Making Them Fit: Examining Teacher Support for Student Questioning

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Social studies research has long advocated inquiry as a desired instructional practice, but the increasing emphasis on the role students’ questions should play in inquiry requires research into what social studies teachers can do to elevate the place of student questioning in classrooms. This study examined the attitudes and actions of two secondary social studies teachers who self-identified as advocates of student questioning and who desired to incorporate more student questioning into their instruction. This study used qualitative research methods and generated data through multiple interviews and classroom observations with each participant along with content analysis of classroom materials. Findings suggest that even though the participants approached student questioning in unique ways, they shared a need for curricular control, often triggered by the pressures of standardized assessments, which influenced how they incorporated student questioning into their classrooms. This study provides valuable insight into the promise of student questioning and factors that must be addressed if teachers are to incorporate student questioning in ways that foster meaningful inquiry.

Key words: student questioning, social studies, secondary education, inquiry, instructional choices, teachers

Introduction

In A More Beautiful Question, Warren Berger (2014) examined the important role questioning plays in innovation. Identifying the ability to question as an essential skill for success in an ever-changing world, he spent an entire chapter exploring why schools do not place greater emphasis on fostering this ability in students. Berger should be pleased with the recently published College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for State Social Studies Standards (NCSS, 2013), which envisions an approach to social studies instruction that places renewed focus on the role of questions in inquiry. Although in line with a long tradition of educators who argue that learning is most powerful when catalyzed by perplexity, the writers of the C3 Framework acknowledge this attention to questioning will likely be one of the greatest challenges for teachers (Grant, 2013). Although teachers commonly espouse their desire to create life-long, self-directed learners, they often ignore a vital element in that process: the students’ questions.

Questioning is especially important in social studies because it not only allows students to become agents in their own learning but also equips them with skills to be agents in their communities. The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which foundations for student questioning were present in secondary social studies classrooms. By conducting an in-depth examination of the practices of two teachers who advocate student questioning, I centered this study on the following question: How do two teachers committed to student inquiry foster student questioning in their classrooms? I focused, more specifically, on teachers’ attitudes toward student questioning, how they attempted to make space for student questioning, and steps they took to scaffold student questioning. Findings suggest that even though the participants
approached student questioning in unique ways, they shared a need for curricular control, often triggered by the pressures of standardized assessments, which influenced how they incorporated student questioning into their classrooms.

**Conceptual Framework**

Constructivists advocate learning environments in which students create their own knowledge and believe this happens most successfully when students are engaged in the examination of issues rooted in students’ interests (Dewey, 1902/1990; Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Inquiry is promoted as the ideal approach to social studies instruction because it fosters students’ meaning making by leading students through the steps of generating questions, collecting and evaluating evidence, and drawing supported conclusions. If inquiry is to fulfill constructivist intentions, then students’ questions must be central to the process, for “it is through the interactions which surround these questions that students are able to develop essential sense-making links” (Aguiar, Mortimer, & Scott, 2010, p. 191). Nonetheless, real world attempts at inquiry tend to be organized and facilitated by the teacher, who focuses students’ energies toward investigating a teacher-selected question (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Though inquiry centered on a teacher-developed question is better than no inquiry at all, such experiences lack authenticity and are unlikely to genuinely engage students. For inquiry to be truly meaningful, students must play an integral part in developing the basis for inquiry by participating in the generation of questions (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

Despite the importance of learner-centered instruction and the power of student questioning to fashion a meaningful learning experience, students need guidance. Students may be naturally curious, but they do not necessarily have the skills to independently engage in meaningful inquiry (Aguiar, Mortimer, & Scott, 2010; Levstik & Barton, 2015). Successful inquiry demands a question of disciplinary significance, but if too removed from the student, such questions lose their authenticity. Skillful teachers are capable of nudging students’ natural interests in more viable directions (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Dewey 1900/1990). Teachers must assist students in determining not only how to ask an inquiry-worthy question but also how to use questions to move that inquiry forward. Students’ curiosities should spark the investigation, and students should be fully immersed in the process of inquiry, but one cannot expect students, of any age, to traverse this challenging path alone (Bruner, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). Considering teachers’ gatekeeping power (Thornton, 1991, 2005), if teachers’ purposes and aims do not align with a desire to foster student questioning, it is unlikely that students will experience opportunities to develop and investigate their own questions.

