

Voices From the Field: Evidence to Support Social Studies Teachers in Their First Year of Teaching

Margaret M. Ferrara

University of Nevada Reno, Reno, USA

This paper captures data from a collaborative school district-university designed case study that looks into secondary in-service teachers' perceptions of what a first-year teacher should know and be able to do to be prepared to be successful in his or her classroom. These insights helped to design a team-taught course in Fall 2017 for preservice social studies teachers and to lay the framework for future teaming initiatives in the College of Education and the school district.

Keywords: social studies, secondary education, collaboration

Introduction

It is estimated that 50% of beginning teachers leave the teaching profession within the first five years (Ingersoll, 2003). When teachers depart, they take with them their knowledge of instructional techniques, students' learning styles, and professional development training (Chuong, 2008). The annual recruitment and placement of teachers is both time-consuming and labor-intensive (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997). Studies on first year teachers, especially those in inner cities schools, consistently showed a common issue—first-year teachers are not what Deborah Ball called “a well-started beginner” and added that first year teachers “need to be prepared for the work of teaching and skilled in helping all their students learn” (Richardson, 2009). Perhaps this blame lies in the lack of experiences in a classroom. Can the blame also point at teacher preparation programs or in the new teacher shortage response, alternative route to licensure (ARL)? Now, with teacher shortages in more schools, first-year teachers may not have experiences as a student teacher. Data collected in the past few years showed that more than 20% of first-year teachers had no student teaching experience at all (Omer, 2011). Another typical issue arises in that first-year teachers are often assigned to challenging classrooms with a large percentage of students of low achievement scores and a high number of students with an individualized education plan (IEP). What do first-year teachers see as classroom complexities and challenges to their success? The first complexity is gaining an understanding of long-term goals and then how to set up a curriculum to reach these goals. The second issue is how to teach multiple academic levels of students. Overall, the consensus is that the amount of teaching in the classroom is inadequate (Glavis, 2015). The study also found that first-year teachers who were mentored with informal or assigned mentors felt more supported in the areas of general awareness and information or procedures than those first-year teachers who were not mentored.

The current work of Goodwin and her colleagues (Goodwin & Kosnik, 2014) brings out the reality that quality teacher education relies on quality teacher educators. A question infrequently asked in teacher preparation

programs is “what should educators should know and be able to do when they enter the classroom”. It is understandable that teacher educators cannot teach what they do not know, but what should they know and how should they be prepared? The study proposed in this session is mirrored from the work of Goodwin and his colleagues (Goodwin & Kosnik, 2014): What do current teacher educators consider to be the foundation elements of their practice? How do they evaluate their preparation in these areas? How can their experiences inform the preparation of teacher educators? Moreover, with this knowledge, how can teacher preparation programs work together in a collaborative and informative way to help address these issues?

Methodologies

A district-wide survey was administered to secondary social studies teacher. Participants in this study were all secondary (Grades 7-12) social studies teachers in the school district.

In addition to the demographic query, the survey consisted of five open-ended questions related to what first-year teachers should know and be able to do in a social studies classroom. Also, to provide triangulation, a select group of 15 teachers who are part of the teacher-leader program in the school district took part in an interview consisting of seven questions aligned with the survey. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Two coders trained by the researchers worked independently to analyze the data. The research coding team survey and interview responses were verified for accuracy. Themes were ordered individually—first with the responses from the survey and then from the responses to the survey. Data from the survey were housed on the web. The notes from the survey were recorded and transcribed. The coder read the responses for each question and provided a category for each response. These responses yielded a set of categories. The categories from the survey data were compared to the data from the interviews for common features and additional features. The categories were counted to build summary findings.

Results

The response rate ($N = 84$ teachers) was high; over 46% of the teachers in the district in Grade 7 through Grade 12 were represented in the survey responses. Teachers in high school (Grades 10, 11, and 12) responded more frequently than those in the middle school (Grades 7 and 8). In the middle school, teachers teach social studies as a combination of various content, namely, history, civics, geography, and economic. At the high school, the teachers who responded most frequently were those who teach United States History. In terms of years in the district as a teacher, the majority of the teachers (63%) have taught 10 or more years. Only 8% of the teachers have taught in the school district for five years or less. More females (59%) than males (41%) completed the survey. These percentages mirror the school district’s female/male ratio of teachers in social studies.

In response to the question: “What should first-year teachers know before they begin teaching?”, the most frequently cited responses were teaching methods (52%), resource management (51%), and lesson planning (31%). Additionally, some teachers distinguished methods as literacy methods and classroom management as resource management as one of their selections. The most frequently cited knowledge was classroom management for the first choice.

