

# Reforming High School Social Studies Curricula: Promoting Critical Thinking and Civic Responsibility

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**Abstract-** *This review paper examines the critical need for reform in high school social studies curricula to enhance students' critical thinking and civic responsibility. As current educational frameworks often emphasize rote memorization and standardized testing, students are frequently ill-prepared for active participation in democratic processes and social justice initiatives. Through a comprehensive analysis of theoretical foundations, existing challenges, and strategies for curriculum reform, this study highlights the importance of integrating diverse perspectives and contemporary issues into social studies education. Effective methods such as project-based learning, community involvement, and service learning are proposed as practical approaches to foster student engagement and critical analysis. The findings underscore the need for collaboration among educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to create an inclusive and effective educational environment. Ultimately, this paper serves as a call to action for all stakeholders involved in shaping the future of social studies education, aiming to cultivate informed and active citizens equipped to address the complexities of modern society.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Curriculum Reform, Critical Thinking, Civic Responsibility, Social Studies Education, Project-Based Learning, Community Engagement*

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Overview of the Current State of Social Studies Curricula in High Schools

Social studies curricula in high schools have historically been designed to teach students history, geography, economics, and government. However, in

many educational systems, these curricula are heavily content-driven, focusing on the memorization of facts and dates rather than fostering deeper understanding or encouraging students to engage with the material critically (Ross, 2020). The result is often a disengaged student body that fails to see the relevance of social studies in their daily lives or the broader world. Many current curricula do not provide adequate opportunities for students to develop analytical skills or explore complex social issues from multiple perspectives (Miles, 2021).

The curriculum also tends to focus on national history, often ignoring or minimizing global perspectives, cultural diversity, and contemporary issues such as social justice and human rights. In an increasingly interconnected world, this limited scope prevents students from fully understanding the global implications of their civic duties (Fozdar & Martin, 2021). Furthermore, with an emphasis on standardized testing, teachers may prioritize covering a wide breadth of information over encouraging deep, critical engagement with important societal questions. This approach has left a gap in students' preparation for real-world democratic participation and social activism (Dube & Moyo, 2023).

Critical thinking and civic responsibility are crucial skills for students to acquire during their education, as these competencies are essential for participating in democratic societies and addressing complex social issues. Critical thinking goes beyond the mere absorption of information; it involves the ability to question, analyze, and evaluate arguments and solve problems and make informed decisions. When students engage in critical thinking, they become active learners capable of connecting historical events, societal structures, and current affairs. This intellectual engagement prepares them to tackle real-

world challenges thoughtfully and rationally (Coelho & Menezes, 2021).

Civic responsibility, on the other hand, refers to the commitment to contribute to the welfare of the community and society as a whole. Educating students on civic responsibility involves teaching them about their rights and obligations as citizens, the structure and functioning of government, and the importance of participating in democratic processes (Westheimer, 2024). In an age marked by political polarization, misinformation, and global challenges such as climate change and inequality, fostering a sense of civic duty among young people is more important than ever. By promoting civic responsibility through education, schools can empower students to become informed, engaged, and proactive citizens capable of positively impacting their communities and the world (Coelho & Menezes, 2021).

## 1.2 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore how reforms to high school social studies curricula can enhance students' critical thinking abilities and promote civic engagement, thus better preparing them for active participation in democratic processes and social justice initiatives. By shifting the focus from rote learning to a more dynamic and inquiry-based approach, curriculum reforms can provide students with the tools they need to think critically about the world around them and take action on issues they care about. These reforms can also address the limitations of current curricula by incorporating more diverse perspectives and addressing contemporary social issues in a meaningful way.

The study examines various strategies for reforming the social studies curriculum, including project-based learning, discussions on current events, debates, and community service projects. Such strategies engage students in active learning and connect classroom content to real-world problems, encouraging students to apply their knowledge in practical and impactful ways. Furthermore, by promoting critical thinking and civic responsibility, these reforms can help to bridge the gap between education and societal needs, ensuring that students are well-equipped to contribute to the democratic process and advocate for social justice.

