around 7 a.m. When they enter the building, most go to the cafeteria to get breakfast and see their friends. Many RFL students do the same, but some prefer to go directly to our much quieter and less chaotic homeroom ("advisory") space. At 7:25am all FHS students are expected to be in their advisory so that teachers can take daily attendance. For our RFL staff, it's a great opportunity to do quick emotional and academic check-ins. I like to say that we "speak the language of hoodie" because we know our students so well that if their hoodie is on a little tighter than usual, we know that something is wrong, and we take the opportunity to check in with them.

We try our best to avoid sending our students to class if they are emotionally unprepared to learn. If a student is absent from advisory, we reach out to the student and parent/guardian by call or text in their native language to find out whether they are on their way. We also do this if we learn that a student is skipping class. Not surprisingly, we take attendance VERY seriously, but it has been one of our biggest struggles, especially post-pandemic.

For academic check-ins, using our school's assessment program, we can have our students show us their grades for each assignment in real time. If we get emails from teachers saying that a student owes work, we will ask the student about it. In some cases, they tried but simply didn't know how to do it. In other cases, the work is done but wasn't submitted because of executive functioning challenges. Often, there are extenuating circumstances such as family strife, medical issues, work obligations, and many other challenges. Regardless of the circumstances, we can talk through solutions so the work gets completed and submitted.

During the school day, there are several reasons why students come to see RFL staff. We offer our own "RFL Seminar" for three different course periods each semester. During that time, I usually teach a 20-minute lesson on things they wouldn't typically learn in class, like financial literacy, how to get a driver's license and buy a car, how to stay organized or motivated, and the college admissions process. We also talk a great deal about future planning and invite in speakers to discuss a wide variety of careers that interest our students. This year, we have had visits from a nurse, gas station/auto repair shop owner, homicide detective, realtor, penguin trainer, engineer, and more.

The rest of each seminar period is dedicated to completing upcoming and missing work, so our aide and I float around and help the students to understand their difficult assignments. We also check their grades at least once per week because when our students slip, they tend to fall very quickly. This time is also a great opportunity for 1:1 pep talks in the hallway and for our social worker to pull students for sessions.

Students also come to our space during the day when they need to meet with the social worker. Some have this included in their IEPs, while others do so as needed, such as after advisory in the morning if something is upsetting them. Our social worker helps students build frustration tolerance and interpersonal and conflict resolution skills regularly.

Some students come to our space as part of a plan to address their challenges with ADHD. We schedule movement breaks about halfway through their longer classes so that it divides a longer period into two shorter and more manageable ones. Others come when there are distractions in class that make it hard to focus or if they need 1:1 help in classes that are too large for the subject teacher to give them all the attention they need. Because we are small and have earned the trust of our faculty, we can make these individualized adjustments that make such a big difference. Our

long-term goal is to wean all students off of these sorts of things by the time they are seniors so they can be adequately prepared for whatever they choose to do after high school.

After school, we expect all of our new students and any upperclassman with any grade below C- to stay after school at least one hour per week. They can work in our room and get help from us or go see their subject teacher. Snacks are also accessible at this time so that students aren't hampered by hunger.

Students in the Resiliency for Life Program receive the RFL Stamina Award at their 2024 banquet. The award goes to the students who put in the greatest effort on a consistent basis.

Reflecting on RFL

One frustrating part about running RFL is that it's very difficult to collect data on what we have prevented. This could include dropouts, fights in the hallways, absences, skipped classes, or even life trajectories such as whether or where a student decided to attend college or became incarcerated, chose to be treated for mental illness or try medication or even eyeglasses. We also help whole family units with food insecurity, getting medical care, housing, and child care, and on and on. I like to think that we have a very positive and generational impact on the students with whom we work, even those who choose to leave our program.

If college acceptances are one measure, then this year's senior class has done us proud. We have acceptances from Penn State University, Ohio State University, UMASS Boston, Amherst, and Lowell, and many more. Our graduates tend to stay in school until they earn their degrees for two reasons. First, a generous benefactor has created a scholarship for our graduates so they don't need

to stress as much about paying for college. Secondly, they are used to asking for and accepting academic and emotional support when they need it.

I mentioned my upcoming "graduation" after the 2025-2026 school year. One of my retirement plans is to help other school districts start programs like RFL. As I said above, I believe every medium to large middle and high school could benefit from this model, and it is not difficult to establish or fund. In fact, most schools probably already have the necessary personnel—a teacher and social worker—and they merely need to be reallocated planfully and provided with a dedicated classroom and office space.

I am so proud of the work RFL does and so grateful to be able to work with the program's students, caregivers, and staff. For more information please email me at mark.goldschmidt.2170@gmail.com.

“Additional Academic Information”: An Embodiment of Resiliency for Life

Kyliegha Osamwonyi
Resiliency for Life Class of 2025

Kyliegha Osamwonyi

Kyliegha Osamwonyi with RFL Social Worker Anna Greenberg and Coordinator/Teacher Mark Goldschmidt after her dance school’s performance of The Nutcracker in December 2023.

