



# Student demographics and teacher characteristics as predictors of elementary-age students' history knowledge: Implications for teacher education and practice



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' content background predicted students' history assessment performance.
- Time on history instruction predicted students' history assessment performance.
- Interdisciplinary instruction predicted students' history assessment performance.
- Dialectical instruction predicted students' history assessment performance.

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## ABSTRACT

Using student- and teacher-level data from the United States National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), we attempted to disentangle the relationship among student demographics, teacher characteristics, and performance on the fourth grade assessment of U.S. history. Our findings suggest that teacher subject matter background, reported time spent on history/social studies and instructional decision-making were positively associated with learning outcomes. The implications of our study include greater emphasis on subject matter knowledge in history teacher education, increased prioritization of history in elementary classrooms, and the incorporation of interdisciplinary resources and in-class discussion as potential high-leverage practices for early grade history teachers.

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## 1. Introduction

Internationally, the purpose of elementary grade social studies, and in particular the embedded discipline of history, takes on multiple meanings and purposes. In the United Kingdom (U.K.), where views toward overt civic inculcation remain skeptical, research suggests that early exposure to history helps primary (the equivalent of elementary) school students develop an appreciable understanding of how people lived, while making connections across time (Barton, 2001; Lee, 1994). In totalitarian states, such as the former Soviet Union, history education serves a distinctly opposite aim: political indoctrination (Contreras, 1990; Wertsch, 2008). In the United States (U.S.), elementary grade history jostles among multiple purposes, including the development of a pluralistic national identity (VanSledright, 2011) and the recognition of a

democratic common good (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

However, history education in the U.S. has traditionally taken a back seat in elementary education curriculum. Elementary school history, as part of the social studies curriculum, is persistently marginalized in comparison with other core subject areas (math, English/language arts, and science). Research indicates that teachers, under pressure from education accountability policies and mandated testing, spend considerably less instructional time on history (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; VanFossen, 2005). Moreover, many elementary grade teacher candidates devote minimal time to social studies in their preservice education and have little background in history (Bolick, Adams, & Willox, 2010; Hawkman, Castro, Bennett, & Barrow, 2015). In classrooms with underexposed and underprepared teachers, analysis of U.S. elementary-age children's historical knowledge suggests that young learners know very little about their past (NCES, 2011). With respect to race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, the knowledge gap is potentially even more pronounced

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(NCES, 2011).

On a positive note, numerous small-scale studies illustrate exemplary elementary social studies teachers who persevere under these adverse conditions and who create meaningful opportunities to learn history and social studies (e.g. Barton & Levstik, 2004; Grant, 2001; VanSledright, 2002). They provide evidence of knowledgeable teachers who find the time for empowering and engaged history education. To date, however, few large-scale studies have analyzed the influence of the interconnected relationship between teachers' characteristics and decision-making on students' historical knowledge development (Levstik, 2008). The rationale for this lack of scalable research is three-fold. First, history education research has traditionally focused on examining how students make sense of learning the past (Barton, 2001; Wineburg, 2001). Second, researchers have sought to describe exemplars of practice for the purpose of advancing history education (Grant, 2001; VanSledright, 2002). Third, the research has conventionally embedded history teaching within the sociocultural contexts of the learner (Martell, 2013; Seixas, 1994). While collectively informative, these studies offer little generalizable evidence that teacher characteristics and decision-making are associated with how elementary-age students learn history.

Examining the connections among student context, teacher practice, and learning at the macro-level has the potential to complement and confirm smaller-scale studies, while also providing policy-level recommendations for both teacher education and the classroom (Wenglinsky, 2002). Using data from the 2010 National Assessment for Educational Progress grade 4 U.S. History test (NAEP-US4), we explored the complex relationship among student demographics, teacher professional characteristics, and instructional decision-making to understand the discrepancies of history knowledge among elementary-age children and the impact that classroom practitioners have on student learning.

