ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION IN SOCIAL STUDIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation includes a systematic review, an empirical study, and a practitioner article, all focused on improving reading comprehension and instruction for secondary students with learning disabilities (LD) in social studies. The evidence-based systematic review synthesized reading comprehension interventions for students with LD in secondary social studies classrooms published between 2011 and 2024. Only one intervention—Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)—was identified as an evidence-based practice (EBP). Findings also revealed limited content diversity in social studies and a need for replication studies to establish additional EBPs. The empirical study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to examine the perspectives of pre-service special education teachers seeking LD endorsements through a survey and focus groups. Participants (n = 51 survey; n = 10 focus group) generally valued social studies and reported comfort in teaching the subject, favoring discussion-based, collaborative approaches. However, it is possible that participants may have relied on general education instructional approaches, a focus of their teacher preparation program, to determine their comfortability. Despite feeling confident in teaching social studies, most participants lacked exposure to social studies-specific pedagogies and field experiences. The final practitioner article translates the findings of the EBP systematic review into practical guidance for implementing CSR in inclusive classrooms. CSR's four components—Preview, Click and Clunk, Get the Gist, and Wrap-Up—incorporate explicit instruction, peer collaboration, and scaffolding to support students' comprehension of primary sources. Together, the three studies underscore the promise of multicomponent reading interventions like CSR and highlight the need for enhanced disciplinary literacy training for pre-service special education teachers to support students with LD in accessing complex social studies content.

For all of my students: past, present, and future.
Thank you for always inspiring me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Social studies education plays a fundamental role in developing students' civic competence, historical thinking, and critical literacy skills (Adler et al., 2013; Nokes, 2022). The discipline encompasses diverse fields including history, geography, civics, and economics, fostering an understanding of societal structures and historical contexts (Adler et al., 2013). Social studies requires students to engage with complex texts, analyze primary and secondary sources, and construct meaning from historical and contemporary events, all of which demand critical thinking, reading comprehension, and the ability to synthesize diverse perspectives (Nokes, 2022). This process involves evaluating the reliability and bias of sources, making connections between historical events and present-day issues, and developing well-reasoned arguments based on evidence (Heafner & Norwood, 2019; Popp et al., 2021).

Despite its importance, social studies presents unique challenges, particularly for secondary students with learning disabilities (LD), who often struggle with reading comprehension, background knowledge, and text-based reasoning (Grigorenko et al., 2020; Vaughn et al., 2024). While a substantial body of research exists to developing and evaluating interventions aimed at improving reading, writing, and mathematics for students with LD (e.g., Al Otaiba et al., 2022; Bone et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2021; Young et al., 2022), content areas such as social studies and science have historically been understudied for special education students (Ciullo et al., 2020; Curtis & Green, 2021). Addressing this gap requires not only a comprehensive review of existing research but also input from key stakeholders who shape instructional practices. Pre-service special education teachers, in particular, play a crucial role in the future implementation of effective strategies, yet little research has examined their

preparation, perceptions, and instructional decision-making related to social studies. Understanding their perspectives is essential for identifying gaps in teacher education and ensuring that emerging professionals are equipped with evidence-based approaches for supporting students with LD in social studies classrooms. This dissertation aims to critically examine the literature on social studies instruction for secondary students with LD, explore the perspectives of pre-service special education teachers relative to teaching social studies for students with LD, and provide actionable strategies to enhance instructional practices in inclusive social studies classrooms.

Barriers to Social Studies Learning for Students with LD

Students with LD face unique challenges in social studies classrooms, where reading comprehension and contextual analysis are essential for understanding historical events and civic concepts (Claravall & Irey, 2022). Many students with LD experience deficits in background knowledge, vocabulary, and decoding skills, making it difficult to engage with the complex texts and abstract ideas often present in social studies curricula (Quinn et al., 2020; Vaughn et al., 2024). Primary source documents—a cornerstone of historical inquiry—can be particularly inaccessible due to their dense language, unfamiliar structures, and advanced vocabulary (Nokes, 2022). Without targeted interventions, these challenges not only hinder students' academic performance in social studies classes but also limit their ability to participate in meaningful historical discussions and civic engagement fully. Traditional teaching methods in social studies, such as lectures and textbook-based instruction, often fail to meet the needs of students with LD (Claravell & Irey, 2022; Nokes, 2022). These approaches typically prioritize rote memorization and passive learning over skill development and critical thinking, exacerbating the disengagement and frustration experienced by students with LD (Grajo & Guzman, 2024). To

address these instructional barriers—such as limited opportunities for meaningful interaction with content, difficulties in accessing complex texts, and a lack of strategies tailored to diverse learning needs (Claravall & Irey, 2022; Garwood, 2021; Quinn et al., 2020; Vaughn et al., 2024)—educators must adopt evidence-based strategies that support reading comprehension and foster active engagement with content.

Despite the importance of literacy in social studies, the subject often receives limited instructional time in K-12 education (Diliberti et al., 2023). Tyner and Kabourek (2020) reported elementary students receive an average of only 28 minutes per day of social studies instruction, which represents just 9% of their total instructional time. Even at the secondary level where students often receive one class period of social studies per day, instructional time remains constrained, and students with LD often struggle to access the curriculum due to gaps in content knowledge and comprehension (Toste et al., 2021; Vogler & Schamm-Pate, 2020). This creates a critical need for literacy-based interventions that can enhance both reading comprehension and content knowledge acquisition in social studies (Curtis & Green, 2021). While some interventions have shown promise (Ciullo et al., 2020; Curtis & Green, 2021; Swanson et al., 2014), there is a need for systematic evaluation of their effectiveness, particularly for students with LD at the secondary level.

Prior Research on Literacy Strategies and Students with LD

To understand the effectiveness of reading comprehension interventions in social studies, it is necessary to examine previous systematic reviews that have analyzed instructional practices for students with LD. Swanson et al. (2014) conducted an early comprehensive synthesis on reading comprehension interventions in social studies for students with LD. They identified several promising literacy strategies but did not establish any interventions as evidence-based

practices due to limitations in research quality and methodological inconsistencies. Ciullo et al. (2020) built on this work by conducting a meta-analysis on social studies interventions for K-12 students with LD. Their findings highlighted the effectiveness of multicomponent interventions that integrated comprehension strategies with disciplinary literacy practices. However, the quality of research varied, and the study underscored the need for more rigorous methodological approaches. Curtis & Green (2021), in their review of evidence-based practices for K-12 students with LD, further examined structured, multi-component interventions and emphasized the importance of disciplinary literacy within social studies. They found positive outcomes for comprehension-focused interventions but content acquisition results were inconsistent, suggesting a need for improved implementation strategies. Together, these systematic reviews provide a foundation for understanding the landscape of reading comprehension interventions in social studies but also highlight gaps in research. The lack of consistent findings across studies, particularly in relation to content acquisition and secondary-level interventions, necessitates further investigation.

Prior Research on Special Educators and Social Studies Education

Effective implementation of evidence-based practices in social studies also hinges on teacher preparation (Shanahan et al., 2023). Pre-service special education teachers, in particular, require targeted training in both content knowledge and instructional strategies to support students with LD in inclusive classrooms (Rodriguez, 2021). However, researchers have indicated many pre-service teachers feel underprepared to teach social studies, often citing a lack of confidence in their content knowledge and instructional skills (Reisman et al., 2019; Rodriguez, 2021). Rodriguez (2021) surveyed pre-service special education teachers' perceptions of teaching social studies to students with disabilities. This study suggested many pre-service

teachers lacked confidence in their ability to teach social studies effectively due to limited content knowledge and inadequate training in evidence-based instructional strategies. A major limitation of Rodriguez's study was its reliance on survey data without deeper qualitative insights into teacher decision-making and instructional experiences.

This gap in understanding how teachers approach literacy instruction is particularly concerning, as inadequate preparation can lead to an overreliance on general literacy strategies rather than disciplinary literacy approaches specific to social studies, ultimately limiting students' ability to engage meaningfully with historical texts and concepts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2017).To address this gap, teacher education programs must emphasize integrating content-specific strategies with inclusive teaching practices for students with LD, equipping future educators with the tools needed to adapt and differentiate instruction for diverse learners (Hedin et al., 2020). This includes coursework explicitly addressing social studies instructional methods, strategies for scaffolding comprehension for students with LD, a focus on disciplinary literacy, and increased resources for teaching social studies in a special education setting (Dobbs et al., 2024; Garwood, 2021; Rodriguez, 2021).

The Purpose of this Dissertation

While previous researcher provided valuable insights into reading comprehension interventions and teacher preparedness to support secondary students with LD in social studies, several gaps remain. First, existing systematic reviews have not established a clear set of evidence-based practices for improving reading comprehension in secondary social studies for students with LD (Ciullo et al., 2020; Curtis & Green, 2021; Swanson et al., 2014). Second, prior researchers on teacher perceptions suggest pre-service special education teachers feel underprepared to teach social studies (Rodriguez, 2021) but additional qualitative research is

needed to explore their specific challenges and instructional decision-making processes. This dissertation seeks to address these gaps by conducting both a systematic review of literacy interventions and an empirical study on pre-service teacher perspectives, and providing a practitioner-focused chapter with strategies for engaging students with LD in the secondary social studies classroom. Broadly, this dissertation has four goals:

1. Synthesize existing research on reading comprehension interventions in secondary social studies for students with LD, identifying key trends and gaps.
2. Assess the methodological rigor of studies on social studies interventions for students with LD, focusing on alignment with evidence-based practice criteria.
3. Examine the perspectives of pre-service special education teachers on their preparation to teach social studies, including perceived challenges and instructional needs.
4. Translate findings from the systematic review and empirical study into actionable recommendations for practitioners and teacher educators in special education and social studies.

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation involves an evidence-based systematic review of the literature, an original data collection study, and a practitioner piece. The evidence-based systematic review of the literature analyzes relevant literature on reading comprehension interventions, disciplinary literacy, and instructional strategies for students with LD in social studies. This study builds on Swanson et al.'s (2014) study, which conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis focused on reading comprehension strategies in social studies classroom for students with LD through 2010. The current systematic review of the literature focuses specifically on interventions in the secondary social studies classroom for students with LD from January 2011 through December

2024.

The original mixed-methods study systematically replicates Rodriguez's (2021) study, which surveyed pre-service special education teachers on their perspectives and perceptions on social studies and special education. The current study employed the same survey methodology as Rodriguez (2021) but expands the participant inclusion criteria to include fourth-year students while also narrowing the focus to students working towards an endorsement in LD. By including more advanced students in the program while focusing on learning disabilities allowed for more comprehensive perspectives while also targeting a specific disability group. This study also added a qualitative component by conducting focus groups to discuss the findings and trends of the survey. The focus groups allowed for more data triangulation to corroborate survey findings while also providing richer insights to survey responses.

Informed by the findings from both the systematic review and the original mixed-methods study, the practitioner manuscript offers secondary special education teachers a research-informed, evidence-based instructional strategy designed to enhance the reading comprehension of students with LD when engaging with primary source documents in inclusive social studies classrooms. This strategy is tailored to address the unique academic and engagement challenges that students with LD often encounter when interpreting historical texts, such as complex sentence structures, unfamiliar vocabulary, and dense content. The manuscript contextualizes the strategy within inclusive teaching practices, ensuring that it aligns with broader efforts to make social studies content more accessible and meaningful for all learners.

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CHAPTER 2

READING COMPREHENSION INTERVENTIONS IN SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES: AN EVIDENCE-BASED SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Social studies education integrates disciplines such as history, geography, civics, and sociology to develop students' civic competence (Adler et al., 2013). By engaging with topics like government, economics, and societal issues, students gain the knowledge necessary for informed civic participation (Martell & Stevens, 2022; Nelson & Durham, 2022). Meaningful social studies instruction not only deepens understanding of civic matters, but also fosters active engagement in democratic processes (Pugh et al., 2023).

Social studies is a critical content area for all K–12 students, yet it often receives limited instructional time and emphasis in schools (Diliberti et al., 2023). This issue is particularly pronounced in elementary schools, where students average just 28 minutes of social studies instruction daily, representing only 9% of their total instructional time (Tyner & Kabourek, 2020). Many school officials and educators prioritize English/Language Arts (ELA) instruction under the belief it will improve reading skills. However, researchers do not find a strong correlation between additional ELA time and improved reading comprehension at the secondary level (Diliberti et al., 2023; Tyner & Kabourek, 2020). In contrast, a longitudinal study by Tyner and Kabourek (2020) found increased instructional time in social studies led to a statistically significant 15% improvement in reading comprehension scores, highlighting both measurable and meaningful gains in literacy.

Despite receiving more instructional time than elementary students (e.g., one class period per day; Vogler et al., 2019), secondary students still experience gaps in background knowledge and content understanding (Toste et al., 2019). Teachers frequently prioritize general literacy

skills (e.g., summarizing, identifying the main idea) over disciplinary literacy strategies (e.g., sourcing, historical inquiry), which affects student comprehension and achievement (Lee et al., 2021). While limited exposure to disciplinary literacy and content knowledge impacts all students, students with LD face greater challenges due to deficits in background knowledge and reading comprehension (Hallahan et al., 2020). These challenges are particularly pronounced for students with LD, as the ability to critically read and analyze historical texts is essential for developing the foundational knowledge needed for higher-order thinking (Nokes, 2022).

Students with LD and Social Studies Education

A deep understanding of social studies content requires students to engage in critical reading, contextual analysis, and synthesis of historical information to develop the foundational knowledge necessary for higher-order thinking (Claravall & Irey, 2022; Swanson et al., 2014). However, students with LD often struggle with these skills due to limited background knowledge, difficulties in making inferences, and challenges with reading comprehension (Poch & Lembke, 2018). Their struggles with basic comprehension extend across all content areas but are particularly pronounced in social studies, where complex texts, dense informational passages, and unfamiliar vocabulary pose additional barriers (Lee et al., 2021; Poch & Lembke, 2018). These difficulties can make it harder for students with LD to interpret historical events, understand governmental structures, and engage with civic concepts, ultimately affecting their ability to meaningfully participate in social studies discourse (Ciullo et al., 2020; Nokes, 2022).

Students with LD face significant challenges in social studies, which are compounded by the heavy reliance on texts—such as secondary and primary sources—as the primary instructional materials (Lucy et al., 2020). While textbooks have traditionally been a cornerstone of social studies instruction, their readability varies widely and often falls short in preparing

students to engage critically with content (Schmitt et al., 2022). To address this gap, teachers have increasingly incorporated additional secondary and primary sources into their instruction (Claravall & Irey, 2020). However, primary sources present their own difficulties, requiring readers to navigate complex content and text structures (Nokes, 2022) For students with LD, who often need extra support with subject-specific vocabulary and reading comprehension, these advanced texts in secondary grades pose substantial cognitive challenges (Claravall & Irey, 2022). To mitigate these difficulties, targeted interventions in social studies and reading and instructional supports are essential (Curtis & Green, 2021; Vaughn et al., 2019).

Interventions for Students with LD in Social Studies

Interventions to support students with LD in social studies usually fall into categories of literacy or content (Curtis & Green, 2021). In a meta-analysis examining the effectiveness of interventions in social studies for students with LD from 1975 to 2017, Ciullo et al. (2020) found students who received interventions targeting general literacy, content acquisition, historical reasoning, or alternative/digital text comprehension performed, on average, 0.76 standard deviation units higher on posttests than students in control conditions. The majority of posttests measured content knowledge, while a smaller subset used standardized assessments. Researchers found large effect sizes for both literacy interventions (0.87) and content-specific interventions (0.82). Small-group interventions yielded larger effect sizes compared to large-group interventions, suggesting content-based instruction in smaller groups may be beneficial for students with LD.

Within literacy-based interventions to support students with LD in learning social studies content, the interventions often focus on reading comprehension (Curtis & Green, 2021). In the most recent review of reading comprehension interventions in a social studies context to date, Swanson et al. (2014) conducted a comprehensive literature search and synthesis of reading interventions

implemented in social studies for students with LD. The researchers found reading interventions using social studies content significantly and positively improved the content and comprehension outcomes among the K-12 students with LD (i.e., overall mean effect size of 1.02). Interventions using mnemonics, graphic organizers, read-and-answer questions, guided notes, and multicomponent instruction were all found to have high overall effect sizes. While Swanson et al. concluded reading comprehension interventions were effective for supporting students with LD in social studies, the researchers did not determine if any interventions were an evidence-based practice (EBP).

