



Implementing Teacher Professionalism in Education: A Systematic Literature Review on Social Studies Learning through the Inquiry Approach

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ABSTRACT

Social Studies education at the elementary level plays an important role in developing responsible citizenship, while the successful implementation of inquiry-based learning depends on teacher professionalism. This systematic literature review examines the relationship between teacher professionalism and inquiry-based Social Studies instruction, addressing two questions: (1) what professional competencies and dispositions teachers need to implement inquiry effectively, and (2) what outcomes and challenges are reported in empirical studies. Following a PRISMA-informed protocol, a Scopus search conducted on 28 November 2025 identified 507 records, with 18 empirical studies meeting the eligibility criteria after screening. Thematic synthesis showed that teachers' professional identity, constructivist beliefs, and self-efficacy support inquiry implementation, while sustained professional development improves pedagogical content knowledge. However, designing compelling and appropriately scaffolded inquiry questions remains a key challenge, especially in elementary education. Limitations include the use of a single database, single-reviewer screening, and the exclusion of non-English/non-Indonesian and non-indexed literature.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted/Received : 21 Dec 2025

First Revised : 06 Feb 2026

Accepted : 25 Jun 2026

First Available online : 29 Jun 2026

Publication Date : 29 Jun 2026

Keyword:

Elementary School, Inquiry Approach, Social Studies Learning, Systematic Literature Review, Teacher Professionalis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social Studies education in elementary schools plays a fundamental role in shaping citizens who are intelligent, critical, and responsible in facing the social challenges of the 21st century. In an increasingly complex global context, social, economic, and environmental issues require students not only to understand facts but also to critically reflect on the context behind that information (Studies, 2013). However, Social Studies teaching practices are still often conventional and provide limited space for students to develop critical thinking skills; teacher-centered methods often restrict active student participation, leaving students as passive recipients of information rather than active constructors of their own knowledge (Green & Harrington, 2020).

The shift toward student-centered learning is increasingly urgent to implement. This approach positions students as active subjects with voice, choice, and responsibility in the learning process, making learning more meaningful and relevant to individual needs (Green & Harrington, 2020). Broader research on student-centered instructional approaches suggests they can meaningfully affect motivation, engagement, and critical thinking when consistently implemented (Bernard et al., 2019).

One learning approach aligned with the principles of student-centered learning and highly relevant to Social Studies instruction is the inquiry approach, which emphasizes knowledge discovery through questioning, investigating, gathering information, and critically analyzing evidence. Successful implementation of the inquiry approach in Social Studies depends heavily on teacher professionalism: teachers must possess not only pedagogical competence but also the disposition and self-efficacy to facilitate open-ended, student-driven learning, which differs in important ways from more teacher-directed instruction (Gholam, 2019). Innovation in instructional media is one practical avenue through which this competence is developed and expressed, as illustrated by recent work on media innovation for the integrated Social and Natural Sciences (IPAS) curriculum in Indonesian elementary schools (Afifah et al., 2023).

Despite growing international interest in inquiry-based learning, research that specifically examines the intersection of teacher professionalism and the inquiry approach within Social Studies instruction has not, to the authors' knowledge, been systematically mapped and synthesized. This gap matters because the professional competencies required to facilitate inquiry differ from those required for conventional instruction, yet the literature has not been consulted systematically to establish what is known, where the evidence is strong, and where it remains thin. This review addresses that gap through a systematic, PRISMA-informed search and synthesis of the empirical literature at the intersection of these variables.

This article is organized as follows: the literature review presents the conceptual and theoretical foundation for the study; the method section details the systematic search, screening, and synthesis protocol; results and discussion are presented separately; and the article closes with a conclusion, limitations, and recommendations for future research and educational practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review is grounded in social constructivist theory, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) concept of learning as a socially mediated process in which learners actively construct understanding through interaction and guided exploration, rather than through passive reception of information (Vygotsky, 1978). This theoretical lens is directly relevant to the inquiry approach, in which students construct knowledge through questioning, investigating,

and evaluating evidence rather than receiving conclusions directly from the teacher. A complementary perspective is Ausubel's (1968) theory of meaningful learning, which holds that learning is meaningful when new knowledge is deliberately connected to a learner's existing cognitive structure, a process that inquiry-based tasks are well positioned to support because they require students to actively relate new evidence to prior understanding rather than memorize isolated facts (Ausubel, 1968).

