

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a Global Content Framework?

Brad M. Maguth
The University of Akron

Huiyong Yang
Henan University, China

Abstract:

Existing research in global and social studies education has focused on methods, tools, and instruments to impart dispositions and skills for global learning, with little research pertaining to key global content knowledge. In this manuscript, the authors consider the use of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a prospective global content knowledge framework to impart global learning in social studies. Middle-grades Ancient World History content standards from two countries, China and the U.S., were reviewed to evaluate the degree of their alignment to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5: Gender Equality. The authors found little direct content alignment between content presented in the SDG and the reviewed content standards. Implications of this research in the consideration of global content knowledge frameworks, as well as preparing learners to live up to the expectations of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5, in social studies are discussed.

Key words: Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations, global education, gender, content standards, China

Introduction

Like never before, globalization and technology have connected culturally diverse and geographically distant populations. People, investments, goods, research, and ideas can be immediately transported to nearly every corner of our planet. At the same time as global markets, mass migration, and other forces push people together, increasing counter forces like rising nationalism and populism can pull people and states apart. However, mounting global

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

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under the SDGs. Below, additional information is provided on the goals selected for review in our analysis for each country.

Why China's Curricular Standards and Gender Equality?

The People's Republic of China content standards were selected due to Author #2 living and working as a college lecturer in the teaching of English in China, and Author #1 having two months of experience teaching and researching global learning in China. Furthermore, China has one of the largest populations of youth, more than 100 million children, enrolled in some 200,000 elementary schools and 52,600 junior high schools nationwide (Michael & Gu, 2016). Additionally, China's Ministry of Education provides readily accessible curricular resources and materials online.

The authors decided to select, out of all the other goals, SDG #5: Gender Equality for their analysis because of the popularity this topic has received domestically and internationally, and because of the paramount importance to ensure that all the world's citizens have full and equal access to rights and opportunities. SDG #5 is focused on promoting gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls; targets include eliminating violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual exploitation, ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life, and enacting legal frameworks to counter deeply rooted gender-based discrimination that often results from patriarchal attitudes and related social norms (United Nations, 2015).

China: Junior High School Course Standards in History

For this study, we examined the *Junior High School Course Standards in History* (2011) published and endorsed by the Ministry of Education in the People's Republic of China. It must be noted that our focus was on the junior secondary grades (ages 12-15) and only in the area of Chinese Ancient World History. We selected these grades due to this being the point at which most students leave school, as compulsory education ends following the completion of grade nine (Zong, 2017).

The *Junior High School Course Standards in History* serves as the official curriculum guide to the teaching and learning of history in China (Zong, 2017). In particular, these standards outline general content that shape the development of history textbooks and instruction. While this document shapes curriculum and content that instructors must teach, schools can select from

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textbooks approved by the State Textbooks Examination and Approval Committee (Zong, 2017). This committee is responsible for ensuring that approved textbooks present appropriate ideological perspectives and content that are in line with the minimum recommendations listed in state course standards and which are developmentally appropriate and adaptable in the classroom.

Table 1

Junior High School Course Standards in China

Chinese Ancient History Standards	http://old.pep.com.cn/peixun/xkpx/czls/kbjd/jiedu/201403/t20140320_1188557.htm
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U.S. Curricular Standards: Ohio's 7th Grade Ancient World History Standards

For this study, we examined the 7th Grade Ancient World History Standards embedded within *Ohio's Learning Standards in Social Studies* approved and adopted by the State Board of Education of the State of Ohio (2010). The 7th grade content standards were selected due to course content (i.e., Ancient World History) and learner age (age 12) aligning well across the different countries' sets of standards. Seventh grade Ancient World History is the last world history course students complete in Ohio before transitioning into modern world history and contemporary American history. Ohio's social studies standards were selected due to both authors' familiarity with the standards, and Author #1 having over 15 years of social studies experience in Ohio.