Kyliegha Osamwonyi, a Class of 2025 graduate of the Resiliency for Life Program at Framingham (MA) High School, wrote the following essay for one of her college applications. Her Resiliency for Life teacher, Mark Goldschmidt, explains further:

Under the university’s typical admissions process Kyliegha would not have been accepted because her grades were not consistently up to their typical standards. Yet Kyliegha had applied through their dance department, and one of the professors sensed that there was more to Kyliegha’s story than numbers on a transcript, so she fought for them to take a deeper look at WHY Kyliegha’s grades went up and down so much. To everyone’s credit, this large, prestigious, out-of-state institution decided to take a much more individualized look and asked Kyliegha to explain what was happening behind the scenes when her grades went down. The essay below is Kyliegha’s response. While the university accepted Kyliegha, the cost of tuition and fees, despite financial aid, was just too much for her family to afford. Kyliegha will proudly attend Bridgewater (MA) State University this fall and she is very excited to join their accomplished dance program.

In looking over my transcript, I am fascinated by just how much it reflects my journey through high school. I entered 9th grade with high hopes for achievement, engagement with my school community, and success despite my previous struggles in 8th grade with isolation, severe depression, and suicidal thoughts during the pandemic. I thought that I would earn good grades and enjoy the experiences and relationships that came with participating in high school activities. Instead, I was confronted by the reality that instability is a powerful force in life that can override hope, ambition, and good intentions. Upon reflection, I am leaving high school with the knowledge that during a prolonged period of dealing with troubles and tough circumstances, my deepest strengths can emerge and help me access the raw materials of resiliency.

My freshman grades tell a transcript reviewer accurately that I am a student who does fairly well in math, and that my love of artistic pursuits brought good grades. These parts of my 'learning personality' represent academic strengths that have sustained me throughout high school and allowed me to keep my GPA afloat over the years. Furthermore, my D+ in World History and my P for Passing in English are clues to the serious problems that plagued me at the time.

I missed two months of school during the spring semester of 9th grade. I was enrolled in a partial hospitalization program due to feeling anxious, hopeless, depressed, and really alienated from the world. I started the school year with a sense of optimism that high school would be a fresh start for me. I loved school prior to the pandemic. School had been something that I really excelled in and genuinely enjoyed. Emotionally, the online-only social interaction and learning that disrupted my 7th grade year really took a toll on me.

I was slow to rebound when school returned to a somewhat pre-pandemic structure during my 8th grade year, and things seemed to have even gotten worse in the midst of trying to transition back. Classmates that I thought of as friends were inexplicably no longer friendly, there were more fights and more criminal acts committed at school, and nothing seemed the same to me. When I discovered that I was still feeling lost after the first few weeks of high school, I felt sad and very alone and out of sync with everyone else. My immediate family had stopped functioning well enough to help me. My dad was serving the second year of a long prison sentence. My mom had not yet attained sobriety and she also struggled with the demands that my brother's special needs placed on her time, energy, and our household in general. My maternal grandmother had become increasingly debilitated due to poor health, and my paternal grandmother had become a busy city councilor who had little free time for anyone. Even my mother's lifelong best friend, whose kids had been like siblings to me for my whole life, was no longer in contact because our mothers' friendship had ended in a nasty disagreement.

I was very sad, and I put a lot of effort into recovery. My education was filtered through my school's Resiliency for Life (RFL) Program so that I could receive emotional support and life skills development along with the required school coursework. At the end of 10th grade, I won RFL's 180-Degree Turnaround Award and they awarded me a cash scholarship to help with my dance school tuition. Despite the increased support, getting better proved to be a slow process.

I suffered a setback in my 11th grade year because I never seemed to have enough time or energy to keep up with school and family demands. My maternal aunt and cousin were severely injured in a car accident. My cousin had to learn to walk again. As a result, my mother helped them and took on more caregiving responsibilities for her own mother. She relied on me to provide more direct care for my younger brother, and I would often stay home from school because of it. I was late or absent from school a lot, and I never fully caught up after falling behind with homework and projects. Due to these constant outside factors and demands, classes such as English that required lengthy ongoing assignments such as research papers and other big projects proved to be especially difficult for me, even with having strong writing and reading skills. This ultimately impacted me to have low grades in English each year. Again, it was math and a creative endeavor (cooking in my World Foods class) that kept me from sinking into the abyss academically. I learned the downsides of being overcommitted and that I have to plan and organize how my time will be used if I want to avoid failure. To take it a step further, I have to be committed, act with intention, and stay goal-directed if I want to succeed.

I approached my 12th grade year with this more practical knowledge of how to achieve the outcomes I want. My solid first quarter grades reflect a combination of relying on my academic strengths in math and artistic work and applying what I have learned about how to succeed. In contrast, I underwent another brief period of instability when I had to move out of my mother's house and into my paternal grandmother's apartment quite suddenly at the end of the first quarter. It was joined by my father's surprise December 2024 release on parole due to his maximum accumulation of "good time" while incarcerated. I was not unhappy about his return, but it required major emotional and lifestyle adjustments to fit him back into my life in a way that is not disruptive. Moreover, it created a bit of a strain on family resources on his side of the family, and my grandmother had found it challenging enough just to cover feeding me and keeping her utilities on as well. My second quarter grades show my plunge into instability once again. However, I have been able to recover quickly in this third quarter.

In college, I would love to be able to show my strengths of not only creativity through my major of dance but also my natural strengths in math, specifically finance in some sort of business, entrepreneurship, or finance minor. Having taken financial literacy in the first semester this school year, it has truly solidified my desire to start my own dance-related businesses in the future and has

given me the confidence in my ability to do so in the future considering the fact I excelled in the class. Being at a residential university is extremely important to me since it would remove me from all the issues competing for my time and emotional energy at home, allowing me to further show my strengths and allowing me for the first time in years to be able to exclusively focus on myself and my academics. I will be a student who has figured out how to be more resilient and how to succeed.

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