In response to the question: “What should first-year teachers be able to do before they begin teaching?”, the most frequently cited responses were lesson planning (62%), teaching methods (40%), and resource management (32%). Other frequently cited skills were connecting with students (29%) and collaboration skills (20%).

What skills are most important to teach as part of the social studies curriculum? The overwhelming response to this question was common core skills (70%). For this item, teachers were limited to one response, in contrast to questions previously, which asked teachers for their first, second, and third responses. The most frequently cited skills tended to be knowledge-based, focused on social studies (e.g., critical thinking, source analysis, and research) as opposed to skills and disposition-based expected behavior (e.g., cooperation and citizenship).

In the question: “What is the relationship between social studies and literacy for teaching and learning?”, teachers overwhelmingly responded that social studies and literacy were highly related (65%). Teachers expressed this relationship as “they (social studies and literacy) go hand-in-hand” or as one teacher wrote, “This marriage makes learning fun, complex, and full of rigor”.

The study also included data from 15 social studies teachers (five males and 10 females) who agreed to provide their perceptions of follow-up questions based on the study. The participants were predominately high school teachers who had at least 11 years of experience as a teacher in the district. Many of the teachers who responded to interview questions have been in the classroom more than 10 years and two have more than 25 years from the time when they were in a teacher preparation program. An instructional specialist in the district who was part of a teacher leader cohort interviewed each teacher. The interviewees agreed to the interview and were not compensated for their time.

The following sections help capture some of the highlights of their interviews:

Think Back to When You Took Your Methods Course in Teaching Social Studies? What Were Some of the Assignments in the Course?

1. We had to write a lesson plan and a unit plan on some history topic or subject. And I did not know how to write a real lesson plan or craft a real unit. I was told to pull standards, but I totally did not understand the totality of the standards or anything about scope and sequence. I remember thinking that I needed much more of a framework before I could be successful.

2. We did a current event, and I think that was about it. That is all I remember. Current events seemed to be social studies. We did not do any lesson plans or anything.

3. We had to plan an entire integrated unit of study. Mine was on Scotland. I do not know why. In real life I never taught anything about Scotland.

4. I remember planning a whole unit in US history on WWII, because that was my love at the time, I did a lot of lesson plans, which were such a pain to do. That is where I learned about *We the People*. It was so impactful.

5. There was also a 50 strategies booklet. I remember feeling that when I saw the Wacky Weseach guy at a conference, that type of fun activity was the norm. My first-year mentor teacher also loved fun little strategies. But I can honestly say that I do not use any of it. We did not focus on discussion strategies or writing. We did a lot of project-based things.

6. I remember having to plan an entire unit that was 30 or 40 pages with another professor. It makes you think of lessons and timing and such, but it also seemed like a lot of busy work. We had to do so many lessons in the same unit that the thinking ended at some time and we were just doing compliance work.

What did You Walk Away From Your Teacher Preparation Program With in Terms of Teaching Strategies? Content?

The findings from this set of data were interesting. This was interesting for several reasons: First, the teachers who responded had stark and sometimes highly negative memories about what they took away from

their teacher preparation courses and experiences. Secondly, the strategies were not consistent, and at times, the widely disparate memories showed that perhaps strategies could be something that is personal choice.

From a positive perspective, teachers cited that they “learned how to level students” and “how to write lesson plans that looked good on paper”. One recalls a set of strategies: learning jigsaw, cooperative learning groups, think-pair-share. I remember learning how to tie in other content areas.

The most negative comments were directed at lesson planning: “Sadly, all I remember was creating super long lesson plans that are not realistic for a real teacher. There was not really modeling of strategies. There weren’t essential questions or a focus to the lessons. We read, we jig-sawed, we talked ...”.

What did You Walk Away From Your Teacher Preparation Program With in Terms of Teaching Strategies? Assessment?

The most consistent finding when asked about their recall of assessment is that teachers reported that they did not learn assessment as it is in schools today.

1. There is one of the biggest struggles now and one of my biggest complaints; we did not learn anything about creating viable assessments.

2. In addition to assessment, the technique of backward planning was mentioned in five out of the 11 interviews.

3. The only thing I remember about assessment, since there was no backwards design yet, I just remember talking about data.

4. This was corroborated with another interviewee’s statement. I wish I had learned backwards design. It is the most important way to plan: standards, make an assessment, and then, set up your assignments and learning activities.

5. The interview included a wishful thinking question: What do you wish you had also learned?

6. I really wish there was a classroom management class that is required since that is the area that all new teachers struggle with.

7. Knowing what I know now, I wish I had been taught that high expectations with scaffolding make it so that all kids can do rigorous work.

