

What an Indicator Really Communicates

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Social studies indicators are often misunderstood as lists of topics that teachers must cover. While indicators include content, they primarily communicate expectations for student thinking and cognitive demand rather than prescribing specific activities, lesson structures, or instructional resources. They are not lesson plans, lists of facts to memorize, or worksheet topics.

When indicators are interpreted as descriptions of thinking rather than tasks to complete, instruction becomes more focused and aligned to what student=s are expected to demonstrate.

One of the most important words in any indicator is the verb. Verbs communicate the type of thinking students must demonstrate. For example, verbs such as identify, explain, compare, or analyze signal different levels of cognitive demand. Even when two indicators address similar topics, the verb may require students to demonstrate very different types of thinking.

Even when indicators use the same verb, expectations change across grade levels. In the primary grades, explaining may involve describing ideas with support, often through discussion or visuals. In later grades, explaining requires students to develop reasoning and support their ideas with evidence. Recognizing these developmental differences helps teachers design tasks that are age-appropriate while still honoring the intent of the indicator.

To better understand how indicators communicate expectations, it is helpful to break them into key components. Social studies indicators communicate three key components. First, the skill tells us what students are expected to do. Second, the content tells us what students are thinking about. Third, the expectation signals how deeply students must think about the content. Reading indicators with these three components in mind helps teachers clearly identify instructional priorities and align tasks to the required level of thinking.

When teachers focus only on the topic of an indicator, instruction can become misaligned with the intended expectations. For example, teaching about a historical event does not necessarily mean that students have demonstrated the skill required by the indicator. Students may be able to recall information about an event without explaining relationships, comparing ideas, or describing causes and effects.

Understanding indicators as descriptions of student thinking helps teachers plan instruction more intentionally. Instead of asking, "What topic does this indicator cover?" teachers can ask, "What thinking should students demonstrate?" This shift allows teachers to design tasks that require students to apply the skill described in the indicator.

Students demonstrate their thinking through observable behaviors that reflect the expectations of the grade level. In the primary grades, this may include discussion, drawing, sorting, or explaining ideas using oral language. In later grades, students may demonstrate their thinking

through written explanations, analysis of sources, or evidence-based reasoning. These demonstrations provide evidence that students are developing the skills described in the indicator.

When teachers read indicators carefully and identify the skill embedded within the language, instruction becomes more focused and aligned. Students are given opportunities not only to learn about social studies topics but also to practice the thinking skills that support deeper understanding.

Reflection

- How do you currently interpret the verbs used in social studies indicators?
- When planning instruction, do you focus more on the topic or the thinking students must demonstrate?
- What might change if you began planning lessons by identifying the skill first?