

# Professional Development in the Social Studies: A Research Study of Tennessee Middle School Teachers

Presley Shilling<sup>1</sup>, Jeffrey M. Byford<sup>2</sup>, and Alisha Milam<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eastern New Mexico University

<sup>2</sup> The University of Memphis

<sup>3</sup> Mississippi State University

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**Abstract:** Drawing on three decades of research, this study explores the attitudes of middle school social studies teachers toward professional development in Western Tennessee. Social studies educators frequently navigate the repercussions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which has led to misguided incentives for states and districts to prioritize English and math, often sidelining vital subjects like social studies. This oversight can diminish the quality of a comprehensive education and restrict funding opportunities for social studies teachers. The main questions of this study investigated how middle school social studies teachers perceive current professional development offerings, their content knowledge, teaching methods, and impacts on student achievement. Nine middle school social studies teachers from Western Tennessee were selected for participation through nonrandom purposeful sampling, and a qualitative case study approach was employed, featuring semi-structured interviews. The researchers identified three themes: 1) Effective professional development should be relevant and applicable to impact pedagogy and classroom practices; 2) Teachers seek professional development opportunities that strengthen their content knowledge and align with state-mandated standards; 3) Traditional professional development practices place a strong emphasis on the examination and interpretation of student data.

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## Introduction

Many middle social studies teachers aim to enhance their content knowledge to improve teaching effectiveness and its implementation in the social studies classroom. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) issued the following position statement in 2023: “The principles of teaching and learning consider the processes through which knowledge is constructed, produced, and critiqued. Teaching social studies powerfully and authentically begins with a deep knowledge and understanding of students, the subject, and each subject’s unique goals.” To embark on this goal, social studies teachers at all levels undertake professional development to stay current with social studies’ latest research, methodologies, and technologies, equipping them to provide the highest quality education to their students. Professional development encompasses a range of modalities, spanning

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professional learning communities (PLCs), workshops and seminars, online courses and modules, classroom and peer observations, and professional organizations' learning opportunities. Regardless of the delivery mode, educational researchers widely acknowledge professional development to enhance the quality of teaching and contribute to improved student learning outcomes in the classroom (Avidov-Ungar, 2016; Ball & Cohen, 1999; Thacker, 2017).

Furthermore, the NCSS (2023) identified three pillars teachers must pursue in ongoing professional development to develop a deep understanding of their subject and best practices centered on research-based social studies pedagogies to effectively build on the pillars that support powerful teaching and learning in social studies classrooms. These pillars are:

- Pillar 1: Powerful social studies places learners at the center of the learning endeavor.
- Pillar 2: Powerful social studies is grounded in intellectual quality that allows learners to see the relevance and applicability of social studies topics to their daily lives.
- Pillar 3: Powerful social studies foster civic engagement necessary for a well-functioning democratic society and global community.

In middle grades, social studies have often been overlooked as schools focused more on math and literacy, which aligns with federal education guidelines like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). Schools tend to emphasize subjects that affect their performance, accountability, and funding, leading to the marginalization of social studies. In Tennessee, social studies are specified less in the state's school and district accountability system than in other tested subjects (TDOE, 2021). Consequently, both social studies and its educators often lack recognition and respect. The result often demonstrates a lack of pedagogical and content resources and effective professional development. In the past ten years, state laws have concentrated on enhancing schools, precisely teacher qualifications and training, as an essential element for improvement (Attard, 2016). To follow these regulations, states have prioritized creating practical learning opportunities for all teachers to develop their pedagogy and improve instruction for better student outcomes (Baird & Clark, 2018).

The Tennessee Department of Education introduced the "Best for All" strategic plan in 2019 to comply with new federal education guidelines (TDOE, 2019). One of the strategic objectives was to implement actions that would lead to the professional development of teachers, enhanced pedagogy, and improved student content retention and success. The "Best for All" strategic plan provided various resources and professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their teaching skills and knowledge, allowing teachers to create a conducive learning environment for students. In Spring 2020, the Tennessee Department of Education launched the "Best for All Central Hub" to offer free, online access to high-quality resources for K-12 education stakeholders. However, the initiative only provides resources and professional development for Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STREAM) subjects. The lack of support for tested and less publicized content areas like social studies is unfortunate as social studies teachers are undoubtedly held to the same standards as their colleagues on the state-produced accountability rubrics, the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM) and Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). TEAM evaluations assess a teacher's effectiveness and professionalism, whereas TVAAS measures student achievement

concerning state-mandated testing. Studies indicate that successful professional development for teachers requires an emphasis on content, active learning, effective practice models, and sustained duration (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; De La Paz et al., 2011; Desimone, 2009). Unfortunately, these crucial elements are often absent from the professional development opportunities provided to social studies teachers.

