

2017

## "Slavery wasn't that bad": An examination of the effects of reduced social studies class time and student misconceptions

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### Recommended Citation

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Running Head: THE EFFECTS OF REDUCED SOCIAL STUDIES CLASS TIME

“SLAVERY WASN’T THAT BAD”: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF REDUCED  
SOCIAL STUDIES CLASS TIME AND STUDENT MISCONCEPTIONS

A Thesis Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation of  
University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa  
December 2017

This study by: Matthew Mengler

Entitled: "Slavery Wasn't That Bad": An Examination of the Effects of Reduced Social Studies  
Class Time and Student Misconceptions

Has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirements for the Designation University  
Honors

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Date

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Dr. Sarah Montgomery, Honors Thesis Advisor, Curriculum & Instruction

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Date

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Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

### **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to thank my amazing thesis advisor Dr. Sarah Montgomery. Without her, this thesis would not have happened. Her Professional Development School classes provided the inspiration for this project and her guidance and influence were certainly needed for the completion of this study.

I would like to thank all of the teachers that I interviewed in this study. Thank you for taking the time not only out of your day, but also your summer vacation to visit with me and discuss your opinions, thoughts, and ideas to what is going on in social studies education today.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my parents. I would not be in the position that I am today without your constant pushing, prodding, and sometimes what I would consider nagging. Thank you for all that you have done for me throughout my life.

### **Abstract**

There are four core subjects taught in American public schools today: math, English language arts, science, and social studies. For years, the social studies have been receiving less instructional time when compared to “more important” subjects such as reading, language arts, and math. This has especially been the case since the legislation of No Child Left Behind which placed English language arts and math as the two main pillars of a child’s education. The goal of this study was to figure out how teachers are adapting to this lack of social studies instruction time and to see if there have been any student misconceptions popping up as a result of this lack of time in the classroom. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced teachers about how they approach social studies, changes they have made in recent years as a result of reduced social studies instructional time, and any misconceptions that they have seen in the classroom. Major themes that were found in these interviews include social studies being a personal subject, social studies seen as “not a high priority,” as well as misconceptions and other concerns that teachers discussed in the interviews.

## **Introduction**

In the spring of 2016, I had the amazing opportunity to teach a literature circle with a small group of sixth graders. One day, when our cohort of 25 pre-service teachers came back together to discuss how our lessons went that day, one of my colleagues shared that one of her students, who was reading a novel about the Underground Railroad, said that, “slavery wasn’t that bad.” Of course, this statement surprised all of us in the room and most of us to this day are still shocked. With social studies teaching being cut in the elementary grades throughout the country, it is no wonder that there are misconceptions in student thinking. The purpose of this thesis study is to explore the effects this has on students in relation to the reduced exposure time to social studies in kindergarten through twelfth grade classrooms, including gaps in student knowledge related to this discipline. It is the hope that with this study, more attention can be drawn to the fact that social studies is getting cut from the education of students, resulting in negative consequences for the students. With this research, there is a long-term goal for social studies to become relevant in schools once again.

## **Literature Review**

The marginalization of social studies instruction in elementary schools is frequently considered to be a result of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal legislation (Rock et al., 2006). However, Wood (1989), as part of a collaborative research study with South Dakota University, found that fifth and sixth grade teachers were spending more than 120 minutes a week on social studies, but kindergarten through second grade teachers on average only taught social studies 31-60 minutes a week. Wood and South Dakota University (1989) also found that social studies was rated as the fourth most important subject, barely edging out science, but far

behind reading, math, and language arts. In a study conducted by Thornton and Houser (1996), it was found that social studies was the fifth rated subject by both district and school representatives. They also found that the largest amount of social studies instruction occurred in sixth grade, where students were receiving about 160 minutes per week, or a little over a half hour per day. Thornton and Houser (1996) went as far to say that “Social studies (and science) are clearly regarded by practitioners—and most likely by parents and the public—as ‘enrichment’ or second-rank subjects” (p. 32). This scholarship helps show that social studies has been neglected long before NCLB legislation arrived, which may cause some concern that there is a longer standing issue in American education with social studies and the amount of time that it is being taught in elementary schools.

The small amount of social studies instruction time is especially alarming considering the amount of time given to the two flagbearers of the elementary curriculum, English language arts and math. Multiple studies have found that these two subjects far outweigh any social studies instruction time in the classroom. McMurrer (2008) discovered that, in the pre-NCLB era, schools were spending, on average, 378 minutes per week on English language arts and 264 minutes per week on math. This translates to about 75 minutes per day for English language arts and about 52 minutes a day for math. These numbers jumped following the installment of NCLB and when increased emphasis was placed on these two subjects. McMurrer (2008) found that after NCLB was enacted, schools spent 520 minutes per week for English language arts and 352 minutes per week for math. This amounts to 104 minutes a day for English language arts and 70 minutes per day for math. Social studies instructional time was drastically affected by this change, causing it to fall from 239 minutes a week pre-NCLB to 164 minutes a week post-NCLB for an average decrease of 76 minutes per week. Before NCLB, students were receiving about 47

minutes per day, but only receive 32 minutes a day after this legislation was passed. This may not seem like a significant decrease, but if this is spread out over an entire 180 day school year, students would be receiving 2,700 fewer minutes of social studies. It is important to know how to read, write, and do math, but if students do not know how to be active citizens and critical consumers of information, skills that they would learn in social studies, all of the extra instruction time in English language arts and math may be a waste. As Leming, Ellington, and Schug (2006) said, “While high levels of competency in reading, math, and science are necessary for a strong nation, these alone will not guarantee national survival. Civic and historical literacy are also essential if our republic is to flourish” (p. 325).