Within this theoretical frame, Social Studies education plays an important role in shaping critical and responsible citizens, and teacher professionalism functions as the mechanism through which this pedagogical potential is realized in practice. Teacher professionalism, as treated in this review, is not a single unitary trait but a combination of content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, professional beliefs and identity, self-efficacy, and reflective practice. The systematic review reported below examines how the empirical literature characterizes this combination of competencies specifically in relation to inquiry-based Social Studies instruction.

3. METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review approach, informed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, to examine the relationship between teacher professionalism and the inquiry approach in Social Studies instruction.

3.1 Search Strategy

A search was conducted on 28 November 2025 using the Scopus database with combinations of the following keywords: "inquiry-based learning," "teacher professionalism," "Social Studies," and "elementary school," combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR). The initial search yielded 507 records.

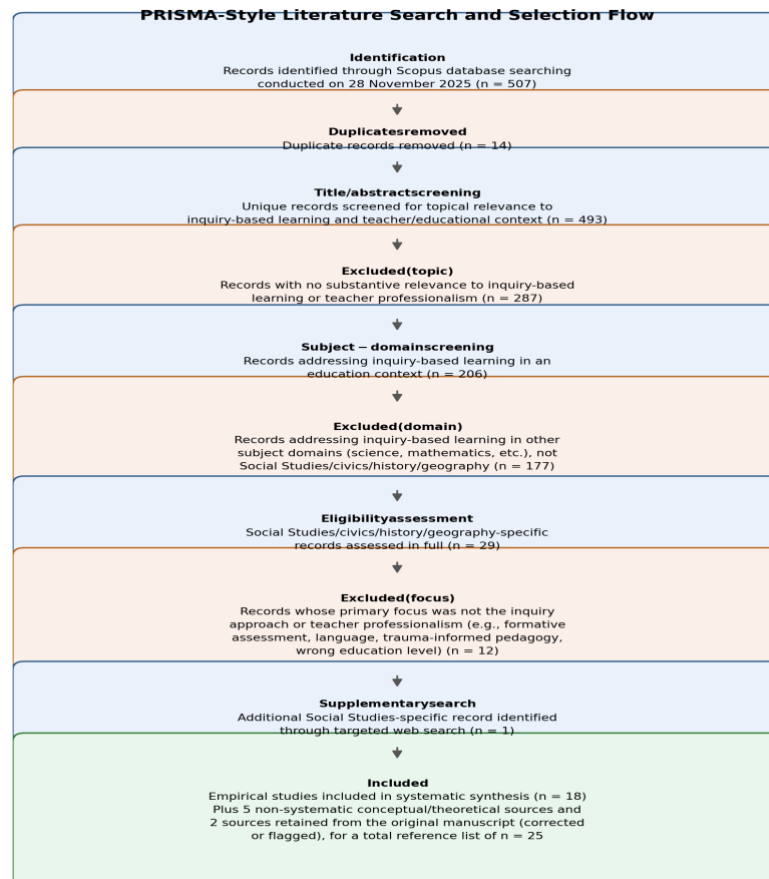
3.2 Screening and Eligibility

Records were screened in three stages. First, 14 duplicate records were removed, leaving 493 unique records. Second, records were screened by title and abstract for topical relevance to inquiry-based learning within an educational context (i.e., mentioning inquiry-based instruction together with either a teacher-related or an educational-context term); 206 records met this threshold, and 287 were excluded for lacking substantive relevance to either concept. Third, the remaining 206 records were screened for subject-domain specificity: because this review's scope concerns Social Studies (encompassing civics, history, and geography), 177 records addressing inquiry-based learning in other subject domains (predominantly science and mathematics education) were excluded, leaving 29 Social Studies-specific records.