Current Study

Understanding EBPs to support students with LD in content-area learning is essential (Wexler et al., 2023). EBPs help bridge the gap between research and practice and support educators in providing high-quality instruction to students with LD in social studies (Wu et al., 2022). This is important given the aforementioned challenges in social studies for students with LD (e.g., less access, challenging textbooks; Berkeley et al., 2016; Schmitt et al., 2022). In this study, the researchers updated and expanded the Swanson et al. (2014) research synthesis on reading interventions in social studies classrooms for students with LD. Specifically, the researchers updated the current understanding of the state of literature through December 2024, while focusing just on secondary students and conducting an EBP analysis. The researchers sought to answer the following research questions: (a) what is the state of the literature on reading comprehension interventions for secondary students with LD published between 2011 and 2024? (b) what is the quality of the research published over that period regarding reading comprehension interventions in social studies with secondary students with LD, and (c) do any evidence-based practices exist regarding reading comprehension interventions for secondary students with LD in social studies?

Method

Researchers evaluated the peer-reviewed published literature between 2011 and 2024 regarding reading interventions provided to secondary students with LD in social studies content instruction or classes. With this evidence-based systematic review, the researchers both expanded and narrowed the last review completed by Swanson et al. (2014) by updating the years covered as well as conducting an evidence-based analysis of the existing literature during this time period. The review by Swanson et al. (2014) more broadly focused on studies involving reading interventions given in social studies content in K-12 classrooms to students with LD only through 2010. For this review, researchers focused on secondary students with LD, given this group is failing to make progress on national measures of social studies, such as U.S. history, as are secondary students in general (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Adapted from Swanson et al. (2014), the researchers used the following inclusion criteria: (a) students with LD and the researchers disaggregated for students with disabilities (e.g., one case of a single case or results for LD within a group were separately mentioned), based on an eligibility identification as reported in the study; (b) participants were enrolled in sixth through twelfth grade; (c) studies employed treatment-comparison, multiple-treatment, and single-case designs; (d) interventions occurred using social studies text or content; (e) interventions occurred during typical school programming; (f) at least one outcome measure assessed social studies content learning or reading comprehension; (g) the study occurred in the United States; (h) the article was published in a peer-reviewed journal before January 2025 and after December 2010; and (i) the article was written in English. Articles were excluded if (a) not a research study, (b) data for students with LD were not disaggregated, (c) social studies text was used during the

intervention, but a content outcome or reading comprehension was not assessed, and (d) a single group design was employed (e.g., pretest-posttest design with one class).

Literature Search and Study Selection

The researchers employed comprehensive article retrieval and selection methods. Initially, they conducted a keyword search across four databases: ProQuest, Sage, EBSCO, and PsycINFO. The search query incorporated the following combinations of terms: "reading comprehension" + "secondary" + "learning disab*" + "social studies," "reading comprehension" + "secondary" + "learning disab*" + "history*," " reading comprehension" + "secondary" + "struggling reader" + "social studies," and " reading comprehension" + "secondary" + "struggling reader" + "history*." The researchers extended their search to specific journals, searching the identical term combinations in the following journals: *Exceptional Children, Journal of Special Education, Remedial and Special Education, Journal of Learning Disabilities, Learning Disability Quarterly, Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, Journal of Special Education Technology,* and *Journal of Social Studies Research.* Researchers selected these specific journals as they publish research involving students with LD and social studies.

The researcher used Covidence, a software program developed for systematic reviews, to facilitate the screening process. Articles identified through keyword searches in databases or journals underwent an initial screening of the abstract to apply the first-level exclusion criteria (see Figure 1 for PRISMA). During this phase, the researchers excluded articles not aligned with the inclusion criteria, including review articles, commentary, conceptual articles, annotated bibliographies, and practitioner articles. They also removed articles lacking an intervention (e.g., qualitative studies) and duplicates of previously screened articles, as these would not provide data on social studies interventions. Researchers also excluded articles not written in English or

conducted outside the United States. Articles passing this initial screening were subject to a full review, during which researchers evaluated the entire article and excluded those that did not report an intervention, were not conducted with secondary students, did not include outcomes related to social studies or reading comprehension, or did not involve students with LD.

Once all articles were screened for exclusionary criteria and those meeting the inclusion criteria were retained, the researchers conducted an ancestral search by scrutinizing the reference lists of all included articles to identify any additional relevant articles. They also conducted a forward citation search to find all the articles that cite back to the original article. Articles identified through the ancestral and forward citation searches underwent similar processes, including initial and full screenings (refer to Figure 1).

Quality Indicators and Standards

For the evidence-based systematic review, the researcher chose to use the quality indicators and standards proposed by Cook et al. (2014) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2014) (refer to Table 1). The researchers selected these due to their ability to evaluate both single-case and group comparison designs. Cook et al.'s quality indicators included 28 indicators—specifically, 24 applicable to group designs and 22 to single-case designs. The 28 quality indicators were organized into eight distinct categories to facilitate comprehensive evaluation. Firstly, the category of Context and Setting included one indicator, focusing on the critical features of the study's environment relevant to the review. Secondly, Participants encompassed two indicators, detailing participant demographics pertinent to the review. Thirdly, Intervention Agent included two indicators, describing the role of the intervention agent and relevant background variables. Description of Practice consisted of two indicators, emphasizing detailed intervention procedures and actions of intervention agents or accessible sources for such

information. The category of Implementation Fidelity comprised of three indicators, evaluating and reporting implementation fidelity concerning adherence using direct, reliable measures. Internal Validity contained nine indicators, assessing the researcher's control and systematic manipulation of the independent variable. Outcome Measures or Dependent Variables encompassed six indicators, focusing on the social validity. Finally, Data Analysis included three indicators, such as presenting graphs illustrating outcome data across all study phases for each unit of analysis. For a complete list of quality indicators, refer to Cook et al., 2014.

Quality Indicators and EBP Analysis

Using a Google form, the researchers assessed each included article based on the 22 or 24 quality indicators outlined by Cook et al. (2014). This form allowed researchers to indicate each quality indicator's presence, absence, or inapplicability. The not applicable option was used for indicators relevant only to single case or group designs when the evaluated article belonged to the other category. Articles were not mandated to report all visual analysis results or techniques (i.e., QI 8.2) if a graph was provided. In cases where articles did not report or calculate standard visual analysis results, the researchers performed the calculations using the provided graphs.

After evaluating each included study using the appropriate quality indicators (Cook et al., 2014), the researchers assessed their methodological soundness to determine which articles met all quality indicators. Articles that did not meet the required indicators for their study design were categorized as not methodologically sound. To determine if an intervention was then evidence-based, researchers examined only the methodically sound articles. Within that group, researchers categorized the articles by intervention type and considered the effects (positive, negative, or neutral/mixed). Cook et al. (2014) defined a positive effect for group designs as an effect size greater than or equal to 0.40, adverse effects were less than or equal to -0.40, and

neutral/mixed effects fell between -0.4 and 0.4. To qualify as an EBP in a group comparison design, it required either two methodologically sound studies with random assignment, demonstrating positive effects, and a total of at least 60 participants across both studies, or four methodologically sound studies with non-random assignment to groups, showing positive effects, and a total of at least 120 participants across all studies (Cook et al., 2014). For single case studies, a positive effect was established by demonstrating a functional relation between the independent and dependent variables, with at least three cases and three-fourths of all cases showing meaningful change without adverse effects (i.e., negative relation between variables), and a minimum of three participants (Cook et al., 2014).

Article Evaluation of Key Elements

Beyond the quality indicators, the authors coded all included, methodologically sound articles for information regarding the study: participants, setting (e.g., general education classroom, special education setting), study design (e.g., single case, group design), interventionist (e.g., researcher, teacher), social studies content (e.g., US history, economics), type of intervention, the dependent variable (e.g., reading comprehension, content acquisition), the effect size, and if there was a positive, negative, or neutral effect to determine the current state of the research on reading comprehension interventions for students with LD in secondary social studies classrooms (see Table 2). Within the study design, researchers considered rigor and reliability, including factors such as sample size, randomization, control groups, and blinding. Within the participants, researchers examined demographics and any relevant inclusion/exclusion criteria, which contextualized the study's applicability and generalizability.

Interrater Reliability

Two members of the research team evaluated at least 30% of the articles using the quality

indicators developed by Cook et al. (2014). The first author, an advanced doctoral student specializing in reading comprehension and students with disabilities, conducted the evaluation alongside a mid-program doctoral student with research experience on secondary students with disabilities. The first author trained the second coder using unrelated articles until they reached 95% interrater reliability (IRR). Training included modeling an article, guided practice with feedback with a second article, and independent coding, where the second coder achieved 100% reliability. Both coders adhered strictly to the literal interpretation of the quality indicators. For instance, for quality indicators 6.8 and 6.9 which outlined standards for attrition, studies without reported attrition were excluded. The IRR was calculated by dividing agreements by the total agreements and disagreements across all review phases. During the initial phase, 42.9% of identified articles were assessed, resulting in an IRR of 90.3%. In the full-text screening phase, 38.8% of articles underwent evaluation, achieving an IRR of 95%. For the ancestral and forward search phase, 35.9% of articles were assessed, producing an IRR of 94%. In the final phase, 37.9% of articles were evaluated with an IRR of 100%. Additionally, 37.5% of included studies were assessed for methodological rigor based on the Cook et al. (2014) quality indicators, achieving an IRR of 95.6%. Researchers discussed and resolved disagreements.

Results

Current State of the Literature

After inputting the search terms into databases and handsearching selected journals, 975 articles met the initial search criteria, as outlined by the PRISMA table in Figure 1. Covidence removed 277 articles because they were duplicates, yielding 748 articles. After completing an initial screening, 645 articles were removed because they were not written in English, conducted in the United States, did not include an intervention, or did not include a population with

disabilities. Of the 103 articles put to a full review, 93 were removed because they did not include students with LD, did not occur in the secondary setting, did not occur in a social studies classroom or use a social studies text, or did not measure reading comprehension and/or content acquisition. Ten articles from the journal and database searches met the criteria to be included to be reviewed as supporting EBPs.

A forward and an ancestral search of the 10 included articles generated another 139 articles published between 2011 and 2024 and related to social studies content acquisition and/or reading comprehension. During the initial and secondary screening protocols, 125 were removed because they did not occur in the United States, include an intervention, focus on secondary students with LD, measure for reading comprehension and/or social studies content acquisition, or were not conducted in a social studies class or with a social studies text. The remaining 14 articles were included and moved to the EBP screening.

Methodologically Sound Studies

Across the different searches, 24 articles were screened using the Cook et al. (2014) quality indicators. Of these 24, 20 included all relevant quality indicators and were deemed methodologically sound (see Table 1). The 20 articles with methodologically sound studies included 12 randomized controlled trials, four quasi-experimental designs, three cluster randomized trials, and one design-based research study. Eighteen studies focused exclusively on middle school students, while two examined both middle and high school students. Seventeen studies used general or special education teachers as interventionists, while three studies involved researchers, trained interventionists, or postdoctoral scholars implementing the interventions. In all studies, interventionists received formal training. Fifteen studies centered on U.S. History topics, such as the American Revolution, Colonial America, and the Civil War.

Three studies used general grade-level social studies content without specifying the topics. Claravall & Irey (2022) explored medieval history topics (e.g., the Crusades and the Islamic Empire), while Bulgren et al. (2011) focused on chemical and biological weapons.

Of the 20 studies, 17 examined multiple dependent variables. Reading comprehension was the most common outcome measure, included in 16 studies. Content knowledge was assessed in 11 studies, and vocabulary acquisition in five. Other reading measures, such as decoding, appeared in four of the 20 studies. All 20 studies involved an intervention package rather than a standalone intervention. The Promoting Acceleration of the Comprehension of Content Through Text (PACT) program was implemented in seven studies. Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) and Building Reading Interventions Designed for General Education Subjects (BRIDGES) were each used in three studies. Other interventions were each examined in a single study. In six studies, researchers reported positive effect sizes for reading comprehension, content knowledge, or vocabulary acquisition, while in 14 studies, researchers found mixed effects. No studies reported negative effects.

Studies Not Found to Be Methodologically Sound

Four of the 24 group design studies were considered not methodologically sound as they failed to meet all quality indicators (QI; Cook et al., 2014; refer to Table 2). Three out of the four studies did not meet QI 6.8 or QI 6.9, which referred to attrition (e.g., low attrition rates across groups and differential attrition). These studies did not report attrition rates. Additionally, one of three (i.e., Wissinger et al., 2019) studies did not meet QI 6.1, QI 6.2, QI 6.3, and Q1 6.4, which refer to internal validity (e.g., the researcher controls and systematically manipulates the independent variable, the study describes control/comparison conditions, control/comparison condition participants have limited access to the treatment intervention, and the study clearly

describes assignment to groups; Cook et al., 2014). Lastly, one study (i.e., Boardman et al., 2015) did not meet QI 7.4 and QI 7.5, which refer to the frequency and timing of outcome measures and adequate interrater reliability (IRR), as it did not report IRR.

Evidence-Based Practices

From the 20 methodologically sound studies, only one intervention—the Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)—met the evidence-based practice criteria for group designs as outlined by Cook et al. (2014). CSR is a structured instructional approach that combines cooperative learning and explicit comprehension strategy instruction to improve students' understanding of content-area texts (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). It includes strategies such as previewing, clicking and clunking (e.g., clarifying confusing words or concepts), getting the gist (e.g., summarizing), and wrapping up (e.g., reviewing key points). Two methodologically sound studies (Boardman et al., 2016; 2018) provided evidence supporting CSR's effectiveness, involving a total of 737 participants. Both used randomized controlled trials and reported positive effects on reading comprehension and content acquisition among middle and high school students with LD.

Discussion

Social studies plays a critical role in developing students' literacy, civic competence, and historical thinking (Adler et al., 2013). However, limited research exists on how to support secondary students with LD in navigating its complex reading and reasoning demands (Nokes, 2022). In this evidence-based systematic review researchers analyzed research from 2011 to 2024 to identify evidence-based reading comprehension interventions for secondary students with LD in social studies. Of the 24 articles that met the inclusion criteria, 20 were deemed methodologically sound (Cook et al., 2014). The main results of the evidence-based systematic review were (a) limited diversity in research focused on reading comprehension for secondary

students with LD in the social studies classroom, (b) all 20 of the methodologically sound studies employed an intervention package rather than a standalone intervention, and (c) only one intervention—CSR—met the criteria for evidence-based practice.

Lack of Diversity in Research

From 2011 to 2024, 24 articles met the inclusion criteria for this review, reinforcing the limited scope of research on secondary social studies instruction for students with disabilities. This number exceeds Swanson et al. (2014), which identified 24 articles encompassing 27 studies on K–12 students with LD in social studies from 1982 to 2010, of which only 12 focused on secondary settings. However, the articles in the present evidence-based systematic review overwhelmingly concentrated on U.S. history, with minimal representation of other social studies disciplines (e.g., geography, economics, civics). In contrast, prior reviews of Swanson et al., Ciullo et al. (2020), and Curtis & Green (2021) documented a broader distribution of content.

Additionally, this review found most studies were conducted in middle school settings, whereas high school contexts remained underrepresented. This differs from prior reviews, which, while still identifying a middle school emphasis, included a comparatively higher proportion of high school studies (Ciullo et al., 2020; Curtis & Green, 2021; Swanson et al., 2014). The diversity of student populations in the present review was minimal, with few studies addressing the needs of English learners or students from rural and underserved areas, which were also noted in the reviews by Ciullo et al. (2020), Curtis & Green (2021), and Swanson et al. (2014). The continued lack of diversity across studies underscores the need for more comprehensive research that captures the full range of learners with LD in secondary social studies settings.