In addition to exploring the theoretical and practical aspects of curriculum reform, this study also highlights the role of educators, school administrators, and policymakers in implementing these changes. Teachers, for example, play a crucial role in guiding students through the critical thinking process and encouraging them to explore different viewpoints. School administrators must support these efforts by providing teachers the necessary resources and professional development opportunities. Meanwhile, policymakers are responsible for creating educational frameworks that prioritize critical thinking and civic engagement over standardized testing and content memorization.

By examining these elements in detail, the study aims to comprehensively understand how social studies curricula can be reformed to foster critical thinking and civic responsibility. Ultimately, these changes can profoundly impact individual students and society as a whole, as better-educated and more engaged citizens are more likely to participate in democratic processes and contribute to social justice movements.

## II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1 Key Theories of Education and Civic Engagement

The theories that underpin education and civic engagement offer important insights into how curricula can be structured to promote critical thinking and responsible citizenship. One influential framework is constructivism, which posits that learners construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflection (Reid-Martinez & Grooms, 2021). This approach emphasizes the student's active role in the learning process, encouraging them to engage with content critically rather than passively absorbing information. Constructivist educators advocate for teaching methods that foster inquiry, collaboration, and hands-on experiences, all of which can be effectively integrated into social studies curricula to enhance students' engagement and understanding (Kayii & Akpomi, 2022).

Another key theoretical perspective is social constructivism, which builds on constructivism's ideas but emphasizes social interactions and cultural context. According to social constructivists, learning

is a communal process, shaped by social interactions and the cultural tools available within a community (Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020). This theory highlights the importance of dialogue and collaboration in the classroom, suggesting that students benefit from engaging in discussions, debates, and group projects that expose them to diverse perspectives. By creating a learning environment that values these interactions, social studies curricula can promote critical thinking and civic responsibility, helping students to navigate complex societal issues collaboratively (Mishra, 2023).

Civic education theory further expands on engaging students as active citizens. This theory emphasizes that education should prepare individuals not only to understand democratic principles but also to participate in them actively (Camicia & Knowles, 2021). Civic education encompasses knowledge of governmental systems, rights and responsibilities, and the skills necessary for effective participation in civic life, including critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving. This theoretical framework asserts that schools play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of civic duty and responsibility among students, equipping them to become informed, engaged citizens (Levy, Oliveira, & Harris, 2021).

## 2.2 The Role of Social Studies in Fostering Critical Thinking and Civic Responsibility

Social studies education occupies a unique position within the curriculum as it combines various disciplines—history, geography, economics, and political science—to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of society. This multifaceted approach allows for exploring complex societal issues and encourages students to think critically about the world around them. The study of social studies promotes skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, which are crucial for effective critical thinking. When students are encouraged to question historical narratives, analyze economic data, and evaluate political ideologies, they become more adept at understanding and interpreting the complexities of modern society (Miles, 2021).

Moreover, social studies serves as a platform for promoting civic responsibility. Through discussions of democratic values, social justice, and human rights,

students learn about their roles and responsibilities as citizens. This curriculum informs them about governmental structures and processes and inspires them to participate actively in their communities. For example, lessons on historical movements for civil rights or social justice can motivate students to engage in contemporary activism and community service, linking their education to real-world issues (Nyantakyi, Bordoh, Anim, & Brew, 2020).

Integrating critical thinking and civic responsibility into social studies curricula creates a synergistic effect: as students develop their analytical skills, they become more capable of engaging with civic issues meaningfully. Conversely, their experiences with civic engagement can enhance their critical thinking abilities as they confront real-life problems and seek solutions. This interconnectedness is vital for preparing students to navigate the complexities of modern democracy (Hollstein & Smith, 2020).

Numerous studies and initiatives have highlighted curriculum reforms' positive impact on enhancing critical thinking and civic engagement within social studies education. One notable example is the Project Citizen initiative, which encourages students to engage in public policy issues by researching community problems, proposing solutions, and advocating for their ideas (Alscher, Ludewig, & McElvany, 2022). Evaluations of Project Citizen have shown that students who participate demonstrate improved critical thinking skills, greater civic knowledge, and an increased likelihood of engaging in civic activities beyond the classroom (Mena Araya, 2020). Another significant reform is the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards, developed by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). This framework emphasizes critical thinking, collaboration, and inquiry-based learning. Schools implementing the C3 Framework have reported higher levels of student engagement and a more profound understanding of civic issues. Research shows that students in these programs are more likely to discuss political topics, participate in community service, and express a desire to engage in civic activities after graduation (McGlinn Manfra & Greiner, 2021).

