

An Analysis of Time Prioritization for Social Studies in Elementary School Classrooms

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Abstract

Time is an essential component of instructional decision-making and subject area prioritization. The greater the amount of instructional time teachers allocate toward a specific subject the greater the content exposure and opportunity to engage learners. Evidence suggests that social studies receives short shrift in the elementary schools resulting in the undermining of opportunities to learn the subject in meaningful ways. Using survey data from 2,336 elementary social studies teachers, we examined relationships among the professional attitudes and instructional decision-making of elementary school teachers on reported social studies instructional time. Results from analyses indicated that teachers who used discipline-specific methods, integrated within English Language Arts, and who reported being satisfied with teaching social studies spent significantly increased time on social studies. Moreover, teachers who reported more frequent social studies content integration or who reported having a mandated test spent more time on discipline-specific strategies than teachers who did not. Findings have implications for teacher educators preparing elementary practitioners, school leaders accommodating the field, and policymakers attempting to position social studies within an era of accountability.

Time is precious in teaching. Instructional time, as an indicator of opportunity to learn (Berliner, 1990), can substantially affect how much and how long students are exposed to specific content and skills. Conversely, limited instructional time can have a negative impact on learning. Thus, teachers' prioritization of instructional time is an important consideration. How teachers choose to use time is determined by a myriad of complex factors including the demands of curricula, grade level, classroom context, management, and teacher disposition (Hargreaves, 1994; Kyriakides, Christoforou, & Charalambous, 2013). Perhaps no classroom practitioners experience the demands of instructional time like elementary school teachers. Unlike their secondary colleagues, elementary teachers juggle competing core discipline areas (English/language arts, math, science, social studies) as well as *specials* (e.g., art, music) while simultaneously nurturing the social and emotional development of students (Wills, 2007; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009).

In the competition among the core subject areas for elementary instructional time, research has consistently indicated that social studies receives the lowest priority (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; VanFossen, 2005). For example, VanFossen (2005) found that, out of a five-hour instructional day, K-3 grade teachers in Indiana spent less than 20 minutes on social studies instruction, while

teachers in grades 4-5 spent less than 30 minutes. Mounting accountability pressures combined with student socioeconomic status and grade level curriculum differences are the most commonly cited predictors of social studies instructional time at the elementary level (Pace, 2008, 2011; VanFossen, 2005). The neglect of social studies at the elementary level can have profoundly negative effects on students' knowledge of history and civics (Bisland, 2012; Brophy, 1986; Good & Brophy, 2000). Perhaps not coincidentally, the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results indicated that among the core subject areas, student performance is lowest in social studies-related fields of history, civics, and geography (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011).

In a recent study, Fitchett, Heafner, and Lambert (2014b) analyzed another dimension of teaching that was significantly associated with the amount of instructional time devoted to elementary social studies: perceived autonomy. Teachers who reported more autonomy (i.e., greater sense of control over the classroom) also indicated spending more time teaching social studies. This finding led us to question whether other attitudes toward teaching social studies, such as job satisfaction and subject area prioritization, were predictors of instructional time. We also sought to understand whether teachers' instructional decision-making and the strategies they used for teaching social studies, factors yet to be examined in large-scale data analyses, were associated with instructional time. Finally, we examined the relationship between two key concepts associated with elementary social studies, teaching integration frequency and mandatory testing (Bisland, 2012; Pace, 2011b), to determine how these factors might influence teachers' instructional decision-making.

In the present study, we used data collected from the online *Survey on the Status of Social Studies* (2010) to examine the contextual determinants of social studies marginalization and the influence of elementary teachers' perceptions of attitudes and instructional decision-making on reported social studies instructional time while controlling for classroom contexts, including testing mandates, grade level of students, and socioeconomic status of students. In addition, we examined the influence of teachers' testing environment and integration frequency on their reported instructional decision-making.

Conceptual Framework

This study built upon three conceptual areas frequently associated with elementary social studies time: the contextual determinants of social studies marginalization (grade-level differences, mandated testing requirements, and school-level characteristics), teachers' professional attitudes (including professional control and perception of social studies value), and instructional decision-making (use of integration and instructional strategy preferences). The following section highlights how these concepts influence the curricular prioritization of social studies among elementary grade practitioners.

Contextual Determinants of Marginalization

In the United States, elementary social studies has historically been placed on the instructional backburner in favor of other core subjects (Barton, 2011; Houser, 1995; Lintner & Schweder, 2008), reflecting a well-documented longstanding issue (Henry, 1993). Over the last decade, instructional time allocated for social studies has further diminished due to high-stakes accountability mandates in the US that have placed greater emphasis on English/language arts (ELA), math, and science (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; Levine, Lopez, & Marcelo, 2008; VanFossen, 2005). Under a narrowing curriculum, teachers eliminated social studies instruction or absorbed it within ELA as part of the literacy agenda (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Holloway & Chiodo, 2009). Research has suggested that grade 1-5 teachers in states with an elementary social studies test spend approximately 30 minutes per week (18 hours more per academic year) on social studies than comparable teachers in non-tested states (Fitchett et al., 2014a).

