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## Integrating theory and practice: Factors shaping elementary teachers' interpretation of an inquiry model for teaching social studies



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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the use of a scaffolded version of lesson study to develop professional teaching knowledge for problem-based historical inquiry among three 4th-grade social studies teachers who taught Alabama History at the same high-poverty elementary school. Lesson study is a collaborative professional development approach that involves teachers designing, implementing, and reflecting on instruction in recursive cycles. Drawing upon observations of lesson study planning and debriefing sessions as well as classroom instruction, researchers examined the three teachers' adoption of professional teaching knowledge for problem-based historical inquiry following three yearlong lesson study cycles. Findings suggest lesson study can be used to cultivate professional teaching knowledge for problem-based historical inquiry among elementary social studies teachers, though the transfer of that knowledge to more typical classroom instruction is fraught with challenges. Three factors appeared to explain variations in teachers' adoption of professional teaching knowledge for problem-based historical inquiry: the degree to which each teacher deferred to professional authorities, whether and how each teacher prioritized developing prior knowledge before higher order thinking, and the extent to which each teacher held idiosyncratic views on teaching and learning.

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### Introduction

Social studies curriculum reformers have long advocated for issues-centered inquiry so that students practice the thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving necessary for citizenship (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996; Oliver, Newmann, & Singleton, 1992; Parker, Mueller, & Wendling, 1989; Saye & Brush, 2004). Yet, social studies teachers rarely use issues-centered instructional frameworks (Saye & Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative, 2013). One reason theory often fails to impact practice may be that teachers' conceptions of knowledge applicable to teaching differ from those of researchers (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Stigler & Hiebert, 2009). We wanted to understand whether lesson study, a professional development approach whereby teachers, researchers, and content experts plan, implement, and revise instruction together, might create an environment in which greater integration of theory and practice became possible.

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Lesson study has shown promise in helping teachers overcome obstacles to the adoption of more ambitious teaching (Howell & Saye, 2015; ; Kohlmeier & Saye, 2017; Bocala, 2015; Fernandez, 2005).

This paper presents findings from a three-year lesson study professional development project called the Plowing Freedom's Ground (PFG) Project. The PFG Project was a partnership between social studies faculty at a large land-grant university in the southeastern United States and five nearby school districts. In previous work, we examined the nature of the professional teaching knowledge culture that emerged among the six 4th-grade teacher participants who were part of the larger project (Howell & Saye, 2015). In this paper, we examine the effects of lesson study on three teachers who taught at the same high-poverty urban elementary school. We sought to understand how these three teachers interpreted and enacted problem-based historical inquiry (PBHI), the issues-centered instructional framework at the center of our lesson study professional development project. For this paper, we focus on the following research questions:

1. How do 4th-grade teachers interpret a holistic, research-based framework for problem-based historical inquiry designed to increase professional teaching knowledge?
2. Do 4th-grade teachers who exhibit greater understanding of PBHI demonstrate greater growth in professional teaching knowledge and higher levels of authentic pedagogy over time?

## Perspective

One means to encourage teachers to adopt ambitious instructional frameworks like PBHI is to convince them that theoretical knowledge can be used to guide instructional decision-making. Teachers place their trust in craft knowledge which is developed through experience and organized around specific problems of practice. While researchers tend to parse out the various knowledge bases needed for good teaching (i.e., Shulman's (1986) contrasting of pedagogical and pedagogical content knowledge), teachers' craft knowledge is more pragmatic and intertwined. Teachers reliant on this craft knowledge are unlikely to examine theoretical knowledge from researchers that could inform their instructional practice (Hiebert et al., 2002). To accept theory-based knowledge, teachers need to see it effectively applied within real-world classrooms (Hiebert et al., 2002). We, therefore, conceive of professional teaching knowledge as the merging of craft knowledge, which is personal, private, and often pragmatic, with researcher knowledge, which is public, propositional, and replicable (Saye, Kohlmeier, Brush, Mitchell, and Farmer, 2009). When familiar craft knowledge is merged with unfamiliar researcher knowledge to form professional teaching knowledge, practitioners become more willing to adopt theory-based generalizations (Hiebert et al., 2002; Saye et al., 2009).

Table 1, drawn from our previous work mentoring individual teachers to adopt PBHI (Saye et al., 2009), summarizes our conception of professional teaching knowledge. Our assumptions about professional teaching knowledge are informed by our understanding of research on teaching and learning (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) but also by our decades-long efforts to help teachers adopt ambitious, inquiry-oriented social studies teaching. Teachers who hold the cultural assumptions for PBHI professional teaching knowledge demonstrate a constructivist epistemology, a willingness to take risks and accept ambiguity, optimistic beliefs about student motivation and curiosity, and, perhaps most importantly, a commitment to civic competence as the principal mission of K-12 history teaching (Saye et al., 2009). Achieving civic competence in students demands that teachers require students to “use knowledge about their community, nation, and world; apply inquiry processes; and employ skills of data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010, p. 9).

### *PBHI and its obstacles*

PBHI is an instructional framework that asks students to investigate historical events within the context of social issues to develop civically competent, democratic citizens capable of informed, ethical decision-making (Saye & Brush, 2004).

**Table 1**

Assumptions Underlying PBHI Professional Teaching Knowledge.

| Constructivist epistemology   | Civic competence purposes for K-12 history teaching   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals and/or communities create knowledge.</li> <li>• Social reality is ill-structured and ambiguous. Sense-making is a complex process.</li> <li>• Perspective shapes interpretation of facts and leads to multiple historical narratives.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop informed, ethical decision-making.</li> <li>• Develop analytical thinking (historical perspective, empathy, sourcing, etc.).</li> <li>• Develop foundational knowledge within an authentic problem context.</li> </ul> |
| Beliefs about students  | Risk taking   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are naturally curious.</li> <li>• Students can engage in higher-order thinking.</li> <li>• Students will undertake meaningful, challenging tasks.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>                          |

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