A literature review of various educational practices reveals that experiential learning in social studies—where students engage in real-world projects, simulations, or community service—leads to enhanced student development. For instance, studies demonstrate that students who participate in service-learning projects develop a stronger sense of civic responsibility and show significant growth in critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Chan, 2023). These experiences enable students to connect theoretical knowledge to practical applications, reinforcing their understanding of civic engagement and social issues. Moreover, integrating technology into social studies curricula has also proven beneficial. The use of digital tools and online platforms for collaboration allows students to access diverse perspectives and engage with global issues. Research indicates that technology can facilitate critical discourse among students, enabling them to analyze information more effectively and collaborate on solutions to complex problems (Budhai, 2021).

In conclusion, the theoretical foundations of education and civic engagement provide a robust framework for understanding how social studies curricula can be reformed to promote critical thinking and civic responsibility. Social studies can play a crucial role in fostering informed and engaged citizens by integrating constructivist and civic education theories. Literature on successful curriculum reforms underscores the importance of inquiry-based learning, community involvement, and technology integration in enhancing student development. Ultimately, these changes are essential for preparing students to navigate the complexities of modern society and actively participate in democratic processes and social justice initiatives.

### III. CHALLENGES IN THE CURRENT SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

#### 3.1 Analysis of the Limitations in Existing Social Studies Programs

The current social studies curriculum in many high schools exhibits several limitations that hinder its effectiveness in promoting critical thinking and civic engagement among students. One of the most significant challenges is the heavy reliance on rote memorization and standardized testing. In an effort to

prepare students for exams, many educators prioritize covering vast amounts of content over fostering an in-depth understanding of the material. This approach reduces the opportunities for students to engage critically with complex societal issues, as they are often more focused on memorizing dates, facts, and figures rather than understanding the implications of historical events or current affairs (Al Hamad, Adewusi, Unachukwu, Osawaru, & Chisom, 2024).

Additionally, existing social studies programs often reflect a narrow perspective on history and current events. Many curricula emphasize a Eurocentric viewpoint, overlooking diverse cultures and perspectives (Schottstaedt, 2022). For instance, the contributions of marginalized groups and non-Western societies are frequently underrepresented, which not only limits students' understanding of global dynamics but also alienates those who may not see their histories and experiences reflected in the curriculum. Such a lack of inclusivity can prevent students from developing a holistic understanding of societal issues and the interconnectedness of different cultures, diminishing their ability to think critically about global challenges (Bartelds, Savenije, & Van Bortel, 2020).

Moreover, the social studies curriculum often fails to incorporate contemporary issues that are relevant to students' lives. While historical events are essential for understanding the present, students are also living in a rapidly changing world marked by social movements, technological advancements, and environmental challenges. A curriculum that does not address these current issues may appear outdated and disengaging to students, further exacerbating their disinterest in the subject matter. For social studies to remain relevant, it must evolve to reflect the realities and complexities of the modern world, encouraging students to connect classroom learning with their lived experiences (Levstik & Barton, 2022).

#### 3.2 Barriers to Promoting Critical Thinking and Civic Engagement

Several barriers impede the promotion of critical thinking and civic engagement within the current social studies curriculum. One significant barrier is the emphasis on standardized testing. Standardized assessments often prioritize factual recall over critical

analysis, pushing educators to focus their teaching on test preparation rather than fostering a deeper understanding of the material. This pressure to perform on standardized tests can lead teachers to adopt a "teaching to the test" approach, which undermines the development of critical thinking skills essential for effective civic participation (Mahmoudian, 2022).

Another barrier is the presence of outdated content in social studies curricula. Many programs rely on textbooks and resources that do not reflect current scholarship or contemporary issues. As a result, students may receive a skewed or incomplete understanding of social dynamics, political systems, and historical narratives. The use of outdated materials can also inhibit discussions about pressing global challenges, such as climate change, social justice, and human rights. To engage students in meaningful ways, curricula must be regularly updated to include diverse perspectives and current events, allowing students to explore issues that affect their lives and communities (Kissling & Bell, 2020).