Classroom- and school-level contexts also shape the nature and prioritization of social studies teaching. Previous studies indicated that elementary teachers in areas of poverty lost more time from social studies instruction than peers in more affluent communities, believing that their students required more support in the form of time in universally-tested subjects like ELA and mathematics (Levine et al., 2008; Pace, 2008, 2011; Segall, 2006). The additional instructional time for these tested subjects resulted in inequitable curricular access to social studies (Au, 2007, 2009; Pace, 2011a; Piere, Baker, & Bobbitt, 1997; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Grade-level was also associated with increased social studies instructional time; teachers of intermediate level students (grades 4-5) spent significantly more time on social studies than practitioners in earlier grades (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Thornton & Houser, 1996; VanFossen, 2005). Researchers posited that this phenomenon was linked to the traditional structure of the elementary grade curriculum, whereby later grades tend to have a more structured, content-specific curriculum compared to the more integrated nature of early grades social studies (Brophy & Alleman, 2008; Duplass, 2007; Hanna, 1937).

Professional Attitudes toward Social Studies

Context and policy do not necessarily predetermine the amount of time elementary teachers allot toward instruction, however. Teachers' workplace attitudes, such as autonomy, satisfaction teaching social studies, and interest in the subject matter influence how teachers prioritize social studies. Social studies remains a low priority among many elementary practitioners in the United States. Previous survey data indicated that elementary teachers and their students viewed social studies as the least important of the core subject areas (Good et al., 2010; Passe, 2006; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Underscoring a lack of interest, research of elementary teacher education programs noted that pre-service teachers experienced less social studies instruction during student teaching than other core areas, resulting in perceptions of feeling

unprepared to teach the subject (Yon & Passe, 1990). Elementary preservice teachers were less likely to student-teach social studies and were frequently cajoled by their cooperating teachers to neglect social studies to provide more time for other instruction (Bolick, Adams, & Willox, 2010).

In contrast to the systematic resistance against preservice elementary social studies, numerous qualitative studies have called attention to examples of practitioners who elected to spend time teaching social studies regardless of testing and standardization constraints (Brophy, 1993; Gradwell, 2006; Grant, 2003; van Hover, 2006). These ambitious teachers consciously chose to teach beyond the limitations set forth by state curricula and accountability pressures. Ultimately, these practitioners viewed themselves as efficacious gatekeepers and critical consumers of the curricula who have pedagogical control over how and how much social studies content they taught (Ross, 2006; Thornton, 1991, 2005). These studies affirmed that teachers who viewed themselves with such autonomy spent more time on social studies instruction than teachers who did not view themselves in that way (Fitchett et al., 2014a).

Instructional Decision-Making

Teacher workplace attitudes, such as perceived autonomy, often impact instructional decision-making. What teachers want to do in their classroom and how they do it are related to the allocation of their instructional time for social studies. Previous studies indicated that teachers who prioritized social studies instruction and engaged in inquiry-based, discipline-specific practice allocated more time to social studies (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Levstik, 2008; Serriere, Mitra, & Cody, 2010). In his examples of historical inquiry, VanSledright (2011) noted that time constraints were a persistent issue for dynamic teaching. Teachers who engaged students with materials outside the textbook, encouraged critical thinking, and promoted cooperative learning spent more time on social studies instruction than teachers who engaged in more passive forms of pedagogy, such as traditional lectures (Brophy, 2006).

Yet, what social studies teachers know regarding content and pedagogy and what they practice are often quite disparate (Barton & Levstik, 2003, 2004; van Hover & Yeager, 2003). U.S. policy trends of increased accountability, standardization, and curricular intensification can affect how teachers make instructional choices, prompting them to increase content coverage. Perceived content mandates seemingly restricted teachers' instructional options (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Mausethagen, 2013; Thornton, 1991). In this intensified environment, teachers perceived worksheets, textbooks, and lecture as timesaving strategies (Wills, 2007; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Testing, as a by-product of accountability policies, has received particular scrutiny from the field. Research has suggested that high-stakes testing in social studies encourages teacher-centered practices such as lecture, reading from the textbook, and other forms of rote instruction, while deterring discipline-specific pedagogies (Gerwin & Viscone, 2006; Saye & The Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative, 2013; Vogler, 2006).

In most states, however, social studies is under-tested at the elementary level (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010). The emphasis on high-stakes testing in content areas such as math and English/language arts leads many elementary teachers to utilize integration, whereby the social studies content is interwoven with ELA content and skills as a strategy for addressing social studies content (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012). The widely used, highly polarizing, Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSI; 2010) includes strands specific to history/social studies integration in grades 6-10. These strands include standards such as “determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas” (CCSI, 2010). Though no such standards exist for elementary grades, research indicates that K-5 teachers frequently incorporate social studies texts in their ELA instruction. For example, Good et al. (2010) noted that 60% of elementary teachers used integration as a general approach to teaching social studies. Findings indicated that such integration efforts varied widely, ranging from highly effective curricula (Field, Bauml, & Ledbetter, 2011; Holloway & Chiodo, 2009) to those lacking substantive social studies content and skills (Boyle-Baise et al., 2008; Pace, 2011b). For this reason, some social studies educators are cautious of championing integration as an optimal instructional compromise (Thornton & Houser, 1996; VanFossen, 2005).