Multicomponent Intervention Packages

Researchers of previous reviews and meta-analyses consistently found social studies

interventions for students with LD primarily address literacy and/or content acquisition, with fewer studies addressing other areas (e.g., critical thinking or historical reasoning) as well as research focused on multicomponent intervention packages, rather than standalone strategies (Ciullo et al., 2020; Curtis & Green, 2021; Swanson et al., 2014). Ciullo et al. (2020) found effective interventions integrated literacy instruction, historical reasoning, and alternative texts, while Curtis & Green (2021) determined approaches such as PACT, CSR, and graphic organizers paired with explicit instruction were particularly effective in improving comprehension and disciplinary content learning.

The findings of this evidence-based systematic review highlight the predominant use of integrated literacy and content supports in secondary social studies instruction for students with LD. All 20 methodologically sound studies in this review implemented structured, strategy-based intervention packages rather than isolated strategies to support both literacy and content outcomes. This reflects a consistent pattern in the field, where multicomponent interventions—such as those incorporating collaborative learning, explicit instruction, and vocabulary development—are the primary approach for supporting both literacy and content acquisition (Ciullo & Garwood, 2024; Wissinger & De La Paz, 2024). The prevalence of multicomponent interventions suggests supporting students with LD in social studies requires a combination of instructional elements rather than a single, isolated strategy. These interventions frequently target general reading comprehension, and some also include components related to disciplinary literacy and improving content acquisition. This trend—favoring multicomponent interventions over isolated strategies—aligns with findings in other content areas, such as science, where multicomponent interventions like CSR have been implemented to improve students' comprehension of discipline-specific texts (McCown & Thomason, 2014).

Evidence-Based Practice for Students with LD

From the 20 methodologically sound studies, only one intervention—CSR—met all the EBP criteria of Cook et al. (2014). The CSR is a multicomponent intervention package involving explicit instruction of strategies in the form of previewing the text, identifying and clarifying unfamiliar concepts (i.e., click and clunk), summarizing the main ideas (i.e., getting the gist), and wrapping up. Three studies examined the effects of CSR in secondary social studies classrooms, involving a total of 1,811 students. Two studies (Boardman et al., 2016; 2018) found strong positive effects on reading comprehension, with effect sizes of 1.02 and 0.72, indicating a substantial impact. The third study (Boardman et al., 2015) reported more modest effects (0.18), suggesting while CSR can be highly effective, its impact may depend on contextual factors such as the level of teacher support, the instructional setting, student characteristics, or fidelity of implementation. The variation in effect sizes across these studies highlights the need for further investigation into how specific implementation conditions influence CSR's effectiveness in diverse social studies classrooms, including conceptual replications (Coyne et al., 2016).

The strong positive effects observed in two studies suggest CSR can enhance reading comprehension in secondary social studies when implemented effectively (Boardman et al., 2016; 2018). Additionally, CSR's multicomponent intervention includes a cooperative learning approach and explicit instruction of strategies, which align with best practices in content-area instruction (Nokes, 2022; Vaughn et al., 2013). Researchers have found CSR is effective not only in social studies classes but also English Language Arts (ELA; Vaughn et al., 2011). Vaughn et al. (2011) examined the efficacy of CSR in improving reading comprehension among seventh- and eighth-grade students in ELA classes. CSR significantly improved students' reading comprehension. Vaughn, Roberts, et al. (2013) also studied the same population with

experienced CSR implementers, finding CSR is especially effective in middle school ELA classes when implemented with high fidelity.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this evidence-based systematic review highlight instructional implications for supporting students with LD in secondary social studies classes. First, all methodologically sound studies involved multicomponent intervention packages rather than standalone interventions. This suggests secondary social studies teachers working with students with LD should prioritize structured instructional approaches that integrate multiple strategies, such as explicit vocabulary instruction, collaborative learning, and guided reading comprehension activities. Given standalone strategies were not examined in isolation, implementing comprehensive, strategy-based interventions may provide the most effective means of supporting both reading comprehension and content acquisition for secondary students with LD in social studies. Second, teachers should consider implementing CSR to improve students' engagement with complex social studies texts, given it was the only EBP. Given CSR emphasizes collaborative learning and explicit comprehension instruction, its implementation may help address both literacy and disciplinary content needs for students with LD.

Limitations and Future Directions

This evidence-based systematic review has limitations. One key limitation of this review concerns the search methodology. While the initial database and journal searches identified many studies, the forward and ancestral searches ultimately yielded more relevant articles. This suggests the initial search terms may not have fully captured all applicable studies. Future researchers should refine search terms through an iterative process that includes piloting various keyword combinations, analyzing preliminary search results, and adjusting terms based on

retrieved studies to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. Further, expanding the number of databases, including grey literature sources, and incorporating more social studies specific journals may have identified additional studies. This review focused on U.S. studies for consistency, which may limit generalizability. Its focus on secondary education, rather than K–12, may have excluded relevant studies, and a broader grade-level scope could enhance understanding of social studies instruction.

Building on these findings, future researchers should address key gaps in the literature. Some interventions, such as PACT and BRIDGES, showed mixed results, warranting further refinement and evaluation. Most studies examined full intervention packages, making it difficult to isolate the effects of specific instructional components. Future studies should analyze the impact of elements like vocabulary instruction or historical reasoning within multicomponent frameworks. Additionally, the predominance of U.S. history in reviewed studies highlights the need for research on geography, civics, and economics. Limited research in high school settings further suggests the importance of adapting strategies for older students as content complexity increases. Addressing these gaps will strengthen instructional approaches and broaden their effectiveness in social studies education.

Figure 1.

PRISMA Diagram for Evidence-Based Practice Systematic Review

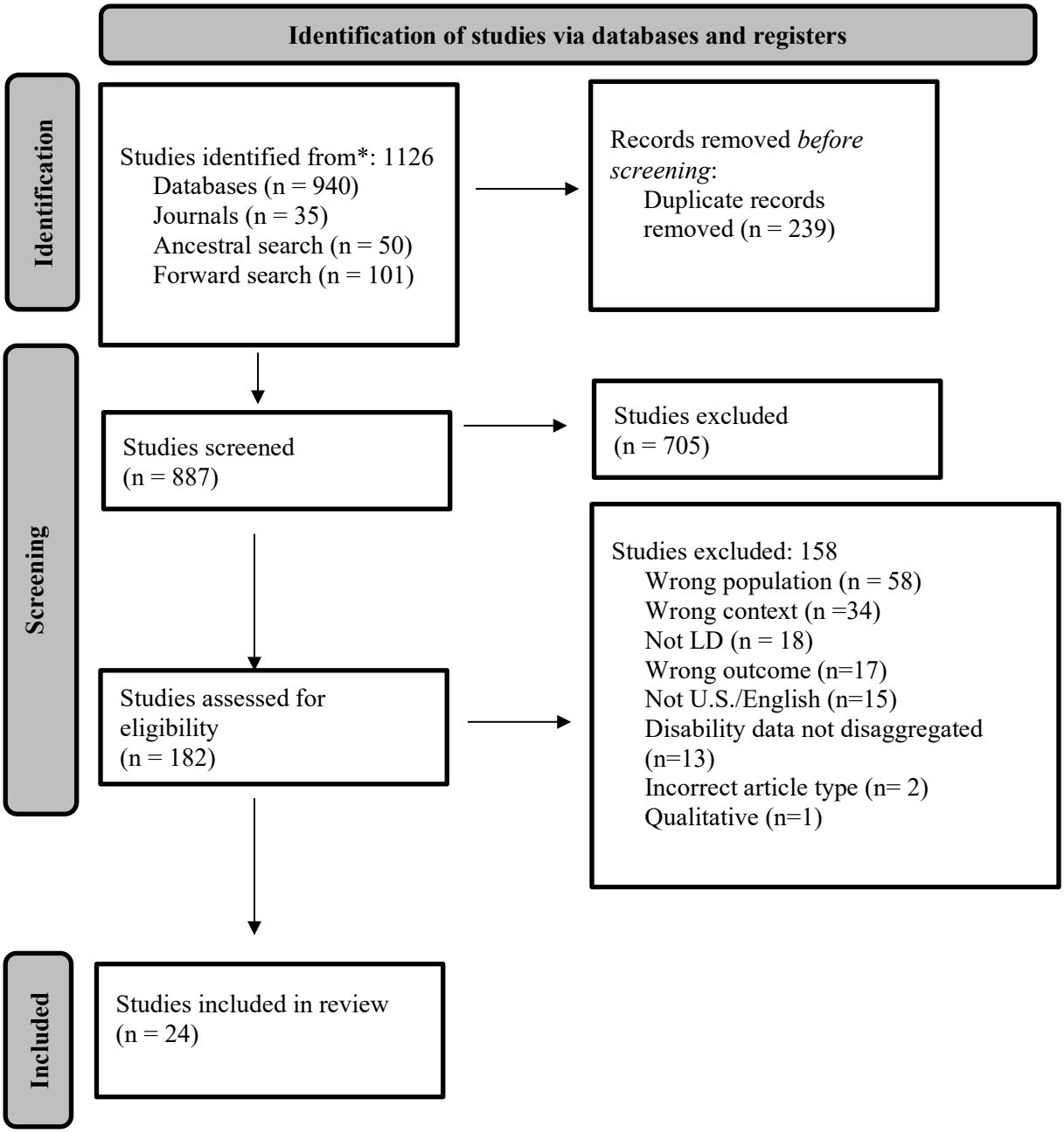

Table 1.

Application of Cook et al., (2014) Quality Indicators on Included Articles

Study	1.1	2.1	2.2	3.1	3.2	3.3	4.1	4.2	5.1	5.2	5.3	6.1	6.2	6.3	6.4	6.8	6.9	7.1	7.2	7.3	7.4	7.5	7.6	8.1	8.3
Boardman et al. (2015)	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Boardman et al. (2016)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Boardman et al. (2018)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Boardman, Klinger et al. (2015)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Bulgren et al. (2011)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Capin et al. (2022)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Claravall & Irey (2022)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
De La Paz & Wissinger (2017)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
O'Connor et al. (2015)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
O'Connor et al. (2017)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
O'Connor, Sanchez et al. (2017)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Table 1. (cont'd)

Swanson et al. (2015)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Swanson et al. (2017)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Vaughn et al. (2012)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Vaughn et al. (2013)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Vaughn et al. (2019)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Vaughn, Martinez et al. (2019)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Vaughn, Roberts et al. (2015)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wanzek et al. (2011)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wanzek et al. (2015)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Williams & Vaughn (2020)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wissinger & De La Paz (2016)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wissinger et al. (2019)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wissinger et al. (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

.

Table 2.

Evidence-Based Classification Support for Reading Comprehension Interventions in Social Studies: Studies with Sound Methods

Study	Participants	Setting	Study Design	Interventionist	DV	Effect Size(s)	Effect	Social Studies Content	Intervention
Boardman et al. (2016)	553 middle school students, 12% receiving special education services	3 MS in 1 urban school district	Randomized control trial (within-subjects design)	Teacher pairs (social studies and science classes)	RC based on CSR implementation	1.02	Positive	Grade 6, 7, and 8 social studies content (specific content not disclosed)	CSR
Boardman et al. (2018)	184 middle school students, 1% in CSR group and 7% in TYP group receiving special education services	Suburban MS contiguous to a large urban area	Randomized controlled trial, within-teacher design	5 middle school English language arts teachers	RC based on CSR implementation	0.72	Positive	Included social studies-related texts, such as Frederick Douglass and Anne Frank	CSR
Boardman, Klingner et al. (2015)	1074 middle school students, including students with LD	2 MS in a large urban district	Cluster randomized trial	9 social studies and 10 science teachers	RC	0.18	Mixed	Grade 6, 7, and 8 social studies content (specific content not disclosed)	CSR
Bulgren et al. (2011)	58 middle and high school students with LD	9 middle and high schools across different districts	Experimental study with control group	General education and special education teachers	Student performance on tests that assess knowledge and comprehension of facts, main idea, and relationships.	Total test scores: 1.16 - 1.42 Matching items: 0.68 - 1.15 Multiple-choice items: 0.97 - 1.26 Main idea: 0.46 - 1.63	Positive	High school social studies content focused on chemical and biological weapons.	Question Exploration Routine
Capin et al. (2022)	198 eighth-grade students, 41% LD	5 middle schools in a large urban district	Randomized controlled trial	Teachers implementing researcher-designed lessons	RC and CK	RC: 0.01 - 0.10 CK: -0.19 - 0.14	Mixed	U.S. history, focusing on the American Revolution	PACT
Claravall & Irey (2022)	13 middle school students with LD in a self-contained classroom	A self-contained social studies classroom	Design-based research	Classroom teacher	Main Idea, RC, and Writing	Main idea: 2.81 RC: .76 Writing: 0.51 - 0.90	Positive	Medieval history content, including the Crusades, the Islamic Empire, and the bubonic plague	Historical reasoning strategy using inquiry-based learning and DBI

Table 2. (cont'd)

De La Paz & Wissinger (2017)	39 sixth- and seventh-grade students, some with or at risk for LD	6 heterogeneous social studies classrooms	Quasi-experimental, comparison group	General education teachers and researchers	CK, persuasive writing quality, and historical writing	CK: 0.23 Persuasive writing quality: 0.43 Historical writing: 0.40	Mixed	U.S. history—founding of America and primary source analysis	Historical Writing Instruction and Document-Based Inquiry
O'Connor et al. (2015)	34 eighth-grade students, 14 with LD	1 middle school, general and special education settings	Quasi-experimental design	Postdoctoral scholars in reading	Decoding, vocabulary, comprehension of cause-and-effect, reading fluency, RC	Decoding: 0.79 Vocabulary: 0.76-0.79 Cause-and-effect: 0.27 Reading fluency: 0.115-.030 CK: 1.58	Mixed	U.S. history — American Revolution and Civil War	BRIDGES
O'Connor et al. (2017)	34 eighth-grade students, including students with LD	1 middle school, general and special education classes	Quasi-experimental	Postdoctoral scholars in reading	Main idea, compare and contrast, cause-and-effect, RC	Main idea: 0.52 Compare and contrast: 0.79 Cause-and-effect: 0.16 RC: 0.08	Mixed	U.S. history—Revolutionary War	BRIDGES
O'Connor, Sanchez et al. (2017)	73 eighth-grade students with disabilities (77% with LD, 45% ELL)	4 middle schools, special education U.S. history classes	Quasi-experimental design	Special education teachers	Decoding, expressive vocabulary, receptive vocabulary, RC-main idea, RC-compare/contrast, RC- cause and effect, CK	Decoding: 0.8 Expressive vocabulary: 0.98-1.33 Receptive vocabulary: 0.91-1.74 RC main idea: 0.56-0.63 RC compare and contrast: 0.76-0.92 RC cause and effect: 0.57-0.58 CK: 0.47-1.03	Positive	U.S. history —U.S. government, leaders of the New Republic, and manifest destiny	BRIDGES

Table 2. (cont'd)

Swanson et al. (2015)	130 middle school students, including students with disabilities	General education social studies classrooms	Randomized controlled trial	General education teachers	CK, Content RC, and General RC	CK: 0.26 Content RC: 0.34 RC: 0.09	Mixed	U.S. history and primary source documents	PACT
Swanson et al. (2017)	160 middle school students with and without disabilities	8 MS	Cluster randomized trial	General education social studies teachers	CK, Content RC, Vocabulary, and General RC	CK: 0.35 Content RC: 0.59 Vocabulary: 0.65 General RC: 0.10	Mixed	U.S. history and government	PACT
Vaughn et al. (2012)	553 middle school students; 12.1% LD	3 MS	Longitudinal randomized trial	Research team interventionists (master's-level teachers)	RC, Word identification, phonemic decoding, fluency	RC: 1.20 Word Identification: 0.49 Phonemic Decoding: 0.52 Fluency: -0.22	Positive	Texts related to social studies topics, including U.S. history and current events	Intensive small-group reading intervention
Vaughn et al. (2013)	419 eighth-grade students	7 middle schools	Randomized controlled trial	8th-grade U.S. history teachers	CK, Content RC, and Standardized RC	CK: 0.17 Content RC: 0.29 Standardized RC: 0.20	Mixed	U.S. history--Colonial America and the American Revolution	PACT
Vaughn et al. (2019)	1629 eighth grade students; 20.8% LD.	94 U.S. history classrooms across 7 schools	Randomized controlled trial	U.S. history teachers	CK, Content RC, and General RC	CK: 0.40 Content RC: 0.17 General RC: -0.05	Mixed	U.S. history--Colonial America and the American Revolution	PACT
Vaughn, Martinez et al. (2019)	358 eighth-grade to 10th grade students, 12.3% LD	Three high schools	Within-teacher randomized block design	U.S. history teachers	Sentence fluency and comprehension, Vocabulary, Word reading, and RC	Sentence fluency and comprehension: 0.18 Vocabulary: 0.41 Word Reading: -0.02 RC: -0.09	Mixed	U.S. history--Colonial America and the American Revolution	PACT