**Literature Review**

Compared to studies of teacher questioning, the student questioning literature base is thin. In general, students ask few questions (Dillon, 1988; Dull & Murrow, 2008), and the questions students do ask tend to be procedural or clarifying in nature (Chin & Brown, 2002; Good, Slaving, Harel, & Emerson, 1987). Although Andrew Whittaker’s (2012) study of eight secondary classrooms concluded that students were asking equal numbers of explanatory and inquiry questions, those questions tended to be distracting rather than conducive to the learning experience. Despite slight disagreement as to the frequency and style of student questioning, most observers conclude that the quality of students’ questions is lacking. Simply acknowledging the important place of students’ questions in the classroom or giving students free rein to develop questions is not enough to substantially improve the quality of students’ questions (Aguiar, Mortimer, & Scott, 2010). Student questioning has been found to improve
when students receive explicit instruction around questioning and opportunities to evaluate their questions (Chin & Osborne, 2008; Ciardiello, 1998; Cuccio-Schirripa & Steiner, 2000).

Three factors emerge from the literature as necessary for the promotion of student questioning in the classroom. First, teachers must care about student questioning, which is best illustrated when teachers “create conditions wherein students believe that it is worthwhile to generate questions” (Aulls, 2008, p. 40). An encouraging classroom culture helps students feel confident enough to fumble as they learn to ask complex, probing questions (Chin & Brown, 2002; Pedrosa de Jesus, Almeida, & Watts, 2004). Such a classroom culture may result when teachers: utilize surprising texts, model questioning techniques (Dillon, 1988), earn students’ trust (Watts, Alsop, Gould, & Walsh, 1997), integrate students’ personal experience into instruction (Donham, Heinrich, & Bostwick, 2010), and nurture dialogic classrooms (Dull & Murrow, 2008). Secondly, teachers must create space for student questioning throughout the learning sequence (Dillon, 1988; Pedrosa de Jesus, Almeida, & Watts, 2004). Though in today’s standards-driven system, teachers are more likely to do this when students’ questions can be used as “steps to the curriculum” (Beck, 1998, p. 877). Lastly, teachers must scaffold student questioning, which includes teaching students how to question, when to question, and how to identify the strengths of different types of questions (Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996; Rothstein & Santana, 2013).

Classrooms that approach student questioning intentionally have been shown to improve reading comprehension (Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996), conceptual understanding (Chin & Brown, 2002; Pedrosa de Jesus, Almeida, & Watts, 2004), and authentic research practices (Donham, Heinrich, & Bostwick, 2010). Various factors, nonetheless, discourage teachers from incorporating student questioning, most notably the pressure to cover content and fear that students’ questions will derail the class (Rop, 2002; Whittaker, 2012). The teacher at the center of Charles Rop’s (2002) case study, for example, was far less open to student questioning when it led away from his curricular objectives.

Researchers (e.g., Aulls, 2008; Barton & Levstik, 2004) often mention the need for teachers to support students’ development of inquiry-learning strategies, but questioning is frequently overlooked. Because questioning plays such a pivotal role in the instigation and facilitation of inquiry, more attention must be paid to how teachers help students build questioning capacity, especially through the key factors of attitude, space, and scaffolds. Because of its longitudinal nature, this study provides insight into not only if these foundational beliefs and actions existed in a moment in time but also if and how teachers’ beliefs and actions evolved over time, especially when teachers were prompted to reflect.

