



# **Putting Things into Focus: Using a Focused Inquiry Design Model (IDM) to Cultivate Cross-Disciplinary Connections in the Elementary Classroom**

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## **Introduction**

"I don't have time to teach Social Studies!" In today's classrooms, this lament is all too familiar. As teachers, finding time to address all required and necessary content in a single school day can be challenging. With a greater testing emphasis on language arts and math, ancillary subjects like science and social studies are often squeezed into the final minutes of the day, put into alternative rotation, or disregarded (Fitchett, et al., 2014; McGuire, 2007). The Inquiry Design Model (IDM), provides a cross-disciplinary solution for infusing social studies concepts into language arts instruction so that history can become an asset rather than an afterthought. In this article, we introduce the IDM and provide two concrete examples of how this model can be used in lower (K-2) and upper (3-5) elementary school settings. These examples provide a case for how teachers can implement this engaging instructional tool in their own classrooms to integrate social studies into language arts instruction.

## **Literature/Supporting Research**

Literacy is more than just the ability to read and write. While students must successfully use literacy skills and tools to systematically decode and comprehend content, they also need to be critical consumers of knowledge who can apply reading instruction to their everyday lives. Instruction should include opportunities to improve literacy skills in content areas (Gross, 2010), and students should apply both productive and receptive skills across all disciplines in order to be successful and critical consumers of literature (Ampa & Akib, 2019). Purposefully integrating social studies and literacy instruction allows students to authentically implement their reading skills into real-world contexts to empower and improve their critical thinking, vocabulary, comprehension, and engagement (Soares & Wood, 2010; Tyner & Kabourek, 2021).

The Inquiry Design Model (IDM) allows teachers to actively spark students' curiosity and prior experiential backgrounds in order to facilitate their ability to become informed global citizens and critical consumers of social studies content. Additionally, pairing the IDM with purposeful literacy instruction allows students to become collaborative participants in both disciplines (Massey, 2017). While often used by social studies teachers, the IDM and inquiry-based approaches to curriculum and instruction provide powerful opportunities for cross-disciplinary connections with language arts as students engage with primary sources, employ close reading strategies, and engage in research and authentic writing. The framework allows students to grapple with difficult topics without making them feel isolated or stigmatized (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012) and encourages curiosity, critical thought, and questioning (Coiro et al., 2016). The model also empowers students to self-identify as change agents who can affect change in their immediate environments and throughout the world (NCSS, 2017).

As social studies instruction continues to take a backseat to literacy and math instruction (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Haverback, 2017; Pace, 2012) it is imperative for teachers to provide alternate pathways for teaching social studies content (Haverback, 2017). Components of the IDM provide systematic opportunities for infusing social studies content into literacy instruction. Additionally, the IDM provides a resource for improving students' achievement in language arts while also providing purposeful social studies instruction that promotes critical thinking and inquiry. Finally, utilizing a variety of children's literature, including primary sources and fictional narratives can provide students with mirrors, windows, and doors to not only appreciate others across history but also to self-identify as current-day global citizens and agents of change (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Sims Bishop, 1990; Tessman, 2019).

## Explanation of Template

The Inquiry Design Model (IDM) is a one-page blueprint grounded in the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Inquiry Arc Framework (NCSS, 2013). This teaching tool (see Appendices 1 and 2 for examples), developed by Swan, Lee, and Grant (2015) allows teachers to focus on a particular point of inquiry by aligning learning **Standards** and **Disciplinary Practice** with an overall compelling question for students to explore. The **Compelling Question** serves to engage and interest students while supporting the curriculum and content. These questions are open-ended, with several potential answers or explanations, which allows students to craft a summative argument using evidence from the featured sources to support their claims (Swan et al., 2015, 2018).