Table 2. (cont'd)

Vaughn, Roberts et al. (2015)	1487 eight-grade students, 15.8% LD	85 U.S. history classes 7 MS	Randomized controlled trial	Teachers	CK, Content RC, and General RC	CK: 0.32 Content RC: 0.02 General RC: 0.01	Mixed	U.S. history-- Colonial America, Road to Revolution, Revolutionary War	PACT
Wanzek et al. (2011)	58 students (grades 6-8, LD)	2 MS	Randomized controlled trial	Teachers	Word reading fluency, phonemic decoding fluency, word reading accuracy, word decoding accuracy, and RC	Word reading fluency: 0.054 Phonemic decoding: 0.018 Word reading: negligible Word decoding: negligible RC: 0.017	Mixed	U.S. history-- early U.S. history	Supplemental reading intervention involving daily instruction, small group setting, and multiple reading components
Wanzek et al. (2015)	178 middle school students with reading disabilities	8 MS	Randomized controlled trial	Teachers	CK, multiple-choice CK	CK: 0.16-0.31 Multiple choice CK: 0.07	Mixed	U.S. history content—Colonial America, Road to Revolution, Revolutionary War	Team-based learning
Williams & Vaughn (2020)	85 eighth-grade students; 84% LD	9 MS	Randomized controlled trial	U.S. history teachers	CK and Content RC	CK: 0.32 Content RC: 0.02	Mixed	U.S. history content—Revolutionary War	Reading Intervention for Adolescence

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CHAPTER 3

PRE-SERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING AND PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL STUDIES FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with learning disabilities (LD) represent the largest group receiving special education services (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024). Students with LD often exhibit challenges in understanding or using language, performing mathematical calculations, coordinating movements, directing attention, and comprehending texts (Grigorenko et al., 2020). These challenges can significantly impact a student's academic performance and social interaction, making training and preparation crucial for teachers to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to address the unique needs of students with LD (Perry et al., 2020). Pre-service preparation to support students with LD is important for special education *and* general education teacher candidates, given students with LD generally spend significant portions of their school days in inclusive classrooms (e.g., 76% of students with LD were educated in the general education classroom for 80% or more of their school day; NCES, 2024).

Special education law and policies, primarily guided by the IDEA (2004), emphasize the importance of providing students with disabilities, including students with LD, a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE; Yell, 2019). The LRE requires all students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum and to be included in general education classrooms, extracurricular activities, and other aspects of school life unless their disability necessitates a more restrictive setting (Osborne et al., 2021). Given data suggesting an increase in providing students with LD education in inclusive settings

(Williamson et al., 2020) and research supporting the benefits of inclusive education for both students with and without disabilities (Graham, 2020), a growing need exists to equip pre-service special education teachers with the knowledge, skills, and strategies to support students with LD in inclusive settings involving content, such as social studies (Theobald et al., 2021). Within these inclusive social studies settings, special education teachers are often in a support role, either supporting a general education teacher in the classroom with literacy interventions or assisting students with assignments in a resource room (Lisanti et al., 2024). Given their supportive role in content instruction, it is crucial special education teachers receive targeted preparation to effectively engage with content and scaffold learning for students with LD.

Teacher Preparation for Pre-Service Special Education Teachers

Effective teacher preparation is essential for equipping pre-service special education teachers with the necessary skills to navigate inclusive classrooms (Leko et al., 2024). Given the increasing demands of content-specific instruction within special education, integrating Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) into teacher preparation programs has become a critical area of focus (Aksin, 2023; Brownell et al., 2020). While special education teachers are traditionally trained in pedagogy and individualized instruction, researchers found they often receive insufficient preparation in subject-specific content, particularly in areas like social studies (Powell, 2017).

Shulman's (1986) concept of PCK underscores the necessity for teachers to develop expertise not only in subject matter but also in how to effectively teach that content to diverse learners. In special education, this is particularly significant, as students with disabilities often require adapted instructional strategies aligned with their learning needs (Grigorenko et al., 2020). Brownell et al. (2020) argued current teacher preparation programs often emphasize

pedagogical skills at the expense of deep content knowledge, leaving special education teachers underprepared for delivering rigorous, content-rich instruction in inclusive classrooms. This concern is especially relevant in social studies education, where teachers must facilitate complex discussions on historical and civic topics (Lightning, 2023). Without adequate PCK, special education teachers may struggle to modify instructional materials in ways that make social studies content accessible and meaningful to students with disabilities (Powell, 2017). Given these challenges, understanding how pre-service special education teachers perceive social studies—including its value, their comfort in teaching it, and their perspectives on instructional and assessment strategies—is critical (Rodriguez, 2021). Their perceptions shape their preparedness and willingness to engage with social studies instruction in inclusive classrooms (Martin et al., 2021).

Preparing Special Education Teachers for Effective Social Studies Instruction

Social studies education provides students with the knowledge and skills needed for informed civic participation (NCSS, 2013). It provides a foundation in history, geography, civics, and economics while fostering critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving—skills particularly valuable for students with disabilities (Garwood et al., 2021; Popp et al., 2021). To support their academic, social, and personal development, students with LD need access to meaningful and appropriately challenging social studies instruction through a balanced approach that integrates specialized and inclusive practices (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Special education teachers play a critical role in supporting students with LD learning social studies as they develop the knowledge and skills necessary for civic participation, including understanding their rights and responsibilities in society (Heafner & Norwood, 2019). In many cases, this support occurs within inclusive general education classrooms rather than through separate, pull-

out instruction (Lisanti et al., 2024). In order to best support their future students on their civic journey, pre-service special education teachers must be properly trained (Brownell et al., 2020). Training in social studies pedagogy ensures special education teachers can adapt and differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of their students, promoting an inclusive learning environment (Bryant et al., 2020). The interdisciplinary nature of social studies often integrates skills from other subject areas, such as reading, writing, and math, enhancing the overall educational experience for students with disabilities and making learning more relevant and engaging (Shifflet & Hunt, 2019). Finally, providing special education teachers with training in social studies pedagogy ensures all students have equal access to quality education and the opportunity to achieve academic success (Worster & Rohde, 2020).

Pre-service special education teachers have historically received insufficient preparation in the area of social studies (Reisman & Fogo, 2016; Rodriguez, 2021). Rodriguez (2021) surveyed 179 pre-service special education teachers to understand their perceptions and practices of teaching social studies in inclusive settings. They found pre-service special education teachers lacked a clear definition of social studies and effective instructional practices, leading to a lack of confidence in teaching the subject in general education settings. Rodriguez's research highlighted the need for pre-service special educators to take a social studies methods course to enhance their teaching abilities. Most respondents expressed discomfort or only moderate comfort in teaching a social studies lesson to students with disabilities due to insufficient theoretical and practical training in social studies methodology (Rodriguez, 2021).

Current Study

Rodriguez (2021) surveyed pre-service special education teachers regarding the perceptions and practices of teaching social studies in inclusive settings. This study provides a

distal conceptual replication of Rodriguez (2021) work by adding a qualitative element (i.e., focus groups) and focusing on a specific endorsement of LD (Cook et al., 2024; Coyne et al., 2016) This study addressed the following questions: (a) To what extent do preservice special education teacher candidates seeking an endorsement in LD perceive social studies as important to their students in the inclusive social studies setting? (b) To what extent are preservice special education teacher candidates seeking an LD endorsement comfortable teaching social studies in the inclusive setting? (c) What do preservice special education teacher candidates seeking an LD endorsement identify as the most effective instructional strategies for teaching social studies to students with LD in the inclusive setting? (d) What do preservice special education teacher candidates seeking an LD endorsement identify as the best way to assess social studies in an inclusive classroom?

Method

Research Design

The current study presented a distal conceptual replication of Rodriguez (2021) in that the same survey questions were used in terms of teaching social studies (Cook et al., 2024; Coyne et al., 2016) The researchers added focus groups to triangulate survey findings with qualitative insights into participants' experiences and instructional perspectives (Natow, 2019). This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of their beliefs about teaching social studies in inclusive settings. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design (Creswell, 2021), in which quantitative data were collected first, followed by qualitative data to further explore and clarify the initial findings. This approach was chosen to better understand pre-service special education teachers' knowledge of social studies instructional methods and assessments, their perspectives on the role of social studies in special

education, and their comfort level in teaching the subject. The first phase involved administering a structured survey to pre-service special education students, seeking a broad overview of their perceptions and instructional practices. In the second phase, qualitative data were collected through focus groups to gain deeper insight into the survey results.

Participant Recruitment and Participant Demographics

This study involved two groups of participants: survey participants and focus group participants, with some overlap between the two groups. Survey participants were pre-service special education teachers from five selected universities within the same Midwestern state and focus group participants included a mixture of survey participants and additional recruits from one focal institution. The focal institution was selected because it had the highest survey response rate, ensuring focus group participants had received similar training and coursework. Additionally, the researcher was completing their doctorate at the institution, making it a sample of convenience. The five universities targeted for the survey distribution were selected because they were located in the same Midwest state; offered an undergraduate teaching endorsement in LD; and had at least five graduates from their program during the 2020-2021 school year, according to the most recent data available (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). This state credentialed special education teachers based on disability category (e.g., learning disability; intellectual disability), as opposed to a cross-categorical license.

To participate in the survey, students had to meet the following criteria: (a) be enrolled in an undergraduate special education program, (b) be pursuing an endorsement in LD, and (c) be in their second, third, or fourth year of the program. First-year students were excluded, as they were just beginning their coursework and likely lacked the background knowledge necessary to provide meaningful responses. Students who participated in the three focus groups needed to

meet the same eligibility criteria as the survey participants (i.e., non-first year student pursuing an LD endorsement) as well as attend the focal institution.

Overall, 141 participants provided consent for the survey. Of those, 51 met the inclusion criteria. Fifty-eight responses were removed because they were incomplete, 19 because the participant was not seeking an endorsement in LD, and 13 because the participant was a first year student. Of the 51 included survey respondents, 78.4% identified as women and 21.6% as men. Just over 80% of respondents identified as White, while about 6% identified as Black, 2% identified as Asian, 10% as multi-racial, and 2% as other. In terms of school year, 35.3% of respondents were in their second year of college, 23.5% were in their third year, and 43.1% were in their fourth year. The majority of participants (e.g., 58.8%) were pursuing a special education endorsement for grades K-12, while 31.4% were working toward an endorsement for preschool through third grade (PK-3). A smaller number of participants were preparing for other grade bands, including 3.9% focused on grades 5-9, 1.9% on birth to preschool (Birth-PK), and 1.9% on grades 7-12. Most participants (e.g., 82.4%) were enrolled in programs directly related to special education, such as early childhood special education or dual certification programs in elementary and special education. An additional 11.8% of participants had education-related majors, including elementary education, general education, and teacher education. Lastly, 5.8% reported majors not directly related to education (e.g., mathematics).

Of the 51 valid survey responses, 19 participants indicated interest in participating in a follow-up focus group. Among them, 11 were enrolled at the focal institution. The researcher successfully arranged focus groups with three of these 11 pre-service teachers; eight failed to respond to email requests. To ensure data saturation, additional participants from the focal institution were recruited. Faculty members in the special education program at the focal

institution distributed an interest and availability form to their students via email. The university registrar sent the same form to all students enrolled in the LD special education program at the institution. As a result of these outreaches, 21 additional pre-service teachers expressed interest in participating in a focus group, and 15 met the eligibility criteria. Due to scheduling conflicts, illness, and non-responsiveness, eight eligible participants were unable to attend, leaving 10 total participants across three focus groups.

Data Sources and Design

For the survey distribution, the researcher contacted the listed director of the undergraduate special education program at each institution to distribute information regarding the study for voluntary student participation. After receiving the appropriate approval to disseminate the survey, the program director or their designee emailed the survey to undergraduates in the special education program at their respective university. As previously noted, focus groups participants were either selected from survey participants at the targeted focal institutions or those who responded to an instructor or registrar email and met all the inclusion criteria.

Using Qualtrics, the first author created a survey of 22 questions, 13 of which were used in the study by Rodriguez (2021). The current study added a demographic section of the survey, consisting of nine questions to assess participants' eligibility for the study and to collect demographic information (e.g., institutional email address, grade level, university, major, enrollment in a teacher education university, certification area, additional endorsements, gender, and race/ethnicity). The researcher collected email addresses to distribute eGift cards for survey completion and to communicate with participants interested in joining a focus group. The 13 questions from Rodriguez (2021) sought to gather information on preservice special education

teachers' practices and perspectives regarding social studies in inclusive settings. Specifically, the questions asked participants (a) about their comfortability teaching social studies (multiple choice; very comfortable, fairly comfortable, not comfortable at all) and why (open-ended), (b) to rank social studies class subjects in order of importance (e.g., economics, geography, history, political science/government, psychology), (c) to select a reason why students might find social studies boring (multiple choice: instructional strategies used, previous "bad" teacher, irrelevant to their lives; difficult content), (d) rank the importance of general school subjects (i.e., art, foreign language, language arts, mathematics, music, physical education, reading, science, social studies) (e) rank the most effective social studies instructional strategies (i.e., worksheets, teacher lecture, group work, technology, recitation, creative arts, textbook based, discussion based), (f) rank the best modality to teach social studies (i.e., integrated with other content areas, as a standalone subject, combination of both integrated and as a standalone subject), (g) rank the best way to assess social studies (i.e., group projects, worksheets, portfolios, creative projects, formal papers), (h) rank school subjects they think will be their favorite to teach (i.e., language arts, math, reading, science, social studies), (i) to define social studies (open-ended), (h) identify the value social studies holds to prospective students (open-ended), and (i) consider what they can do to become a better social studies teacher (open-ended). At the end of the survey, respondents could complete an optional twenty-third question: would you be interested in participating in a follow-up focus group.

When engaging in the focus group, the researcher introduced themselves and framed the focus group as semi-structured. The participants were told the focus group questions served as guidelines but the format would be a free form discussion that could deviate from the questions. Some participants knew each other from previous coursework and greeted each other. While not

given a specific direction to do so, all participants introduced themselves at the beginning of the focus group. To ensure participants fully understood the purpose of the focus group, the researcher provided both written and oral versions of the questions during in-person meetings. The sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed using a paid transcription service and the lead researcher carefully reviewed transcriptions for accuracy. The focus groups consisted of 13 structured questions, which were reviewed by a tenured faculty member with expertise in focus groups. The questions were developed based on trends identified in the survey data from the participants in the focal institution as focus group participants were from the same focal institution. These questions were designed to explore participants' beliefs about the value of social studies, the instructional strategies they found most effective, and the challenges they faced in teaching social studies to students with LD. Specifically, the questions asked participants to (a) provide their definition of social studies, (b) consider how they would use current events to connect to history, (c) discuss why or why not social studies is important to their students, (d) identify how they would implement discussion-based and creative strategies for teaching social studies to students with LD and past successes with these strategies, (e) share their experiences and potential challenges using worksheets and lectures for teaching social studies to students with LD, (f) discuss their interest and experience using technology in social studies, (g) discuss their interest and experience using group work in the classroom, (h) share experiences and potential challenges for teaching social studies to students with LD, (i) identify and share effective strategies for engaging students with LD, (j) consider and share how classroom strategies can contribute to larger goals for social studies teaching (i.e., exposing diverse perspectives, understanding societal structures, promoting critical thinking), (k) determining resources, training, and support that would best support them in teaching social

studies, and (l) share any additional ideas regarding social studies and/or students with LD.

