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Using lesson study to develop a shared professional teaching knowledge culture among 4th grade social studies teachers



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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether scaffolded lesson study might contribute to the emergence of a shared professional teaching knowledge culture among 4th grade social studies teachers. The study reports findings from a three-year lesson study professional development project that sought to develop professional teaching knowledge for problem-based historical inquiry among participating teachers. Participants included six 4th grade State History teachers from three different schools and three different school systems. Using qualitative data collected during three yearlong lesson study cycles, we present evidence that suggests that lesson study can be used to develop a shared professional teaching knowledge culture among 4th grade social studies teachers. We suggest, however, that a combination of factors might contribute to variations in teachers' participation in that shared professional teaching knowledge culture including the degree to which the teachers embraced the public nature of lesson study. These factors include the teachers' idiosyncratic views of teaching and learning, the teachers' individual tolerance for socially constructing curricula, and the degree to which teachers acceded to cultural obstacles within elementary schooling.

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Introduction

This paper grew out of a three-year professional development project called the Plowing Freedom's Ground Project (henceforth, "PFG Project"). Using lesson study as the professional development vehicle, the PFG Project sought to develop participating teachers' professional teaching knowledge for problem-based historical inquiry (PBHI). The PFG Project was a partnership between social studies education faculty at a large land-grant university in the southeast United States and five nearby school districts. In this paper, we examine the effects of the PFG Project on one subgroup of participants – six 4th grade social studies teachers. For this subgroup, we considered variations in the teachers' interpretation of a professional teaching knowledge culture for problem-based historical inquiry. We recognized that teachers serve as the gatekeepers for the curriculum enacted in their classrooms (Thornton, 1991) and that long-term professional development would be critical

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to changing teachers' instructional practice (Borko, 2004; Guskey, 2002; Lieberman, 2009; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Through the PFG Project, we sought to develop a collaborative community of inquiry-based practice that would foster a shared professional knowledge culture for PBHI. For this paper, we focus on the question: *Does lesson study facilitate the development of a shared professional knowledge culture among 4th grade teachers?*

PBHI is an instructional framework that asks students to investigate historical events within the context of social issues for the purpose of developing democratic citizens (Saye & Brush, 2004; Oliver, Newmann, & Singleton, 1992, Shaver, 1996). For example, a teacher preparing a unit on the 1920s era might ask students to consider the question of whether the government was justified in limiting personal freedoms during this period. Students might analyze a variety of competing historical perspectives in order to develop a reasoned response to the question. To assess students' ability to answer the question, students might participate in a mock congressional hearing during which they represent historical actors with various perspectives before making their own personal decision on the question (Brush & Saye, 2003). As part of the unit, the teacher might also ask students to consider an enduring or persistent question: "Under what circumstances is the government justified in limiting individual freedoms?" Discussion of the persistent question thereby helps students to better understand other historical and modern events that reflect the value conflicts inherent in the two questions (Oliver et al., 1992; Saye & Brush, 2004) with the ultimate aim of developing students' civic competence.

Problem context

Civic educators have long advocated for the examination of social issues as a way to engage disinterested social studies students while developing decision-making and reasoning skills for effective citizenship (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996; Oliver et al., 1992; Parker, Mueller, & Wendling, 1989; Saye & Brush, 2004). Yet, the adoption of issues-centered instruction has remained rare (Saye & Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative, 2013), in part due to the differing views of knowledge held by classroom teachers and academics (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Saye, Kohlmeier, Brush, Mitchell, & Farmer, 2009).

Professional teaching knowledge

Convincing social studies teachers that theory-based knowledge produced by researchers has value that can assist them in making pragmatic instructional decisions is challenging because many teachers give greater weight to craft teaching knowledge. This focus on craft knowledge often leads practitioners to overlook or ignore theoretical knowledge that might inform their instructional practice (Hiebert et al., 2002, Lortie, 1975). We conceived of professional teaching knowledge as the merging of craft teaching knowledge, which is personal, private, and often pragmatic, with researcher knowledge, which is public, propositional, and replicable. To accept researcher knowledge, teachers must see it practically and effectively applied within real-world classrooms (Saye et al., 2009). When familiar craft knowledge is merged with unfamiliar researcher knowledge to form professional teaching knowledge, theory-based generalizations become more palatable to practitioners (Hiebert et al., 2002; Saye et al., 2009).

Table 1 summarizes our conception of professional teaching knowledge. Teachers who hold the cultural assumptions for PBHI professional teaching knowledge demonstrate a constructivist epistemology, a commitment to democratic citizenship as the mission for K-12 history teaching, an acceptance of risk taking and ambiguity, and optimistic beliefs about student motivation and curiosity (Saye et al., 2009). Teachers operating within a professional knowledge culture ground their planning, teaching, and discussion in research theory, use theory to diagnose and resolve problems of teaching practice, value the collaborative dialogue typical of lesson study, and view lesson study as an opportunity to create a more public and generalizable teaching knowledge base (Saye, Kohlmeier, Brush, Maddox, & Howell, 2007).

Table 1
Cultural assumptions.

Constructivist epistemology	Civic competence function of history
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals and/or communities create knowledge. • Social reality is ill-structured and ambiguous. Sense-making is a complex process. • Perspective shapes interpretation of facts and leads to multiple historical narratives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop informed, ethical decision-making. • Develop analytical thinking (historical perspective, empathy, sourcing, etc.). • Develop foundational knowledge within an authentic problem context.
Beliefs about students	Risk taking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are naturally curious. • Students can engage in higher-order thinking. • Students will undertake meaningful challenging tasks. 	<p>Risk taking by teachers and students is necessary and good to stimulate thinking, explore multiple perspectives, and prepare citizens to make responsible decisions in an ambiguous world.</p>

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