Rationale for Further Investigation and Research Questions

Research confirms that emphasis on high-stakes testing and standards in math and ELA has crowded out elementary teachers’ social studies instructional time allocation. Yet, teachers’ decision-making remains a complex phenomenon. Some previous research examined the relationship between school contexts (demographics, testing, and grade level) and social studies instructional time (cf. Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Pace, 2011a; VanFossen, 2005). Other studies explored the phenomena of ambitious teaching and its relationship to instructional decision-making (cf. Au, 2007; Grant, 2003). The confluence of these lines of research has remained relatively unexamined in social studies, however, and serves as the rationale for this study. Specifically, there is a paucity of research exploring the extent to which teachers’ instructional decision-making and workplace attitudes influence reported social studies time – an important indicator of opportunity to learn (Berliner, 1990). Understanding how workplace attitudes and instructional decision-making are associated with social studies prioritization has potential implications for how teachers, teacher educators, and educational leaders promote social studies in the elementary grades. Thus, our study examined teachers’ instructional decision-making strategies and professional attitudes as predictors of instructional time and explored the association between teaching context and attitudes on instructional decision-making. We addressed the following research questions:

1. What professional attitudes and instructional decision-making do elementary teachers report toward social studies?

2. Is there an association between the proportion of instructional time elementary teachers report allocating to social studies and their professional attitudes when controlling for contextual determinants of marginalization (e.g., urbanity, socioeconomic factors)?
3. Is there an association between the proportion of instructional time elementary teachers report allocating to social studies and their reported use of three types of instructional decision-making when controlling for contextual determinants and professional attitudes?
4. To what extent is there a relationship between mandated testing and teachers' reported instructional decision-making use in elementary social studies?
5. To what extent is there a difference in the use of three types of instructional decision-making reported by elementary teachers who frequently integrate social studies in their ELA instruction compared to teachers who do not frequently integrate in ELA?

Method

Participants

In the present study, we used data collected from the online *Survey on the Status of Social Studies (S4)* (2010), which included PK-12 social studies teachers across 44 U.S. states ($N = 11,295$)¹ between spring 2010 and spring 2011. Participants were recruited via email to complete the survey. Limited access to states' social studies teacher databases made a nationally representative, stratified-random sample prohibitive. Therefore, the sampling frame for this study is considered a convenience sample. The S4 is the largest study of social studies teaching attitudes, reported practices, and characteristics in over two decades (Fitchett & VanFossen, 2013).

For purposes of the present study, we selected respondents who indicated they were full-time, U.S. teachers in grades 1-5.² Because team teachers and single subject teachers would confound reports of instructional time (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010), we also selected only respondents who reported teaching in self-contained classrooms (i.e., taught all subjects). Data were conditioned to a subsample ($n = 2,336$).

¹ A link to the survey can be found here:

<http://webpages.uncc.edu/~pfitchet/NationalSocialStudiesSurvey.pdf>

The District of Columbia, Hawaii, Missouri, New Mexico, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming did not participate in the study.

² Kindergarten was intentionally excluded from our study because of the organizational variability across U.S. states and school systems. In some states, kindergarten is required full-instructional day. In other states/systems, it is required half-day, and in a few states, kindergarten is not required at all.

Respondents were overwhelming female (94%) and white (88.3%). Among the subsample, 99% were licensed teachers. A majority of teachers reported having a master's degree (54%) compared to bachelor's (43%) and doctorate (2.2%) degrees. The average years of teaching experience among the subsample was approximately 15 years. A greater proportion of the teachers surveyed characterized their schools as suburban (38%) compared to urban (26%) or rural (36.3%). Teachers also reported low minority enrollment (34%).

Instrument

The online survey instrument (S4) included 97 items that measured reported time spent teaching social studies at the elementary level, professional attitudes, and instructional emphases. Participants' email addresses were removed from all respondent data. The average completion time for the instrument was approximately 20 minutes. Likert-type items were analyzed for validity and technical adequacy in both a pilot study and technical report following data collection (cf. Fitchett & VanFossen, 2013). Face validity of the instrument was obtained through feedback from social studies teachers and teacher educators. Item reliability on various subscales was minimally to moderately adequate ($\alpha = .70$ to $.80$) on inventories reporting teachers' decision-making (e.g., frequency of use of textbooks, lecture, primary source documents) and dispositional items relating to teacher autonomy (e.g., teacher control over resources, instructional strategies). Statistical validity of the items was obtained through principal axis factor analysis.³

Before investigating the research questions, several individual items on the S4 were combined into factors. Factors offer greater reliability and validity than single item predictors (Liu, 2004). Furthermore, educational research suggests that teaching factors are more valid predictors than singular instructional approaches (Kyriakides et al., 2013). In a previous study (Fitchett & VanFossen, 2013) that examined the technical adequacy of individual S4 items, the authors conducted exploratory factor analysis to examine the statistical validity and reliability of key item inventories embedded within the instrument. Using principal axis factor analysis with oblique rotations, factor inclusion and simple solutions were determined by eigenvalues (>1.0) and scree plots. Findings indicated that items in the instructional decision-making inventory of the S4 loaded onto three distinct factors: discipline-specific instruction, teacher-centered instruction, and student-centered instruction.⁴ This finding corresponded with existing literature and research on social studies teachers'

³ A full description of the survey instrumentation can be found at Fitchett, P.G. & VanFossen (2013). Survey on the Status of Social Studies: Development and analysis. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 8(1), 1-23. Retrieved from: http://www.socstrpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/MS_06462_no1.pdf

⁴ Items 16, 31 and 47 comprise the instructional decision-making inventory for Survey on the Status of Social Studies.

instructional decision-making (Fallace, 2010; Knowles & Theobald, 2013; Levstik, 2008). For purposes of the present study, each of these factors was then used to create scale variables by summing across all the Likert-type items that loaded on a particular factor. For example, the *student-centered scale* summed items on use of role-play, cooperative learning assignments, and group projects. The *teacher-centered scale* summed items on use of the textbook, worksheets, and lecture. The *discipline-specific scale* was created by summing responses to items that asked about teachers' use of primary/secondary materials, writing essays, computer applications, role play, film, and maps and globes. The *teacher autonomy scale* was created by summing responses to teacher control items: How much actual control do you have in the classroom at this school over the following areas of your planning and teaching: selecting the textbook, selecting content and skills taught, curriculum emphases, teaching techniques, and evaluation?