The 10 focus group participants were spread over three groups. The first group consisted of three participants, all white females, all three of whom were second-year students in their special education teacher education program. The second focus group also included three white female participants. Two of the participants in this group were third-year students, and one was a second-year student. The final focus group consisted of four participants, all white, three who identified as women, and one who identified as a man. Two participants were third years, one was a second year, and one was a fourth year. The focus groups took, on average, 50 min 32 sec, ranging from 43 min 22 sec to 1 hr 2 min 32 sec.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for the survey was dependent on question type. See Table 1 for data sources for each research question. For the demographic questions, frequency was determined for grade level, gender, race, and grade band for certification. This manuscript represents a subset of the larger study, explicitly focusing on pre-service special education teachers' perceptions of social studies instruction. Accordingly, only a portion of the survey questions were analyzed, particularly those related to participants' comfort with teaching social studies, instructional and assessment preferences, and perceived challenges. For the questions regarding comfortability in teaching social studies and answers that required a single response (i.e., nominal data), descriptive statistics were specifically calculated for each response category (i.e., frequencies). For rank order questions (i.e., ordinal data), measures of central tendency (i.e., mean) and frequencies were calculated.

For both the open-ended survey questions and focus group transcripts, researchers conducted thematic analysis using the same codebook to ensure consistency in identifying

patterns across data source. First, the researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times for familiarization. The researcher generated memos at this stage to note initial impressions and potential themes. Next, the themes and impressions were reviewed, and key phrases and sentences were assigned preliminary codes. Axial coding was then used to group similar codes into broader categories or themes to identify relationships between different codes, which generated a codebook. The researcher then applied this codebook to open-ended survey questions. After reviewing the codes against the open-ended survey questions, additional codes were added. Once no new themes emerged (e.g., data saturation was reached), the data were analyzed in respect to each theme. This involved examining recurring patterns in participant responses, interpreting their significance within the study's context, and selecting direct quotations to illustrate and substantiate the findings. The analysis aimed to ensure each theme accurately reflected the perspectives and experiences shared by participants.

Data Saturation

After conducting three focus groups, no new themes emerged, indicating data saturation had been reached. While prior research suggested saturation typically occurs within four to eight focus groups with nine to 17 participants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), the consistency in responses among participants in this study suggested additional focus groups were unlikely to yield substantially new insights. Given these findings, no further focus groups occurred. For open-ended survey items, responses were first reviewed and analyzed using the codebook developed for the focus groups. As new themes emerged, additional codes were created to capture nuances in the data. The process continued until researchers reached data saturation, meaning no new codes were identified, indicating a comprehensive representation of participants' perspectives.

Quality and Validity

To ensure validity of interview analysis and open-ended survey items, the author and a graduate student reviewed the interview transcripts and survey responses. Once the author determined the final codes, the second graduate student and author independently coded the transcripts. The researcher trained the graduate student using the code book created during initial coding. After training with the codes, inter-observer agreement (IOA) was completed for 25% of the interviews and 25% of open-ended survey items. Through the coding process, the researcher and fellow graduate student had agreement for 86% of the focus group and 87.9% of the open-ended surveys items. The graduate students and researcher reviewed the codes and discussed any disagreement in the codes until a consensus was reached.

Results

Perception of Social Studies as Important

All participants expressed the importance and value of social studies for their students, highlighting the need for relevance. When asked to rank general school subjects from best (e.g., 1) to worst (i.e., 9), social studies was not ranked as most important by any participants and was rated least important by 9.4% (see Table 2). Reading was overwhelmingly ranked as the most important school subject (72.5%), while music (31.4%) and foreign language (29.4%) were frequently ranked least important. In the survey, social studies was the least preferred subject special education preservice teachers wanted to teach, with only 7.8% ranking it as their top choice and 37.5% ranking it as their least favorite. Language arts was the most preferred subject to teach (31.3%), followed by science (21.6%), math (19.6%), and reading (19.6%).

A concern among participants in focus groups and survey respondents was making social studies important to students by making it more relevant to students' lives. For example, one

participant believed it was the most critical part of teaching social studies, stating, "I think the biggest thing is making history feel real. If students can connect events to something they know, like a personal experience or a modern issue, they actually care about it and remember it." In addition to relevance, one focus group participant believed current events allowed for flexibility in instruction and incorporating relevant content. They said, "I think that being flexible in my teaching, because social studies is constantly evolving. Obviously there's curriculum goals you need to meet but also trying to work in current events and allow your students to learn about the real life and how that will affect the future and their lives and decisions." Further, another participant expressed connecting historical events to students' lives increased engagement and comprehension. One participant described a lesson on the First Thanksgiving in which they used a role-playing exercise to help students grasp the concept of colonization: "I asked them to imagine coming home one day and finding someone else making decisions about their house. It helped them relate to what was happening in history."

Other participants felt that current events were more relevant because they did not focus solely on something that had already happened. For example, one survey respondent shared, "I think social studies should focus more on current news, and less on something that happened hundreds of years ago." In the focus groups, one participant mentioned bringing in news stories to their students to discuss themes such as government structure and civic responsibility: "We talked about elections and how local governments work because students often don't realize voting happens more than just every four years." Another discussed the role of social media for students today and shared, "I try to connect history to what's happening now, like discussing protests or government decisions that students see on social media. It helps them see that history isn't just in the past—it's shaping the world they live in."

Survey respondents also emphasized the importance of social studies for their students, especially as it related to their personal lives and futures. One survey respondent wrote, “These topics are important for students to be aware of when progressing on in life. It can help students to explain the world around them and the interactions within it.” This was also echoed in focus groups, where one participant stated, “Just understanding what affected them in the past, so then if they do go into a job or something that has to do with that, maybe they can make changes if they want to. I think being informed about your history is important to just understanding just what is happening around you in your environment."

Comfortability with Teaching Social Studies

In the survey, about one-fifth (19.6%) of respondent indicated they were very comfortable teaching social studies, over half (56.9%) indicated they were fairly comfortable teaching social studies, and 23.5% said they were not comfortable (refer to Table 2). The majority of those expressing discomfort (83.3%) stated they lacked preparation in teaching social studies (i.e., social studies method course did not provide enough information) and needed more practice teaching the domain. In focus groups, participants also expressed concern over the lack of training and resources available to teach it effectively, particularly for students with disabilities. For example, one focus group participant shared, “I feel like taking classes for teaching students with learning disabilities social studies, and it's like, a lot of it just applies to general education social studies. That doesn't help me if I'm teaching that to somebody who maybe has a specialized learning disability, and they need this instruction in a certain way.” Others noted their teacher preparation programs emphasized math and literacy interventions but provided minimal guidance on how to teach social studies in inclusive settings. One third-year participant explained, "We had one class on social studies, but it was mostly about general

education. There was barely anything about working with students with disabilities." Another participant said, "I think the biggest one would be having the resources and materials to teach it [social studies] and to do it well. I feel like for math and reading, there are a lot of available resources, there's a lot of support around it, but I think having just in general the tools to use to make sure that you're doing the students a good service for that topic, and not doing too much or too little, and having enough support and resources there."

Another challenge mentioned in all three focus groups was the scarcity of high-quality instructional materials for social studies. Participants noted this issue was compounded by their schools' emphasis on math and reading interventions, which often took priority over social studies instruction, limiting access to both resources and instructional time for the subject. One stated, "I have barely seen social studies taught in my special ed placements—it's just not a priority." Another added, "I honestly have not seen a lot of social studies in my special ed placements. It's basically non-existent. At least I haven't seen it." Another noted available textbooks were often inaccessible or lacked the depth necessary for meaningful engagement, "the textbooks just skim over everything, and they don't really help students understand why events happened. There's no depth, and for students who struggle with reading, it's even worse because the language isn't accessible either." When asked to explain why they felt uncomfortable teaching social studies, one survey respondent perceived fewer available materials for social studies. This person responded, "I would not be comfortable because social studies is a science/art and there is a wide array of topics and it's not easy to find a lesson premade or a video to show."

Some mentioned the recent politicization around social studies as an area of concern. One focus group participant shared, "I also think there's also, they're starting to exclude stuff out of

the history books. Different states too, changing laws. That's crazy to me... you're just hurting the students when you start excluding information like that." Another one shared their concern about the impact of teaching certain topics, adding, "Social studies, especially now, can sometimes even become a hot topic. I feel like there's a lot of things going on with it, and there's definitely ways you can present things in the wrong way, and that will change a student's perception of it for the rest of their lives. That's kind of what they're living with, that's what they love to know."

Effective Instructional Strategies for Teaching Social Studies

In terms of social studies instructional strategies, participants ranked discussion-based activities as the most effective (49%), followed by creative strategies (23.5) and group work (19.6%; refer to Table 2). Worksheets (3.9%), lectures (1.9%), and technology (1.9%) were rated as the least effective social studies instructional strategies. Emphasis on discussion and student participation in social studies classroom was echoed in focus groups as well. One participant shared, "I think a discussion would be great, discussion-based learning, especially if your students are facilitating it, because then they can bounce ideas off each other and then you can kind of check their understanding, as well, and see where they're starting and where they're ending" Another focus group participant shared that working together can also help students work through misconceptions, stating, "It was definitely more them driving the conversation. I definitely think that that helped them a lot, being able to talk to each other and work through ideas that were confusing to them in a whole group, instead of just reading something on a paper and still being confused."

When considering the modality of how social studies should be taught, the majority of survey respondents (e.g., 78.4%) believed a combination of standalone and integrated instruction was the most effective approach for teaching social studies. Teaching social studies exclusively

as a standalone subject was considered least effective by 90.2%. Focus groups echoed a preference for integrating of social studies into multiple academic disciplines. Many viewed social studies as a subject area that can incorporate literacy, civics, and even science within a broader historical and cultural framework. One participant noted, "You can write a letter to a politician about an environmental issue, and then you're covering social studies, science, and English all in one." Another participant described how math could be incorporated into social studies: "When we talk about economics, students can use real-world math skills, like calculating taxes or interest rates, which helps them see the relevance of both subjects." This cross-disciplinary approach aligns with the need for a more integrated curriculum that reflects the interconnectedness of real-world issues.

Participants also highlighted the role of social studies in fostering social-emotional learning (SEL). Specifically, one focus group participant shared, “I think social studies can really reinforce that because the world is so different. And again, different doesn't mean bad. So, I think I would tie a lot of SEL into social studies. I mean, I kind of touched on it earlier, but I mean it's a personal goal of mine to create the best humans I can. And I think that social studies really enables me to do that.” Focus group participants discussed using historical narratives to develop empathy and critical thinking, particularly by drawing parallels between historical events and contemporary social justice movements. One participant reflected, "Teaching about inequalities—whether it’s race, gender, or economics—helps students understand the world around them." Another participant noted how social studies could help students not only develop empathy, but also higher-order thinking skills, "I think social studies helps make students better people because they grow a bigger lens and have a better perspective of others. Hopefully, depending on how you teach it, they can develop more empathy and critical thinking."

Beyond integration in other academic subjects and SEL, focus group participants noted providing multiple modes of representation for content (e.g., videos, pictures, group work) can increase engagement. One focus group participant shared, “Having multiple modes of representation for students is so important in the classroom... Sometimes if you offer videos, if you offer, even if they can just listen to the book instead, or just offering pictures, things like that to kind of still engage in their learning and have activities as well." Another focus group member believed utilizing movement could enhance learning for students with LD. They shared, “100% kinesthetics. It's just 100% movement... I haven't necessarily thought about how to incorporate that into social studies, but in other subjects, I've seen kinesthetics help students a lot.”

Best Ways to Assess Social Studies

Survey responses ranked creative projects as the most preferred assessment method (58.8%), followed by group projects (19.6%). Portfolios (13.7%) and worksheets (7.8%) received lower support (refer to Table 2). Formal papers were rated the least effective by 60.8%. Focus group participants advocated for project-based assessments, discussions, and presentations as more meaningful ways to gauge student understanding. One participant emphasized the importance of providing varied ways for students to demonstrate knowledge, saying, “I think giving them that opportunity to express what they're thinking, and maybe it doesn't have to be written, maybe they can do an art piece to demonstrate what they’re thinking. I think that still gives them an opportunity to participate in the class and to show that they are understanding the content.” Informal assessment methods, such as class discussions, were also identified as valuable tools for evaluating student comprehension. One focus group participant explained, "Having students lead discussions can also be an informal way of assessing their understanding while making it more engaging than just giving them a quiz." Another elaborated on the role of

teacher facilitation in these discussions: "If the students are leading the discussion, then the teacher can kind of do a little teacher moves and weave in, and if they're straying away from the topic, then go back towards it. So I think that's a really effective method." Finally, participants noted non-traditional assessments not only promote understanding but also foster student engagement and strengthen teacher-student relationships. As one participant observed, "If you put a worksheet or just something in front of a student, you don't get to build relationships with them... With discussion-based or with creative strategies, there's so much more opportunity for them to have relationships with their peers and for you to really see what excites them."

Discussion

Despite its role in fostering critical thinking, civic engagement, and interdisciplinary learning (NCSS, 2013), social studies is often overlooked in special education teacher preparation programs (Brownell et al., 2020). As a result, many special education teachers enter the classroom underprepared to effectively support students with LD to meaningfully engage with historical and civic content (Brownell et al., 2020; Rodriguez, 2021). To explore this concern, researchers analyzed survey and focus group data to examine pre-service special education teachers' perceptions of the value of social studies, their comfort in teaching it, and their preferred instructional and assessment approaches when focused on students with LD. Overall, researchers found pre-service special education teachers emphasize relevance and engagement in social studies but their instructional confidence is often rooted in general pedagogical strategies rather than discipline-specific preparation.

Researchers found pre-service special education teachers value engagement and accessibility when teaching social studies to students with LD, often conceptualizing engagement as student participation, interest, and enjoyment. Across both survey and focus group responses,

participants consistently favored collaborative, discussion-based, and creative approaches over textbook-driven methods. Almost half of survey respondents (i.e., 49%) ranked group work effective, following by discussion (23.5%) and creative activities (19.6%). Focus groups participants described effective lessons as "fun," "active," and "connected to real life," with examples including hands-on projects (e.g., building models or simulations), real-world applications (e.g., researching current events or writing to public officials), and structured class discussions. Focus group participants provided support for their instructional approach selections, noting they promote student choice, encourage movement or collaboration, and connect academic content to students' lived experiences. These findings echo Rodriguez (2021), who found pre-service special education teachers viewed group work, creative arts, and discussion as central to engaging students in social studies.

Researchers hypothesize the survey and focus group participants' emphasis on engagement-oriented instruction—group work, class discussions, and creative projects—was influenced by the structure and focus of their preparation programs. All focus group participants and most survey respondents were enrolled in dual-certification elementary and K–12 special education programs. Coursework in elementary education programs often emphasizes student-centered and integrated approaches that prioritize creativity, accessibility, and relevance to students' lives (Haverly & Davis, 2023; Livers et al., 2021). In focus groups, the participants rarely described how the instructional approaches they emphasized (i.e., group work, discussions, creative projects) supported core social studies disciplinary skills, such as analyzing primary sources, facilitating civic discourse, or content-area literacy in social studies (Russell & Waters, 2022).

The researchers also hypothesize participants' reliance on general instructional

approaches within social studies may also be linked to limited exposure to social studies during field placements. Nearly a quarter (23.5%) of survey respondents reported not having a placement where social studies was taught, and only one focus group participant described observing a placement that addressed social studies instruction for students with LD when asked to describe their experience with specific instructional approaches. When participants observed social studies instruction, it was often described as part of interdisciplinary units or embedded within literacy instruction. The focus on integration likely reflects the reality of reduced instructional time allotted to social studies in elementary settings and creative efforts of teachers to maintain exposure to civic and historical content despite structural constraints (Diliberti et al., 2023; Pryor et al., 2016).

Despite the creativity of educators to integrate social studies into other content area learning given its reduced emphasis and time in elementary classrooms and education (Diliberti et al., 2023), researchers warn about the risks when social studies is integrated primarily to support literacy goals (Pryor et al., 2016). Huck (2019) found social studies integration into reading blocks often resulted in diminished attention to the disciplinary features of social studies. When coursework and field placements prioritize general pedagogy and interdisciplinary adaptation over content-specific instruction, pre-service teachers may enter classrooms feeling confident but underprepared to support students' disciplinary learning in social studies (Brownell et al., 2020; Theobald et al., 2021).

