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# From potential to practice: Compelling questions as an impetus for curricular and instructional change<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Despite arguments that successful inquiry hinges on an engaging question, relatively little attention has been paid to how teachers craft such questions. This study examined how six high school civics teachers defined and developed compelling questions and evaluated the potential of compelling questions to influence curriculum and instruction. This study used qualitative research methods and generated data through interviews, verbal reports, and content analysis of teacher-completed materials. Findings suggest that teachers are hopeful that compelling questions will prompt challenging instruction that is more relevant to students, but they also acknowledge the various barriers that may temper the impact. Situated within the context of Kentucky's revised social studies standards document, this study provides valuable insight into the potential of a standards document to influence teachers' understanding and use of inquiry and inquiry questions.

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## Introduction

Despite persistent advocacy, research suggests that inquiry continues to be an exception rather than a norm in social studies classrooms (King, Newmann, & Carmichael, 2009; Levstik, 2008; Saunders-Stewart, Gyles, & Shore, 2012; Saye & SSIRC, 2013). One explanation is that teachers are unclear as to what constitutes inquiry (Barton & Levstik, 2004). More frequent are claims that content-heavy standards and high-stakes assessments discourage teachers (Berger, 2014; Grant, 2006; Thornton, 2008). This study was influenced by recent movements in the field that attempt to address both concerns.

In particular, this study was influenced by attempts within the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework* (NCSS, 2013) and an early draft of Kentucky's Social Studies Standards for the Next Generation (KDE, 2015)<sup>1</sup> to name and define inquiry questions. Utilizing the term *compelling question*, both documents position inquiry as central to good social studies and questions as central to good inquiry. Drawing from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998), this study intended to examine the mediated relationship between teachers (actor), inquiry (action), and questions (cultural tool). Although a compelling question is not a new concept, these documents do introduce new terminology. As such, this study identified compelling questions as a new cultural tool and examined its potential to encourage inquiry, particularly because of the term's inclusion in a state standards document. I centered the study on the following question: How do high school social

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<sup>1</sup> In August 2016, Stephen Pruitt, Kentucky's Education Commissioner, delayed implementation of the proposed social studies standards. Since then, all links to the 2015 draft of the proposed standards have been removed from the Kentucky Department of Education's website. Quotations included in this article are derived from the 2015 document that was publically available for review.

studies teachers understand the role questions play in inquiry? For the purpose of this paper, I focus on teachers' conceptions of compelling questions and the potential impact of this tool on their curricular and instructional decisions. Findings suggest that teachers are hopeful that compelling questions will prompt challenging instruction that is more relevant to students, but they also acknowledge various barriers that may temper the impact.

## Theoretical framework

Within sociocultural theory, this study was particularly concerned with mediated action, which focuses on the relationship between the agent and cultural tools (Wertsch, 1998). This study aimed to investigate ways in which teachers' actions are mediated by the cultural tool of questions. For example, revising Kentucky's social studies standards to include particular forms of questions can be considered an attempt to introduce new cultural tools designed to improve social studies instruction, but it remains to be seen if those affordances will be realized and what constraints might emerge. Viewing questions as cultural tools, this study sought to investigate the meanings teachers ascribe to and their uses of particular forms of questions.

This study was also concerned with pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). A teacher's decision to pursue inquiry and to center that inquiry on a question is a reflection of her pedagogical content knowledge (Reitano & Green, 2013; Saye & Brush, 2004). The type of question a teacher employs, including the question's tone, topic, and phrasing, provides insight into how she believes content knowledge is best relayed (Grant & Gradwell, 2010; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991). This study sought to examine teachers' views of questions as a means to engage students with content.

Finally, this study was framed by the concept of reflective practice. In describing the behaviors of a professional, Schön (1983) argued that "competent practitioners usually know more than they can say" (p. viii). Consequently, teachers' "knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in [their] patterns of action and in [their] feel for the stuff with which [they] are dealing" (p. 49). This study hoped to unearth the tacit knowledge that informed teachers' approaches to questions and investigate how teachers adjust their approaches to questions when faced with new standards and expectations.

## Literature review

Inquiry is a common term among educators and a favored approach across the disciplines (Brophy, 2001; Saunders-Stewart, Gyles, & Shore, 2012). Although a single definition does not exist, researchers have noted that common themes emerge, such as "asking new and important questions, collecting data that will help answer them, choosing criteria for the acceptability of evidence, selecting the desired degree of generalizability, and communicating the results to a critical community and the greater public" (Oppong-Nuako, Shore, Saunders-Stewart, & Gyles, 2015, p. 201). Consistency is less apparent when examining inquiry in practice. Banchi and Bell (2008) presented an "inquiry continuum" that includes the four levels of confirmation, structured, guided, and open (p. 26). Aulls and Shore (2008) identified 11 different approaches to inquiry instruction, often tied to particular disciplines, including project-based learning, experimentation, and research. Oppong-Nuako et al. (2015) examined the extent to which high school teachers incorporated inquiry into their instruction and found that even the teachers identified as implementing the "most inquiry" did not necessarily describe their approach to inquiry in the same ways. Similarly, Robinson and Hall's (2008) examination of middle school teachers' approaches to sustained inquiry revealed three patterns of teacher thinking about inquiry: question-driven, resource-driven, and discovery driven. It is unclear the degree to which diverse conceptions of inquiry influence its use or its quality in social studies classrooms, but steps have been taken to clarify the practices of inquiry for social studies teachers (e.g., Fogo, 2014; NCSS, 2013).

### Questions and inquiry

Questions are afforded a particularly important role in inquiry. Dewey (1933) asserted that inquiry begins with "a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty" (p. 12). Some claim this perplexity must directly reflect students' own concerns (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2004), and other traditions describe it as relating to structures of social studies disciplines (e.g., Bruner, 1977). Nonetheless, the central place of questions to inquiry endures because of their role in both initiating and sustaining inquiry (Swan, Lee, & Grant, 2014). For example, the teachers and teacher educators/educational researchers in Fogo's (2014) study ultimately identified "utilize historical questions" as the most important history teaching practice.

The social studies literature tends to address what constitutes an inquiry question with the broad recommendation that it should balance rigor and relevance. Beyer (1971) said inquiry questions relate to "an unsettled, discordant, or problematic situation" (p. 35) and are "cast in terms that have meaning for the inquirer" (p. 37). Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977) described an inquiry question as "a two-pronged affair: it points outward to objective, empirical phenomena, and it points inward to perceived feelings and values and private outlooks" (p. 66). Levstik and Barton (2015) claimed that inquiry questions "do not have simple or single answers" (p. 24) and must "grow out of [students] concerns and interests" (p. 14). This two-trait criteria seems relatively straight-forward, and the literature insinuates that teachers have an inherent sense of what questions are suitable for inquiry; however, this simplicity is deceiving.

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