**Method**

The central question of this study was “How do two teachers committed to student inquiry foster student questioning in their classrooms?” Although the literature suggests that some approaches to questioning are more valuable to inquiry than others, the goal of this study was not to prioritize a certain type of student questioning or to judge a teacher’s approach to student questioning but rather to better understand how individual teachers defined and supported this skill.

**Participants**

Participants were selected using a purposeful-sampling method (Patton, 1980). Since this study went beyond what teachers thought about student questioning to what teachers were doing about student questioning, a methodological decision was made to focus the study on teachers...
who had expressed a personal commitment to this goal. I contacted social studies methods professors at a local university about potential participants. Two teachers from different Central Kentucky high schools agreed to participate. At the time of the study, Natasha (pseudonym) had taught for seven years and was teaching AP European history, AP world history, and world civilizations. Mark (pseudonym) had taught for five years and was teaching government, U.S. history, and AP government. Both participants are European American and worked briefly in non-teaching professions before returning to the same graduate institution for teacher certification.

**Procedure**

The study utilized a holistic multiple-case study design (Yin, 2014) and employed three major data generation techniques during a seven month data collection period. Four classroom observations were conducted with each participant. The first served as an introductory observation, during which basic information about the participant’s teaching style was gathered. The second, third, and fourth observations occurred during lessons that the teacher identified as incorporating student questioning. No limitations were placed on that requirement, allowing teachers to referent it as they saw fit. Four audio-recorded interviews were conducted with each participant. The first served as an introductory interview, during which information about the participant’s professional background and pedagogical beliefs, particularly around questioning, was gathered. The second, third, and fourth interviews were opportunities to debrief about the observed lessons with a particular focus on the teacher’s instructional decisions. Classroom materials were also collected. At the conclusion of the study, the participants submitted a written reflection in which they reacted to selected quotes from our first interview, described if and how their approach to student questioning changed over the course of the year, and explained any intention to incorporate their interest in student questioning into their professional development plans.

**Analysis**

I reviewed the data using an open coding process (Glesne, 2011). I revised the open-code sheet with each cycle of data generation, thereby approaching initial data analysis in an iterative fashion that employed cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2014). I examined the data continuously for emerging themes, which influenced subsequent interview questions. As the data generation process progressed, I crafted memos that expanded on the data and helped elaborate the themes (Glesne, 2011). I returned to the final code sheet at the conclusion of data generation and developed conceptually-grounded categories that reflected major trends in the literature (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). I then re-configured the evidence according to conceptually grounded categories (beliefs, space, and scaffolds) and examined those groupings for the most pertinent and compelling themes. Member checking was built into the research process through debriefing interviews that gave teachers the opportunity to explain what happened during the observations and to react to my understandings and interpretations of the observations. The final written reflections allowed the teachers to comment on their perceived growth during the process and their desired next steps. These were used to triangulate my interpretations of any evolution in their attitudes and actions toward student questioning.

**Findings**

Findings from the observations and interviews offer a glimpse into the teachers’ beliefs and actions regarding student questioning. In what follows, I offer findings that cluster around three assertions: (1) teachers’ belief in student questioning did not always mitigate their
discomfort, (2) teachers utilized student questioning in service of curricular demands, and (3) teachers guided students toward certain questions. Taken together, these findings portray teachers attempting to meld what they want to do in the classroom with what they feel they have to do in the classroom.

**Teachers’ Belief in Student Questioning Did Not Always Mitigate Discomfort**

Natasha and Mark were invited to participate because of their declared appreciation for student questioning, but that commitment was not necessarily enough to dissuade their fear of loosening their control over the classroom.

As seen in the literature (e.g., Carlsen, 1991; Chin & Brown, 2002), Natasha and Mark agreed that a teacher’s attitude toward questioning directly impacts the likelihood that students will ask questions. They both described themselves as unlikely to evade students’ questions but acknowledged that their confidence was a product of teaching experience, either because they were now more familiar with the material or had learned to become more flexible instructionally. In addition, both believed that questioning was an important skill for students to develop and that social studies teachers had a significant role to play in fostering this skill.

