The past year has been turbulent for social studies educators. The summer of 2020 brought calls for racial justice and discussions of structural racism to the forefront in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and widespread Black Lives Matter protests. Then, shortly thereafter, a group of pundits, politicians, and parents weaponized the term critical race theory and framed any attempts to teach about historical oppression as divisive and unpatriotic.\(^1\) In stunning coordination, state legislatures across the U.S. began to introduce legislation limiting the ways teachers could discuss issues of race, gender, and other aspects of identity.\(^2\) In a matter of months, talk of racial justice moved from commonplace to, in some settings, potentially costing teachers their jobs. The overarching conflict is most plainly encapsulated in the competing visions put forward by the New York Times’ 1619 Project,\(^3\) which positioned enslavement as foundational to the development of the United States, and the Trump administration’s 1776 Report,\(^4\) which called for an uncritical re-commitment to the nation’s founding documents. Despite debates on the historical merits of each camp, both view history education as a fight for the soul and character of the nation. As educators witnessing these culture wars in action, it can be tempting to succumb to the heat of these ideological factions and seek safety in the past of least resistance.

But teaching “hard history” is essential for understanding who we are, how we got here, and what hope lies ahead.\(^5\) Hard history confronts messy and uncomfortable ideas in order to work towards a more just future. As Hasan Kwame Jeffries noted in the preamble to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Hard History framework, failing to engage with difficult parts of the nation’s history not only mis-educates students about the past, it can lead to bad public policy decisions in the present. In the inquiry-based curricular loop detailed herein, we avoid the past of least resistance and lean into historic events that are difficult to examine: slavery, genocide, internment, oppression. We also take the study of these topics further by inviting students to wrestle with the notion of justice and the ways in which individuals, groups, and governments are working to make peace with these horrific events.

In this article, we examine one approach to teaching hard history using an Inquiry Design Model (IDM) curricular loop.\(^6\) A curricular loop allows students to build a deeper understanding of a complex
idea and develop a greater facility with the tools of inquiry over a course of study by regularly engaging in an inquiry. The curricular loop we feature here was designed with and for eighth-grade social studies teachers in the Syracuse, New York, school district who wanted a series of inquiries that would enable students to confront challenging events of the past and to deliberate the question, “How do we make peace with the past?”

The compelling question, “How do we make peace with the past?”, threads together the six inquiries that make up the eighth-grade U.S. History curricular loop (see graphic above). Each inquiry in the loop serves as a case study of a hard history topic (e.g., slavery, internment), a group of people (e.g., women, American Indians), and the slate of tools that societies use to reckon with the past (e.g., monuments, reparations, formal apologies). Each of the six inquiries has its own compelling question that allows students to build an understanding of the historical context, an empathy for the people who were impacted by this event, and an appreciation for the ways societies might make peace with past oppression:

1. Did the return of Bruce’s Beach bring justice? (Focused Inquiry: 1-2 days of instruction)
2. How did the U.S. manifest Westward Expansion? (Structured Inquiry: 3-5 days of instruction)
3. How did Reconstruction lead to retaliation? (Structured Inquiry: 3-5 days of instruction)
4. What is the legacy of Japanese Internment? (Structured Inquiry: 3-5 days of instruction)
5. How should we remember Brown v. Board? (Structured Inquiry: 3-5 days of instruction)
6. How should Syracuse make peace with past redlining? (Guided, Taking Informed Action Inquiry: 7-10 days of instruction)

Students begin with a case study that surfaces many of the ideas and tensions that they will encounter across the inquiries. The initial inquiry also serves
Bruce’s Beach, a Black-owned California seaside property seized by Manhattan Beach’s city council a century ago, is finally being returned.

to hook students into the overarching compelling question that guides the inquiry loop: How should we make peace with the past?

In this focused inquiry, “Did the return of Bruce’s Beach bring justice?”, students learn about a recent landmark California bill that enables Black families to reclaim lands seized decades ago. This inquiry focuses on the case of African American couple Charles and Willa Bruce, who owned a once-flourishing seaside resort called Bruce’s Beach Lodge in Manhattan Beach, California.

In 1924, white community residents pressured the city to seize the land using eminent domain zoning laws. The city complied, and the Bruces lost their resort and livelihood. In October 2021, the California legislature announced that it would return the land to the descendants of the Bruces. The story of Bruce’s Beach highlights the loss of generational wealth and property that many Black landowners experienced. This inquiry asks students to think about this hard history and to consider the role that land reparations could play in making peace with the past.