The relationship between social studies, the other core subjects, and how they are taught is also interesting. One way that some teachers have tried to incorporate more social studies into their teaching is through the integration of social studies content into English language arts instruction. Rock et al. (2006) found in their study that 74.1% of teachers taught social studies as a combination of integrated and stand-alone lessons while 21.5% of teachers taught social studies through integration alone. If integration is done correctly, this could help increase the amount of time that students are taught social studies. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. While observing students learning about the Nazis during a literacy integrated social studies lesson, Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Cayot Serriere, and Stewart (2008) discovered that, “In this format, Nazism was approached as a tool for literacy (or reading comprehension), rather than as a subject for critical examination” (p. 242). Students were unconcerned with the content of the story that they were reading; they were more focused on reading comprehension strategies and making predictions as to where the story would go. This is unfortunate considering the topic that the students were dealing with and all of the empathy, cultural understanding, and critical thinking



that students could have developed throughout the unit. Another example of the integration of social studies and English language arts ineffectively communicating social studies concepts comes from Judith L. Pace's 2011 study. Pace (2011) discovered that, in one teacher's classroom, the integration of the two subjects focused on "practicing strategies to assist expository reading and writing, as well as test taking, and away from understanding history" (p. 46). This is not the only classroom where this occurred; she observed another moment in a different classroom where the focus of the lesson was on literacy skills rather than on social studies content (2011). While language arts might seem like it is damaging social studies the most, it is not the only subject taking time away from social studies. Science, another "supplemental" elementary subject, also battles social studies for instructional time. Rock et al. (2006) found that the majority of second to fourth grade teachers alternated science with social studies, resulting in students getting half a year of science and half a year of social studies. Clearly, the way that social studies interacts with the other core subjects and the manner in which they are taught affects the amount of social studies instruction time and the concepts that students learn.

One thing that could help social studies become more of a focal point in the elementary curriculum could be to add the subject to standardized tests. Fitchett and Heafner (2010) explained that one of the major factors working against social studies is standardized testing when they said, "the national movement toward increased standardized and high-stakes testing has led to a decline in social studies instructional time in elementary schools" (p. 127). Yes, the last thing that educators really want to do is force students to take more standardized tests, but there is some research showing a positive correlation between the time spent teaching social studies and standardized tests. Vogler et al. (2007) looked at South Carolina, a state that has a

standardized test for social studies, to see if this had any effect on the amount of time that teachers spent teaching social studies. When comparing the time spent on social studies at the time of the study to five years beforehand, Vogler et al. (2007) found that there was an increase of social studies instruction in all of the grades from kindergarten to fifth grade. The smallest increase was 61% in first and second grade with an even more significant increase of 82% for third grade. Unfortunately, this increase in social studies teaching time was probably not the most effective way of teaching as teachers might feel rushed to get through the curriculum as fast as they can. In the end, it is unclear whether or not it would be beneficial for social studies to be on standardized tests. The benefits include an increase in social studies instruction time but the drawbacks are that teachers may cover the material poorly and students would have to take even more standardized tests.

This study aims to explore the impact of reduced instructional time for social studies in upper elementary and middle school grades. For this study, three educators who teach in fourth through ninth grades were interviewed. The following sections outline the methodology and findings of the study. It is expected that findings from this study will provide insight on the realities teachers are facing and gaps in student content knowledge resulting from the increasing marginalization of social studies education.

## **Methodology**

### **Overview and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the effects of students' reduced exposure time to social studies, including gaps in student knowledge related to this discipline. This study aimed to discover how much social studies instruction time has been impacted by

government policies and other factors that affect schools (i.e. standardized testing) in the classroom, how this reduced time has affected student knowledge, any gaps that have surfaced in student knowledge, and teachers' thoughts on this reduced social studies instruction time. The intent of this study was to help inform educators and to shed light on the shortage of social studies instruction time in schools. The main research questions for the study were:

1. How has social studies teaching changed since the focus on testing and standards has increased? How much time is spent on teaching social studies?
2. How are teachers teaching social studies today? What approaches are they using?
3. How is technology being used to teach social studies?
4. What resources and support (i.e. professional development) are teachers given?
5. What might be the perceived impact of reduced time for social studies instruction upon students?

The research methods are described in detail in the following sections: Setting and Participants, Research Design, Data Collection, and Data Analysis.

### **Setting and Participants**

For the purpose of this study, interviews were conducted with teachers who taught classes ranging between 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Teachers selected had to teach social studies content. Five rural and urban districts in the Midwestern United States were invited to participate in the study through email. Three of the teachers who responded were selected to participate based off of response time to the email invitation as well as the grade that they taught. These teachers were then invited to take part in the interviewing process. With the nature of the study, the participants' names will be kept confidential and they will be referred to using pseudonyms. The

first participant interviewed, Ms. Smith, has worked in her district for over 23 years and taught 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade social studies during the 2016-2017 school year. The second participant, Ms. Johnson, has been teaching in her district for 31 years and has been in 4<sup>th</sup> grade for the past 14 school years. The final participant, Mr. Williams, has spent 16 years in his district and teaches 9<sup>th</sup> grade American History as well as other social studies subjects in his high school. The interviews were all conducted face to face and took place in the teacher's respective classrooms.

### **Research Design**

The research design of this study consisted of semi-structured interviews (Myers & Newman, 2007). The interview protocol, which can be found in Appendix A, contained questions to help guide the direction of the interview but these were not the only questions that the interview was limited to. By setting the interview up in this manner, more relevant information could be gained and the participants could elaborate on things that they wanted to point out. If participants were not comfortable with any of the questions asked, they could refuse to answer the question. Participants were also able to leave the interview at any time if they chose to do so.

### **Data Collection**

This study required IRB Human Subject's approval for the use of interviews as a strategy to collect data. The researcher met with each participant individually, in each of the participant's classrooms, for a time period of 40 to 60 minutes in order to complete the interview. The participants read a consent form and provided written consent in order to participate in the study. While the interviews were taking place, an audio recording was kept so that the interview could be reviewed and analyzed at a later date. After the audio recording was analyzed and transcribed,

the recording was destroyed and any identifying markers were removed from the data in order to protect the participants' privacy.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were conducted and the transcriptions were written, the data analysis process began. Thematic categories that emerged were identified using the constant comparative method (Glesne, 2006). Through this process, themes were found across all interviews, including the sentiment that social studies is a personal subject; that the subject of social studies is not a high priority; the limitations of textbooks; the impacts of reduced travel; and student misconceptions. Teachers also described a few different instructional strategies that they believed could help social studies in the future. By identifying the similarities and differences between the interviews, the researcher was able to see these central themes and issues around this topic which will be discussed in the Findings section of the study, outlined in detail below.

## **Findings**

### **Social Studies as a Personal Subject**

The first theme found in this study was that social studies subjects were seen as a very personal subject to the teachers interviewed. Here, "personal" indicates that it meant something to the teachers and they tried to make it mean something to the students as well. The teachers interviewed in this study cared about social studies and tried to make it so that their students would care about it as well.