Natasha felt that student success was predicated on asking questions, explaining that not asking questions led students’ learning to “remain stagnant.” On numerous occasions, Natasha commented that questioning had the ability to increase students’ engagement with the material and give students more ownership, ultimately resulting in improved academic performance. To achieve these goals, Natasha wanted students to ask questions that helped them think through academic tasks such as, “What evidence can I use to support my argument?” Natasha believed these types of questions would help students uncover the natural questioning they do every day and apply those processes in the classroom.

Mark held similar views regarding the importance of student questioning, both in his characterization of questioning as “the way people learn” and his belief that questioning can better engage students with the material. When it came to questioning in a social studies class, Mark’s support of questioning was evidenced by a poster lining his wall that claimed, “history is about questions, not answers.” Mark emphasized, “our goal is to get them to start questioning what’s around them a little bit” and to wonder “why things are the way they are.” Ideally, his students would ask more “conjecture or inference” questions such as, “I see that in government; I wonder why that really happens?” Mark believed that by asking these types of questions, students would be more likely to understand not only “how people actually do historical work and make sense of the world” but also “give them a fighting chance to understand the world that they’re living in.”

Despite their professed support for student questioning, Natasha and Mark also acknowledged that a need for curricular control limited their willingness to encourage or use students’ questions. Natasha confessed that only when she “stop[s] feeling like I have to answer their questions and really show them how to answer their own questions” would she become truly comfortable with student questioning. Mark was more concerned by the potential of students’ questions to derail his planning: “You want me to teach a lesson about something in history, I can do that, but to let the kids go a little bit is a little scary sometimes [because] I lose control over the outcome.” Because of the extensive responsibility that teachers have for students’ behavior and performance, especially in a high-stakes environment, it is understandable that Natasha and Mark would be hesitant to loosen their control over the classroom. Similar to other teacher studies (e.g., Rop, 2002; van Hover & Pierce, 2006), Natasha and Mark wanted
students to be given greater responsibility so they may develop into independent learners but were wary because of the realities of teaching.

Natasha and Mark also doubted students’ abilities to ask quality questions. For Natasha, content knowledge was a pre-requisite for questioning: “How would they know what questions to even ask if they don’t even have a cursory knowledge of what’s happening, which is how I feel I can make really good questions.” Mark also acknowledged the importance of content knowledge to student questioning, saying “I’m more familiar with that content. Expecting students who’ve only had a half a year of it to come up with those same really important questions is not really realistic because they haven’t been scaffolded.” According to Mark, students’ content deficits contributed to his hesitancy to incorporate student questioning:

“You want it to be the right question they are asking, and sometimes it’s so difficult to get them to ask the right questions that you just don’t have time to spend 30 minutes asking questions or developing good questions, and so it’s usually sacrificed.

Throughout the study, both of these teachers struggled to let go of the classroom despite their personal commitment to student questioning, which resulted in narrow questioning opportunities for students.

The literature suggests that simply providing space for students to ask questions is not enough to guarantee students will ask inquiry-worthy questions (Aguiar, Mortimer, & Scott, 2010; Whittaker, 2012), so Natasha and Mark are correct to be concerned about the quality of students’ questions. It is suggested that if teachers view the “potential” in students’ questions, they might feel more comfortable in their own ability to mold students’ questions into ones that are more appropriate for sustained inquiere or more in-line with their expectations of good questions (Beck, 1998, p. 878). Natasha and Mark did seem to believe in their students’ potential as questioners and sought to create experiences in which students were more likely to ask questions that would serve the teachers’ purposes.