Since compelling questions must be broad enough to generate several potential answers, teachers can utilize one or more **Supporting Questions** to help narrow the focus of the inquiry, focus on different aspects of the topic, and/or identify useful information for addressing the compelling question (Swan et al., 2015, 2018). The supporting question(s) should have an accompanying **Formative Performance Task** to allow students to practice the skills, identify content, and organize information (Swan et al., 2015, 2018). Teachers may design these tasks to help students focus on specific skills and disciplinary tools as students unpack the featured sources. Then, students draw on the information from these tasks to create their argument to address the overall compelling question at the end of the inquiry.

The **Staging the Question** component of the inquiry is a warm-up activity that serves as a “hook” to introduce the topic and generate student interest. This activity presents the overall idea posed by the compelling questions and prompts students to begin thinking critically about the topic (Swan et al., 2015, 2018).

The **Featured Source(s)** within the inquiry are selected with

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the purpose of providing necessary content to build student understanding, to provide opportunities to practice identified skills, and to interest and engage students (Swan et al., 2015, 2018). Featured sources should provide enough information for students to be able to draft a claim to answer the compelling question with evidence. For the examples in this article, we selected children’s narrative texts as the central featured sources to introduce the topic, and then accompanied them with supporting primary sources which served to provide further information and authentic, real-world examples (see Appendices 1 and 2).

At the conclusion of the inquiry, students create a **Summative Performance Task** to answer the overall compelling question. Summative performance tasks can take many creative and authentic forms, but require students to include information from the featured sources as evidence to support their argument (Swan et al., 2015, 2018). Finally, an **Extension** activity allows students to use a different format to share their knowledge, and can be used in place of the summative **Argument**, or offer an acceleration or challenge activity for students if time allows (Swan et al., 2015, 2018).

In an attempt to demonstrate how the IDM can be used in both lower and upper elementary school classrooms, the following sections provide concrete examples of how this model can be used in the lower (K-2) and upper (3-5) elementary grades. In these examples, we elected to focus on the topic of refugees, which provides a timely opportunity for students to discuss and explore relevant events that are currently unfolding on a global scale.

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### IDM Example: Lower Elementary (K-2)

The focused inquiry for grades K-2 (see Appendix 1) begins by staging the **Compelling Question**: “Who is a refugee?” This inquiry focuses on defining who a refugee is so that students can then draw parallels to their own identity, which ultimately helps foster greater understanding and empathy for diverse individuals. Within this inquiry, students are asked to consider three **Supporting Questions**: (1) What makes someone a refugee; (2) What do refugees leave behind on their journey; and (3) How can we help refugees feel welcome in their new homes? This particular model aligns

with cross-disciplinary learning **Standards** for the state of Virginia in English and history, and provides opportunities for **Disciplinary Practice** as students learn about different groups throughout history and the present day, while also providing opportunities for reading comprehension and purposeful writing experiences.

Teachers can introduce the topic by **Staging the Question**. To begin, teachers ask students to consider: “If you were forced to leave your home, and a backpack was all you could carry, what would you put inside? What would be important or valuable to take? What would you be forced to leave behind? How would you decide?” After a brief discussion, teachers conduct a read aloud of the first **Featured Source**, *My Name is Sangoel* (2009) by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed. This children’s picture book narrates the fictional journey of Sangoel, a refugee from Sudan, as he and his family find refuge in the United States.

The idea of identity is first addressed at the beginning of the story when Sangoel expresses concern about leaving his home, and the Wise One tells him: “You will be Sangoel. Even in America” (Williams & Mohammed, 2009, n.p.). However, when Sangoel arrives in his new school, he finds that his classmates have a difficult time pronouncing and remembering his name, and over time, Sangoel begins to feel that his identity is being taken from him, just like his home. At dinner, he even laments to his mother, “In America, I have lost my name,” to which she responds, “America is our home now. Perhaps you need an American name” (Williams & Mohammed, 2009, n.p.). This story juxtaposes maintaining one’s identity against the desire or needs to assimilate into mainstream culture. It also addresses the sense of loss refugees feel, not just on a physical level, which is commonly addressed in books about refugees, but also on a deeper, emotional level, and how displacement can lead to a loss of self. At the end of the story, Sangoel finds that while he has suffered profound loss as a refugee, he is still able to maintain his identity. He creates a shirt with an image of the sun and a soccer goal to help his classmates learn how to pronounce his name, which then helps them begin to understand one another and connect.