The initial indicator of the interviewed teachers' strong feelings toward social studies was through their quick response to the email invitation asking them to participate in the study. All

three teachers responded quickly and were willing to take part in the study. This eagerness to talk about social studies was evident during the interview process as well. Within the first few minutes of each interview, it was clear that each teacher cared a great deal about social studies as they spoke with great passion about the topic. Ms. Smith said, "...social studies is actually my favorite. The history aspect—that's always what I enjoyed as a kid, [I] originally went to college to be a junior high social studies teacher" (Interview, 7/24/17). Ms. Johnson also talked about this, saying that, "Social studies is one of my favorite things to teach" (Interview, 7/25/17). While Mr. Williams did not specifically express that he "loved" social studies, he has taught a variety of social studies subjects for 16 years.

The excitement that the teachers felt for social studies translated into their teaching. Each of the teachers shared that they try to make social studies come alive for the students through stories and supplementary materials. Ms. Smith would bring in "anything that I have or have acquired along the way from traveling, trips, things I've seen on [state public television] or the History Channel. Just incorporating anything that I have, places I've been..." (Interview, 7/24/17). All of these resources that Ms. Smith incorporated into her classroom were in addition to a "pretty book directed" curriculum that teachers were following in the grades she was teaching (Interview, 7/24/17). Ms. Johnson has had the same social studies textbook for the past 14 years and says, "I tell more stories that they can relate to and goes along with it....And at the end of the year when they write a paper about things they want to remember, they all say, 'I'll never forget the ... stories'" (Interview, 7/25/17). According to this interview, Ms. Johnson's students are more likely to remember her stories that she connected to the social studies curriculum than what is in the book, a book that happens to be printed before they were born. This goes to show the impact of Ms. Johnson's passion for social studies and her effort in

personalizing this subject area. Mr. Williams also touched on this, saying, “I find that the students are more engaged if it’s in a story style mode, more personal.... I think that’s where people feel that social studies gets boring, when it’s just dates and facts and people which was the traditional way to teach it” (Interview, 8/11/17). Mr. Williams additionally shared that he tries to connect the curriculum to what is happening in today’s world so that “...some pieces are relatable, even to kids, so that it sounds common or it sounds current...” (Interview, 8/11/17).

All three of the teachers interviewed in this study have a personal interest in social studies and it was evident in how they described their teaching. By incorporating stories and things that they have collected throughout their lives, these teachers are using their personal interest in the subject of social studies to engage students and make it interesting for them. This passion could be something that helps social studies survive in the current school climate. As this study shows, making social studies personal and relevant to students makes the content come alive for the students and they are more likely to engage with and remember this information. This could be one way for teachers to help social studies gain a foothold in the classroom. However, in the world of high stakes testing, making social studies personal may not be enough, as can be seen in other themes brought up in this study.

### **“Not a High Priority”**

As stated in the literature review, social studies subjects have had less instruction time in elementary classrooms in recent years. This was reiterated throughout the interviews conducted in this study. All three teachers discussed how social studies does not get nearly the instruction time that the other core subjects receive. The teachers interviewed also pointed out that this problem does not seem like it will get resolved in the near future.

Instruction time spent on the core subjects has changed a great deal in recent years. Ms. Johnson talked about this in her interview in regards to social studies, “Well, it’s a half hour a day. We’re lucky if we can do it three to four days, three to four times a week. We used to do it every day” (Interview, 7/25/17). Just by cutting one or two days of social studies instruction out of the week, social studies is receiving 30 to 60 fewer minutes every week. Spread out over a whole school year, this adds up to a significant loss of time. When asked why this was the case, Ms. Johnson responded, “Well, the time we have to legally do reading now has grown. I mean, we used to do an hour and now they’re almost wanting us [to teach] two hours. So I teach reading in the morning and in the afternoon and then squeeze the other stuff in when I can” (Interview, 7/25/17). There has been a large push for reading and math in elementary schools, and this was definitely the case in the school where Ms. Johnson was teaching. In addition to the push for two hours of instructional time spent on reading and language arts, Ms. Johnson also had to spend a full hour on math each day. This leaves her little time to spend on the rest of the subjects when you factor in all of the other things that take place during a typical elementary school day. This does not even factor in intervention times that might take place if students do not score well on tests. As Ms. Johnson explained,

...three times a year we do our testing for reading and my class scored low on fluency every time. So we had to do a 12 day intervention with the entire class and it couldn’t be during reading time, it couldn’t be during math time, it um... So the only time we had, where I had every single student, which I had to have every single student in my room was social studies. And it was the last half hour of the day. So we had to do that twice...in the winter and in the spring. So that was four weeks of school that we didn’t have any social studies (Interview, 7/25/17).



Not only would students be missing out on learning new social studies material during this time period, they would also be forgetting a large chunk of material that they had learned prior to the intervention. Ms. Johnson also brought up the new science standards that are going to be required by the state soon. She says that,

My science in the past, won't be able to happen anymore, all of the Title [reading] kids leave my room during science and go to Title [reading]. But now that that's going to be, that we're going to have standards we have to fulfill, those kids will have to go out of social studies until that [the implementation of social studies standards] happens someday (Interview, 7/25/17).

The heavyweights of language arts and math have been taking away from the instructional time that social studies receives, but there will soon be a new competitor for social studies as new state science standards will soon be hurting social studies even more. To summarize what Ms. Johnson felt about the school day, she said, "...I think time is the worst thing about... There's just not enough time in the day. And it just gets worse, and worse, and worse" (Interview, 7/25/17).

Ms. Smith also commented on the lack of social studies instructional time. While she is not specifically teaching reading and language arts or math throughout the day because of the rotation that the teachers in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade have, she still feels the effect of these two subjects taking up instructional time. When talking about how much time she would want to give social studies, she says, "...I can easily give it [social studies] 45 minutes a day. Sometimes it gets there, sometimes it doesn't. It just depends on everything else butting in. You know, with our, gotta have 90 [minutes] for math, 90 [minutes] for reading..." (Interview, 7/24/17). The phrase

“butting in” is something that really stands out here as it makes it sound like there are many things at work that are not only taking up time, but also impeding on social studies instruction. When pressed further about other things that affect the amount of time she is able to give social studies, Ms. Smith responded, “Where our specials fall, you know, recess, and the music, art, PE, all that stuff, and lunch time. Early outs, social studies and science are the first to get scrapped if we have an early out” (Interview, 7/24/17). One of the big questions stemming from this quote is how can educators convince students that social studies is important if it is dismissed by the district as unimportant when there is an early out? Ms. Smith goes as far as saying that she feels like social studies is “not a high priority subject” as far as student preparedness in this subject is concerned (Interview, 7/24/17).