We then conducted Cronbach's *alpha* to examine the internal consistency of the scale variables developed for this subsample. Results indicated that teacher autonomy and the discipline-specific scales were moderately consistent ($\alpha > 0.70$). While teacher-centered and student-centered scales were minimally acceptable ($\alpha > 0.60$), we decided to include these scales because previous analyses confirmed their validity and multidimensionality (Fitchett & VanFossen, 2013). For interpretation purposes, items and variable constructs were occasionally recoded. Item 19 ("How often do you integrate the following subjects: English/language arts?") was recoded into two categories: the highest two values (*almost daily* and *frequently*) were recoded as *high frequency integration in ELA* and the remaining values were coded as *low frequency integration in ELA*. Another item ("To what extent do you agree with the following statement? I am generally satisfied teaching social studies at this school.") was recoded into two values: *satisfied (agree/strongly agree)* and *dissatisfied (disagree/strongly disagree)*.

Because the length of the instructional day varies among schools (Berliner, 1990), using *reported instructional time* as a dependent variable can be problematic. Given the building environment and curricular obligations, how much time a teacher reported spending on a subject might be a greater or lesser proportion of the instructional day compared to another teacher. Due to curricular variability among schools, we decided against using *reported social studies time* as the dependent variable. Instead, we examined the proportion of time spent on social studies as a percentage (%) of aggregate core subject instructional time, whereby

Aggregate core subject time = Social Studies instructional time + ELA instructional time + Science instructional time + Math instructional time.

SSPERCENT = (Social Studies instructional time / aggregate core subject time) X 100.

This approach standardized social studies instructional time across respondents to a percentage.

Design and Data Analysis

To answer research question 1, we used descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) to analyze elementary teachers' overall attitudes toward social studies. To answer questions 2 and 3, we employed hierarchical multiple regression (HMR). This statistical technique specifies the order in which variables (grouped into blocks) enter the model. It accounted for the unique variance contributed by various predictor types (see Table 1). Model 1 included control variables previously associated with social studies instructional time (i.e., contextual determinants of marginalization). To answer research question 2, Model 2 added professional disposition variables. To answer research question 3, Model 3 included teacher instructional strategies. Ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates were used in these analyses because we posited that error terms associated with these models would remain constant across responses. Tests of homoscedacity confirmed this assumption. In a practical sense, this analytical approach allowed us to examine the effect of assigned conceptualized variable groupings in predicting change in the percentage of instructional time spent on social studies. Models are specified below:

Model 1

$$Y_{SS\text{proportionaltime}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{\text{urbanity}} + \dots + \beta_5 X_{\text{mandated test}} + r_0$$

Model 2

$$Y_{SS\text{proportionaltime}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{\text{urbanity}} + \dots + \beta_5 X_{\text{mandated test}} + \dots + \beta_6 X_{\text{prioritizeSS}} + \dots + \beta_8 X_{\text{autonomy}} + r_0$$

Model 3

$$Y_{SS\text{proportionaltime}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{\text{urbanity}} + \dots + \beta_5 X_{\text{mandated test}} + \dots + \beta_6 X_{\text{prioritizeSS}} + \dots + \beta_8 X_{\text{autonomy}} + \beta_9 X_{\text{frequentlyintegrate}} + \dots + \beta_{12} X_{\text{disciplinespecific}} + r_0$$

Whereby:

$Y_{SS\text{proportionaltime}}$ = Reported Social Studies Proportional Time

$\beta_1 X_{\text{urbanity}} + \dots + \beta_5 X_{\text{mandated test}}$ = Classroom Context Variables

$\beta_6 X_{\text{prioritizeSS}} + \dots + \beta_8 X_{\text{autonomy}}$ = Teacher Professional Attitudes

$$\beta_9 X_{\text{frequently integrate}} + \dots + \beta_{12} X_{\text{discipline specific}} = \text{Teacher Instructional Strategies}$$

Table 1
Description of Variables for Hierarchical Multiple Regression Model

Model No.	Variable Constructs	Variables
Model 1	Classroom Context	<i>Five dummy-coded control variables frequently associated with social studies instructional time</i> High/Upper Middle/ Middle socioeconomic status (compared to Low Middle/Low SES) Urban, Rural (compared to Suburban) Intermediate grades 4 and 5 (compared to grades K - 3) State test in elementary social studies (compared to no test)
Model 2	Teacher Professional Attitudes*	<i>Variables examining teacher attitudes</i> Teacher Rank of Social Studies (1 lowest to 6 highest) Satisfied Teaching Social Studies (agree/somewhat agree compared to somewhat disagree/strongly disagree) Teacher Autonomy scale (5 lowest to 20 highest)
Model 3	Teacher Instructional Strategies*	<i>Variables associated with instructional strategies</i> High Frequency of Integration (Almost daily/frequently compared to occasionally/rarely/never) Student-centered instruction scale Teacher-centered instruction scale Discipline-specific instruction scale

*Factors were statistically validated in previous studies conducted by the researchers (Fitchett & VanFossen, 2013).