Ohio's Learning Standards in Social Studies outlines the "most essential curricular content" inclusive of topics and content Ohio's social studies educators are expected to impart to learners. Educators are expected to align their classroom instruction and accompanying assessments in accord with these adopted state standards. However, there is no state assessment aligned to these standards, as the state has defunded all elementary and middle school social studies standardized assessments (Ohio Department of Education, 2017). Ohio law also makes it illegal for the state's department of education to require high school students to complete a world history assessment (Ohio Revised Code 3313.603).

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Table 2

Ohio 7th Grade Social Studies Standards

Grade 7: Ancient World History	http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Social-Studies/Model-Curriculum-for-Social-Studies/Grade-7-Social-Studies-Model-Curriculum_Aug2014.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US
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Findings

Our review of the *Junior High Chinese Ancient World History* content standards and Ohio's 7th Grade Learning Standards in Ancient World History shows that there is inadequate alignment with Goal 5 of the United Nations SDGs. Content standards represent essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions valued and officially promoted by their ministries of education. According to these documents, teachers are at best encouraged to take a "gender blind" instructional approach despite existing gender inequalities, historically and currently, both domestically and globally.

This study finds that no language expressed in SDG Goal #5 or its accompanying targets are included in either the *Junior High Chinese Ancient World History* or Ohio's 7th Grade Ancient World History content standards. Missing language includes referencing both historic and current efforts, domestically and internationally, in ending all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, efforts to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life, and the adopting and strengthening of sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

Of the 31 historical individuals represented in the *Chinese Ancient World History Standards*, 30 are male. The only woman represented is Princess Wencheng; her claim to fame highlights how her marriage created "harmony" between the Tibet and Tang Dynasty. It must be noted that all of the males referenced in the document were scientists, inventors, soldiers, and esteemed statesmen.

While females and their contributions to society are mostly absent in the *Chinese Ancient World History Standards*, there is also a failure to reference any historical improvements (through movements or decree) or any historical progression or struggle in the area of gender equality. No

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references are made to patriarchy and patrilineal societies that existed from at least the 11th century BCE onward in China. This includes the popularity of foot binding, female infanticide, and restricting the freedom of movement for women. The silence and invisibility of contributions by women in Chinese ancient history is contrary to the rich historical record of the important role women played in their communities and families during this time (Brown, 2018; Cartwright, 2017).

The 7th Grade Ohio Ancient World History Content Standards also fail to reference gender or any historical improvements (through movements or decree), progression, or struggle in the area of gender equality. While no historical individuals were referenced in the very vague content statements or topics sections, the accompanying model curriculum document does present historical figures and specific gendered content to be communicated by instructors. These include:

- When discussing Greek Democracy and the Roman Republic (Content Statement 17), the document informs teachers that only males over 18 with Athenian fathers could be granted citizenship and given the right to vote in elections. The document never states directly that women were unable to vote, masking this inequality in the fact that other males (those under 18 and without an Athenian father) were unable to be citizens and vote as well.
- This same model curriculum document, under its “content elaborations” section, lists three historically significant actors by name: Christopher Columbus, Marco Polo, and Kings [in general]. No historically important females or female-specific titles (i.e. Queen or Princess) are referenced.
- Missing from Ohio’s 7th Grade World History standards is any reference to the discrimination and challenges faced by girls and women throughout ancient world history, and the persistent struggle for females to gain acceptance and entry into circles outside family and leadership roles. Women and their contributions are invisible in the Ohio ancient world history standards, more so than even individual female representation in reviewed Chinese ancient history standards.

This missing content across both sets of standards only reinforces the still long and difficult work needed in schools to advance gender equality. As noted within the United Nations’ SDGs:

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Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will require more vigorous efforts, including legal frameworks, to counter deeply rooted gender-based discrimination that often results from patriarchal attitudes and related social norms. Content standards in history are one such necessary legal framework that can be revisited to more vigorously counter discrimination and advance gender equality.