While Mr. Williams did not feel the time crunch at the high school to the extreme that his elementary school counterparts felt, he did note that there were times when social studies was given less instructional time. “Since social studies, especially for a lot of our younger kids, is a core subject, it’s a subject that is sometimes sacrificed for testing time because, maybe not because it’s social studies, but because all the kids are in one big group...” (Interview, 8/11/17). What Mr. Williams is saying here is that since ninth grade American history is a requirement at his high school, it is most efficient for the district to test all of these students during their social studies time as they are all in the same place at the same time. There has also been some restructuring of classes and who teaches them at Mr. Williams’s high school, causing him to not be able to teach everything that he once could. He said, “Philosophy is almost impossible to get back in now because there just isn’t time to teach it and maybe I could teach a sociology [class] and a psychology [class] both in the same semester, now I don’t have time, it has to be one or the

other” (Interview, 8/11/17). Mr. Williams also acknowledged the time crunch happening at the elementary level when he said,

...being a realist I could see that [losing instruction time in the elementary school] happening in other places where they’re sacrificing that time to reinforce reading skills, especially if your district becomes marked as one that has to make changes and you know, our elementary went through that...they had to have given up time in other subjects... (Interview, 8/11/17).

Overall, while social studies at the high school was not impacted by as large of a cut in instructional time as the elementary school, Mr. Williams expressed that it was still being affected.

Another aspect that makes social studies seem unimportant is the emphasis placed on other subjects through standardized testing. As already mentioned, Vogler et al. (2007) found that there was a significant increase in the time spent on social studies instruction following its inclusion on standardized tests. With these findings in mind, the teachers interviewed in this study were also asked about how social studies was influenced when standardized tests did not have social studies tests included or required for students to take. Ms. Smith and Mr. Williams both talked about how social studies was impacted and some of their frustrations about this issue. Ms. Smith discussed the effects that standardized testing had on her teaching of social studies, saying that “we take our [state] tests [and] they don’t ask a lot of that type of material. So we don’t teach to that either” (Interview, 7/24/17). Here, it can be interpreted that the tests determine the curriculum that is taught in the classroom. Standardized testing can also be seen as an interruption, something that disrupts the routine of a normal education week and the goals that

the school and district are trying to meet. Ms. Smith dove even deeper into the impact of the standardized tests saying,

There are some of those types of [map] skills there but a lot of them too are optional and you don't have to do them...They don't [get used], yeah. Because then that cuts our testing time down during the week. Then we can get back to putting your 90 minutes in, your guided reading in, your intervention in, which the state says 'hey you have to do this every day' (Interview, 7/24/17).

What Ms. Smith meant with this quote is that there are social studies tests on the state tests her school gives that are not mandatory for the students to take. When the district chooses to exclude the test, they are cutting down on their amount of testing that takes place during the week, for example, from four days of testing to three days of testing. This shows that the social studies are not considered important enough by either the state or the district that Ms. Smith teaches in since they do not make them mandatory. Both the state and the school district are more concerned with getting students back to the normal schedule of 90 minutes of math and reading each day.

When Mr. Williams talked about standardized testing he said,

...when you look at the testing that the kids take, almost, there's almost no content knowledge in social studies testing on like a standardized test. Almost none of it is content knowledge. Most of it is map skills, reading a bar graph and charts, pieces like that (Interview, 8/11/17).

This lack of content knowledge is something that bothered Mr. Williams on multiple fronts. In addition to this, he was concerned about the lack of content standards set by the state standards. He wondered what he was supposed to be teaching students in terms of content since he was not

given a lot of guidance from the state or standardized tests. “But standardized testing is standardized testing and until that trend changes, I really find that social studies will probably be on the back end, the back burner, so to speak” (Interview, 8/11/17). The relationship between social studies and standardized testing is summed up in this quote. It seems that until social studies standardized testing becomes mandatory, the chances of social studies being given a more prominent role in the curriculum are very slim. While this might be the case, including social studies in standardized tests might actually hurt the subject. In a public presentation about his research on standardized testing, Dr. Wayne Au answered a question concerning how social studies might be affected by being included in standardized testing, saying that doing this may make social studies more prominent, but it might also hurt social studies because it may be taught very poorly (W. Au, presentation, October 23, 2017). With this in mind, it is unclear whether or not standardized testing can benefit social studies.

Professional development is something that teachers must go through during their careers. It makes them better teachers and more prepared to teach the content that they are presenting to students. One interesting piece of information found in this study was that there is very little or no professional development concerning social studies available to the teachers who were interviewed. When asked about professional development in social studies, Ms. Johnson stated that,

There isn't really a lot out there. There's a lot for science right now. And of course, reading, writing, there's always that but there isn't a lot for social studies unless it's secondary I'm guessing. But as an elementary teacher there isn't a lot (Interview, 7/25/17).

When asked the same question about professional development, Ms. Smith had a similar answer, when she said,

Slim to none right now I would say. I mean if [Area Education Agency] were to run something and I would want to go I'd probably be allowed to go. But are they bubbling over like the math, the language, and the science? No (Interview, 7/24/17).

Ms. Smith also went on to say that she could not remember the last time that she saw a “workshop or a professional development for social studies, skills, or information....So I think yeah, teacher delivery and preparation is just, is just kind of status quo, it is what it is” (Interview, 7/24/17). This is troubling as Ms. Smith points out that, when it comes to social studies instruction, what teachers have always been doing is just “status quo,” implying that this is not going to change at all. In reality, social studies and how it should be delivered to students is changing just like every other subject. Finally, Mr. Williams said, “There are, there are some. Most of them are technology based which are important but... Yeah, if you dig in, you can find social studies things. There are a lot more for elementary than high school” (Interview, 8/11/17). This quote is interesting because it directly contradicts what Ms. Johnson said in her interview. These teachers both think that the other teacher, in their specific setting, has more opportunities for professional development in social studies. This is a little disconcerting. Just in this study of three teachers, two of the three teachers felt like other teachers have access to improving themselves in teaching social studies when they themselves do not have that opportunity but no one is actually getting access to social studies professional development. Mr. Williams did add that,

I do find most of my recertification or most of my hours that I add are probably not directly in social studies, they're in other pieces or other dynamics where I can use my social studies background but it's not strictly learning more social studies... (Interview, 8/11/17).