Each of the inquiries in the loop employs a student-led deliberation technique called the Harkness Discussion. In a Harkness discussion, a teacher sits outside of the Harkness table (desks are typically shaped into a circle/oval) and charts the conversation of the group members (see diagram on p. 37). Students are given challenging sources along with a key question to deliberate. Harkness discussions foster a culture of curiosity, interdependence, and conversation—key attributes of a healthy citizenry. Students practice their first Harkness discussion in the beginning inquiry (Did the return of Bruce’s Beach bring justice?) and then again in each of the subsequent inquiries, allowing them to “take laps” around the loop’s central question, “How do we make peace with the past?” Each of the Harkness discussions focuses on a particular time period (e.g., Reconstruction, Japanese American Internment) and mechanism for reconciliation (e.g., monuments, reparations). By the sixth inquiry, students have examined a slate of tools intended to make peace with the past. They then enter the final inquiry with an understanding of how citizens in Syracuse could make peace.
with the history of redlining, the practice of denying financial services to people in certain areas based on their race or ethnicity. Repeating the Harkness discussion enables students to practice deliberation and to improve on the literacy skills of speaking and listening that are needed for good discussion.

The second structured inquiry, “How did the U.S. manifest Westward Expansion?”, asks students to interrogate narratives found in the conflict between expansionist ideologies and Native sovereignty in the mid- to late-1800s. Students examine how political leaders, writers, and artists crafted narratives that promoted and justified Westward Expansion. These narratives look specifically at examples of cultural misrepresentation of Native American tribes, intentional misremembering of conflicts between settlers and Natives, and the ways in which western lands were framed as empty and untamed.

To close the inquiry, students engage in an extension exercise with a present-day focus by participating in a Harkness discussion in which they discuss the role of cultural representation in popular media forms and how marginalized groups might find a measure of justice by being able to tell their own stories (both past and present) to mass audiences. By exploring a range of media representations of Indigenous peoples, students answer the question, “Can representations make peace with the past?”

In the third structured inquiry, “How did Reconstruction lead to retaliation?”, students investigate an all-too-common phenomenon in which political, economic, and social gains made by an oppressed group are met with retaliatory actions and policies. Within the investigation, students learn how federal reconstruction efforts after the Civil War enabled and protected African Americans’ newly gained freedoms. They also explore how that protection failed when the withdrawal of federal troops allowed white Southerners to reassert dominance through violence and intimidation and, ultimately, through the creation of Jim Crow laws, which codified white dominance. Simultaneously, Confederate statues and symbols emerged to memorialize the Lost Cause and intimidate those who resisted white supremacy. As an extension to this inquiry, students engage in a Harkness discussion that
explores how communities must deal with modern reminders of this hard history as seen in Confederate statues. Ultimately, students grapple with the question, “Can monuments make peace with the past?”

The fourth structured inquiry, “What is the legacy of Japanese internment?”, asks students to investigate the impacts of Japanese American detention during World War II by considering the costs incarceration had on Japanese American communities as well as how the U.S. government tried to make peace decades later with those wronged by its discriminatory policies. Students evaluate what Japanese Americans lost by investigating the stories of those who lived through internment, how Japanese Americans and other activists lobbied for justice, and the merits of the U.S. government’s response in the form of apologies and reparation payments. As an extension task, students engage in a Harkness discussion where they interrogate the value of reparations by exploring the question, “Can reparations make peace with the past?”

In the final structured inquiry, “How should we remember Brown v. Board?”, students are asked to question their assumptions on the impact of the landmark Supreme Court decision. Although Brown remains an important symbol refuting the legitimacy of state-sponsored segregation, a full understanding of the case requires an investigation into the Cold War context, the pace and scope of school integration after the decision, its impact on the Black teaching force and Black communities, the rollback of Brown by subsequent Court decisions, and the current state of school segregation. In exploring these topics, students evaluate the extent to which the decision provided access to better educational opportunities across race, class, and geographic lines. After the inquiry, students engage in a Harkness discussion around the efficacy of federal policy in creating justice, grappling with the question, “Can policy make peace with the past?”

To close out the inquiry loop, students engage in a guided, taking-informed-action inquiry with a local focus. Throughout the inquiry loop, students have explored a range of case studies that illuminate ways in which governments or groups have sought to make peace with the past (e.g., legislation, monuments, apologies).

Conclusion
This inquiry curricular loop asks students not just to learn hard history, but to consider how a society might attempt to make peace with that history. Certainly, there is no action that a government or group could take to make amends completely for a past atrocity. Yet silence or inaction only allows historical wounds to fester, breeding distrust and cynicism among segments of society. As social studies educators, we must help our students consider how these hard histories might be used to guide the creation of a more humane and just world. Can the United States celebrate 1776 without reckoning with 1619? Can words or actions make a difference? Can policies promote progress? Can symbols and representation play a role in making the nation whole? By avoiding the past of least resistance, we can engage with tough questions and imagine a better future.
Notes


7. Ibid.


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Visit socialstudies.org/advocacy for the new NCSS Advocacy Toolkit and other resources for advocating the importance of social studies education.