While there is ample research on the critical components of effective professional development, it is essential also to consider teachers' perceptions of what works and how it leads to better instruction and student achievement (Brendefur et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; De La Paz et al., 2011; Desimone, 2009). Teachers' approach and involvement in the educational process can significantly influence their pupils' academic success. Hence, school districts must consider the perceptions of their teaching staff and design initiatives that encourage effective teaching practices, which will lead to better student academic outcomes (Pharis et al., 2019). Gaining insight into the viewpoints of social studies educators regarding professional development can significantly enhance the caliber and accessibility of programs and opportunities within this undervalued education sector. The inequitable distribution of professional development resources to social studies teachers compared to their counterparts teaching mathematics, science, or literacy necessitates rectifying this disparity.

Nonetheless, a significant portion of professional development offerings for social studies teachers remains the traditional, lectured-based workshops or seminars, which provide limited teacher engagement and participation (Grant, 2003; Van Hover, 2008; Adler, 1991). Despite the crucial role that professional development plays in enriching teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical practices, teachers are frequently deprived of the autonomy to plan and organize such sessions. In professional development for teachers, it is a convention to entrust the task of designing and executing training programs to district officials rather than the teachers who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the resulting initiatives (Choy et al., 2016; Colbert et al., 2008). This lack of autonomy can lead to an inadequate and unfulfilling professional learning experience, which may not meet individual teachers' unique needs and interests, and the empowerment of teachers to plan their professional development enhances their engagement and induces changes in their teaching practices (Sparks, 2004).

### **Purpose**

Recent research indicates that teachers, school and district leaders, and state stakeholders emphasize data and outcomes more due to new educational reforms (Behari, 2014; Pharis et al., 2019). Current research reinforces the notion that districts should prioritize professional development to meet the needs of teachers and ensure academic progress and student achievement while cultivating effective educators (Brendefur et al., 2016; Schachter et al., 2019). Guskey (2003) believes effective professional development should increase a teacher's content knowledge and pedagogy. However, these characteristics are often associated with mathematics and science, neglecting social studies.

Understanding middle school social studies teachers' attitudes toward and perceptions of professional development can illuminate concerns about the lack of content-specific professional development opportunities and how professional development affects their teaching and students' academic performance. Therefore, the central purpose of this

study is to examine middle school social studies teachers' perceptions of the design and use of professional development. This study aims to answer the following questions: a) What are middle school social studies teachers' perceptions regarding professional development? b) What are middle school social studies teachers' perceptions regarding professional development and its relation to the subject? c) What are middle school social studies teachers' perceptions regarding professional development concerning pedagogy? and d) What are middle school social studies teachers' perceptions regarding professional development in relation to student achievement?

## Methods

The research study methods and procedures are designed to parallel the case study approach outlined by Creswell (2002). The case study approach provides a comprehensive approach to studying a process, program, or individual, allowing for a deep understanding of the topic (Merriam, 1998). The case study approach is suitable for investigating a single issue, such as middle school social studies teachers' perceptions regarding professional development and its relation to content, pedagogy, and student achievement. Nine middle school social studies teachers from Western Tennessee participated in our study. Schools were selected using a non-random purposeful sampling method to explore how social studies teachers in middle schools perceive professional development within their school and how it relates to their subject knowledge, teaching methods, and improvement of student achievement. The selection was based on community type and letter grade assigned by the state's education department, which depended on the students' success rates in standardized testing. The study included three rural schools with letter grades ranging from A to F, three suburban schools with letter grades ranging from A to C, and three urban schools with letter grades ranging from A to F. The research design involved deliberately selecting participants based on their experiences and comparing public middle schools with varying community types and student success rates to contribute to developing effective professional development programs for middle school social studies teachers (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1.** *School Site Characteristics.*

*School Site Characteristics*

Schools	Community Type	Enrollment: 2023/2024	Grade Band	# of Teachers Sampled	State Letter Grade	S.S. Success Rate
A	Rural	405	6-8	1	A	62.9%
B	Rural	370	5-8	1	C	48.7%
C	Rural	526	6-8	1	D	17.6%
D	Suburban	1,143	6-8	1	A	64.9%

E	Suburban	773	6-8	1	B	66.1%
F	Suburban	1,094	5-9	1	C	67.1%
G	Urban	271	6-8	1	A	78.4%
H	Urban	364	6-8	1	B	81.5%
I	Urban	621	6-8	1	F	23.7%

Eight semi-structured interview questions were formulated based on the four research questions to investigate the participants' perceptions. Each research question was accompanied by two sub-questions aligned with it, allowing participants to express their views and opinions. The questioning categories proposed by Strauss, Schatzman, Butcher, and Sabshin (1981) were employed to encourage participants to provide comprehensive and detailed responses. These categories encompassed hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretative questions (see **Table 2**).