Overall, these findings align with a state level report about the lack of professional development for social studies which found that “only 12.9% of the elementary teachers surveyed said that social studies professional learning opportunities were available to them within the last three years...” (Iowa Department of Education, 2015). Given these findings, it is not a stretch to think that teachers will eventually view social studies as insignificant if they keep getting the message that social studies is not worthy of professional development. This feeling of irrelevance toward social studies will eventually get passed on from teachers to students, especially if the teachers do not seek out ways to improve their social studies content knowledge and teaching abilities. Overall, a lack of social studies professional development leads to further marginalization of social studies.

The teachers interviewed in this study were also asked about how they were supported in teaching social studies. This could be from the other teachers in their grade level, from other teachers throughout the building, or from administrators. There were mixed responses from the teachers who were interviewed. Ms. Johnson said that,

We have an instructional coach in any area. She basically works on reading but she will find materials on any area if we ask her to. [The librarian] used to do a good job of finding books in the library for us. That's just stinky that we don't get one replaced.... Otherwise not a lot (Interview, 7/25/17).

Here Ms. Johnson was referencing how the school librarian was supportive of her teaching, but when the librarian retired she was not replaced due to budget constraints. Ms. Johnson's answer also suggests that while there are supports available, they might not always be as readily available as they would be for other subjects such as reading. This was echoed in Ms. Smith's reply as well. She said,

I don't ask for much in this realm usually. But if there was something out there that I wanted to purchase the district has been pretty good in the past about you know, okay go ahead. But it's probably not one that's, you know, if you want something for social studies let me know (Interview, 7/24/17).

Ms. Smith also worked with the librarian fairly well and a little bit with the art teacher but admitted that "I can't say that we ever really connect back to a pinpoint" meaning that they she had never worked closely with the art teacher and they did not teach students from the exact same unit at the same time (Interview, 7/24/17). Once again, this teacher could get support if she desired it but it was not going to be given freely to her. Mr. Williams probably had the strongest supports out of all of the teachers interviewed when he said,

I guess a way I would say is my administrators like social studies...almost all of them like social studies as a subject and because of that, I think that they are a little more engaged in what I do and what we do here (Interview, 8/11/17).

Mr. Williams also brought up the fact that the social studies teachers in his high school had worked together for a long time, saying "There's a lot of experience at [his school district] when it comes to, jeez, I mean...probably 60 some plus years of teaching experience between the three teachers here, so that's a lot—in a small school" (Interview, 8/11/17). In summary, teachers are



being supported in social studies in some ways. This might not be to the fullest capacity when compared to math or reading, but the teachers who were interviewed at least felt like they had some supports if they needed resources for social studies.

This section was titled with a quote from Ms. Smith saying that she felt like social studies was not a “high priority subject” (Interview, 7/24/17). The evidence from the interviews tends to support her claim. With social studies instruction time being cut, standardized testing basically ignoring social studies entirely or at least the discipline-specific content knowledge, the lack of professional development, and support from the school only when it is asked for, these teachers are communicating that in their experiences, social studies is not deemed as important as other core subjects such as math and language arts. This was the case in Ms. Johnson’s fourth grade classroom with social studies being fourth in order, following English language arts, math, and science. This was also the case in the high school and Mr. Williams helped to sum this up when he said,

No, it doesn’t take you long to figure out, when you’re in the social studies department, you are the fourth, you’re still not the arts department, the arts department is obviously the tail who is on their own...they get sacrificed the most and probably the next piece up would be social studies... (Interview, 8/11/17).

### **Some Concerns: Textbooks, Lack of Travel, and Misconceptions**

Aside from social studies not prioritized when compared to the other subject areas, the teachers in this interview also raised other concerns. The lack of social studies instruction has led to students having misconceptions that teachers might have been able to address before social studies instructional time began to get cut. Additionally, according to the teachers, students lack

access to travel opportunities, jeopardizing an accurate view of the world around them. Finally, textbooks are a concern for teachers; this will be addressed first in this section.

**Limitations of Textbooks.** Whether you think they are the only thing that students should be using in the classroom or that content material should come from other sources, textbooks are influential in what students are learning in the classroom. The textbooks that the interviewed teachers were using in their classrooms were quite old; they had been used consecutively for at least the past 15 years. All of these books had a common flaw in them; these textbooks did not do a very good job of covering multiple groups of people and what they have done throughout history. For example, while looking through her textbook, Ms. Smith found a passage and talked about it, saying, “But yeah see, ‘Some Mexican American families had lived in the United States for many years.’ And just think about how dominant the Mexican culture is in the United States today, and not just in the South” (Interview, 7/24/17). Ms. Smith’s textbook offered a narrow and individualized perspective that was mainly from the position of a white male; the other two teacher’s textbooks were very similar. Ms. Johnson’s textbook had little boxes where the book would highlight an important person in African American history such as the example she pulled from the book, George Washington Carver. It is nice that the textbook included a look at these important people, but these people should be in the regular part of the text, not in a small, separate box where it makes them seem like they are not as important. Ms. Johnson also talked about how she has to go beyond the text in her teaching, and said,

You know, sometimes you have to go beyond the book with your talks. Because if you, I mean when you read this, they didn’t talk about beating the slaves; they just talked about them not being well paid, overworked, and they didn’t go into detail (Interview, 7/25/17).

Later on, Ms. Johnson also said that you “have to go beyond the book because they just give you a rough draft of things” (Interview, 7/25/17). In Ms. Johnson’s fourth grade textbook facts were already being glossed over, something that Mr. Williams brought up in his interview. While he did not have enough textbooks in order to serve his students during the past school year, Mr. Williams still brought up how textbooks are glossing over or leaving important bits of history out. He said,

Everything before 1900 is basically a few paragraphs and even stuff up to the 1950s is just getting smaller and smaller for introduction of newer, more current things that are happening in the world which, I guess, is how it works (Interview, 8/11/17).