To answer questions 4 and 5, we employed factorial multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine the relationship between two significant predictors from the HMR (high frequency of integration and mandatory testing) on instructional strategies scales. Given the highly correlated nature of social studies teaching (Levstik, 2008; Stodolsky, 1993), we chose multivariate analysis to examine the linear combination of the reported strategies (student-centered, teacher-centered, and discipline-specific scales) on two independent variables (high frequency integration and mandatory testing). MANOVAs also allowed us to explore the relationship between integration and mandatory testing, a point of interest in earlier qualitative elementary social studies research (Boyle-Baise et al., 2008). Thus, we examined the potential interaction between the two independent variables. For post-hoc tests of between-subject statistical difference, we used analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Results

Elementary Teachers' Professional Attitudes and Instructional Decision-Making

What professional attitudes and instructional decision-making do elementary teachers report toward social studies? To answer Research Question 1, we examined descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation among variables (Table 2). Results indicated that sampled U.S. elementary social studies teachers spent 13.8% of their core subject area instruction time on social studies content, whereas ELA instruction received 43.9% of the core instruction time. Respondents prioritized social studies fourth of six in subject area importance (English/Language Arts, math, science, social studies, art, PE). On average, 56% of respondents were satisfied with teaching social studies ($n = 1,302$), and 86% of respondents reported integrating social studies content into ELA instruction on a frequent basis ($n = 2,001$). Teachers reported feeling relatively autonomous given the scale range (mean of 14.20 out of a 5 to 20 range). Approximately 14% of respondents indicated giving a mandated test on social studies ($n = 328$). Based on mean scale results, respondents were slightly more likely to engage in student-centered instruction than using teacher-centered instruction or discipline-specific instruction (including analyzing primary sources, reading maps/globes).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Elementary Teacher Professional Disposition and Instructional Emphasis (n = 2336)

Variable (range)	Mean	SD
SSPERCENT (1.79-58.62)	13.77	5.76
ELAPERCENT (3.03-81.58)	43.86	9.13
MATHPERCENT (2.22-63.54)	27.92	6.26
SCIPERCENT (1.59-39.91)	14.44	5.40
Prioritize SS (1-6)	3.31	0.82
Autonomy (5-20)	14.20	2.92
Reported a mandated test in SS	0.14	0.35
Satisfied teaching social studies	0.56	0.50
Frequently integrate ELA	0.86	0.35
Student-Centered instruction (3-15)	8.96	2.17
Teacher-Centered instruction (3-15)	8.15	2.61
Discipline-Specific instruction (6-30)	16.86	3.61

Instructional Time, Professional Attitudes, and Instructional Strategies

Next, we employed hierarchical multiple regression to answer research questions 2 and 3 (see Table 3). Results from Model 1 confirmed previous research that testing, grade level, and socioeconomic status as significantly associated with reported elementary social studies time (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014a, 2014b; Pace, 2011a). Holding other contextual determinant variables constant, teachers who have a state test in social studies devoted almost 4% more time to teaching social studies than comparable teachers in states without a test. Teaching in the intermediate grades (4-5) was associated with an approximately 1.6% increase in proportional social studies time compared to teaching in the primary grades (K-3). Working in a higher socioeconomic school environment was associated with almost a 1% increase in proportional time spent on social studies instruction. In the subsequent models 2 and 3, these context variables served as controls, allowing us to better isolate the unique association

between teachers' workplace attitudes and instructional decision-making in social studies on reported social studies time.

Is there an association between the proportion of instructional time elementary teachers' report allocating to social studies and their professional attitudes when controlling for classroom context? To answer Research Question 2, we developed a model that explained variables associated with social studies practitioners' attitudes toward teaching (Model 2 in Table 3). Holding the control variables in Model 1 constant (i.e., accounting for their variance) instructional prioritization of social studies (from 6th priority to 1st priority) was associated with an increase between 0.6% to 3.0% in the proportion of time spent teaching social studies. Teachers who were highly satisfied teaching social studies reported spending approximately 3% more proportionally on the subject per week. Greater teacher autonomy was associated with an approximate increase of between 0.1% to 1.6% in social studies time per week. Model 2 accounted for 16% of proportional social studies time, a significant change that doubled the variance attributed to the previous model.

Is there an association between the proportion of instructional time elementary teachers report allocating to social studies and their reported use of three types of instructional decision-making when controlling for classroom contexts and professional attitudes? To answer Research Question 3, Model 3 was constructed. Holding both the contextual controls and the teacher attitudes constant, we found that teaching emphasis across all three instructional factors and high frequency integration were associated with more time spent on social studies. Among the three instructional decision-making scales, time spent on discipline-specific instruction was associated with the largest increase in the proportion of time spent on social studies—a range between 0.19% to 4.60%. Increases in teacher- and student-centered instruction were associated with smaller ranges of proportional social studies time: 0.25% - 3.0% for student centered and between 0.26% - 3.14% in teacher-centered instruction. Teachers who reported frequently integrating social studies content into their ELA instruction spent an estimated 0.73% more time on the subject than teachers who did not integrate. When accounting for the final model predictors, autonomy and reported socioeconomic status of the school were no longer significantly associated with social studies time. This finding reflects that the variation in instructional strategies confounds the significance of professional autonomy and reported socioeconomic context. Variables associated with Model 3 accounted for 22% of the variance attributed to proportional social studies time, a significant increase of approximately 6% from Model 2 and a 14% increase from Model 1. Given these initial findings, we examined in more detail two of these predictors: mandated testing and frequent integration.