Using the SDGs as one possible marker for global content knowledge could easily serve as an analytical tool to investigate the commitment (or lack thereof) states are making in using schools to prepare citizens to confront significant global issues and challenges. After all, the SDGs represent an agreement by 193 UN member states that identifies the most significant global issues, committing all member states and their people to working together to tackle these challenges. Current frameworks in global education are often void of referencing any specific global content knowledge about the world, its people, or issues, and this research explored the possibility of using the SDGs as a common entry point in presenting global content to learners.

This study finds little to no direct content alignment between the SDGs and the reviewed state content standards. This lack of alignment may pose a challenge for some states in agreeing upon a global content knowledge framework, even with the SDGs as a prospective pathway. Content standards frequently promote national identities and allegiances that come at the cost of and trump readying all youth for an increasingly global age (Grossman, 2017; Ross, 2004).

Discussion

There is recent textbook analysis research that finds improvements in documenting the historical contributions of women in China (Zong, 2017) and in the U.S. (Chick, 2006; Chick & Corle, 2016). Zong investigated the six most widely adopted middle school history textbooks and reported an increase in the visual and textual reference to women in middle school history textbooks. This includes 45 textual references to women and 41 visual images of women across the six middle school history textbooks she analyzed. Unfortunately, Zong's research did not report how women's representation and inclusion compared to that of men. She did note, however, that women are still omitted from these texts during key historical Chinese events (May Fourth Movement, Revolutionary Era, etc.). Gender stereotyping and misrepresentation seemed to dominate history textbooks up through the 1990s (Shi & Ross, 2002; Yi, 2002). Yi Jin's research (2002), which investigated widely adopted history textbooks in China in the 1990s, found the gendered division of labor and gender role clearly manifested in young children's reading materials. Yi noted that:

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

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One hundred percent of scientists, workers, peasants, and soldiers are males, whereas 100 percent of teachers and 75 percent of service personnel are female. Males that appear in elementary school language teaching materials pursue social, professional, managerial, and recreational pursuits, whereas females appear mainly in private, family settings. Even prominent female leaders who have shaped the course of Chinese history are depicted in domestic or supportive roles. Deng Yingchao, one of the most influential female leaders of the Chinese Communist Party and state, appears twice in elementary school teaching materials, once mending Premier Zhou Enlai's clothes, and once bringing an umbrella to a guard on a rainy day. (p. 68)

Historical narratives and research are filled with powerful men writing about the importance of other powerful men, and *his*-story has taken precedent over *her*-story in the social studies classroom (Crocco, 2011). In particular, ancient China was a patriarchy where women were expected to follow the "three obediences" (Cheng, 2016). An ancient Chinese woman was expected to obey her father before she married, her husband after marriage, and her son after her husband's death. Ancient Chinese men also valued particular "virtues" in women. These virtues included women being loyal and moral (fidelity) to the men in her life, and their being ignorant, passive, and uneducated, as women in ancient China were not allowed to attend formal schooling (Cheng, 2016). These unjust and discriminatory attitudes go unacknowledged in the Junior High Chinese Ancient World History Standards, as do the valuable, rich historical contributions of such female figures as:

- Empress Zhangsun (601-636 CE), one of the most famous women in ancient Chinese history. She was wife to Emperor Li Shimin (598-649 CE) during his reign from 626-649 and assisted in the founding of the Tang dynasty (618-907). She also wrote a 30-volume work titled *Examples for Women*. When, upon her death in 636, Emperor Taizong was presented with her writings, he said, "This book, written by the Empress, is capable of being an example to generations;"
- Li Qingzhao (born 1084, died after 1155), one of China's greatest poets. She produced seven volumes of essays and six volumes of poetry, but most of her work is lost except for some poetry fragments. Her work continues to be highly regarded;
- Emperor Wu Zetian, also known as Empress Consort Wu (624-705 CE), the only female emperor in the history of China. She reigned during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) and was one of the most effective and controversial monarchs in China's history. When her

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husband Emperor Gaozong died in 683, Wu took control of the government as ruling emperor of China until a year before her death in 705 at the age of 81.