Mr. Williams probably assessed this transition that textbooks make in a fair manner, because the older stuff might not seem as important to current students. He did say that he feels like this shrinking content in textbooks does leave out important information. One of the most interesting things that Mr. Williams brought up was this example:

Like, I know I have some friends in Colorado that are teachers that, you know, they got their new issue of social studies textbooks and the part where they talk about Western expansion and Native American interaction, the Native American interaction is just basically like ‘whites and Native Americans interacted.’ Okay, so if you’re not, if you have no knowledge of that topic at all, you would look at it and you would say, ‘Oh it wasn’t really that big of a deal. White people showed up, worked with the Native Americans maybe, possibly, and now we have what we have today.’ Well, no, it leaves out the genocide. It leaves out the mass murders. Just because they don’t want to, they’re

just trying to be politically correct and they don't want to point out specific things to make groups feel bad or to cause rivalry between groups (Interview, 8/11/17).

According to Mr. Williams, mass murder and genocide are being glossed over and left out of textbooks in social studies today. Social studies books include some factual information and make very general statements as these teachers point out, but these books are also missing some of the cause and effect relationships that created the emotions and actions that created the history of our nation. As these teachers talked about, not only are students receiving less time in social studies instruction, but they are also missing out on some very important content and history about their country if their teachers do not take the time to go beyond the book.

**Lack of Travel.** Another finding that emerged from the interviews was the teachers' concerns about their students' lack of travel experiences and how this impacts the students' schema for social studies content and aims. The interviewed teachers were worried that their students did not travel as much as students have traveled in the past, and the interviewed teachers figured that this negatively impacted their historical content knowledge and geographical understanding. The fourth-grade social studies curriculum that Ms. Johnson teaches addresses the different regions of the country and as part of this, the students are to memorize the 50 states and where they are located on a map. When asked about if her students' had some geography knowledge starting the school year, Ms. Johnson talked about student knowledge of states in the United States. She said, "Every year I have one or two kids that already know them all; they know the location of all of them. And I have five or six kids that can't tell me where Iowa is" (Interview, 7/25/17). When asked about gaps in student knowledge and why these gaps occurred, Ms. Johnson said,

Well some kids have lots of experience traveling and some kids have never left [town where they go to school] other than a McDonald's trip or to go once in a great while to [a city of 130,000 people 45 minutes away]. So that's the biggest gap, the experience that they've had (Interview, 7/25/17).

While it is hard to find a solution for student experiences being different, this is still a concern for teachers as some students might not find social studies important if they have never had the opportunity to travel beyond their rural community. Ms. Smith also brought up students' limited travel experiences as impeding their social studies learning. She noted what travel can do for a student in the classroom, saying,

I mean, I had one girl in fifth grade last year who, [for] her summer vacation they'd gone out east and they had been to Boston and they had been to Lexington. So when we got there, she could really contribute and connect those things (Interview, 7/24/17).

Mr. Williams also brought up the aspect of travel and how this affects what students know.

...again that comes with lack of travel...most of them don't cross the Mississippi River so to know the Atlantic Ocean is on the East Coast and the Pacific Ocean is on the West Coast, those are things you assume a 14 or 15 year old kid would know...but when they don't have a lot of experience with travel they may not just know... (Interview, 8/11/17).

Therefore, all three teachers who were interviewed shared a concern about their students' limited experiences outside of their local, rural community and the impact of this on social studies teaching and learning in their classrooms.

One thing that will be constant for classrooms will be that students will come into it with different experiences. This cannot be directly changed by the teacher or the schools. However, what happens in the schools can be controlled. One way for students to get travel experience is through field trips. Unfortunately, field trips have been disappearing according to the teachers interviewed in this study. Ms. Smith did say that,

We have... field trips that we were able to take and some that were not even maybe, what would I say, scheduled. We would go to the historical museum uptown maybe. I took students to the bank once and we got a little bit of a history lesson in early types of banking (Interview, 7/24/17).

While these field trips were probably worthwhile, the students did not have to leave town in order to experience these different things. Ms. Johnson said that the fourth grade no longer went to an engaging, prominent local historical site in an urban area, explaining,

There's been a law before then that you can't charge and he [the superintendent] told us no more field trips that cost money. That's when they lost the one [fifth grade field trip] too. And that was such a good thing, [the local historical site in an urban area] because it went right along with our reading themes and it went right along with our social studies themes (Interview, 7/25/17).

The teachers were openly upset about the loss of these important field trips and the impact of this loss on students learning geography and history concepts. Would this help students develop a better understanding of geography? It would be hard to say but it probably could not hurt, especially when it might be hard for families to travel on their own.

Two common themes that kept coming up in the interviews conducted in this study were that textbooks lack important information and figures and how students do not travel as much as students have traveled in the past. One of the major goals of this study was to figure out what teachers believed students had misconceptions about in regards to social studies subjects and the previous two things mentioned, combined with decreased instructional time and a feeling that social studies is inferior to other subjects, play into the misconceptions that students have today. While the following student misconceptions described by the teachers will not be representative of all students and all misconceptions that they have pertaining to social studies, they do provide an insight into what the teachers felt that their students may not completely understand in this subject area.

**Misconceptions.** One of the major misconceptions that Ms. Johnson described in her interview was the idea that America is equal. She pointed out that many people “think of America being equal, well it’s not true to this day. If you go down South, there’s a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot of prejudice down there. There’s prejudice in Iowa” (Interview, 7/25/17). This may be concerning as we do not want our students growing up in a world where they believe that everything is fine and everyone is equal when it really is not. Another thing that Ms. Johnson noticed was how far off some of her students would be in trying to identify where states are located on a map. She said in regards to a map game they play,

When I play my game up on the board where they have to go, sometimes I have them go and point to the state after we get better at it, and it kills me when they’re over in the eastern part of our country and it’s [the state the student is supposed to identify] clear out west (Interview, 7/25/17).

From her experiences, students are lacking general understandings of the locations of states within regions of the United States. The idea of students lacking geographical knowledge could be troublesome if students hear about a state in the news and they have no idea whether that event happened close to where they are or if it is far away. Students may develop the idea that if they do not know where a state or region is, it means that it is not close to them and they will not have to worry about what is going on there. Unfortunately, this could result in our country becoming more regionalized than what it already is.

Ms. Smith also described many misconceptions that she has noticed during her teaching career. One of the more concerning things that Ms. Smith brought up was that students need to be more aware of civics. She shared,

You know, volunteering, being helpful, voting, what those things, why those things are important because if they aren't getting it now as they progress [in school], as adults it's not important to them either. And so I don't know that they really understand what they as citizens, the freedoms, and this is really going to get deep, you know, the liberties that they have (Interview, 7/24/17).