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Unstandardized Coefficients for Variables as a Predictor of Proportional Reported Social Studies Time (n = 2336)

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE	CI 95%	B	SE	CI 95%	B	SE	CI 95%
(Constant)	12.26**	0.25	11.73, 12.72	7.26**	0.73	5.83, 8.69	0.74**	0.86	-0.94, 2.42
Urban	-0.35**	0.31	-0.96, 0.25	-0.10	0.30	-0.69, 0.48	-0.23*	0.29	-0.79, 0.34
Rural	0.37	0.28	-0.18, 0.92	0.25	0.27	-0.028, 0.78	0.37	0.26	-0.14, 0.88
High_SES	0.82**	0.25	0.32, 1.31	0.50**	0.25	0.02, 0.98	0.44*	0.24	-0.29, 0.90
Intermediate	1.58**	0.24	1.10, 2.05	1.84*	0.24	1.37, 2.30	1.45**	0.23	1.00, 1.90
Mandated SS Test	3.73**	0.34	3.06, 4.40	3.05**	0.33	2.39, 3.70	2.43**	0.33	1.79, 3.07
Prioritize SS				0.61**	0.14	0.33, 0.84	0.46**	0.13	0.20, 0.72
SSsatisfaction				2.85**	0.24	2.39, 3.31	2.21**	0.23	1.75, 2.66
Autonomy				0.10**	0.04	0.03, 0.18	0.06	0.04	-0.02, 0.13
FreqintegrateELA							0.73*	0.32	0.10, 1.37
Student-Centered instruction							0.25**	0.07	0.11, 0.39
Teacher-Centered instruction							0.26**	0.04	0.18, 0.35
Discipline-Specific instruction							0.19**	0.04	0.11, 0.28
Model R2	.082			.156			.218		
F for Δ R2	40.8*			65.8**			44.6**		

*p < .05, **p < .01

Mandated Testing, Integration, and Instructional Decision-Making

To answer Questions 4 and 5, we conducted a factorial MANOVA to explore the relationship between teachers' reporting of mandatory testing and frequency of social studies integration in ELA on the instructional factors: student-centered, teacher-centered, and discipline-specific (see Table 4).

To what extent is there a relationship between mandated testing and teachers' reported instructional decision-making in elementary social studies?

Significant differences were found between teachers who reported giving a mandated test and those who did not on each of the three instructional factors [Wilk's $\Lambda = .98$, $F(3, 2330) = 12.97$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$]. Follow-up between subject tests (ANOVA) indicated significant differences between testing status and the dependent variables. As Table 4 illustrates, teachers who reported a mandated test spent more time on: (a) student-centered instruction [$F(1, 2332) = 15.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$], (b) teacher-centered instruction [$F(1, 2332) = 20.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$], and (c) discipline-specific instruction [$F(1, 2332) = 25.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$]. Though the effect sizes for these models were small, findings indicated a consistent theme that testing was associated with greater instructional decision-making opportunity indiscriminate of typology (student-centered, teacher-centered, or discipline-specific).

To what extent is there a difference in the emphasis of instructional decision-making reported by elementary teachers who frequently integrate social studies in their ELA instruction compared to teachers who do not frequently integrate in ELA?

Multivariate tests pointed toward significant differences between high and low frequency integration of ELA among instructional factors [Wilk's $\Lambda = .96$, $F(3, 2330) = 29.56$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$]. ANOVA tests indicated that teachers reporting high frequency integration in ELA spent more time on: (a) student-centered instruction [$F(1, 2332) = 65.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$] and (b) discipline-specific instruction [$F(1, 2332) = 79.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$] (see Table 4). Tests showed no statistically significant time difference in teacher-centered instruction between those respondents who reported frequently integrating social studies content into ELA and those who did not [$F(1, 2332) = 1.94$, $p = .591$]. Results conveyed that elementary teachers who frequently integrated social studies with language arts also spent more time on social studies-specific instruction. A final multivariate test was conducted to examine the interaction effect between testing status and the frequency with which social studies content was integrated into ELA. Results indicated no statistically significant difference across instructional factors that could be associated with the interaction [Wilk's $\Lambda = 1.00$, $F(3, 2330) = 1.33$, $p = 0.263$].

Table 4
Mean Instructional Factor Scores by Reported Testing Status and Integration Frequency (n = 2336)

Instructional Factor (range)	Reported Testing Status	Mean (SE)	Reported ELA Integration Frequency	Mean (SE)
<u>Student-centered instruction</u> (3-15)	No test in social studies reported	8.29 (.07)	Low frequency	7.89 (.18)
	Test in social studies	9.06** (.18)	High frequency	9.46** (.07)
<u>Teacher-centered instruction</u> (3-15)	No test in social studies reported	7.85 (.08)	Low frequency	8.34 (.23)
	Test in social studies	8.945** (.23)	High frequency	8.47 (.08)
<u>Discipline-specific instruction</u> (6-30)	No test in social studies reported	15.66 (.11)	Low frequency	15.03 (.30)
	Test in social studies	17.27** (.30)	High frequency	17.90** (.11)

** $p < .01$

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to examine the confluence of teacher workplace attitudes and instructional decision-making on social studies time. Furthermore, we sought to understand the relationships among instructional decision-making, testing, and ELA integration. Results indicated that teachers' decision-making with an emphasis on discipline-specific instruction and teacher attitudes' (i.e., their satisfaction teaching social studies at their school) were significantly associated with proportional time spent on social studies. Moreover, testing was associated with increases in all three instructional decision-making types, contrary to research suggesting that testing constrains discipline-specific instruction (Vogler, 2006). Moreover, high frequency integration was associated with increased student-centered and discipline-specific instruction—pedagogies championed by social studies researchers and advocates

(Barton & Levstik, 2004; Fallace, 2010; VanSledright, 2011). In the following sections, we describe how this research can be used to inform social studies teachers, school leaders, and policymakers.