Although many participants reported feeling confident in their ability to teach social studies to students with LD, researchers hypothesize the confidence stems from their training in general instructional approaches rather than content-specific pedagogy. The disconnect between confidence and preparedness mirrors research suggesting special education teacher preparation

programs tend to emphasize universally applicable teaching methods over the development of pedagogical content knowledge in academic subjects (Brownell et al., 2020; Ciullo et al., 2020). These findings also validate those of Rodriguez (2021), who found pre-service special education teachers often expressed instructional confidence despite having limited exposure to the content-specific practices necessary for effective social studies instruction.

Implications

Findings from this study highlight the importance of integrating content-specific pedagogy—particularly in social studies—into special education teacher preparation. While special education teachers may not always serve as the lead instructors in content-area classrooms, they frequently support students with disabilities in general education settings where social studies is taught (Lisanti et al., 2024). In these support roles, special educators may be called on to co-teach, accommodate texts and assignments to support IEP goals, and facilitate student engagement during instruction (Lisanti et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2021). However, without targeted preparation in the disciplinary demands of social studies—including civic reasoning, historical analysis, and primary source interpretation—special education teachers may lack the tools to make content accessible without oversimplifying it. Embedding training in how to scaffold disciplinary texts, adapt inquiry-based tasks, and promote participation in discussion-rich environments is essential for supporting students with LD in accessing the full depth of civic education (Ciullo & Garwood, 2024; Lightning, 2023; O'Brien et al., 2023).

In addition to coursework, special education teacher preparation programs should prioritize structured field placements that provide opportunities to engage meaningfully with social studies instruction. Participants in this study described limited exposure to social studies in their clinical experiences, often due to scheduling constraints or the prioritization of reading and

math instruction. When social studies is consistently deprioritized in both coursework and fieldwork, pre-service teachers may assume it is a lesser priority—reinforcing a cycle of limited preparation and limited access for students with LD. Content-specific field placements, ideally in inclusive classrooms where general and special educators collaborate on instruction, can help bridge this gap. These experiences allow candidates to see inclusive civic instruction in action and to practice their roles in supporting student access, thereby developing both confidence and instructional competence.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study possesses limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The sample was limited to pre-service special education teachers from five universities within a single Midwestern state. As such, generalizability can be limited. Additionally, the study focused specifically on participants seeking an endorsement in LD; the state in question licensed teacher by disability category and pre-service teachers seeking other endorsements (e.g., intellectual disability, emotional/behavior disorders) may have different responses. While one could assume generalizability to students seeking a cross-categorical mild license used in many states, it is unknown. Future researchers should expand the geographic and institutional scope of similar studies to determine whether findings are consistent across diverse teacher preparation programs. Including participants from multiple states and different types of teacher education programs (e.g., undergraduate vs. alternative certification) or certifications (e.g., emotional and behavioral disabilities, autism) could provide a more comprehensive understanding of pre-service special education views on teaching social studies. Further, most of the survey participants and all of the focus group participants in this study were obtaining a dual endorsement in elementary education and K–12 special education. As such, their perspectives are likely shaped by greater familiarity

with elementary-level instructional practices, such as integration with literacy and the use of creative or hands-on learning activities. Further, the students tended to be earlier in their teacher preparation careers (e.g., second-year and third-year students) and as such may not have had an opportunity to gain all the relevant knowledge of students at the end of their programs. In fact, only one focus group participant was in their fourth and final year of their program. As such, readers should interpret the results within that lens. Future researchers should consider examining how different certification pathways—such as dual endorsements in elementary and special education versus standalone special education programs—influence pre-service teachers' perceptions of content-area instruction. They should also explore the perspectives of those earlier in their teacher preparation careers with those later as well as new teachers.

It is important to note the limitations of the survey instrument itself. As a distal conceptual replication, this study included questions that were developed by Rodriguez (2021). While those questions allowed the researcher to gather crucial information regarding the perceptions and perspectives of pre-service teachers, questions around instructional and assessment approaches were limited to general instructional approaches rather than discipline-specific or content-specific approaches. Additionally, survey respondents did not have the opportunity to provide rationale for their rankings on these questions. Due to the constraints of the instrument, researchers were required to make informed inferences about the participants' responses—interpretations may be open to alternative explanations. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data from surveys and focus groups, which may introduce social desirability bias or limitations in participants' ability to accurately assess their preparedness and instructional preferences (Bergen & Labonte, 2020). Future researchers should incorporate classroom observations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how pre-service

special education teachers implement social studies instruction. Finally, this study captured perceptions at a single point in time. As participants gain more field experience, their perspectives may shift. Longitudinal research tracking pre-service teachers into their early careers could offer insights into how their instructional practices evolve and identify areas where additional training or support may be needed.

Table 1.

Data Triangulation for Research Questions

Research Questions	Primary Data Source	Secondary Data Source	Tertiary Data Source	Data Analysis
To what extent do preservice special education teacher candidates seeking an endorsement in LD perceive social studies as important to their students in the inclusive social studies classroom?	Survey- open ended question	Focus Group	N/A	Focus group transcript review - Open coding - Axial Coding - Codebook Review of survey data - Apply focus group codebook - Add additional codes - Final codebook Themes generated
To what extent do preservice special education teacher candidates seeking an endorsement in LD feel comfortable teaching social studies in the inclusive social studies classroom	Survey- single answer question	Survey- open ended rationale question	Focus Group	Review of single-answer survey data - Calculate frequencies Review open-ended survey data - Apply codebook Review focus group data - Apply codebook Themes applied
What do preservice special education teacher candidates seeking an endorsement in LD identify as the most effective instructional strategies to teach social studies in the secondary social studies classroom?	Survey – rank order question	Focus Group	N/A	Review of rank order question data - Calculate frequencies Review focus group data - Apply codebook Themes applied
What do preservice special education teacher candidates seeking an endorsement in LD identify as the best way to assess social studies in the inclusive social studies classroom?	Survey – rank order question	Focus Group	N/A	Review of rank order question data - Calculate frequencies Review focus group data - Apply codebook Themes applied

Table 2.

Summary of Key Findings

Category	% of Participants
Comfort Teaching Social Studies	
Not Comfortable at All	23.5%
Fairly Comfortable	56.9%
Very Comfortable	19.6%
Most Important Subjects	
Reading	70.6%
Language Arts	19.6%
Math	5.9%
Physical Education	1.96%
Science	1.96%
Social Studies	-
Art	-
Foreign language	-
Music	-
Effective Instructional Strategies	
Discussions	49%
Creative Strategies	23.5%
Group Work	19.6%
Worksheets	3.9%
Technology	1.96%
Teacher Lecture	1.96%
Recitations	-
Textbook Activities	-
Best Assessment Strategies	
Creative Project	58.8%
Group Project	19.6%
Portfolio	13.7%
Worksheets	7.8%
Formal Paper	-

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CHAPTER 4

COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC READING: AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING PRIMARY SOURCES IN INCLUSIVE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOMS

Ms. Rivera, a special education teacher, and Mr. Thompson, a seventh-grade geography teacher, sat together in Mr. Thompson's classroom reviewing student responses from their latest co-taught lesson on human-environment interaction. "It's just not clicking for them," Mr. Thompson said, shaking his head. "We're asking them to analyze reports and firsthand accounts about the impact of human actions on wildlife, but they're struggling to make sense of the text." Ms. Rivera nodded. "I've noticed that too. A lot of them get stuck on the vocabulary or the structure of the reading. They're trying, but the language is dense, and the concepts are abstract." Mr. Thompson leaned back in his chair. "Even when they're interested, they don't always know how to pull out the important ideas. And I don't think they see how it connects to anything beyond this class." Ms. Rivera paused, thinking. "What if we tried breaking the text into smaller sections and gave them some tools to help identify what's important? Maybe something that supports vocabulary and gives them a strategy to talk through the ideas with a partner?" Mr. Thompson nodded slowly. "Yeah, like an intervention or something. I'd be open to trying something new if it helps them actually engage with the reading." "I've used something called Collaborative Strategic Reading before," Ms. Rivera offered. "It's a way to guide students through texts in steps—previewing, figuring out confusing words, summarizing, and wrapping it up with discussion. It might give them more structure and confidence." Mr. Thompson smiled. "That sounds promising. If it helps them slow down and work with the text more intentionally, I'm in."

Reading comprehension is critical in social studies, where students analyze complex

texts, primary sources, maps, and data to understand historical and geographic concepts (Russell & Waters, 2022). However, students with learning disabilities (LD) often struggle with decoding specialized vocabulary, synthesizing information across multiple sources, and connecting abstract ideas and real-world applications (Nokes, 2022). Understanding climate change, for example, requires interpreting scientific reports, firsthand accounts, and policy documents, which demand technical vocabulary knowledge, data analysis, and critical reasoning, which can be especially challenging without structured support (Vaughn et al., 2024).

Despite the centrality of reading comprehension in social studies, many students, especially those with LD, lack access to instructional approaches that explicitly support their engagement with complex texts (Nokes, 2022; Russell & Waters, 2022). Traditional social studies instruction often assumes students can independently navigate dense historical documents, policy reports, and data visualizations (Nokes, 2022). However, without targeted supports, these materials can become learning barriers rather than inquiry opportunities (Vaughn et al., 2024). Researchers found structured, evidence-based interventions help students develop the disciplinary literacy skills needed to analyze sources, make connections, and engage in critical discussions (Ciullo et al., 2020; Curtis & Green, 2021). Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)—an intervention focused on supporting reading comprehension—provides a framework that uses explicit instruction, peer collaboration, and scaffolding (i.e., temporary supports gradually removed) to help students break down complex texts while building independence in comprehension (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). This article examines the implementation of CSR in inclusive secondary social studies classrooms, illustrating how its components—Preview, Click and Clunk, Get the Gist, and Wrap-Up—support students in developing the needed skills to engage with primary sources critically.

Collaborative Strategic Reading

CSR is a multicomponent reading comprehension intervention (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). Initially developed for general reading, researchers adapted CSR for social studies to help students analyze historical documents and policy reports (Boardman et al., 2016; 2018). In an evidence-based synthesis of reading comprehension based interventions supporting secondary students with LD in social studies, Authors (2025) determined CSR to be an evidence-based practice. Across the three phases of instruction (i.e., before, during, and after reading), teachers implement specific CSR components (i.e., Previewing, Click and Clunk, Get the Gist, and Wrap Up) that support student comprehension by activating background knowledge, clarifying vocabulary, summarizing key ideas, and synthesizing information (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998).

Teachers use explicit instruction to model each CSR component, guide students through practice, and support independent application (Boardman et al., 2018; Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). For each CSR component (i.e., Previewing, Click and Clunk, Get the Gist, and Wrap Up), teachers model the component, demonstrating how to apply it with a text. This is followed by guided practice, during which students engage with the component alongside teacher support and feedback. Once students demonstrate proficiency, they transition to independent practice. In CSR, independent practice often takes the form of structured peer collaboration. During this phase, teachers facilitate interactions in which students take on specific roles and work together to apply the CSR components—predicting, clarifying unfamiliar terms, summarizing, and synthesizing content (Vaughn et al., 2013). Structured collaboration supports students in internalizing the components through purposeful, guided interactions (Fisher & Frey, 2021). To promote accountability and engagement, students are assigned clearly defined roles and follow established procedures (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998; see Table 1 for a summary of student roles

and their functions within CSR).

CSR Phases

CSR is organized into three instructional phases—before, during, and after reading—during which teachers provide specific components that support students in accessing and understanding complex texts, such as primary sources (see Table 2 for examples of supports for each instructional phase and component of CSR). In the before reading phase, teachers guide students in activating background knowledge through the Preview component (Klinger & Vaughn, 1998). This component helps students examine text features such as the title, author, and broader historical or thematic context. Teachers also provide explicit instruction on essential vocabulary and engage students in structured prediction, which are tasks that rely on text cues or teacher-directed prompts to guide them to anticipate the text's main ideas using cues such as the title, headings, and highlighted terms.

The during-reading phase promotes active comprehension monitoring through two key CSR components: Click and Clunk and Get the Gist (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). Teachers first model each component using explicit instruction—such as with think-aloud—and then guide students through scaffolded practice with feedback. As students build confidence, they begin applying the components collaboratively with peers, often in structured reading groups. In Click and Clunk, students identify confusing words or phrases (i.e., clunks) and apply strategies, such as rereading, using context clues, breaking the word into parts, or consulting glossaries or digital supports, to clarify meaning (Amjadi & Talebi, 2021). Teachers may provide a checklist or sentence starters (e.g., "This clunk might mean… because…") to support the process.

In Get the Gist, students work together to identify the most important idea in a section of text and restate it in their own words. Teachers may use guiding questions like "Who or what is

this section about?" and "What is the most important thing about it?" to help students focus on essential content and eliminate irrelevant details. Teachers support this process with guided notetaking, collaborative discussions, and digital tools like shared documents or annotation features to keep students engaged in constructing meaning.

The after-reading phase deepens comprehension by encouraging synthesis and reflection. This phase involves the Wrap Up component, which helps students identify overarching themes and connect them to broader contexts (Klingner et al., 1998; Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). Teachers often facilitate this process through structured discussions, debates, or project-based responses, allowing students to demonstrate their understanding in varied and meaningful ways.

Research on CSR

Authors (2025) evidence-based systematic review concluded CSR as an evidence-based practice based on two studies of 734 secondary students with LD. Boardman et al. (2016) found that the CSR intervention provided the necessary support for middle school students with LD to break down complex historical and legal texts into manageable components. Boardman et al. (2018) found CSR supported middle school students with LD to engage meaningfully with challenging texts and improves their overall comprehension. They also determined students became more confident in their comprehension and more likely to engage in discussions, ask questions, and take ownership of their learning. Boardman et al. (2018) also concluded using CSR helped students draw more meaningful connections between historical documents and contemporary issues in inclusive social studies classes, which empowered them to think critically and independently within an inclusive classroom environment.

Implementing CSR in the Inclusive Secondary Social Studies Classroom

Before Reading: Previewing

In the first phase of CSR—Previewing—teachers use explicit instruction to prepare students for reading by activating background knowledge, building essential vocabulary, and setting a purpose for reading (Hughes et al., 2022). Teachers begin by introducing key vocabulary terms from the primary source. For example, from the case vignette, Ms. Rivera and Mr. Thompson might identify such vocabulary as biodiversity and deforestation. Teachers define each word explicitly, use it in context, and reinforce understanding with examples. Then, they prompt students to make predictions using a sentence stem such as, "Based on the title and headings, I think this text will be about…" Teachers model how to scan the document's title, headings, and visuals to gather clues, then guide students in recording their predictions. Teachers provide a graphic organizer—such as a cause-and-effect or text features chart—to support vocabulary and structure and model how to fill it in.

To support vocabulary acquisition, teachers provide word banks that include teacher-defined terms with space for students to write meanings in their own words. In print formats, this may be a vocabulary chart; in digital formats, teachers embed supports like clickable definitions, audio recordings, and example sentences. Teachers introduce the word bank before reading and guide students through a matching or sorting activity to reinforce meaning. To support comprehension of historical documents, teachers also model how to use a document analysis organizer. Using a think-aloud, the teacher highlights key elements such as author, purpose, and audience: "Let's look at who wrote this, why they wrote it, and who the audience was." Teachers guide students in completing the organizer using prompts or sentence stems such as, "What clues tell you who wrote this?" or "What words suggest the author's purpose?" For students who need

more support, teachers provide partially completed organizers to focus their attention on the most challenging elements.