These 29 records were then read in full (title, abstract, and, where necessary, full text) and assessed against the following inclusion criteria: (a) empirical or design-based focus on the inquiry approach and/or teacher professionalism, competence, self-efficacy, or professional development in a Social Studies, civics, history, or geography context; (b) publication in a peer-reviewed journal, conference proceeding, or edited academic volume; (c) availability of sufficient detail (via abstract or full text) to characterize the study's design and findings. Twelve records were excluded at this stage for reasons including a primary focus on formative assessment rather than inquiry pedagogy, a primary focus on language or literacy rather than teacher professionalism, a primary focus on trauma-informed pedagogy without a substantive inquiry component, or an educational level outside the scope of this review. Seventeen records met all inclusion criteria. A supplementary targeted search (conducted to

locate literature for topics where the Scopus results were sparse) identified one additional eligible record, yielding a final set of 18 empirical studies included in the systematic synthesis.

In addition to these 18 systematically identified empirical studies, this review draws on five sources, two foundational theoretical works (Ausubel, 1968; Vygotsky, 1978) and three general (non-Social-Studies-specific) empirical or policy sources (Bernard et al., 2019; Gholam, 2019; Green & Harrington, 2020) for conceptual and theoretical framing in the Introduction and Literature Review. These five sources were not identified through the systematic search and are not part of the systematically synthesized evidence base; they are used, consistent with common practice in systematic reviews, to provide background and theoretical grounding rather than as findings under review.



3.3. Synthesis Approach

Given substantial heterogeneity across the 18 included studies in research design (quasi-experimental, survey, qualitative case study, design-based research), sample (in-service teachers, pre-service teachers, and students), and educational level, this review synthesizes findings thematically rather than through statistical meta-analysis. Themes were developed inductively by reading each included study in full and grouping recurring concepts; this synthesis was conducted by a single reviewer without independent verification by a second coder, which is acknowledged as a limitation.

3.4 Limitations of the Method

This review's search was limited to the Scopus database, supplemented by a small number of additional targeted searches; relevant work indexed only in other databases, published in languages other than English or Indonesian, or available only as grey literature may not have

been captured. Screening and eligibility decisions were made by a single reviewer, without the independent double-screening that strengthens systematic reviews in fields with established protocols. Because publication bias and study-quality appraisal were not formally assessed (e.g., no risk-of-bias tool was applied to the included studies), the strength of individual findings should be weighed with appropriate caution.

4. RESULTS

This section presents what the 18 included empirical studies report, organized into six themes. Interpretation of these findings is reserved for the Discussion that follows.

4.1 Theme 1: Teacher Professional Identity, Beliefs, and Disposition as Drivers of Inquiry Adoption

A survey of 183 U.S. teachers found that constructivist beliefs and teacher efficacy were positively associated with teachers' inclination to adopt inquiry-based learning in Social Studies, whereas teacher autonomy was negatively associated, suggesting curriculum responsibilities shape adoption decisions; the positive relationship between professional respect and inquiry adoption was mediated by relationships with department leadership (Lu et al., 2024). A qualitative study of Taiwanese civics and society teachers similarly framed teachers' development of inquiry-based courses as itself a form of professional inquiry, in which teachers iteratively researched and refined their own practice (Chen, 2025). Among 40 Singapore primary teachers across social studies, music, and visual arts, teacher knowledge and beliefs shaped how inquiry-based curriculum was enacted differently across subjects, informing a proposed framework integrating aesthetic and inquiry-based learning (Costes-Onishi et al., 2026).

4.2 Theme 2: Teacher Self-Efficacy and Preparedness

A study of 60 Indonesian pre-service primary teachers found that self-efficacy for teaching Social Studies varied according to prior educational background and teaching experience (Khusniyah et al., 2023). Slovak pre-service teachers' preparedness for geographic inquiry improved through structured practice with digital mapping tools, suggesting that preparedness for inquiry can be deliberately cultivated during teacher preparation (Csachová & Gábor, 2025). A qualitative case study of rural U.S. high school Social Studies teachers found that teachers valued inquiry-oriented decision-making materials but reported persistent challenges reconciling these materials with state standards and existing instructional practice (Milam & Byford, 2023).