Implications and Recommendations for Elementary Social Studies Practitioners and Teacher Educators

Not surprisingly, elementary teachers who responded to the *S4* rated social studies as the least important subject among four core areas (math, ELA, science, social studies). Given recent U.S. policy toward education, including *No Child Left Behind* science testing mandates and *Race to the Top*, we posit that the time devoted to social studies will continue to decrease. These findings affirm that social studies has never really been a priority (Henry, 1993). Hierarchical multiple regression findings conveyed a more complex picture, indicating that teachers' opportunities to teach social studies were influenced by workplace attitudes and instructional decision-making. The current study confirmed the significance of contextual determinants of marginalization reported in previous studies (Fitchett et al., 2014a, 2014b; Pace, 2011a; Segall, 2006), such as grade level, social economic status of students, and mandatory testing. Given the mean reported social studies instructional time ($M = 2.84$ hours per week), teachers in states with mandatory testing spend, on average, 7 minutes more per week on social studies instruction. Across a traditional academic year in the US (36 weeks), this increase contributes 252 more minutes (or over 4 hours) to social studies instruction; however, these variables only contributed a modest 8% of the variance in reported social studies time.

For social studies teachers and teacher educators, these findings suggest that, while testing remains a significant predictor of time spent on social studies content, elementary teachers do not have to remain instructionally hamstrung by accountability mandates. Elementary teachers' positive professional attitudes toward social studies and their instructional decision-making in the model accounted for over twice the variance in the overall amount of proportional time spent on social studies. More importantly, unlike testing mandates, promotion of instructional strategies and positive attitudes are within the realm of good social studies practice and teacher education. Teachers who showed positive attitudes toward their job satisfaction accounted for a proportional increase between 2.9% (Model 2) and 2.2% (Model 3) of social studies time or roughly 2.3 or 2.9 hours increase in social studies during an academic year. Empowering teachers and equipping them with discipline-specific instructional practices can produce positive outcomes for improving social studies' learning opportunities in elementary schools. Findings suggest that those practices aligned with discipline-specific instruction are associated with up to 8 additional minutes of instructional time per week or 4.70 hours per academic year.

From results of the present study, we conclude that teachers who reported having greater professional autonomy were more likely to report spending a greater

proportion of time teaching social studies content than those who did not. This finding aligns with the literature on an *ambitious teaching* construct and the gate-keeping mentality that social educators have advocated for several years (Grant, 2003; Thornton, 1991, 2005). Influencing autonomy or the perception of autonomy, among social studies teachers is a slippery slope, however. Encouraging and nurturing specific teaching attitudes is difficult and is empirically unreliable (Anderson, 2014; Bruner, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Tubachnick & Zeichner, 1984). As illustrated in the present study, after instructional strategies were included in the model, perceived autonomy along with the socioeconomic indicator were no longer statistically significant.

Given our findings, we recommend that social studies teachers emphasize discipline-specific strategies similar to those measured in our study. As our findings illustrate, however, it is also important that teachers have positive attitudes (satisfaction and autonomy) toward social studies. In finding a way to combine the best of all desired qualities associated with this study, we encourage elementary grade teachers to orient themselves as curriculum “gatekeepers” (Thornton, 2005), whereby they take ownership of the content, skills, and concepts associated with social studies teaching and learning. Gatekeeping social studies teachers also embed principles of social studies content, skills, and dispositions in their daily lessons. Effective ideas for teaching social studies in the K-12 can be found in the National Council for the Social Studies journal, *Social Studies and the Young Learner*. We suggest that teachers interested in improving their practice begin by exploring the discipline-oriented lesson plan examples found there. We also encourage teacher education programs to provide greater emphasis on social studies instruction in their course work and offer greater opportunities for teachers to become more comfortable teaching the subject. Social studies programs that seek to encourage ambitious, gatekeeping practices should partner preservice teachers with cooperating teachers who privilege social studies education and make instructional decisions congruent with discipline-specific instruction (i.e., using source material, maps and globes, writing essays, role play/simulation), while also demonstrating positive attitudes toward the subject.

Confirming qualitative (Field et al., 2011) and quantitative (Holloway & Chiodo, 2009) research, we found that teachers who integrated social studies content within ELA instruction spent more time on social studies content and also spent more time on student-centered and discipline-specific instruction. From these results, we posit that such integration can be used to improve the quantity of social studies instruction in constrained curricular environments. While the issue of instructional quality is outside the scope of this study, findings from this study indicate integration with ELA is associated with a greater frequency of highly advocated teaching practices (e.g., discipline-specific instruction and student-centered instruction). We recommend that teachers further their development of meaningful integration techniques in conjunction with discipline-specific methods, perhaps including case studies from existing research (Field et al., 2011; Serriere, Mitra, & Cody, 2010). Beyond reading circles, elementary teachers and teacher educators should give primacy to literacy practices that encourage

inter-textual reading of source material, analysis of documents, and creation of authentic historical accounts.

Implications and Recommendations for School Leaders

While teachers' professional attitudes are difficult to influence within teacher education programs, research indicates that building-level climate and teacher job satisfaction are strongly associated with school leadership, including principals and department chairs. Numerous studies have pointed out that principals who provide faculty greater curricular freedom over day-to-day instruction improve teachers' workplace attitudes (Bolger, 2001; Shen, 1997; Singh & Billingsley, 1996; Taylor & Tashakkori, 1995). Among social studies practitioners, teachers who viewed their school leadership favorably tended to maintain higher job satisfaction (Nelson, 1981). VanFossen (2005) found that building-level support for teaching social studies content significantly related to the amount of instructional time for social studies in grades K-5. A recent study by Patterson, Maguth, DeWitt, Doppen, Harshman, and Augustine (2013, April) noted that school principals value social studies and believe that elementary teachers should spend time on the subject. Concurrently, Anderson (2014) found that principal support was strongly connected with elementary teachers' emphasis on social studies content. Teachers who felt compelled and encouraged by school leadership to teach social studies spent more time on the subject. By supporting teachers in their social studies teaching and giving them greater curricular control, school leaders can indirectly improve the emphasis of social studies instruction.