Mr. Thompson and Ms. Rivera introduce a primary source excerpt from a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) fact sheet focused on deforestation. To support comprehension, they select a cause-and-effect graphic organizer aligned with the structure and purpose of the text, helping students track how deforestation leads to specific environmental outcomes and affects human communities. These teacher-created organizers are available in both print and digital formats, with differentiated versions that include sentence stems or partially completed sections for students who benefit from additional scaffolding. To model the Preview component, Mr. Thompson displays the fact sheet on the whiteboard, reads the title and headings aloud, and uses a think-aloud to highlight key vocabulary and prompt predictions. As he underlines the phrase "biodiversity loss due to deforestation," he reflects, "Biodiversity means a variety of living things. If deforestation is causing biodiversity loss, I wonder what species or ecosystems—and even what human communities—might be impacted." He draws a box around the word "ecosystems" and turns to the class: "We've talked before about how people interact with their environment. Can someone remind us what an ecosystem is?" A student replies, "It's where living things interact with each other and their environment." "Exactly," Mr. Thompson says. "So, as we preview, let's keep that in mind—this fact sheet might describe how cutting down trees disrupts ecosystems and affects people who depend on those environments." He then instructs students to open their graphic organizers, modeled after the CSR Preview guide, and helps them record the title and headings in the first column. "Let's jot down our predictions about what we think this fact sheet will explain—especially how cutting down trees affects both the environment and human communities. Then, as we read, we'll check to see if our predictions

were accurate or if we need to update them." Ms. Rivera provides multiple entry points for engaging with the primary source, tailoring supports based on students' instructional needs. Some students receive annotated excerpts with embedded definitions, guiding questions, or visual cues. Others work with side-by-side supports that pair the original text with sentence starters or paraphrased passages. Students ready for the original document engage with the full excerpt independently. To support interaction with the text and visuals, Ms. Rivera provides annotation tools, such as highlighters and sticky notes for print versions and comment features for digital formats, enabling all students to engage actively with the material.

During Reading: Click and Clunk and Get the Gist

In the during-reading phase of CSR, teachers support students in navigating complex vocabulary and concepts (e.g., abstract ideas, unfamiliar historical references, or technical academic language) through the Click and Clunk and Get the Gist components. In Click and Clunk, students learn to identify "clicks"—words that support comprehension—and "clunks"—unfamiliar terms that disrupt understanding (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). To teach this component, the teacher projects a sentence from the text and models identifying a clunk word. For example, the teacher reads, "The Constitution outlines the enumerated powers of Congress," then pauses and says, "Enumerated powers—that's a clunk. I'm not sure what that means. Let's check the surrounding sentences for clues." The teacher models using context clues and prior knowledge to figure out the meaning, thinking aloud through the process. After modeling, the teacher provides a new sentence and asks students to identify clunks and apply fix-up strategies using guided questions, such as, "What clue in the sentence helps you understand that word?" or "Can we substitute a word that makes sense here?" As students gain confidence, they work with a partner to identify clunks and apply strategies independently. Teachers circulate to provide

feedback, clarify misunderstandings, and prompt deeper analysis. Tools like Clunk Cards (see Figure 1) offer step-by-step reminders students can use while reading.

In the next class period, Mr. Thompson and Ms. Rivera introduce students to the Click and Clunk component, explaining a click is a word or phrase that makes sense, while a clunk is something unfamiliar that disrupts comprehension. To reinforce this concept, they begin by modeling the component using an example sentence: "Deforestation contributes to biodiversity loss and disrupts ecosystems worldwide." Mr. Thompson underlines key terms and prompts students to reflect on prior knowledge, asking, "Do these words click for us? Have we seen them before?" Ms. Rivera highlights the phrase disrupts ecosystems and, noticing hesitation, models how to determine its meaning using context and analogy: "If a storm disrupts a city, what happens? Now think about what might happen when ecosystems are disrupted." She walks students through applying reasoning to determine the meaning of the sentence. As they continue, Ms. Rivera models identifying both clicks and clunks while reading an excerpt from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) fact sheet. When she encounters the phrase sustainable land management, she pauses: "This might be a clunk. Let's break it down—what do we already know about the word sustainable? And what about land management?" She then connects the ideas, reinforcing how the meaning of unfamiliar terms can be constructed using known vocabulary and context clues. To support students as they begin practicing the component, the teachers provide guided notes with highlighted key terms and sentence stems (e.g., "One reason deforestation impacts biodiversity is…"). As students continue reading, they identify clicks and clunks with a partner, using strategies modeled earlier, while Mr. Thompson and Ms. Rivera circulate to offer feedback and reinforce comprehension strategies.

After clarifying unfamiliar vocabulary through Click and Clunk, teachers introduce the

Get the Gist component to help students summarize the main ideas from complex texts (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). To model the component, the teacher projects a short excerpt and reads it aloud, pausing to think aloud: “This sentence introduces the main idea—deforestation accelerates climate change. The next sentence gives an example, so I don’t need to include that in my summary.” The teacher underlines key phrases on the board and shows how to restate the main idea in one sentence. Students follow along using their own annotated copies or digital tools. Next, the teacher provides a new excerpt and guides students through the same steps using prompts like, “Which part tells us the main idea?” or “What detail can we leave out?” As students gain skills, they work with a partner or small group to apply the component independently. Teachers circulate to check for accuracy, ask clarifying questions, and support students in refining their summaries.

During guided practice, the teacher provides students with a new text excerpt and supports them in identifying the main idea and restating it in their own words. The teacher uses prompts like, “What is the most important point in this paragraph?” and “Which details can we leave out?” to focus student attention. As students work, the teacher circulates to offer feedback, reinforce the summarization process, and clarify misunderstandings. To support organization, the teacher often provides a graphic organizer—such as a main idea/detail chart or a Get the Gist template—and models how to use it (see Table 3 for an example from the case vignette). As students demonstrate increased accuracy, the teacher gradually reduces support and transitions to structured peer practice. Students apply the component in pairs, compare summaries, and justify their choices using sentence stems or guiding questions.

The following day, Ms. Rivera begins by reviewing key vocabulary from the previous lesson and introduces the Get the Gist component to help students summarize key ideas. She

projects an excerpt from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) fact sheet and highlights central phrases such as "deforestation leads to biodiversity loss" and "increases carbon emissions." Using a think-aloud, she models how to identify the main idea and distinguish it from supporting details. She verbalizes her thought process as she condenses the information into a clear summary, writing it below the passage to show how essential meaning can be preserved while unnecessary details are omitted. Mr. Thompson introduces a graphic organizer that guides students through the summarization process (see Table 3). He models its use by selecting key words from the text and paraphrasing them into a concise summary. As students begin applying the component with support, Ms. Rivera circulates, offering feedback and prompting students with guided questions such as, "What is the main point of this section?" or "Which details can you leave out?"

After Reading: Wrap Up and Beyond

In the after reading phase, teachers help students synthesize their understanding by identifying key takeaways, asking and answering meaningful questions, and making connections beyond the text (i.e., Wrap Up; Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). Teachers often pose an essential question—such as "What is the author's main argument, and why does it matter?"—and model how to identify and explain evidence that supports a response. For example, the teacher might say, "Let's look back at paragraph four. This sentence about government regulation stands out—why might the author include that?" Then the teacher highlights a key phrase, explains its significance, and connects it to prior learning: "This statement connects to our earlier discussion about climate policy and how governments can limit deforestation."

To guide student responses, teachers provide sentence stems such as "The most important takeaway is…" or "This connects to…". These stems can be displayed on the board or included

in student materials. The teacher then facilitates a short discussion or collaborative writing task in which students use evidence from the text to respond to the essential question. For example, students might work in pairs to construct a written response that includes a claim, supporting evidence, and a concluding statement.

During guided practice, teachers lead small-group or whole-class discussions to help students explore key themes and refine their responses. As students share ideas, the teacher circulates and prompts deeper thinking with questions like, "How does this idea compare to another source we read?" or "What are the real-world implications of this issue?" The teacher offers feedback, affirms strong ideas, and helps students clarify or expand their reasoning. To support independent application, teachers may assign a reflective writing task, a peer discussion, or a student-generated question tied to the essential question. Graphic organizers—such as comparison charts, cause-and-effect maps, then-and-now organizers—help students structure their thinking and extend comprehension into analysis and synthesis (see Figure 2).

After analyzing the World Wildlife Fund fact sheet, Mr. Thompson prompts students to connect the environmental impacts of deforestation to contemporary issues. To scaffold this process, he introduces question stems such as, "What does this fact sheet suggest about the role of governments in environmental protection?" and "How do the consequences of deforestation relate to current climate policy discussions?" These guided prompts support students as they begin small-group discussions, drawing on textual evidence and prior knowledge to extend their thinking. Ms. Rivera facilitates by circulating and prompting deeper analysis, asking questions like, "How might deforestation caused by agriculture differ from deforestation driven by urban development?" To help students structure their responses, she introduces a Text-to-Today graphic organizer (see Figure 2), which guides students in connecting the text to real-world

contexts and raising new questions. For students who benefit from additional support, both teachers provide sentence starters such as, "One way this issue connects to today is…" Throughout the Wrap-Up component, Mr. Thompson and Ms. Rivera monitor student understanding, pose follow-up questions, and offer targeted feedback to extend analysis.

While CSR ends at Wrap Up, there is an opportunity to extend this intervention to deepen understanding and foster disciplinary literacy. After generating questions within their groups, students can use these questions to engage in whole-class discussions. Structured discussions not only heighten engagement but also promote critical thinking and help students solidify knowledge through dialogue (Boardman et al., 2016). Additionally, students can transition from discussion to writing and authorship tasks, either individually or collaboratively. Writing about their interpretations, connections, or extended inquiries provides an authentic learning experience, mirroring the practices of historians and geographers who analyze sources and communicate findings (Wineburg et al., 2012). These writing tasks could include brief constructed responses, multimedia presentations, or even the creation of informational posters or digital fact sheets aimed at informing their peers or the school community. By engaging in public authorship, students take ownership of their learning and develop communication skills that extend beyond the classroom.

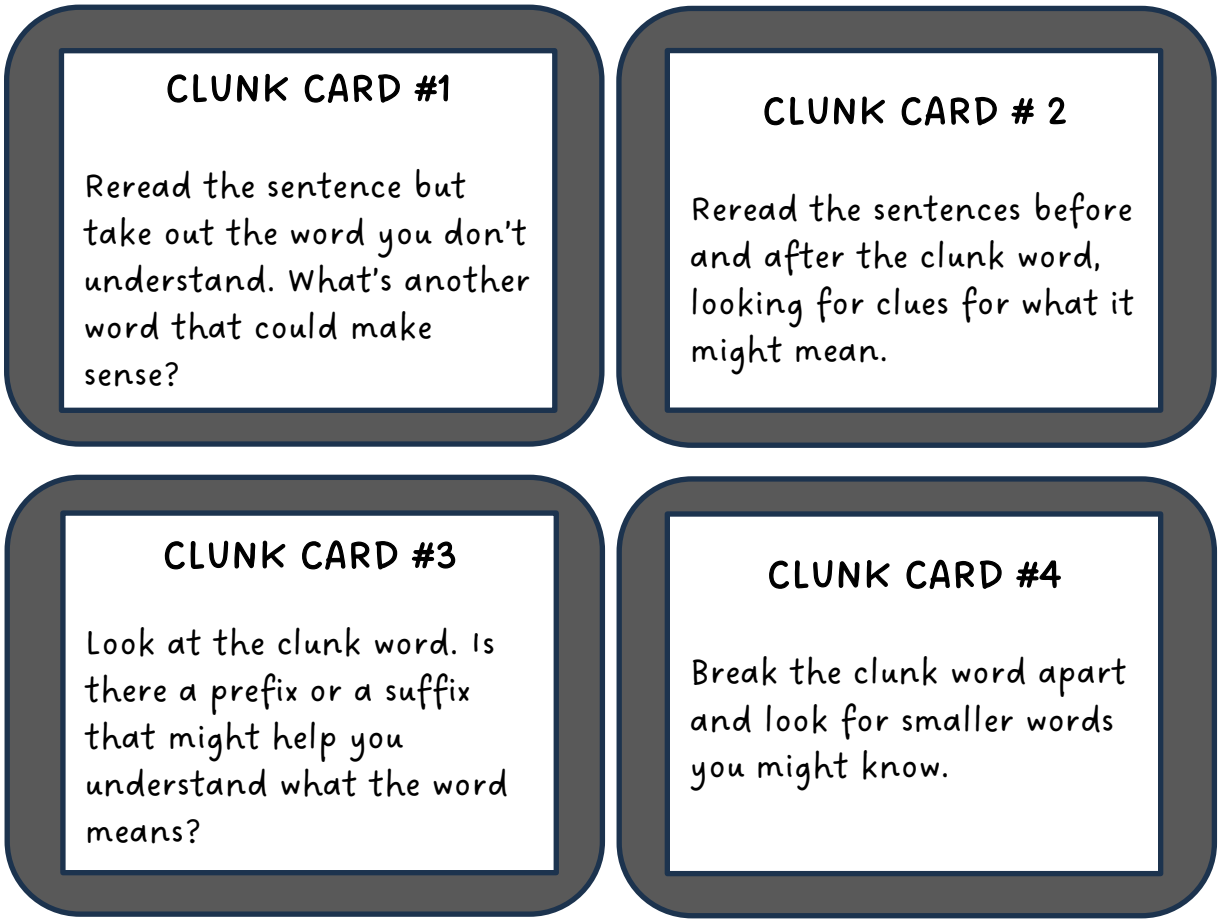
Conclusion

The ability to critically engage with complex texts is essential for informed citizenship in today's interconnected world (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2020). CSR offers a structured, evidence-based approach for supporting students with LD in inclusive secondary social studies classrooms. Through its four components—Preview, Click and Clunk, Get the Gist, and Wrap Up—teachers provide explicit instruction and scaffolded peer

collaboration to help students access challenging texts, clarify unfamiliar vocabulary, identify main ideas, and make meaningful connections. When implemented across the before, during, and after phases of reading, CSR not only removes common literacy barriers but also promotes active, inquiry-based engagement with primary and secondary sources (Boardman et al., 2016; 2018). By embedding reading comprehension into social studies instruction, CSR helps all learners—especially those with LD—develop historical understanding, build content knowledge, and participate meaningfully in discussions about issues that shape our world.

Figure 1.

Clunk Cards for Breaking Down Unknown Words



Adapted from Klingner, J. K. & Vaughn, S. (1998). Using collaborative strategic reading. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 30*(6), 32-37.

Figure 2.

Then and Now Graphic Organizer

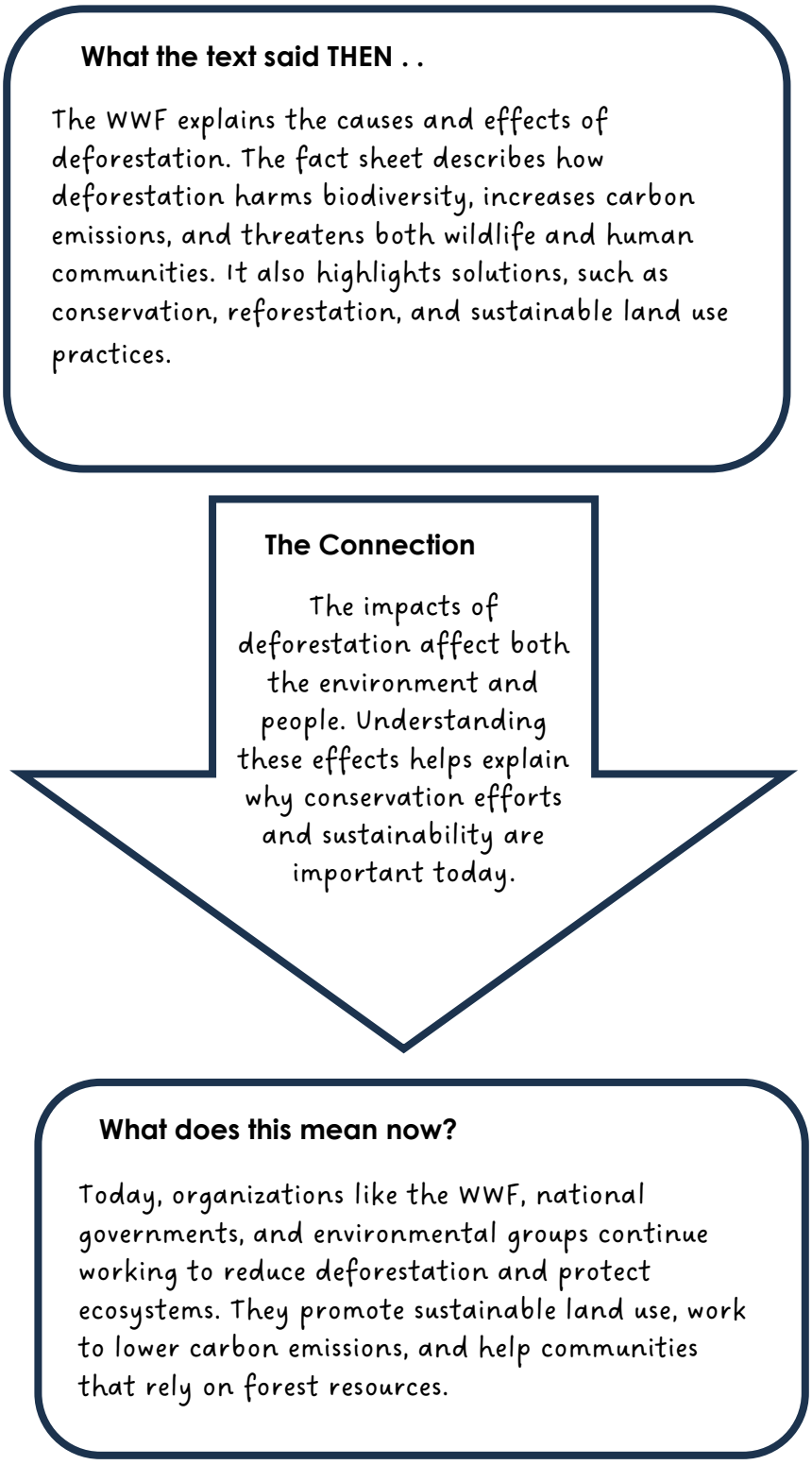


Table 1.