Additionally, the lack of professional development opportunities for teachers can contribute to the challenges faced in social studies education. Many educators may not feel adequately prepared to teach complex and controversial topics that demand critical engagement. Teachers may struggle to create an environment conducive to discussion and debate without proper training and resources. As a result, students miss out on opportunities to engage with different viewpoints and develop their critical thinking skills. Providing teachers with ongoing professional development focused on innovative instructional strategies and current social issues is crucial for promoting effective social studies education (Okoye et al., 2023).

Moreover, educational leaders' and policymakers' absence of support can exacerbate these challenges. When school districts prioritize other subjects, such as mathematics and reading, over social studies, the latter often receives less attention and fewer resources. This lack of support can lead to inadequate funding for social studies programs, limited access to instructional materials, and insufficient opportunities for experiential learning. To ensure that social studies can

effectively promote critical thinking and civic engagement, educational leaders must recognize its importance and provide the necessary resources and support for effective implementation (Atobatele, Kpodo, & Eke, 2024).

Finally, the politicization of education poses a significant challenge to social studies curricula. In recent years, there has been increasing debate over what should be taught in schools, particularly regarding race, identity, and history issues. This politicization can result in censorship and a reluctance to address important but controversial topics, leaving students ill-equipped to understand the complexities of social issues. When educators are pressured to conform to political ideologies rather than provide a balanced and inclusive education, the integrity of the social studies curriculum is compromised (Flensner, 2020).

#### IV. STRATEGIES FOR CURRICULUM REFORM

##### 4.1 Proposed Methods for Revising the Curriculum to Integrate Critical Thinking and Civic Responsibility

Reforming high school social studies curricula to enhance critical thinking and civic responsibility is essential for preparing students to engage effectively in democratic processes and social justice initiatives. The proposed methods for revising the curriculum encompass a multifaceted approach that emphasizes inquiry-based learning, the integration of diverse perspectives, and incorporating contemporary issues.

To begin with, curriculum revision should focus on developing an inquiry-based framework that encourages students to ask questions, conduct research, and engage in critical analysis. This approach promotes active learning and helps students develop the skills necessary for analyzing complex societal issues. By fostering a classroom environment where questioning is encouraged, educators can help students gain a deeper understanding of the material and develop the ability to think critically about historical and contemporary events. Moreover, it is crucial to integrate diverse perspectives and voices into the curriculum. This means including content that reflects a variety of cultural, social, and political viewpoints, particularly those of historically

marginalized groups. By exposing students to multiple narratives, educators can cultivate empathy and a broader understanding of social dynamics. This integration can also serve to highlight the contributions of diverse groups to history and society, promoting a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of the past (Ayeni, Chisom, Al Hamad, Osawaru, & Adewusi, 2024).

Additionally, the curriculum should address contemporary issues that resonate with students. By connecting classroom discussions to real-world problems—such as climate change, inequality, and social justice—educators can foster a sense of relevance and urgency among students. This connection engages students in critical thinking and empowers them to take action on issues they care about, thus reinforcing their civic responsibility (Ayeni et al., 2024).

#### 4.2 Practical Approaches

Implementing effective strategies for curriculum reform necessitates practical approaches that engage students actively and foster critical thinking skills. One such method is project-based learning (PBL), which encourages students to engage in extended, collaborative projects that require them to investigate and respond to complex questions or problems. In PBL, students work in teams to explore real-world issues, conduct research, and develop solutions. This experiential learning method promotes critical thinking and enhances students' problem-solving and collaboration skills, making them more effective participants in civic life.

Another effective approach is the incorporation of structured debates within the curriculum. Debates encourage students to research different sides of an issue, articulate their arguments, and engage in respectful dialogue with their peers. This practice enhances critical thinking by requiring students to analyze information, consider multiple perspectives, and defend their viewpoints. Furthermore, debates can empower students to understand and appreciate the complexities of social issues, thus fostering a greater sense of civic responsibility.

Community involvement is another key strategy for promoting civic engagement within the curriculum.

By partnering with local organizations and community leaders, schools can allow students to engage in meaningful discussions and projects that address community needs. This involvement can range from organizing town hall meetings to participating in community service projects. Such experiences help students understand the importance of civic engagement and inspire them to participate actively in their communities (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021).