**Teachers Utilized Student Questioning in Service of Curricular Demands**

Because of the perceived need to stay focused on the requirements of the course, both Natasha and Mark found it challenging to make space for student questioning. Neither teacher felt they had the time for students to ask and pursue just any question. Questions, instead, needed to directly connect to curricular demands (e.g., predetermined content). In essence, Natasha and Mark wanted to utilize students’ questions as “steps to the curriculum” (Beck, 1998, p. 877).

In our first interview, Natasha explained how her planning process was guided by relevant curriculum documents. The observed lessons were tightly focused on selected content standards, and Natasha employed student questioning opportunities in attempts to help students “focus more heavily on these standards and then to create a way for them to be engaged in that process themselves.” During one observation, for example, students used an I-Search chart (ReadWriteThink, 2011) to structure a mini-research task. They began with an AP World Civilization standard: “Official Chinese maritime activity expanded into the Indian Ocean region with the naval voyages led by Ming Admiral Zheng He, which enhanced Chinese prestige” (College Board, 2011, p. 51). Working as a class to transform that standard into a question, they ultimately arrived at “Analyze how naval voyages led by Zheng He led to an enhancement in China’s prestige.” When I asked about a student’s comment that the collective result sounded more like a “comma and” than a question, Natasha seemed unconcerned, primarily because AP essay prompts are phrased similarly. Students then worked in small groups to develop
supporting questions that would assist in answering the larger question. Examples included, “Where did he go?” “What goods did he introduce?” and “What countries/cultures did he affect?” Appendix A displays how Natasha incorporated student questioning into each observed lesson and her identified purposes for each questioning opportunity.

When reflecting upon her decision to incorporate student questioning in particular ways, Natasha clearly connected each exercise with a curricular demand, including more focused homework and familiarity with question types. When discussing the I-Search exercise, Natasha emphasized her plan to incorporate student questioning as a way to promote comprehension of content standards:

What I noticed is that even though I was giving students this [reading] homework and having them take notes, I really wasn’t making great connections with the standards. So that kind of drove my focus for why I determined student questioning. I started thinking to myself ‘I need to give them tools to be able to meet these standards.’ I really wanted them to really understand how to create questions from the standard itself.

Natasha’s decision to focus student questioning on specific standards is a clear example of using student questioning as a “step to the curriculum” (Beck, 1998, p. 877).

Although Mark acknowledged a desire to make content objectives a secondary focus, he readily admitted the influence that standardized exams had on his instructional decisions. Initially, Mark’s student questioning opportunities focused less directly on curricular demands, but as the study progressed, Mark moved more in this direction. In an early observation, students developed “what,” “why,” and “how” questions about an antebellum image (e.g., What is the purpose of the picture? Why are they dressed so fancy? How do they all live in that little house?). Mark did not expect students to answer these questions; he just wanted students to “get behind the author’s point of view.” As comparison, in the final observed lesson, Mark used student questioning as a way to review for an exam. Mark provided a compelling question (Is freedom conditional?) that related to key objectives from their study of civil rights and liberties. Students then created supporting questions that assisted in answering the compelling question (e.g., What is the 14th Amendment? What is the definition of conditional?). These supporting questions were posted on a class web-resource so that students could use them to study.

Appendix B displays how Mark incorporated student questioning into each observed lesson and his identified purposes for each questioning opportunity.

When asked about his different approaches to student questioning throughout the year, Mark commented that he developed more structured student questioning opportunities when the stakes were higher:

I think in those different instances, the form meets the function. [During Observation 2] I was just having a conversation. If that’s all I want, there’s really no need to go into a whole lot of detail, but preparing for an essay [Observation 3], I thought that one was a bit more difficult because they’re going to definitely have to have this task, so I need to almost channel them a little bit more.

Over time, Mark’s usage of student questioning as a “step to the curriculum” (Beck, 1998, p. 877) became more explicit.