This book helps students explore the things refugee children are forced to leave behind when leaving their homes. In addition to this story, teachers can display images from the second **Featured Source**, “What’s in My Bag? What Refugees Bring When They Run for Their Lives” (Carryology, 2015). These images depict real-life refugee children of all ages, posing with their backpacks and the items they chose to bring with them on their journeys. These images provide a starting point for identifying needs versus wants and

discussing the difficult choices refugees must make about what to take and what to leave behind when they flee their homes.

After discussing the images, teachers can immediately “hook” students with a **Formative Performance Task** by constructing a visual of a backpack on loose-leaf paper and asking students to draw the items they would pack if they were forced to leave their home. Teachers can encourage students to think broadly and deeply about the things they would carry and the things they may lose and encourage students to craft an **Argument** that moves beyond just physical items but also addresses intangible losses refugees may feel, including their sense of identity and culture.

After sharing, teachers may conclude by addressing the **Summative Performance Task** and encouraging students to turn their learning into authentic action. Students revisit the final supporting question, “How can we help refugees feel welcomed in their new home?” and consider again how Sangoel (Williams & Mohammed, 2009) felt before he created a shirt to help his classmates pronounce his name. Students can draw from the fictional life of Sangoel (Williams & Mohammed, 2009) and the real-world examples of refugees around the world (Carryology, 2015) to create a visual explaining who a refugee is, and to illustrate the things they may take or lose on their journey to their new life. As part of the **Extension**, students can also create a brochure that addresses how to help refugees feel welcomed in their new homes by affirming their identity and valuing the things they bring with them while also honoring what they have lost. Students can share this brochure with their families, students in other classrooms, administrators, or other special guests.

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At the conclusion of the lesson, students combine literacy skills like oral and written reading responses with identifying who a refugee is and what they leave behind.

### **IDM Example: Upper Elementary (3-5)**

The focused inquiry for grades 3-5 (see Appendix 2) asks students to address the overall **Compelling Question**: “Why do some children have to leave their homes?” This inquiry is designed to (1) help students grasp the concept of refugees, (2) explore why some people are forced from their homes, and (3) describe how these changes can alter the lives of refugees. Focusing the overall compelling question on children allows students to draw connections to their own lives and realize that anyone can be a refugee. Within this inquiry, students learn what a refugee is and discover a few reasons why some refugees are forced to flee their homes. This inquiry helps students practice several skills tied to learning **Standards** for the state of Virginia and **Disciplinary Practices**, including summarizing, using evidence to answer a question, identifying new information, and asking and answering questions about what is read. Students are also introduced to several different perspectives through the use of fictional and nonfiction texts.

The first **Featured Source** associated with this inquiry is a children’s picture book entitled *My Beautiful Birds* (2017) by Suzanne Del Rizzo. This text follows Sami, a Syrian refugee who flees his home with his family due to war. While in Syria, Sami cared for pet pigeons, and he worries about their safety after his family is forced from their home. When

Sami and his family settle into a refugee camp, he struggles to adjust as other children begin to play and attend school. It isn’t until several birds fly into camp and Sami cares for them that he is reminded of a sense of home, and he begins to adjust to his new surroundings. The narrative gently examines the effects of a refugee crisis on children and offers a new perspective of life in a camp, providing insight into how difficult and traumatic these situations can be for the individuals living through them. It also addresses the theme of home and emphasizes the notion that home is not necessarily a physical place, but somewhere familiar that we feel safe and loved.