CSR Roles and Responsibilities

CSR Role	Primary Responsibilities	Instructional Approach
Leader	Guides the group through CSR steps, selects reading sections, and ensures strategies are followed.	Introduced through teacher modeling; gradually takes on responsibility during guided practice.
Clunk Expert	Supports comprehension by helping identify difficult words and applying fix-up strategies (i.e., breaking down words, rereading for context).	Modeled through think-alouds; students practice decoding strategies with teacher support.
Announcer	Ensures balanced participation by prompting group members to read or share ideas.	Teachers use structured prompts to model how to facilitate equitable discussion.
Reporter	Summarizes key findings and generates discussion questions for the whole class	Explicit instruction on summarization strategies, with scaffolding for generating discussion questions.
Timekeeper	Manages group progress by setting timers for each CSR phase and keeping discussions on track.	Modeled through real-time practice; teachers provide guidance on pacing and time management.

Table 2.

Using Explicit Instruction to Teach CSR Components

CSR Phase	Component	Explicit Instruction			Feedback & Scaffolding (Ongoing)
		Modeling	**Guided Practice**	**Independent Practice (with peers)**	
Before Reading	Preview	Use a think-aloud to demonstrate how to examine headings and visuals, activate background knowledge, and predict content	Guide students through previewing a new text using tools like KWL charts and prediction stems	Pairs complete differentiated graphic organizers with title, headings, key terms, and predictions	Provide sentence stems, partially filled organizers, or embedded definitions as scaffolds
During Reading	Click and Clunk	Model how to identify "clunks" and apply fix-up strategies (e.g., context clues, rereading) using Clunk Cards	Support clunk identification using vocabulary anchor charts and sentence frames	Students work in pairs to apply Clunk Cards and fix-up strategies; use vocabulary cards with visuals	Circulate to clarify misconceptions, prompt strategy use, and provide targeted vocabulary support
	Get the Gist	Demonstrate identifying the main idea and rephrasing it concisely using a short passage	Use prompts (e.g., "What's the main idea?") and guided summaries with whole class or small groups	Students use "Get the Gist" note templates with sentence frames to write and justify main ideas in pairs	Use sentence stems, summary templates, and verbal feedback to refine understanding
After Reading	Wrap-Up	Model answering essential questions, generating discussion prompts, and connecting content to current issues	Facilitate class or group discussions using scaffolds like "Text-to-Today" or reflection organizers	Students generate and answer essential questions using a question generation organizer and share in groups	Scaffold with question stems, monitor for depth of analysis, and extend thinking with clarifying prompts

Table 3.

Example of a "Get the Gist" Graphic Organizer Based on a WWF Fact Sheet

Section 1		
Who did it?	**What did they do?**	**Why did they do it?**
World Wildlife Fund (WWF)	Raised awareness about the effects of deforestation and promoted conservation	To protect biodiversity, reduce carbon emissions, and promote sustainable land use.
The gist: The WWF educates the public and promotes conservation to address deforestation.		
Section 2		
Who did it?	**What did they do?**	**Why did they do it?**
National governments.	Created and enforced protection laws and reforestation programs.	To control land use, protect ecosystems, and lower carbon emissions.
The gist: Governments make and enforce laws to limit deforestation and restore forests.		
Section 3		
Who did it?	**What did they do?**	**Why did they do it?**
The gist:		
Section 4		
Who did it?	**What did they do?**	**Why did they do it?**
The gist:		
Summary:		

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CHAPTER 5

OVERALL DISCUSSION

This dissertation examined instructional approaches for supporting secondary students with learning disabilities (LD) in social studies, with a particular focus on reading comprehension. It includes three interrelated manuscripts: an evidence-based practice (EBP) systematic review on reading comprehension interventions in secondary social studies for students with LD, an empirical study exploring pre-service special education teachers' perspectives on social studies instruction for students with LD, and a practitioner-oriented article detailing the implementation of Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) in an inclusive secondary social studies classroom. Two main results emerged from the overall dissertation. First, a need exists for evidence-based practices (EBPs) in social studies, as CSR was the only reading comprehension intervention that met all Cook et al. (2014) EBP criteria in secondary social studies for students with LD. This analysis is from the first manuscript. The third manuscript provides provide explicit information on how teachers can implement CSR in secondary social studies classes to support students with LD. Second, pre-service special education teachers require targeted training in disciplinary literacy and content-specific instructional strategies to better support students with LD in inclusive social studies classrooms. Together, these findings underscore the urgency of advancing both research and teacher preparation efforts to ensure students with LD have equitable access to meaningful social studies learning experiences.

The Need for Evidence-Based Practices in Social Studies Instructions

The present evidence-based systematic review on reading comprehension interventions designed for secondary social studies instruction for students with LD found 20 methodologically sound studies, with only one EBP—CSR. Two studies exist that support CSR

as an EBP—all which focus on middle school students with LD (Boardman et al., 2016; 2018). Given the researchers found only one EBP across the 20 methodologically sound studies, more research is needed on existing interventions to help establish EBPs in reading comprehension within a social studies context for secondary students with LD.

The limited EBPs for supporting secondary students with LD with reading comprehension in social studies classes supports the growing trend and focus in special education of replication studies (Cook et al., 2022; 2024). Despite increasing calls for replication to strengthen the evidence base, such studies remain rare in special education and intervention research (Cook et al., 2024; Perry et al., 2022). Replication is essential for verifying the effectiveness of interventions across diverse contexts, yet studies examining the same reading comprehension interventions in secondary social studies are scarce (Ciullo et al., 2020; Curtis & Green, 2021). Cook et al. (2024) reported replications account for only 0.54% of special education research, which remains insufficient to build a robust evidence base. Further, most replication studies are conducted by at least one author from the original study, raising concerns about potential bias and limiting the ability to determine whether findings generalize across different research teams and contexts (Cook et al., 2024).

The lack of reliable replication studies means many promising interventions remain unverified beyond their initial studies, limiting their classification as EBPs. This was evident from the current EBP systematic review with only one EBP but potentially two others that lacked sufficient number of studies and consistent positive results to classify them as EBP (e.g., Promoting the Acceleration of Comprehension a Text [PACT] and Building Reading Interventions Designed for General Education Subjects [BRIDGES]). The lack of EBPs is problematic for reading comprehension interventions in social studies, which require both

general literacy skills and content-specific strategies (Nokes, 2022). Expanding replication efforts would help solidify reading comprehension strategies as truly evidence-based, ensuring instructional practices recommended for students with LD are reliable and effective across diverse educational settings (Cook et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2016).

As previously noted, CSR was the only EBP researchers found in their current EBP systematic review. Three studies explored CSR in secondary social studies classrooms for studies with LD (Boardman et al., 2015; 2016; 2018). CSR is a multicomponent intervention that involves three phases—before, during, and after reading—and four components—previewing, clicks and clunks, get the gist, wrap up—that align with the phases. These components work together to increase students' access and engagement with complex texts by targeting key processes such as activating background knowledge, monitoring comprehension, identifying main ideas, and synthesizing information (Klinger et al., 1998). Teachers implement CSR through explicit instruction, which involves modeling each strategy, guiding students through supported practice, and gradually moving them toward independent application (Hughes et al., 2022). As students develop proficiency, instruction transitions into structured peer collaboration, where students apply strategies cooperatively using defined roles and routines (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). Throughout each phase, teachers provide targeted supports—such as vocabulary scaffolds, graphic organizers, and sentence starters—to ensure accessibility for students with LD. When implemented with fidelity, CSR supports students not only in improving comprehension, but also in developing the disciplinary literacy skills necessary for success in inclusive social studies classrooms. (Boardman et al., 2016; 2018; Klinger et al., 1998).

Challenges in Teacher Preparation for Social Studies Instruction

Supporting students with LD in social studies requires not only effective instructional

strategies but also well-prepared teachers equipped to implement them (Brownell et al., 2020). Despite growing recognition of disciplinary literacy's importance, pre-service special education teachers historically report receiving minimal preparation to teach social studies (Worster & Rohde, 2020). In this dissertation, researchers found mixed perceptions among pre-service teachers pursuing LD endorsements. While most valued social studies instruction, nearly a quarter (23.5%) reported discomfort teaching it, citing limited coursework, lack of exposure to content-specific strategies, and an overemphasis on general literacy instruction. These findings echo prior research highlighting the lack of disciplinary literacy training in special education programs (Reisman et al., 2019; Rodriguez, 2021). Although general literacy strategies are important, disciplinary literacy (e.g., emphasizing historical thinking skills like sourcing and contextualization) offers students with LD greater access to content (Marlatt, 2018; Waymouth & Weary, 2024).

Although about 25% reported feeling unprepared to teacher social studies, a majority (76.5%) of pre-service special education survey participants reported feeling either fairly or very comfortable teaching social studies to students with LD. This finding may reflect a sense of confidence rooted in their broader teacher preparation—particularly their exposure to general instructional strategies emphasized in elementary and special education coursework (Brownell et al., 2020). The majority of participants in this study were pursuing dual endorsements in elementary education and K–12 special education, which likely shaped their comfort levels. These programs often emphasize student-centered, cross-curricular approaches that prioritize engagement and integration across content areas (Haverly & Davis, 2023; Livers et al., 2021). As such, participants may have envisioned applying familiar strategies—such as collaborative learning, creative projects, and discussion-based instruction—in their future social studies

teaching. While this confidence is encouraging, it does not necessarily indicate deep preparation in social studies-specific pedagogy. Rather, it highlights a key tension: pre-service teachers may feel comfortable because they plan to apply general methods, even if they have limited training in how to adapt these methods to meet the unique demands of historical inquiry, civic reasoning, or disciplinary literacy for students with LD. Addressing this tension requires preparation programs to build on this existing instructional confidence while deepening candidates' pedagogical content knowledge in social studies.

Prior researchers found special education teacher preparation coursework and field placements often prioritized reading and math interventions, with little focus on social studies instruction (O'Brien et al., 2023). Some survey and focus group participants in the current study reported taking only one course addressing social studies pedagogy, while others had no exposure at all. The lack of exposure to content aligns with prior research suggesting special education programs undervalue content-specific instruction, leaving teachers underprepared to support comprehension in social studies classrooms (Brownell et al., 2020; Theobald et al., 2022). Despite calls to integrate pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) into special education training (Shulman, 1986; Reisman et al., 2019), implementation remains limited (Brownell et al., 2020). Focus group participants in this study described their role in field placements as supporting students with assignments, rather than delivering instruction. Without targeted preparation in disciplinary literacy, special educators may struggle to bridge students' reading needs with the demands of content-area learning (Brownell et al., 2020). Addressing these gaps requires embedding content-area instruction, including social studies, more intentionally into teacher preparation (Theobald et al., 2022).

Implications for Research and Practice

Findings from this dissertation suggest several important implications for research and practice. First, there is a clear need for additional high-quality research on reading comprehension interventions in secondary social studies, particularly for students with LD. Although the researcher determined CSR as an evidence-based practice for secondary students with LD in inclusive secondary social studies classrooms, further research is needed to examine its implementation in inclusive social studies settings and to explore how its components can be adapted or extended to support disciplinary literacy. Future researchers should investigate the integration of instructional approaches like CSR with historical thinking strategies such as sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration to enhance content-area comprehension. In addition, researchers should examine how complementary approaches, including inquiry-based learning and document-based questioning, can be modified to meet the needs of students with LD and improve both literacy and content knowledge outcomes.

Second, a greater emphasis on replication studies is necessary to strengthen the evidence base for reading comprehension interventions in social studies. The limited number of replication studies in special education research raises concerns about the generalizability and reliability of existing interventions (Cook et al., 2024; Perry et al., 2022). Future researchers should prioritize direct and conceptual replications of existing studies to confirm intervention effectiveness across diverse educational contexts and populations (Cook et al., 2024). Within secondary social studies this incudes not on only additional examinations of CSR, but also other multicomponent interventions such as PACT and BRIDGES, which were found to modestly improve reading comprehension and inconsistently improve content knowledge. Examining variations in implementation—such as differences in instructional settings, student demographics, and teacher

training—would provide valuable insights into how interventions can be adapted to better meet the needs of students with LD (Cook et al., 2016; 2024; Coyne et al., 2016).

Third, teacher preparation programs should prioritize disciplinary literacy instruction for special educators, ensuring they are equipped to support students with LD in social studies classrooms. This requires interdisciplinary collaboration between special education and social studies faculty in teacher preparation programs to develop coursework that addresses both pedagogical and content-specific challenges. Future researchers should examine the effectiveness of embedded field experiences that allow pre-service special education teachers to practice disciplinary literacy strategies in social studies classrooms before entering the profession. Ensuring future special educators are exposed to evidence-based reading comprehension strategies (e.g., CSR) during their training will better prepare them to implement effective instruction in inclusive settings.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this dissertation offers several important findings and implications for practice, it is not without limitations. A primary limitation is the scope of focus, as the dissertation primarily examines reading comprehension interventions and teacher preparation within secondary social studies for students with LD but does not address broader contextual factors that influence students' learning experiences. Variables such as school policies, curricular constraints, and administrative support were not examined in this study, yet they may play a critical role in shaping the implementation and sustainability of effective instructional practices in social studies for students with LD. Also, researchers in this dissertation considered CSR as a comprehensive instructional package; future researchers might explore how its individual components—such as peer collaboration, summarization, and vocabulary strategies—function in isolation or in

combination. Investigating how these elements support reading comprehension across different social studies topics and text types could refine our understanding of what makes content-area interventions most effective for students with LD.

The dissertation also does not examine student-level factors that influence engagement and comprehension, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and behavioral challenges. While the research highlights the importance of structured reading comprehension interventions, future researchers should consider how behavioral and motivational supports can be integrated with reading comprehension strategies to enhance student persistence and engagement in historical inquiry. Finally, generalization remains a key consideration in applying the findings of this dissertation to varied instructional contexts. While the studies explored reading comprehension strategies and teacher preparation in specific settings, the extent to which these findings translate across different schools, grade levels, and instructional models is uncertain. Future researchers should examine how interventions can be adapted for different student populations, school environments, and instructional approaches to ensure their effectiveness beyond the studied contexts. Expanding research on the intersection of special education and social studies pedagogy remains essential for ensuring equitable access to rigorous content for all students. Researchers should also build upon the findings of this dissertation by conducting direct intervention research and replication studies to further validate effective instructional strategies for students with LD in secondary social studies.

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