Chick and Corle (2016) analyzed gender balance in the texts and illustrations of three recently published high school U.S. history textbooks and one alternate volume of American history. In all of the American history texts analyzed, there were significantly more males than females in textbook content and illustrations. Women and girls who contributed to U.S. history were absent, leaving teachers in a difficult position whereby they needed to fill the visibility gender gap through their own research and sources. This finding was also visible in our analysis of the Ohio 7th Grade Ancient World History Standards, as the names and actions of females that contributed to world history went unacknowledged and reordered. This, despite an array of vast female actors in ancient history (including those listed previously) who helped shape the world (Brown, 2018), such as:

- Cleopatra (Cleopatra VII), who ruled ancient Egypt for almost three decades. She could speak various languages and served as a dominant ruler who gained influence over Roman leaders Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, some of the most powerful Western men of the time;
- Artemisia, Warrior-Queen of Halicarnassus, the ruler of Halicarnassus (near today's Bodrum, Turkey) and its neighboring islands, part of the Persian empire then ruled by Xerxes. When Xerxes went to war against Greece (480-479 BCE), Artemisia brought five ships and helped Xerxes fight the Greeks in the naval battle of Salamis. The Greeks offered a reward of 10,000 drachmas for capturing the courageous Artemisia, but no one succeeded in winning the prize;
- Enheduanna, an Akkadian/Sumerian poet credited with creating the paradigms of poetry, psalms, and prayers used throughout the ancient world, which led to the development of the genres recognized in the present day.

This research is coupled with findings that textbooks in the U.S. and China are emerging as more gender inclusive despite a lack of attention to gender equality in middle grades ancient world history standards. It is our conclusion that, at best, both sets of standards reviewed strive to take a “gender blind” approach, and authors opted to take a mostly collective “we” approach versus disaggregating historical events, issues, achievements by gender. However, when specific individuals are referenced in these standards and within their supporting documents, all tend to be male figures.

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Furthermore, this study found that there is little to no direct content alignment between SDG #5: Gender Equality and the reviewed state content standards. Thus, as currently written, the goals do not align to or fill a “global content knowledge gap” in global education. This supports the finding that curricular content continues to prioritize national and local identities over global issues or shared goals (Grossman, 2017; Ross, 2005). A different yet related challenge in the movement towards a global content knowledge framework is the process of deciding what content to include in schools, as this process can be difficult and contentious across and within nation-states. Even though the United Nations 17 SDGs and 169 targets provides an agreed-upon global agenda to promote a sustainable future for humanity, their intended purpose was not to serve as a resource for states in identifying global content in their school’s curriculum standards, as valuable as this may be. The SDGs are general, agreed-upon statements, with some content listed within devised targets that fail to provide a thorough list of global content knowledge about the world, its people, or issues.

Finally, and of paramount importance, a global content knowledge framework includes the limitations that would exist in any construction of an agreed-upon framework. This includes how such a framework may marginalize or subordinate minority perspectives. Such a framework may serve as an ideological tool that colonizes the hearts and minds of others—something all too common in the history of curriculum, schooling, and global learning (Merryfield, 2008; Subedi, 2010; Willinsky, 1998). Individual nation-states are closest to the needs of their citizens and, many would argue, best positioned to meet their particular development needs.

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

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Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

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About the Authors:

Brad Maguth - Associate Professor of Social Studies Education in the Department of Curricular & Instructional Studies in the LeBron James Family Foundation College of Education, The University of Akron.

Huiyong Yang - Instructor of English in the Department of English at Henan University, China.

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

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Appendix A - Analytical Tool

SDG Target #	Target	Content Review	
		<i>Standard Title</i>	<i>Applicable Content Standard</i>
5.1	End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere		
5.2	Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation		
5.3	Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation		
5.4	Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the		

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	provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate		
5.5	Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life		
5.6	Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on		

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	Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences		
5.A	Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws		
5.B	Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women		

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5.C	Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels		
	Other: Gender inequality persists worldwide, depriving women and girls of their basic rights and opportunities. Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will require more vigorous efforts, including legal frameworks, to counter deeply rooted gender-based discrimination that often results from patriarchal attitudes and related social norms.		