To begin the inquiry, teachers can **Stage the Question** by asking students to examine a photo from a news article about Syrian and Iranian refugees crossing the Greek-Macedonia border in 2016 (Todd, 2019). During a whole-group discussion or think-pair-share, students can share what they think is happening and what evidence in the photograph led them to those conclusions. Providing this photograph provides a common starting point for students to make predictions and generate questions prior to reviewing the featured sources. Since students need to explain why refugees must flee and describe life for refugees in the summative argument, the formative performance task asks students to focus on these ideas in order to identify and list information as they read the featured sources.

After brainstorming, teachers can pose the **Supporting Question**: “What is a refugee?” and then provide three additional **Featured Sources**, including three *Newsela* articles. These real-life examples focus on refugees in three different contexts and provide additional sources for students to read about in order to build on Sami’s story (Del Rizzo, 2017). As students read these sources, they can compile a list of ideas and evidence to answer the compelling and supporting questions.

The first article, “She Travels 3,500 Miles in a Wheelchair to Find Safety” (Oltermann, 2016), discusses Nunjeen, a 17-year-old Kurdish girl who leaves Syria and travels to Germany when the arrival of the Islamic State threatens the safety of her family. Nunjee’s journey was especially difficult since she is in a wheelchair, which provides a powerful reminder that refugees include individuals from all walks of life.

The second article, “Waiting, Fearing Singing: A Night Sheltering in Ukraine Amid Constant Russian Bombing” (Associated Press, 2022), provides an opportunity for present-day connections and shares the experiences of Ukrainian families seeking safety in bomb shelters during Russian bomb

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raids. The article helps students to realize how everyone, even children, can be a refugee, and how dangerous it can be when people are forced from their homes.

The third article, “‘Sesame Street’ Unveils Rohingya Muppets to Help Refugee Children” (Al-Jazeera, 2021) focuses on the introduction of Rohingya Muppets. Many Rohingya have fled Myanmar and are living in camps in Bangladesh, and Sesame Street is working to bring educational videos to children within the camps. This source focuses on how displacement affects children in particular and explores how difficult it can be to create life with a semblance of normalcy in refugee camps.

After students collect information and evidence from the featured sources, the final **Summative Performance Task** asks students to use their list of ideas to construct an **Argument** explaining why refugees are forced to flee their homes, and then describe their new lives. This task can take many shapes. For example, students may create Found Poetry with the news articles, they may write descriptive paragraphs, or they may design posters illustrating their argument. Providing students with choice in their **Summative Performance Task** allows for creativity in processing and sharing information they learn from the featured sources. As an **Extension** activity, students may choose a specific refugee crisis and create a presentation to explain the crisis and its effects on children to an audience, which can help prompt higher-order thinking. After the inquiry, students should gain an understanding of refugees, be able to identify events that cause refugee crises, and describe what life is like for refugees.

At the conclusion of the lesson, students combine literacy skills like summarizing, questioning, and providing evidence to demonstrate social studies knowledge regarding what a refugee is and why they are forced to leave their homes.

## Implications

Social studies education does not have to continue to be marginalized within the elementary classroom. Engaging students with literacy skills and exploring fictional children’s literature and primary sources through a social studies lens can provide purposeful opportunities for instruction facilitated by mentor texts. Highlighting these perspectives may help students become more understanding, informed global citizens, which is a goal of social studies instruction as defined by the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS, 2017). Using these texts in conjunction with the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) is one-way teachers can create pathways for cross-curricular instruction between literacy and

social studies. This model provides authentic opportunities for instruction and supports inquiry to prepare students for the C3 Framework and the study of social studies-related content including civics, economics, geography, and history (Duplass, 2020). Implementing social studies within the context of literacy instruction creates a cross-curricular pathway for improving social studies content knowledge while also expanding instructional opportunities for literacy (Haverback, 2017). Furthermore, using children’s literature portraying marginalized populations also serves to provide purposeful pathways for providing mirrors, windows, and doors for students (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Sims Bishop, 1990; Tessman, 2019). Finally, it is important to note that all children’s literature can be used as read-alouds to provide a foundation for teachers to promote social justice in both literacy and social studies instruction (Norris, 2020).