Natasha and Mark actively encouraged student questioning. According to Beck (1998), by intentionally creating space for questioning, Natasha and Mark were “increas[ing] the probability that excellent questions will be asked by increasing the probability that additional questions will be asked” (p. 884). But, when determining how to incorporate student
questioning, both Natasha and Mark thought ahead—to the next activity, to the upcoming exam—and selected questioning opportunities that would, theoretically, set students up for success. Clearly, Natasha and Mark preferred students’ questions to be purposeful. Asking the right question meant asking a relevant question, which allowed the teachers to better ensure coverage of essential content and skills (Barlowe, 2004).

**Teachers Guided Students Toward Certain Questions**

As the study progressed, the teachers’ expectations for students’ questions and strategies for guiding students to become better questioners became more specific. The curricular demands discussed in the previous section influenced not only the types of questioning opportunities offered but also desired question traits.

From the beginning, Natasha’s purpose for student questioning was focused on helping students better understand tested content and test-style questions, and the scaffolds she provided were designed to move students in these directions. One approach was providing sources that would lead students to ask expected questions:

> When we put together those analytical groups, the idea was that no matter what students’ questions, they would end up coming up with similar groups, and that’s just because their sources were chosen by me, so I knew, probably, how that was going to go.

Natasha wanted students to take the lead in question development, but at the same time, she felt a responsibility to be a “quality control person [and] continually reiterate what they have to do until they’re at a place of [questioning] proficiency.” This was especially clear when examining the feedback that Natasha provided, which attempted to ensure that students’ questions focused on the identified standard. Natasha circled back to this theme during each interview. On one occasion, Natasha explained, “I was trying to make sure that students stayed focused on Zheng He, on China, on did it really increase their prestige or not. And I just kept focusing them back on those words.” In a later interview, Natasha talked about spending her time helping students revise questions in particular ways with comments like “you need more detail.” During our final conversation, Natasha talked about helping students “double-check” their Document-Based Questions to “make sure you are hitting every mark on the DBQ.” When scaffolding student questioning, Natasha attempted to balance her desire to give students “ownership” over their learning with her responsibility to prepare them for AP exams.

When compared to Natasha, Mark’s views on the purpose of student questioning were less standards-focused. The same can be said for the scaffolds and feedback he provided. Like Natasha, he delineated the traits and purposes of different types of questions and modeled questioning for the students. During one observation Mark explained, that a “what” question tended to produce a one-word answer, whereas a “how” question forced a respondent to explain. Over the course of the study, Mark’s guidance became more structured. Mark initially asked students to develop “what,” “why,” and “how” questions that they would like to ask the creator of an image. During a subsequent observation, Mark again stimulated student questioning through a visual (a graph depicting Social Security spending, receipts, and reserves over time), but asked students to craft “why” and “how” questions that would “help them understand what’s going on with Social Security right now.” When asked if this change was designed to provide students with more direction or to influence the nature of questions that students developed, Mark responded that both factors played a role:
I think it’s both because in the back of my mind I already know what they’re going to be looking at later [in an essay], and so I think that’s probably just how I scaffold them up to do that, but I think it’s also for them because I also know their weaknesses. Like Natasha, Mark also wanted to help students edit their questions, but instead of re-focusing students on a standard, he tended to elicit explanations from students as to why their questions were important. When reflecting on his approach to feedback, Mark talked about asking students, “why is that a good question that you’re asking” or “what made you want to ask that question.” Mark also explained that his expectations for students’ questions might decrease for fear of ruining the flow of the class:

I think a lot of times it just comes down to they’re struggling to find words, just like I struggle to find words. But at the end of the day, I have freshmen in high school who are generating really thoughtful questions about issues of freedom and the Bill of Rights, and I would be silly to say “that’s not very good; let’s throw it out.”

Mark’s response is due, in part, to his belief that questioning allows students to “engage on their own terms” and reflects a realization that questioning is hard work, so students must be given space to fumble through this process as they build confidence and skill as questioners. Mark acknowledged that it is tempting to push students’ questions aside when they seem inarticulate or simplistic:

A lot of times we want to overlook “why are they wearing those clothes” questions, and for that student, that is a historically meaningful question to them, whereas maybe in the grand scheme of things, to us that’s not, but that’s their entry point, and that’s where they go.