As Ms. Smith pointed out, it is troubling to think about the youth of our country not finding any importance in volunteering, voting, or in any of their civic duties. It may be difficult for this country to continue to develop as a democracy if their citizens do not find these processes worthwhile, the process that Ms. Smith described in her interview.

Ms. Smith also noted other misconceptions that students had when arriving in her classroom when she said,



...I don't think a lot of them realized that, you know in the early beginnings of history with American history that some of our servants and slaves, if they were indentured, whatever the case, were white people. You know, they totally perceive slavery or servants as blacks or African Americans (Interview, 7/24/17).

Another misconception that her students had included,

... and I don't think they realized a lot of how male dominated history is. You know, they look out today and you see your females and your African Americans or people of ethnic backgrounds that are really dominant in our government and in our world and I think they think that always was (Interview, 7/24/17).

Finally, Ms. Smith said, "I don't think that they really connect the fact that most battles are either over finances, or religion, um, you know, land dominance. I don't know that they really understand why certain battles were fought or wars happened" (Interview, 7/24/17). When pressed for why she thought her students did not know why battles or wars were fought, she continued, saying, "I think because they're bad people. Yeah, you know, like Saddam Hussein, he's a bad man. But, you know, that's it. They're satisfied with that" (Interview, 7/24/17). Ms. Smith therefore highlighted how her students lacked the ability to address multiple perspectives on complex historical and current issues likely due to their limited social studies learning experiences. With all of these instances, students are missing out on pieces of information that could change their perception about how our country was formed. For instance, if a student did believe that there have always been African Americans in politics, they might not understand why it was such a big deal for Barack Obama to be elected president or why people of color might feel underrepresented in political office. These misconceptions were probably caused by

what students are seeing on a regular basis as well as what they are hearing at home; both of these things alter their perception of events when they are limited to a few viewpoints.

Mr. Williams also pointed out examples of how his students had misconceptions at the high school level. Mr. Williams highlighted when his students watched scenes from the movie *Selma* and the blatant racism that African Americans received during the Civil Rights era in American history. After students watched *Selma*, he said,

...they're [the students] just like, 'Wow. That's not real. You can't deny someone their voting rights because they can't name all appellate judges in the whole state of Alabama' or whatever. And they're [the movie makers] like, well yeah you can, they did...

(Interview, 8/11/17).

This fits in with what Ms. Johnson said about her students thinking that America was this place where everyone was equal when in reality it is not at this point and that was definitely not the case 50 years ago. Another thing that Mr. Williams pointed out was the Holocaust and how many students consider all conflict to be driven by anger and hate. When Mr. Williams sees that his students think that war is driven by these two things he explains to his students that,

...it's not because the Nazis and Germans hated the Jews, it was indifference. It's like something you would do with a fly or a mouse, that you would catch in a trap...and because a lot of young people think that war is all driven by hate and fury and rage and it is, but not all of it, sometimes it's just, people just disconnect and bad things happen

(Interview, 8/11/17).

Mr. Williams' reflection on his students' perception of conflict ties in with Ms. Smith's comment that students do not understand why wars are fought. While students figured that wars were

fought between the good and bad guys in Ms. Smith's fifth and sixth grade social studies classes, in Mr. Williams's class the students believe that wars are fought because people hate each other. As Mr. Williams tries to explain to his students, wars are very complex things, each having many different causes and this is something that students need to be taught; students need to be aware that wars are not fought just because someone is good and someone is bad. However, it is unclear whether or not students are learning this as they move through their academic careers.

It has already been noted that Mr. Williams felt like students were lacking knowledge in geography when they entered his classroom. Mr. Williams also discussed that many students are coming in with misconceptions about hot topics in the news. He said, "They just want the guts of it and that's what I get from a lot of kids. They don't want the whole story; they just want the highlights..." (Interview, 8/11/17). With students not wanting to dive into all of the details surrounding a story, Mr. Williams has found that he is helping students sort through information and helping them to figure out what is true and what is not. He noted, "...maybe an old school teacher can get frustrated with that because it doesn't feel like you're teaching a lot of content because you're just sorting through what is real information and what is [not]" (Interview, 8/11/17). While it did not sound like Mr. Williams was overly frustrated with doing this, it also did not sound like he was extremely excited about this aspect of his job either. He did point out that this was important to do though so "the kids aren't being fooled or misled" (Interview, 8/11/17). It is not surprising that Mr. Williams has to deal with student misconceptions based on what the students are seeing in the media and it is not a stretch to assume that this will one day be happening in the elementary grades as well. As students continue to try and make sense of what they are seeing in the media, they are going to need time to sort this out with someone who is knowledgeable about it. If this does not happen in the schools, how are students going to have

a chance to sort through this information with someone who is unbiased and critical of what they are seeing in the media? Most students come in with biased perceptions and they need a chance to work through information and learn multiple viewpoints of a problem so that they can get to the heart of that topic and come to their own conclusions concerning that particular subject. If students are not given the opportunity to do so, as could be the case with the decrease of social studies instructional time, students could continue to develop misconceptions with current issues.

Students are suffering from what is happening in social studies right now. There are important people and pieces of information being left out of textbooks. Students are not getting to experience the world around them through field trips and this could be causing a lack of geographical knowledge. Because of these factors, in conjunction with reduced instructional time for social studies and the feeling that social studies is “not a high priority”, students are walking into the classroom with some pretty significant misconceptions that could affect them when they are adults. As Mr. Williams put it,

American history has a lot of points in it which are very savage and destructive and, and those are pieces that I think young people need to be aware of. They, they need to know that our history isn't just all sunshine and flowers and things like that. There is struggle and strife and things that happen and occur... (Interview, 8/11/17).

With the way that the teachers interviewed for this study have described the trends for social studies, students might go through life thinking that American history has always been filled with happiness if they do not have a teacher who discovers this and is willing to challenge their misconceptions.