## Conclusion

Though the time for social studies is often severely limited or even eliminated at the elementary level, the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) provides a tool for teachers to thoughtfully integrate social studies with language arts instruction. Focused inquiries in particular allow for close examination of relevant topics, opportunities for pairing children’s texts with primary sources and practice with cross-disciplinary skills. With its immense flexibility, the IDM is a tool teachers can use to interest and engage students, and a concrete way to convert social studies from merely an afterthought into an asset.

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## Appendix 1

### Focused Inquiry Template

Compelling Question	
Who is A Refugee?	
Standard	History K.2 Recognize that history describes events and people from other times and places English K.9: Demonstrate comprehension of fictional texts English K.12 Write to communicate for a variety of purposes
Disciplinary Practice	Understand different groups of people represented throughout history. Gather evidence from sources.
Staging the Question	Have each student hold up their backpack. Ask: If you were forced to leave your home, and this was all you could carry, what would you put inside? What would be important or valuable to take? What would you be forced to leave behind? How would you decide?

Supporting Question	
What makes someone a refugee? What do refugees leave behind on their journey? How can we help refugees feel welcome in their new homes?	
Formative Performance Task	
After you read the sources aloud to the students, prepare an outline of a backpack on loose-leaf paper. Have students imagine they are a refugee who is forced to leave their home. Ask them to draw the items they would choose to take with them inside the backpack, and to draw the items they would be most sad to leave behind outside of the backpack.	
Featured Sources	
<i>My Name is Sangoel</i> (Williams & Mohammed, 2009)  "What's in My Bag? What Refugees Bring When They Run for Their Lives" (Carryology.com)	

Summative Performance Task	<b>ARGUMENT:</b> Why do some children have to leave their homes? Construct an argument explaining why refugees are forced to flee their homes, and what their lives are like. (i.e., found poetry with news articles; descriptive paragraphs; poster displaying reasons why refugees leave home).
	<b>EXTENSION:</b> Have students choose a refugee crisis and create a presentation to explain the crisis and its effects on children. Students can share the presentation with family, students in other classrooms, administrators, or other special classroom guests.

## Appendix 2

### Focused Inquiry Template

Compelling Question	
Why Do Some Children Have to Leave Their Homes?	
Standard	History 3.1d: Summarizing points and evidence to answer a question  English 3.6d: Ask and answer questions about what is read English 3.6f: Summarize major points found in nonfiction texts English 3.6k: Identify new information gained from reading
Disciplinary Practice	Understand different perspectives in history.
	Gather evidence from sources.
Staging the Question	Display the photo at the top of the news article “By the Numbers: Syrian Refugees Around the World” (Todd, 2019). Ask students: What do you think is happening in the photo? What in the photo makes you think that? (Whole group discussion or think-pair-share)

Supporting Question
What is a refugee?
Formative Performance Task
As students read the sources (or during read alouds) have students make a list of the reasons why people have to leave their homes and what life is like for them.
Featured Sources
<p><i>My Beautiful Birds</i> (Del Rizzo, 2017)</p> <p>“She Travels 3,500 Miles in a Wheelchair to Find Safety” (Oltermann, 2016)</p> <p>“Waiting, Fearing, Singing: A Night Sheltering in Ukraine Among Constant Russian Bombing” (Associated Press, 2022)</p> <p>“‘Sesame Street’ Unveils Rohingya Muppets to Help Refugee Children” (Al-Jazeera, 2021)</p>

Summative Performance Task	<b>ARGUMENT:</b> Why do some children have to leave their homes? Construct an argument explaining why refugees are forced to flee their homes, and what their lives are like. (i.e., found poetry with news articles; descriptive paragraphs; poster displaying reasons why refugees leave home).
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