8. In terms of teacher preparation, I wish I had learned more pragmatic skills like setting up a grade book, mapping a curriculum for a year, how to set up your classroom with effective procedures.

9. And the focus on literacy awareness now and its importance were reiterated time and again. I would add a huge emphasis on literacy. I wish that there were a lot more modeling and then an expectation that we also teach the class. We never had to “do”. We were not held accountability for the methods we read about. They should have to videotape themselves teaching and show it to everyone to inform reflective practice. We used to sit through every class, comfortable, and not really learning.

What are the Three Most Important “Things” (Have Them First Explain Things) That a Few Year Social Studies Teacher Should be Able to do During This First Year in the Classroom?

1. They should be able to manage kids and by manage I mean have classroom discipline. But also they need to have empathy and care about kids. They need to build relationships. They need to be reflective and understand how to get better.

2. Pedagogy is the most important. And knowing where to find materials. They need to know good materials to access and use. The next thing is a toss-up between how to differentiate and scaffold instruction so that all students’ needs are being met whether they are high or low.

3. How to put together the content standards with the common core literacy standards with backwards design of whole units with summative and formative assessments and learning activities that fit with that.

4. I think they need to know how to analyze documents (and that documents are not always written things) and how to teach students to analyze.

5. I think first of all they should be able to write a cohesive lesson based on the content standards and the Common Core Social Studies Standards reading, writing, speaking, and listening standards. They do not know good, vetted resources available to them. They should learn this to find good, quality materials for instruction. They do not know how to teach good discussion lessons based on the standards.

6. I think they have to want to have a relationship with students, an authentic relationship, not a facade relationship. As a teacher, you also need to have a willingness to adapt and try new things. You also have to know you are going to fail. You have to have a growth mindset and be willing to get yourself back up.

7. I would want them to be willing to delve into the teaching of writing and have some background to writing to the discipline of social studies. I know that many teachers do not get any writing instruction, but this is really important. I would want them to get away from stand and deliver and be able to demonstrate that they have explored and tried various teaching strategies. I would want to see some sample or model lessons that included engaging strategies that have kids analyzing and doing the work of the lesson.

8. I really want them to be able to have literacy skills and understand how that applies to content. They need skills to find resources, determine if they are good, and format them for students. I think it is so important that they are life-long learners and want to engage in professional development and constantly get better.

9. Because of so much of the shifts of instruction are based on text, I would want them to know how to find complex text and ask good text dependent questions about that text.

10. Another area is learning to lead class discussions. I think they should be willing to take risks and try to lead whole class discussions. They think either that kids cannot do it, or they are terrified to give up control. We want to work with people who are willing and able to let students lead certain parts of the class.

What are Important Skills You Think That are Needed to Teach Students as Part of the Social Studies Curriculum?

1. Students need to be critical evaluators of information. They need to be able to evaluate the merits of an argument.

2. I would say how to analyze and be able to communicate both in writing and verbally to share ideas with one another.

3. They need to know how to analyze primary and secondary sources, both written and visual.

4. Reading and writing are the most important. They need to be able to make coherent arguments. They need to be able to make a defensible claim and support it with sound evidence and reasoning.

5. They have to be able to communicate, read, and articulate verbally or in writing, to provide an analysis of what they have read, watched, or observed.

6. Students need to know how to present their arguments or opinions whether it is in a discussion format or to articulate their opinions in writing. They should be able to engage in civil discourse and to analyze sources for bias and understand perspective and point of view.

7. Civil discourse, critical thinking, the ability to analyze. We really need to support students with a growth mindset.

8. Students need to learn to ask good questions and know how to inquire and challenge ideas. They need to learn to reason through their ideas. Also, researching is huge; students need to be able to evaluate sources.

9. For me, it is effective ways to manage information, like annotating or using graphic organizers and note takers to process and manage so much information. They should learn how to read and analyze primary and secondary sources.

What Relationship do You See Between Social Studies and Literacy?

1. Everything we teach needs to come through some modality, and often that is words on a page. No matter what fun, cute activity you have, it has to be rooted in something, and that something is probably on a piece of paper.

2. I think they are one in the same. I think we use literacy skills to learn social studies content. I think that when we teach them separately, students do not see the connection.

3. Oh, it is very connected... We need to give students common language in these areas between English language arts and social studies.

4. A huge relationship! I do not think you can effectively teach social studies without teaching literacy. I have always thought this, even before common core. Everything we do in social studies classes revolves around reading and writing!

5. They are intertwined. All teachers are literacy teachers, but social studies teachers are the most so of the content areas.

6. They are one in the same; you cannot have one without the other... Literacy is social studies. History is written, so you have to have literacy skills.