4.3 Theme 3: Professional Development for Inquiry-Based Social Studies Teaching

A design-based study developing a professional development programme for Dutch primary teachers found that iteratively designed, sustained professional development grounded in teacher interviews and literature on effective PD improved teachers' pedagogical content knowledge for designing inquiry-based history lessons that foster pupils' historical reasoning (Potjer et al., 2026). A meta-synthesis of inquiry-based classroom practices in Singapore's humanities and arts subjects found that, despite policy emphasis on inquiry, instruction remained largely teacher-centered in practice, with teachers reporting uncertainty about how to enact inquiry effectively (Costes-Onishi et al., 2020).

4.4 Theme 4: Student Outcomes Associated with Inquiry-Based Social Studies Instruction

A quasi-experimental study of 132 Indonesian grade 7 students found that guided inquiry learning combined with explicit social skills instruction was associated with improved analytical skills relative to conventional expository teaching (Chandra et al., 2020). A related

quasi-experimental study of grade 8 Indonesian students found that a thinking-skill-based inquiry learning method was associated with improved Social Studies learning outcomes (Nurhayati et al., 2020). Among pre-service history teachers, a quantitative study found that combining inquiry-based learning with a student-response-system-based formative assessment was associated with improved academic achievement relative to conventional instruction (Tirado-Olivares et al., 2021). These three studies differ in sample (junior secondary students, pre-service teachers), design, and outcome measures, and their reported associations should not be treated as directly comparable or additive.

4.5 Theme 5: Designing and Scaffolding Inquiry Questions

A design-based mixed-methods study following 28 elementary teacher candidates across two U.S. universities found that shifting from conventional compelling questions to questions addressing sociopolitical injustice ("critical inquiry") was demanding for participants, particularly for elementary-level teacher candidates who had less experience with critical content. Complementary work on questioning techniques for students with disabilities in inclusive Social Studies classrooms similarly emphasized questioning as a critical, learnable skill for fostering engagement and higher-order thinking (Minarik & Bulgren, 2024). An examination of elementary inquiry design models found that the specific actions required of students varied considerably across models, suggesting that teachers' choice of inquiry design model has direct implications for what students are asked to do (Brugar et al., 2024).

4.6 Theme 6: Contextual and International Variation

A preliminary qualitative study of Singaporean secondary teachers found considerable variation in how teachers interpreted and enacted a newly introduced inquiry-based "Issue Investigation" component of the national Social Studies syllabus, suggesting that curricular introduction of inquiry does not by itself produce a shared understanding of the approach among teachers (Yang, 2023). A historical case study of the mid-20th-century Amherst Curriculum Project situated inquiry-based history teaching within a longer reform tradition treating history as a mode of inquiry rather than a fixed body of knowledge (Jong, 2024). A survey of 309 Slovenian primary teachers found that experiential and outdoor learning were the most frequently used instructional strategies in early Social Studies, with inquiry-based learning as the second most common, and that teacher attitudes shaped which strategies were used (Hegediš et al., 2026). A design-based study addressing opportunity gaps for lower socio-economic-status students in U.S. early-years Social Studies proposed a "wonder" framework combining inquiry-based learning, historical primary sources, and dialogic reading to elevate curiosity-driven instruction (Berson & Berson, 2024).

5. DISCUSSION

Across the six themes synthesized above, a consistent pattern emerges: teachers' professional identity, beliefs, and self-efficacy (Theme 1 and 2) appear closely tied to whether and how inquiry-based Social Studies instruction is adopted, independent of ; and in some cases more strongly associated with adoption than technical training alone (Chen, 2025; Lu et al., 2024). This is consistent with a social-constructivist account of teaching as well as learning: just as students are theorized to construct understanding through active engagement (Vygotsky, 1978), teachers appear to construct their professional practice through ongoing reflection and identity work, as illustrated most directly by Chen's (2025) framing of teachers' inquiry-based course design as itself a form of professional inquiry.

