



The associations of teacher professional characteristics, school environmental factors, and state testing policy on social studies educators' instructional authority

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of pedagogy and social studies content influences a teacher's decision making and helps teachers conduct sound instructional practices despite the influence of high-stakes testing policies. Using national data from the Survey of the Status of Social Studies (S4), this study examined the associations of teachers' professional characteristics, school environmental factors, and state testing policy on self-reported levels of authority that secondary level social studies teachers (grades 6–12) hold over key classroom tasks. Through hierarchical multiple regression analysis, key findings from this study indicated that greater minority enrollments are associated with lower levels of instructional authority. Teachers who worked in states where a state-mandated social studies test was administered reported less freedom to choose what to teach and how to teach than those in non-testing states. Also, this study showed that in-field status, the type of licensure, and years of teaching experience are important factors in exercising social studies teachers' instructional authority (e.g., their ability to balance effectively the demands of state-mandated reforms with teaching for meaningful student learning). This study recommends that schools with high minority enrollments, especially if these districts exist in a high stakes testing environment, should invest in teachers with high-quality social studies preparation.

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The exercise of responsive and educationally-sound classroom authority is regarded a crucial right and responsibility for a professional educator in general and in the social studies classroom specifically (Hlebowitsh, Hamot, Hong, & Leitz, 2013). The need for social studies teachers to exercise fully academic freedom in order to meet the needs of students and to create and carry out educative experiences related to citizenship education is essential to keeping our democracy vibrant (Campbell, 2006; Conway, 1984; Darling-Hammond, 1988; Hlebowitsh et al., 2013; National Council for the Social Studies, 2007).

State testing policy has influenced and generally restrained social studies teachers' classroom planning, practices, evaluation, and decision-making power in carrying out these essential needs (Au, 2009; Clarke, Shore, Rhoades, Abrams, Miao, & Li, 2003; Grant, 2007; Pedulla, Abrams, Madaus, Russell, Ramos, & Miao, 2003; Segall, 2006; Wills, 2007; Yeager &

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Pinder, 2006). Nevertheless, many social studies educators make efforts to exercise instructional authority and serve as curricular-instructional gate-keepers by actively responding to and negotiating state testing pressures based on high levels of content, curricular, and pedagogical knowledge (Grant, 2000, 2005; Grant, Gradwell, Lauricella, Derme-Insinna, Pullano, & Tzeto, 2002; Salinas, 2006; Smith, 2006; van Hover & Heinecke, 2005; Webeck, Salinas, & Field, 2005).

Teacher professional characteristics, such as academic background in social studies education, the nature of their licensure/certification, and number of years in the profession, play a role in shaping not only social studies teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge, but also their ability to react to the demands of state-level testing reform and to exercise instructional decision making. Although previous qualitative studies have explored the influence of state-mandated testing policies on social studies teachers' decision making regarding curriculum and instruction (e.g., Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005; Grant & Gradwell, 2005; Misco, Patterson, & Doppem, 2011; Pace, 2011; Segall, 2006; Smith, 2006; Wills, 2007; Winstead, 2011; Yeager & Pinder, 2006), this study contributes to the limited empirical research on the associations of social studies teachers' broader professional characteristics, school environmental factors, and state-level testing policy on secondary level social studies teachers' instructional authority.

Identifying certain teacher characteristics that predict teachers' social studies "curricular-instructional gate-keeping" autonomy (Pace, 2011, p. 33) in an age of state-level testing policy is a significant issue inherent to policy discussions. State-level testing policies raise a dilemma for administrators concerning which qualities and qualifications are essential to develop, recruit, and hire autonomous social studies teachers who can conduct ambitious teaching, provide minority children quality social studies education, and achieve equity in social studies educational outcomes.

No previous studies have investigated how social studies teacher professional characteristics, school environmental factors, and state testing policy are associated with secondary level social studies teachers' instructional authority. As a result, this study explored the following research questions through hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

- First, to what extent do social studies teachers' professional characteristics (e.g., their in-field status, type of certification, and number of years in the profession) predict the self-reported levels of classroom instructional authority and control among secondary level social studies teachers?
- Second, to what extent do school environmental factors such as school poverty levels and school minority enrollment levels predict the self-reported levels of classroom instructional authority and control among secondary social studies teachers?
- Third, to what extent do a state-mandated social studies test and the use of state test results on job security predict the self-reported levels of classroom instructional authority and control among secondary social studies teachers?
- Fourth, do teachers' professional characteristics moderate the relationship of a state-mandated social studies test to secondary social studies teachers' classroom instructional authority?
- Finally, do teachers' professional characteristics moderate the relationship of the use of state test results on job security to secondary social studies teachers' classroom instructional authority?

Using the Survey of the Status of Social Studies (S4), the largest survey data on US social studies teachers in three decades since Shaver, Davis, and Helburn's (1978) study, and hierarchical multiple regression analysis, this study looked closely into the associations of secondary level social studies teachers' professional characteristics, school environmental factors, and state testing policy on self-reported levels of authority and control that secondary social studies teachers (grades 6–12) have over key classroom tasks.

1. Teachers' instructional authority in the social studies classroom

Classroom authority in general and in the social studies classroom specifically is considered an essential right and responsibility for teachers in addressing the academic needs of students, in being a good leader in a learning environment, and in maintaining our democracy, culture, and government (Campbell, 2006; Conway, 1984; Darling-Hammond, 1988; Hlebowitsh et al., 2013; National Council for the Social Studies, 2007). Teachers who are identified as a source of professional knowledge to solve the problems of the nation's schools and make them better should have increased control over both the school and classroom working conditions, as well as the intellectual freedom and discretionary latitude to make professional judgments on how the content area should be taught (Hlebowitsh, 2005; Melenyzer, 1990; Short, 1994; Sykes, 1990). A teacher's academic freedom to make the best decision for their students is fundamental to his or her empowerment, which has an indirect impact on instructional quality and student academic achievement in mathematics and social studies (Marks & Louis, 1997). Teachers who think they are granted power and control possess a strong sense of professional identity, and acknowledge their job as a genuine profession (Marks & Louis, 1997; Pearson & Hall, 1993; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

However, high-stakes testing accountability has affected teachers' decision making over curriculum and instruction in the classroom. Authority has migrated from the classroom teacher to federal and state governments, educational policymakers, and administrators (Au, 2007, 2009; Santoro, 2011; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Research indicates that the influence of state-level testing policy on social studies teachers' instructional authority shows up in the form of pedantic teaching, such as heavy dependence on textbooks, narrowing of the curriculum, emphasis on generic skills, and use of scripted curriculum for test preparation (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Grant, 2005; Guggino & Brint, 2010; Fickel, 2006; Pace,

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