7. They are absolutely interconnected. You cannot teach social studies without literacy. Social studies is inextricably linked with literacy.

8. You cannot have one without the other. The best social studies teachers are those who focus on literacy.

9. There is a direct relationship. You cannot have social studies without literacy. You cannot be competent in the social studies without being able to read, write, and discuss.

A Reflection on the Frustration of Three of the Interviewees

1. The university should be willing to work in conjunction with our school district and possibly with the consulting teacher (who works with first-year teachers) to develop a vertical articulation (like we have with elementary, middle, and high school) to help them with the issues I have talked about. It seems like the district wants to work with the university but that the professors do not always want to hear about the realities and change their teaching styles. The professors really need to change with the times.

2. Why are not students taking relevant classes? Like classroom management?

3. And we have professors who have fought common core and fought literacy. We have so little time to teach new teachers at the university, but there needs to be a total overhaul at the university to offer relevant course work and to embrace the real work of teachers.

4. It is kind of like what we were talking about. There needs to be a coaching and mentoring system that is really based in choosing the right teacher leaders. The district needs to support people with scope and sequence documents and really good resources.

Conclusions

The importance of the findings from the teacher survey and follow-up interviews is making sure that

in-service teachers' voices drive the next step in this co-teaching initiative. It is essential in a school district-university partnership that focuses on enhancing student learning, which the curricula drive the preservice teacher education program with relevant connections to what is taking place in the professional development of the partner school district.

Hearing and decoding each teacher's voice from the most common findings to the most abstract are important in deciding what will be covered and what will be eliminated from a preservice teacher preparation course. Building this model helps preservice teachers frame the curriculum on how to make changes and work collaboratively grounded in sound evidence from the field. The bottom line is that all learn and this includes the course instructors, teachers, and most importantly students.

Why conduct a survey to ascertain information that will not be contributory? A statement in the survey helps to bring this point to the forefront:

We need a better bridge between the college and school district. I have mentored new preservice teachers who are receiving information and learning that is contradictory to our standards and expectations. Our teachers need more opportunities to develop lessons aligned with content, standards, and literacy strategies and then more time in front of the students. Less theory and more application. In addition, we need to prepare better our new teachers with classroom management learning and expectations for teachers.

This needs to be a team effort and change needs to take place not only at the university in terms of teacher preparation but also in the school district. These comments below were gathered before the project began and now the project needs to continue to study the progress of this team-teaching initiative in the year ahead and beyond.

The university should be willing to work in conjunction with the school district and possibly with the consulting teacher departments (who works with first-year teachers) to develop a vertical articulation (like we have with elementary, middle, and high school) to help them with the issues I have talked about.

The district also has a responsibility to support new teachers. There needs to be a coaching and mentoring system that is really based in choosing the right teacher leaders. The district needs to support people with scope and sequence documents and really good resources.

A final point is that the design for this study is a natural way to bring the College of Education into alignment with the local school district. The players can make this happen and the most important essential disposition is to maintain a sense of openness and willingness to change for all players. It is also important to continue to hear the voices of everyone—preservice teachers, first-year teachers, “seasoned teachers”, and district-college professional development team. Change is only possible if there is a high sense of willingness and energy. The study helps demonstrate a start of something that will grow into a powerful change model not only for social studies but also for other content areas that need to bridge higher education teacher preparation with school level professional development.

References

- Boe, E. E., Bobbitt, S. A., & Cook, L. (1997). Why didst thou go? Predictors of retention, transfer, and attrition of special and general education teachers from a national perspective. *The Journal of Special Education*, 30(4), 390-411.
- Chuong, D. R. (2008). Teacher attrition: Perceptions of teachers and administrators. *Dissertation Abstract International: Section A—Humanities and Social Sciences*, 69(7A), 2537.
- Glavis, A. (2015). Beliefs of first-year future teacher students on education and teaching: An exploratory study. *Procedia-Social and Behavior Sciences*, 209, 67-72.

- Goodwin, A., & Kosnik, C. (2014). What should teacher educators know and be able to do? Perspectives from practicing teacher educators. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 65(4), 284-302.
- Ingersoll, R. (2003). *Is there really a teacher shortage?* Washington, DC: University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.
- Omer, S. (2011). Classroom “crisis”: Many teachers have little or no experience. *Education Nation on NBC News.com*, 2001. Retrieved from http://www.nbcnews.com/id/44505094/ns/us_news-education_nation/t/classroom-crisis-many-teachers-have-little-or-no-experience/
- Richardson, J. (2009). Equity and mathematics: An interview with Deborah Ball and Bob Moses. *Phi Delta Kappa International*, 91(2), 54-59.