The professional development literature synthesized in Theme 3 suggests that sustained, iteratively designed programmes are more consistently associated with improved

pedagogical content knowledge than one-off training (Potjer et al., 2026), while the persistence of teacher-centered practice despite policy support for inquiry (Costes-Onishi et al., 2020) suggests that curricular mandates alone are insufficient without accompanying professional development that addresses teachers' uncertainty about enactment. This is consistent with Ausubel's (1968) emphasis on connecting new practice to teachers' existing understanding, rather than presenting inquiry as an isolated technique.

Student-outcome studies (Theme 4) report associations between guided or thinking-skill-based inquiry instruction and improved analytical or critical thinking outcomes (Chandra et al., 2020; Nurhayati et al., 2020; Tirado-Olivares et al., 2021). However, these studies are geographically concentrated (two of three in Indonesia), vary in sample and design, and were not assessed for methodological quality in this review; the reported associations should therefore be read as indicative rather than as a generalizable effect, and as noted in the Method, no formal risk-of-bias appraisal was conducted.

The challenge of designing appropriately scaffolded inquiry questions (Theme 5) recurs across contexts and grade levels, and appears particularly acute for elementary teachers working with critical or sociopolitically sensitive content (Jong, 2024). Taken together with Theme 6's evidence of substantial contextual variation in how teachers interpret curricular inquiry mandates (Yang, 2023), in which instructional strategies are actually used in practice (Hegediš et al., 2026), and in the specific pedagogical models through which inquiry is operationalized (Brugar et al., 2024) this review's findings suggest that inquiry-based Social Studies instruction should not be treated as a single, uniform practice. Teacher professionalism, in this literature, functions less as a fixed prerequisite and more as an ongoing, context-dependent process of belief formation, skill development, and reflective adaptation.

Practical and policy implications suggested by this review offered with appropriate caution given the review's reliance on a single database and single-reviewer screening include prioritizing sustained, iteratively developed professional development that explicitly engages teachers' beliefs and identity (not only technical skills), and providing elementary teachers with structured support for designing compelling, appropriately scaffolded inquiry questions, particularly where sensitive or critical content is involved.

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review examined how teacher professionalism relates to the implementation of the inquiry approach in Social Studies instruction, synthesizing 18 empirical studies identified through a PRISMA-informed search and screening process. Teachers' professional identity, constructivist beliefs, and self-efficacy are consistently associated with inquiry adoption across the studies reviewed; sustained, iteratively designed professional development is more consistently associated with improved practice than brief training; and designing appropriately scaffolded inquiry questions remains a persistent challenge, particularly for elementary teachers and for content addressing sociopolitical issues. Reported associations between inquiry-based instruction and student analytical or critical-thinking outcomes are promising but geographically concentrated and methodologically heterogeneous, and should not be treated as a generalizable effect size.

This review has several limitations that should inform how its conclusions are used. The search was limited to the Scopus database, supplemented by a small number of additional targeted searches, and may not capture relevant work in other databases, in languages other than English or Indonesian, or in non-indexed regional journals. Screening and thematic synthesis were conducted by a single reviewer without independent second-coder

verification, and no formal risk-of-bias or study-quality appraisal was applied to the included studies. Consequently, the synthesis presented here should be read as a systematically documented, indicative mapping of the available literature rather than a definitive or exhaustive meta-analytic account, and its practical implications should be treated as considerations for further testing.

Future research could usefully pursue a multi-database systematic review with independent dual screening to test the robustness of the themes identified here, apply a formal quality-appraisal tool to weigh the included studies' relative methodological strength, and conduct a meta-analysis where study designs permit comparable effect-size estimation. Empirical studies that directly measure teacher professional identity alongside classroom implementation fidelity would help clarify the mechanism suggested by Lu et al. (2024) and Chen (2025). Comparative studies across different resource contexts would help clarify which of the implementation challenges identified here are context-dependent versus general to inquiry-based Social Studies pedagogy.

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