When scaffolding student questioning, Mark attempted to balance his need for students to ask sophisticated questions that aided their understanding of a concept or prepared them for an upcoming task with his desire to respect and value all questions.

Both Natasha and Mark took concrete steps to support students’ development as questioners through modeling (Dillon, 1988), question prompts (Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996), and using students’ questions as “steps to curriculum” (Beck, 1998, p. 877). Although aware of their responsibility to address explicit content and skills, Natasha and Mark wanted to draw on students’ interests, so they used scaffolds to move students in desired directions. This allowed them to better connect seemingly digressive questions with the larger themes of the course, thereby balancing a desire to support students’ interests with their responsibility to cover material (Barlowe, 2004).

**Discussion**

**Making Them Fit**

Both Natasha and Mark were methodical planners who took their gatekeeping (Thornton, 1991, 2005) responsibilities seriously. As reflected in their views about social studies, both teachers wanted to equip students with skills and knowledge that benefitted students in the classroom and in their own lives. Nonetheless, one cannot deny the impact of content standards and assessment expectations on their instruction, resulting in a preference for a certain type of questioning. Their decisions reflected what Jeffrey Cornett (1990) termed “personal practical theories” (p. 267) or the idea that one’s instructional decisions are influenced by ever-evolving personal and practical experiences. Natasha, for example, explained that her commitment to teaching skills was a product of her time in the business world and determination that skills have a greater impact on students’ future success than “knowing who William and Mary are in the
Glorious Revolution.” At the same time, Natasha taught AP courses and wanted students to pass those exams; therefore, she could not ignore AP standards. In Mark, the potential for personal and practical experiences to produce conflicting theories was more pronounced. On several occasions, Mark expressed a desire to respect and incorporate students’ questions as personal “entry points” into content, but he also stressed that, “we just assume that because questions are a part of teaching that students know how to ask questions, and they don’t, they really don’t on a basic level.” This contradiction emerged from confusion as to who or what decides if a question is the right question. Mark’s comments clearly revealed the struggle teachers encountered when making their views of questioning fit with the realities of the classroom. In many ways, the teachers’ attempts to navigate “cross-current influences” (Grant, 1996, p. 241) supported their desire to develop instruction that addressed their personal beliefs, organizational demands, and policy pressures. For student questioning to take hold in classrooms where teachers are less innately attracted to this instructional approach or are overwhelmed by outside demands, steps must be taken to show teachers how questioning can be used to effectively and efficiently fulfill their many obligations.

**Teacher Development**

Natasha and Mark were selected as participants because of their self-identified commitment to using student questioning; however, they both characterized this instructional approach as an area for growth instead of an area of expertise. Although not an initial goal of the study, one of the most valuable outcomes was the opportunity to facilitate conversations that supported the evolution of teachers’ attitudes and actions toward student questioning. At the beginning of the study, both Natasha and Mark expressed a need for tools and models, but neither knew where to turn. Over the course of the study, both participants initiated conversations about the C3 Framework and came to incorporate the language of the C3 Framework (e.g., compelling and supporting questions) into their classrooms and reflections, though often in distinct ways. Natasha and Mark were excited by the potential of the C3 Framework, but their unique interpretations of the framework revealed an important question. Will the C3 Framework be used to create inquiry around pre-determined questions and to create questions around pre-determined content, or will it embolden teachers to not just make students’ questions fit but, instead, make them central to the learning experience?