## 2. Student demographics, school contexts, and historical understanding

Before students enter the classroom, a substantial portion of learning opportunities is associated with demographics (Berliner, 2006; Guiton & Oakes, 1995; Wang, 2010). Out-of-school differences in social capital and culture-based educational priorities can influence the learning trajectory of students. Demographics are also conflated by the distribution of school-based resources afforded to non-White, less affluent learners. In U.S. schools, non-white and less-economically advantaged students are more likely to track into less academically rigorous classrooms (Guiton & Oakes, 1995; Schmidt, Burroughs, Zoido, & Houang, 2015). In history education, evidence also suggests that how U.S. students identify with content further complicates learning. The discipline of history is a culturally constructed accounting of the past (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Seixas, 1994). Yet, the traditional canon of Western history is particularly narrow in scope, focusing on the achievement of males in the Caucasian majority while portraying minorities and women as ancillary actors (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995; Loewen, 2009). Non-majority and female students, unable to find historical positionality in such a curriculum, reject the canon and the content that it propagates (Crocco, 2006, 2008; Levstik, 2008). Within elementary history education, studies find that identifying with individuals from the past is an exceptionally powerful learning tool. However, students who do not make such connections often lack the motivation to learn the material, which influences how and to what extent they retain historical content (Barton & Levstik, 2004;

VanSledright, 1998).

## 3. Teacher professional characteristics

Although student background influences young learners' meaning-making, teachers remain a crucial component of exposing young learners to learning opportunities. To this end, when educators have a strong command of the discipline, they are more pedagogically adept in their subject areas and they contribute positively to student learning (Mo, Singh, & Chang, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2008). Yet, unlike other disciplines, history education in U.S. elementary schools is typically subsumed within the larger academic subject area of social studies. Examination of teacher education programs suggests that preservice elementary teachers feel less prepared to teach the multitude of interdisciplinary content embedded within the social studies, and hold the subject in lower regard than the other core subjects (Mathis & Boyd, 2009; Wineburg, 2005). Indicative of the lack of preparation in history education, future elementary teachers observe very little social studies (and history) teaching in U.S. field experiences (Bolick et al., 2010; Hawkman et al., 2015). With little interest in the subject and few models of practice to observe, elementary history marginalization begins before teachers step foot into the classroom. Not surprisingly, studies suggest that, on average, less than 30 min a day is spent on history/social studies instruction prior to the middle grades (Center on Educational Policy, 2007; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010).

A lack of subject matter knowledge and preparation also inversely impacts on the quality of social studies instruction. In their case study of one U.S. middle grades (student ages 11–13) teacher's use of historical inquiry, Reisman and Fogo (2016) found that instructional decision-making was impeded by a lack of history knowledge. Because the middle school teacher, like many elementary teachers in the U.S., lacked subject matter training in history, he struggled at times to engage students in nuanced disciplinary work such as engaging students with source material and emphasizing key pedagogical components specific to the discipline of history and the processes of historical thinking. Similarly, Anderson (2014, p. 91) examined what he referred to as "outliers"—elementary grade U.S. teachers who emphasized social science and history despite prevailing trends of marginalization. Interestingly, he noted that only one of the six outlier teachers whom he studied incorporated dynamic instructional practices such as using inquiry, engaging students with source material, and privileging student-directed learning. Findings suggest that, while teachers spent time on the subject, they did not necessarily enjoy teaching it or feel competent to utilize more nuanced instructional strategies. Moreover, the inconsistent nature of U.S. teachers' preparation of and experience with elementary history education creates potential disparities in the quality of teaching and learning for students.

## 4. Teacher instructional time and decision-making

Time provides teachers with the opportunity to engage students in meaningful instructional experiences that contribute to student learning (Boscardin et al., 2005; Cooper & Liou, 2007; Elliot, 2015; Lafontaine, Baye, Vieluf, & Monseur, 2015). In U.S. elementary classrooms, the teacher's role as an instructional decision-maker is especially pronounced. Balancing several subjects at once, teachers juggle instructional time, curricular coverage, and pedagogical decision-making as well as competing demands from other subject areas. Traditionally undervalued in U.S. prekindergarten-grade 5

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