Appendix B - Historic Individuals References, Chinese Ancient History (Grades 7-9)

Male or Female	Historical Individuals Referenced w/ Content
M	○ Emperor Shi Huangdi was the founder of the Qin Dynasty and was the first emperor of a unified China.
M	○ Emperor Wudi was a great emperor in the Han Dynasty and his empire was the largest one in the world at that time.
M	○ Zheng He was a Chinese mariner, explorer, diplomat, fleet admiral, and court eunuch during China's early Ming Dynasty.
M	○ Emperor Yan, the Flame Emperor, was a legendary ancient Chinese ruler in pre-dynastic times.
M	○ Emperor Huang, the Emperor Yellow, was a legendary ancient Chinese ruler in pre-dynastic times. The Chinese people are often referred as the “Descendants of the Yan and Huang.”
M	○ Shang Yang was a politician in Qin Dynasty and is known for The Reforms of Shang Yang.
M	○ Laozi was an ancient Chinese philosopher and writer. He is known as the reputed author of the Tao Te Ching, the founder of philosophical Taoism.
M	○ Confucius was an influential Chinese teacher, editor, politician, and philosopher.
M	○ Chen Sheng was the leader of the Dazexiang Uprising, the first rebellion against the Qin Dynasty.
M	○ Wu Guang was a leader of the first rebellion against the Qin Dynasty.

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M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Emperor Wendi was an emperor in the Han Dynasty who ruled his empire with “virtues.”
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Emperor Jingdi was the son of Emperor Wendi and maintained the peace and prosperity of the Han Dynasty.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Sima Qian was a Chinese historian of the Han dynasty. He is considered the father of Chinese historiography for his Records of the Grand Historian.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Zhang Zhongjing was an Eastern Han Dynasty physician and one of the most eminent Chinese physicians during the later years of the Han Dynasty.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Hua Tuo was an ancient Chinese physician who lived in the late Eastern Han Dynasty.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Emperor Xiao Wendi was an emperor in the Northern Wei Dynasty and advocated the integration of different ethics.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Zu Chongzhi was a famous mathematician and astronomer in the Southern and Northern Dynasty period.
F	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Princess Wencheng was a princess of the royal family in the Tang Dynasty and married the leader of Tufan (today’s Tibet) to promote ethnic integration.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Emperor Xuanzong of Tang was the seventh emperor of the Tang dynasty in China, reigning from 713 to 756 CE.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Jian Zhen was a monk in the Tang Dynasty who went to Dong Ying (today’s Japan) to spread Buddhism.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Xuan Zang was a monk in the Tang Dynasty who went to Tian Zhu (today’s India) to learn Buddhism.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Emperor Taizong of Tang was the second emperor of the Tang dynasty of China, ruling from 626 to 649 CE.

Corresponding author: bmaguth@uakron.edu

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M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ An Lushan was a leader of Fanzhen (local separate regime) who led a rebellion against the Tang Dynasty.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Shi Siming was a leader of Fanzhen who helped An Lushan in the rebellion.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Yue Fei was a Chinese military general who defended the Southern Song Dynasty against foreign invasion.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Genghis Khan was the Great Khan and founder of the Mongol Empire, which became the largest contiguous empire in history after his death. He came to power by uniting many of the nomadic tribes of Northeast Asia.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Qi Jiguang was a military general of the Ming Dynasty. He is best known for leading the defense on the coastal regions against wokou (Japanese pirates) activities in the 16th century.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Li Zicheng was a Chinese rebel leader who overthrew the Ming Dynasty in 1644 and ruled over China briefly as the emperor of the short-lived Shun Dynasty.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Zheng Chenggong was a Chinese Ming loyalist who resisted the Qing conquest of China and recovered Taiwan.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Wen Tianxiang was a politician and patriotic poet in the Song Dynasty who is known for his fighting against the Yuan Dynasty.
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Kang Xi was the fourth emperor in the Qing Dynasty and fought many wars to keep the territorial integrity of China.