Moreover, results indicate that integration of social studies content into ELA instruction is positively associated with increased time for social studies and more frequent dynamic instruction. We encourage teacher-leaders to collaborate and share ideas for using integration as an effective strategy for improving overall social studies instruction among grade levels. Finding curricular spaces in which social studies can share instructional time with other subjects, specifically ELA, is a practical step toward improving overall instruction. Additionally, integration aligns with current Common Core initiatives and could position social studies teachers (informational text and close reading literacy specialists) as leaders in cross-curricular integration. We contend that Common Core language associated with the history/social studies strands in grades 6-12 should be applied to elementary grades. Integration for purposes of analyzing and evaluating multiple sources is a skill applicable in early grades as well (Barton & Levstik, 2004). We encourage social studies advocates to consider thoughtful integration practices that complement the discipline-specific pedagogies associated with the field.

Implications and Recommendations for Curriculum and Instruction Policy

Interestingly, these analyses indicated that testing, often associated with narrowing of pedagogical decision-making and rote instruction (cf. Grant & Salinas, 2008), was associated with a reported increase in time spent on a variety of instructional strategies. Though the present study did not examine the nature of course content, our findings suggest that the presence of elementary social studies testing increased the quantity of social studies instruction across various instructional typologies, specifically discipline-specific instruction, and increased the amount of social studies taught overall. We posit that these findings differ from research in U.S. secondary education (Vogler, 2006), primarily due to the complex curricular organization of elementary grades. Unlike in U.S. middle and high schools where social studies is typically afforded a specific block of instructional time with a subject-area specialist (Stodolsky, 1993), elementary grade practitioners are often required to teach social studies as part of the self-contained instructional day. Thus, elementary teachers' decision-making is predicated on curriculum mandates and macro-level accountability pressures that constrain time usage (Anderson, 2014; Wills, 2007; Wills & Sandholz, 2009). Mandated testing exemplifies one of these external pressures, influencing both exposure to various content, at the exclusion of others, and pedagogical decision-making of teachers (Mausethagen, 2013).

The bottom line is that state testing policies impact teacher decision-making. The fact that social studies is not tested in some U.S. states, while it is tested in others, perpetuates a national inequity for the opportunity to teach and learn elementary social studies across the country. Elements outside of testing policy, such as teachers' instructional decision-making and professional attitudes, can and should be major foci of social studies research and advocacy efforts. We argue that a balance of accountability (testing/policy mandates), teacher attitudes, and discipline-specific instructional practice will create a more level, equitable learning opportunity for all students while positioning social studies as an important and essential subject. Lastly, we recommend that future research examine the relationship among state-level accountability policies, instructional decision-making, and social studies time on student achievement in social studies-specific subjects. Such analyses would help policymakers and curriculum specialists better understand the effects accountability has on teacher decision-making and student learning.

Limitations

Effective teaching is directly related to the amount and management of instructional time (Berliner, 1990, Kyriakides et al., 2013). Follow-up case research is needed to examine the relationship between teachers' instructional emphases and reported social studies time across various educational outcomes. Further complicating the findings, the sampling for this study was a convenience sample. There is a potential for over- or underrepresentation of various teacher-types. Moreover, our study used

self-reported data and, therefore, was subject to possible social desirability bias. Given the large sample size and use of de-identified survey protocols, however, we posit that these issues are minimal. Lastly, the nature of data prohibited us from using multilevel analysis and accounting for teaching conditions nested within schools. Further research is needed to examine how elementary school-level climate and context influence social studies teaching.

Conclusion

Anecdotally, teachers across the country are beginning to recognize the value of assessment to increase exposure to social studies. In May 2012, the Governor of Maryland signed into law a bill mandating that all seniors pass a state assessment on government prior to graduating (Dresser, 2012; Maryland House of Delegates 1227, 2012). The law also requires the state school board to develop and implement middle school social studies assessments by the 2014-2015 academic year. Interestingly, it was classroom teachers and other social studies professionals who advocated for the return of state assessments in order to bolster support for the much-maligned subject area. Traditionally opposed to testing, social educators are now keenly aware of the ongoing and intensified marginalization of social studies in the era of increased standardization and accountability.

Marginalization of social studies at the elementary grades negatively impacts students' opportunities to learn, which in turn can have potentially harmful effects on students' performance in later grades as well as hinder civic understanding. While the presence of a mandated test remains a significant predictor of the proportion of time spent on social studies, results from our study also indicate that testing at the elementary level is associated with increased use of a range of instructional factors, including discipline-specific teaching. This finding offers promise of pedagogical change toward more historical thinking and inquiry-based activity as advocated in the field. We also infer from our findings that teachers, teacher educators, and proponents of social studies education not directly tied to accountability policymaking can make a substantial contribution to the field by promoting efficacious attitudes, quality integration, and dynamic instructional strategies. More importantly, taking the time to teach social studies at the elementary level is an important step toward guaranteeing that students are exposed to content and skills necessary to becoming productive, engaged members of a democratic society.

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