### **Instructional Shifts and Future Directions**

Students currently have access to large amounts of information online, some of which may not be entirely correct. As Mr. Williams put it, “A lot of kids are very, very conscious through social media of what is going on. Now, whether they’ll actually click on anything and read about what’s happening in the world today, probably not for most of them...” (Interview, 8/11/17). With information being so accessible to students, it was suggested by the teachers interviewed in this study that social studies teachers shift some of their curriculum toward modern history or current events. Ms. Smith recognized this in her elementary students and spoke on how the curriculum could change, saying, “Yeah I think it [current events or modern history] would be more beneficial to knowing and understanding. And in the classroom, in my opinion, would open up a lot of good discussion...” (Interview, 7/24/17). While struggling with the idea of what he should be teaching his students, Mr. Williams said, “And I think, basically some of the answers that I’ve come to is can they gain access and recognize real information, uh, what is real, what isn’t fake news...” (Interview, 8/11/17). The bottom line here is that students are going to be able to access information on current events that are happening in the world. Teachers should be there to help them sift through the information and develop critical media literacy—the idea that Mr. Williams was promoting of figuring out what information is real and what is not. Not only will this promote discussions in the classroom as Ms. Smith noted, it would also give the students a lifelong skill that they can use whenever they read or hear something from a media source.

Changes also need to be made concerning the best practices for how students learn. One thing that was noted in multiple interviews was that students need to find the material relevant to them. Social studies can no longer be “just dates and facts and people” (Interview with Mr.

Williams, 8/11/17). As previously discussed, one of the students in Ms. Smith's class "could really contribute and connect those things" concerning places in the American Revolution and this was all because the material was relevant to this student (Interview 7/24/17). As already noted in the "Social Studies as a Personal Subject" section, Ms. Johnson and Mr. Williams both tried to make social studies content relevant to students through a story telling approach as they both felt like this was one of the best ways to get students to connect to the curriculum. All of these teachers recognized the importance of how relevancy can impact a student's learning.

Another interesting point about how teachers should change their practices for students was brought up solely by Mr. Williams. He has found that students struggle to hold their attention on one thing for an extended period of time. Mr. Williams' school recently went one to one with Chromebooks and, when asked if the students were ever distracted by the technology, Mr. Williams answered before the question was even finished, saying, "All the time, they are distracted all the time" (Interview, 8/11/17). This was especially interesting when compared with the two elementary teachers interviewed who did not use much technology in their classrooms. Mr. Williams described how he tried to approach this issue, saying,

With the technology, anything that's short, little bursts they can stay on that and get to that... They don't like the sitting and watching something over multiple days, I've found that. That used to be the only way that we could get through some of these things was you had to watch over multiple days and I've really tried to eliminate a lot of that because it doesn't work with this group of kids (Interview, 8/11/17).

As Mr. Williams illustrates, students have increased difficulty with staying on task. As he describes, short, little bursts of information might be best for students in social studies. This,

coupled with making the content more relevant to students, may make social studies more appealing to students. As Ms. Smith put it, “Many kids will find social studies boring” (Interview, 7/24/17). Hopefully, making some of these changes will help more students become interested in social studies and will at least cause it to be enjoyable even if it does not have much instructional time.

### **Conclusions**

This study was conducted in order to see how teachers are adapting to a decrease in social studies instructional time as well as to see what implications this lack of instructional time has produced. The results from this study did suggest that teachers have had to change to this new teaching environment and that they do see the effects of reduced social studies instruction time, along with other negative factors described in this study, on students. During this study, it was found that social studies is a personal subject to the teachers who were interviewed and these teachers then tried to make this subject personal to their students. It was also found that social studies is not seen as a high priority; this could be seen through the lack of instructional time that social studies receives as well as through the absence of professional development and social studies content knowledge being left out of standardized tests. Finally, there were other concerns raised by the teachers interviewed in this study. These concerns included the limitations of textbooks, a lack of student travel, and the sense that students have misconceptions surrounding social studies as a result of the combination of the harmful themes described by the interviewed teachers. These misconceptions are one of the more significant findings in this study. If social studies does not receive the prioritization that it deserves, students could have misconceptions about many aspects of today’s world which could result in negative consequences for these students and for society as a whole. It is with this in mind that the

researcher suggests doing additional research on this topic and encourages a push toward making social studies relevant in schools to avoid any poor outcomes that might come as a result of social studies continuing to be left out.

### **Future Research**

After conducting this study, there are still some questions yet to be answered or explored further. While this study has pointed out some of the implications of reduced social studies instructional time, only three Iowa teachers were interviewed for this study. Their experiences related to this topic could be vastly different from those in other school districts and even more different from those in other states. It is hoped that more studies will be carried out in various parts of the country to shine additional light on how the lack of social studies instruction time is impacting the students of this country. After conducting this study, the researcher has developed a few ideas that could be investigated further with future studies. Teachers in other states could be interviewed and their ideas and stories could be compared to the teachers interviewed for this study. This would be done to see if any themes develop across the country or if themes, discovered in different studies, are limited to a certain region. The researcher also recommends exploring the ideas of teaching current events and using quicker bursts of information in the classroom with other teachers to see if they too think that these would be good ideas to implement. Finally, student misconceptions should be examined to see how these vary from region to region as well as to see how teachers are perceiving student misconceptions at a national level. Hopefully, with this further research and evaluation of social studies instruction, researchers can determine the future of instructional time and how it should be divided between the core content subjects, how to make content relevant and meaningful to all students, and how to make social studies nationally relevant in schools once again.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

1. Please first tell me about your professional work in relation to education and social studies.
2. How do you teach social studies? What resources and methods do you frequently use?
3. What are some social studies units or teaching examples that you are really proud of?
4. How much time do you typically teach social studies in a given week? What are some factors that impact that amount of time? Does this amount of time for social studies differ from previous years or decades of teaching for you?
5. Do you integrate literacy standards into your social studies teaching? How? Can you give some examples of what your approach to integration looks like?
6. Do you integrate technology into your social studies teaching? How do you use it? Can you give some examples?
7. How has your social studies teaching changed in the last decade? Can you describe some approaches and units you did previously compared to what you are doing now? What do you sense has prompted you to make these changes? How do you feel about these changes?
8. How prepared do you think your students are in the social studies subjects when they start the year with you? Do you notice differences in student preparedness in the past decade in the social studies subject areas? If so, how has this impacted your teaching?
9. Have you noticed that students are coming to you with gaps in their knowledge base or misconceptions about social studies content? If so, can you give some examples? How have you responded? Do you have any examples of when your students were surprised to

learn something that they previously did not know or had misconceptions about in regards to social studies?

10. In what ways are you supported in teaching social studies? Are there opportunities for professional development or focus in this area? Have you been able to collaborate with other teachers or school librarians to support your social studies teaching?
11. What else would you like to share about this topic or related to this topic?