Additionally, service learning combines academic learning with community service, allowing students to apply their knowledge to real-world situations. In service-learning programs, students engage in projects that address community issues while reflecting on their experiences and the lessons learned. This approach fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills and instills a sense of civic responsibility by connecting students to their communities. Research has shown that students who participate in service-learning initiatives are more likely to develop a commitment to civic engagement and social responsibility (Coelho & Menezes, 2021).

#### 4.3 Role of Teachers, School Administrators, and Policymakers in Implementing Reforms

Successful curriculum reform requires the collaboration and commitment of various stakeholders, including teachers, school administrators, and policymakers. Teachers play a pivotal role in implementing reforms at the classroom level. They must be provided with professional development opportunities that equip them with the skills and knowledge to integrate inquiry-based learning, diverse perspectives, and contemporary issues into their teaching. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, teachers can create engaging and dynamic learning environments that promote critical thinking and civic responsibility (Datnow, 2020).

School administrators also play a crucial role in supporting curriculum reform. They must prioritize social studies education and allocate resources to facilitate the implementation of new instructional strategies. This includes providing teachers with access to updated materials, professional development, and time for collaboration and planning.

Furthermore, administrators should encourage a culture of collaboration among teachers, allowing them to share best practices and work together to develop interdisciplinary projects that enhance critical thinking and civic engagement (Oplatka, 2020). Finally, policymakers must be actively involved in creating supportive frameworks for curriculum reform. This includes advocating for the importance of social studies education in the broader educational landscape, and ensuring that curricula align with current research and best practices. Policymakers can also support initiatives that provide funding for innovative programs, educators' training, and school resources. By creating policies that prioritize critical thinking and civic responsibility in social studies curricula, policymakers can ensure that students are prepared to navigate the complexities of modern society and actively participate in their communities (Pont, 2020).

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

The study on reforming high school social studies curricula highlights the urgent need to foster critical thinking and civic responsibility among students. Through a comprehensive examination of existing curricula, theoretical foundations, challenges, and strategies for reform, it becomes evident that the current state of social studies education often falls short of equipping students with the necessary skills for active participation in democratic processes and social justice initiatives. The findings suggest that many curricula rely heavily on rote memorization and standardized testing, which stifles critical thinking and does not adequately engage students in meaningful discussions about contemporary issues.

Furthermore, the research indicates that integrating diverse perspectives and contemporary issues into the curriculum is crucial for promoting civic responsibility. Students who encounter multiple viewpoints are better prepared to understand the complexities of social dynamics, enhancing their ability to engage thoughtfully in civic discourse. Practical approaches such as project-based learning, community involvement, and service-learning emerge as effective methods for enriching the educational

experience and fostering a sense of agency among students. These strategies enhance critical thinking and empower students to take informed actions within their communities.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the insights gained from this study, several recommendations can be made for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to enhance social studies education:

- Curriculum developers should prioritize the revision of social studies frameworks to incorporate inquiry-based learning, diverse perspectives, and contemporary issues. By fostering a curriculum that encourages critical questioning and analytical thinking, students will be better prepared for active citizenship.
- Educators must receive ongoing professional development opportunities that focus on innovative teaching methods, including project-based learning, debates, and service learning. Equipping teachers with the necessary skills will enable them to create engaging classroom environments that foster critical thinking and civic engagement.
- Schools should establish partnerships with local organizations and community leaders to create opportunities for students to engage in meaningful service projects and discussions around pressing community issues. These partnerships can help bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world applications, reinforcing the importance of civic responsibility.
- Policymakers must advocate for inclusive curricula that reflect the diversity of the student population and the community. Education can promote empathy and understanding, crucial to effective civic engagement, by including diverse voices and perspectives.
- Educational institutions should encourage collaboration among teachers across disciplines, facilitating interdisciplinary projects that enhance critical thinking and civic responsibility. Creating a culture of collaboration will empower educators

to share best practices and support each other in implementing reforms.

In conclusion, reforming high school social studies curricula is vital for preparing students to engage thoughtfully and effectively in their communities. By focusing on critical thinking and civic responsibility, we can cultivate informed, active citizens ready to contribute positively to society. The recommendations outlined in this study serve as a roadmap for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers striving to enhance the educational landscape and promote a more engaged citizenry.

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