Like Natasha and Mark, all Kentucky teachers should have a vested interest in student questioning, as the new “Framework for Teaching Proficiency System” specifically includes student questioning as an aspect of teacher evaluation (Kentucky Department of Education, 2014). Even without this change in teacher evaluation, the findings of this study have implications outside of social studies, as elevating the role of student questioning in the classroom is good practice in all disciplines. Varied instructional resources and professional development opportunities must be made available to teachers, both the motivated and the hesitant, if they are to move from simply accepting the value of student questioning to making space for students to pose questions to, most importantly, creating a learning environment in which students are assessing the quality of their questions and engaging in inquiry driven by their questions.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated the beliefs and actions of two secondary social studies teachers, thereby serving as an initial examination of the place of student questioning in social studies classrooms. Before teachers can confidently implement the vision of social studies advocated by
documents like the C3 Framework, more work must be done to reveal how teachers currently understand student questioning and strategies that effectively support students in developing inquiry-sustaining questions. In order to investigate the impact of questioning opportunities on student performance, students’ views must also be examined: Do students find questioning activities as engaging as teachers consider them to be? Do students see questioning opportunities as personalized entry points into content or as one more required activity? Do students consider the questioning they do in their daily lives as akin to the questioning being asked of them in the classroom? With a fuller picture, resources may be developed that will assist teachers, like those in this study, who desire to shift their practices in rigorous and innovative ways but are unsure where to turn for help.

References


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**Web-based References**


### Incorporation of Student Questioning into Instruction: Natasha

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<th>Observation</th>
<th>Student Questioning</th>
<th>Purpose for Questioning</th>
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| 2           | Following the I-Search method\(^a\), students worked collaboratively to convert an AP World History standard into a question, generate relevant supporting questions, and answer those questions. Students completed an I-Search with a different standard for homework. | • “create questions from the standard itself”  
• “increase student achievement”  
• “give them more specific homework based solely on these standards” |
| 3           | Students examined a primary document and determined what question the author was trying to answer, grouped questions into themes, generated thematic questions, and synthesized these thematic questions into a compelling question, which became the basis of an essay that was completed as homework. | • “getting them to see the evidence in a light that would help them see what imperialism was about”  
• “In the end, did I really need them to be highest compelling question ever, or was the explanatory question enough for them to have learned about imperialism?” |
| 4           | Students worked collaboratively to develop a Document Based Question in the style of an AP European History DBQ. | • “Essentially the activity I’m looking for is to create a question that can be answered through these documents.”  
• “This particular activity definitely has everything to do with increasing their understanding of how a DBQ works, understanding how the documents inform your answer to the question and really are created specifically to make you see analytical groupings.” |

*Note.* This table reflects the student questioning opportunities that Natasha intentionally incorporated into her instructional plan. Examples of spontaneous questions by students are not included.

\(^a\)(ReadWriteThink, 2011)
Appendix B
Incorporation of Student Questioning into Instruction: Mark

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<th>Observation</th>
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| 2           | Students generated ‘what,’ ‘how,’ and ‘why’ questions as stimulated by an antebellum image. | • “actively engage them in an example of paternalism”
|             |                     | • “get behind the author’s point of view and understand why people viewed slavery the way they did” |
| 3           | Students converted a content standard, which related to an upcoming essay, into a question and then generated ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions that were stimulated by a related graph. They answered self-selected ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions as homework. | • “see how well they could look at a piece of information and then come up with questions that would dig a little bit deeper into the reasoning behind”
|             |                     | • “see the connection between what was going on in that graph, which was later going to show up on their writing assignment anyways, and other pieces of information” |
| 4           | Mark posed a compelling question, and students worked collaboratively to develop supporting questions. Self-selected questions became the basis of mind-maps that were used to review for an upcoming exam. | • “generate questions about things that they had already learned and base those questions on content that they were really familiar with”
|             |                     | • “I tried to incorporate student questioning by giving them a very, very simple but profound question like ‘is freedom conditional?’ and then allowing them to see what kind of questions that we have to ask of ourselves to answer that question.” |

Note. This table reflects the student questioning opportunities that Mark intentionally incorporated into his instructional plan. Examples of spontaneous questions by students are not included.
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