### **Findings and Discussion**

The researchers identified three common themes shared among middle school social studies teachers. Common themes were: 1) Effective professional development should be relevant and applicable to impact pedagogy and classroom practices; 2) Teachers seek professional development opportunities that strengthen their content knowledge and align with state-mandated standards; 3) Traditional professional development practices place a strong emphasis on the examination and interpretation of student data.

#### **Theme 1: Professional Development Should Be Relevant and Applicable**

Pedagogical knowledge involves understanding the learning process, using effective teaching methods, and having knowledge of students' needs. Some professional development opportunities aim to improve teachers' subject-matter knowledge, while others focus on improving their pedagogy, such as teaching practices, classroom management, lesson planning, or assessment methods (Garet et al., 2001). Eight of nine interviewed teachers agreed that professional development must be relevant and applicable to their teaching directly. Seven teachers believed professional development positively impacts their pedagogy and teaching practices when applicable to their classrooms.

**Table 2.** *Research and Interview Questions.*

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Interview Questions	Research Questions			
	What are middle school social studies teachers' perceptions regarding professional development?	What are middle school social studies teachers' perceptions regarding professional development and its relation to the subject?	What are middle school social studies teachers' perceptions of professional development concerning pedagogy?	What are middle school social studies teachers' perceptions regarding professional development in relation to student achievement?
Suppose you were to develop a professional development session for faculty. What would it look like? (Hypothetical)	X			
Would you say that professional development is beneficial? (Interpretive)	X			
What do you think the ideal social studies professional development session would look like? (Ideal)		X		
Would you say that professional development helps advance your primary subject content knowledge? (Interpretive)		X		
What do you think the ideal professional development for acquiring differentiated instructional strategies would be like? (Ideal)			X	
Some teachers say that professional development has little impact on their pedagogy. What would you say to them? (Devil's Advocate)			X	
Suppose you attended a professional development session designed to improve student learning and learning outcomes. What would it be like? (Ideal)				X
Some administrators say teachers who invest more time in professional development tend to have higher test scores. What would you say to them? (Devil's Advocate)				X

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When teachers were asked if they thought professional development was beneficial, one teacher stated:

*"Yes. If it's quality, I don't believe that all professional development is if you do not walk away from that PD with new knowledge that you can apply in your classroom in your daily instruction, I don't think that that kind of PD is beneficial. But yeah, good quality, professional development, it's worth its wait."*

This teacher emphasized the importance of professional development, providing teachers with practical strategies for immediate implementation in their classrooms. While another teacher confirmed this viewpoint in their response:

*"I would say that when I lead a PD session in general, no matter what it's on, whether it's assessment or questioning or development of aligned content to standard aligned content, whatever it is, I want it to be applicable and implementable... So when I approach what my PD is going to look like, I definitely focus in on how can the PD be usable immediately, regardless of what it is."*

Teachers expressing a desire for professional development opportunities relevant to their classroom goals is not a new trend. Research (Long, 2006; Sparks, 2004) indicates that educators' dissatisfaction with professional development stems from its perceived irrelevance or lack of applicability. A 2014 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation study revealed that teachers conveyed discontent with existing professional development programs, citing their lack of relevance, effectiveness, and connection to their role in facilitating student learning. When asked if professional development is deemed beneficial, one teacher answered:

*"Only in very specific circumstances. A lot of it I would have defined as either repetitive or a waste of time, unfortunately... I have found that they've tried to homogenize all professional development to make it all fit so they don't have to be as content-focused, so for social studies, we're going to do this differently, and it all seems to more focus on either literacy or numeracy because they focus on math and ELA and they'll try and think how can we just cram social studies into that? I found that has happened quite a bit."*

According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), effective professional development should encompass active learning, content-specific teaching practices, opportunities for collaboration, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and modeling to demonstrate best practices. Six of the nine participants emphasized the significance of extended time and collaboration as fundamental components of a practical professional development session. One teacher indicated the following:

*"Personally for me, I would think it would be really beneficial to look at the standards that you teach with the people who also teach those standards. Maybe all of sixth-grade social studies, all of eighth-grade social studies, and talk about the things that people do, obviously base it off data right, but if there's one teacher who's just killing it on standard 6.52 and everyone else is like, how did you do that? Where are you doing this? And being able to communicate effective teaching practices for how they're able to achieve higher scores. I think a lot of collaboration would be necessary and collaboration with people who are teaching the same thing."*

Another teacher paralleled this sentiment in their response:

*"I think a lot of brainstorming and collaboration with other people who are teaching that subject content is critical and having time to have those conversations and then come back to the whole group and then talk about that. I think that that really needs to occur."*

Their recommendation to collaborate with colleagues teaching the same content and grade level aligns with the concept of a professional learning community (PLC), which is a prevalent form of professional development in many educational institutions.

A PLC typically comprises a cohort of educators teaching the same grade level and subject area, collaboratively addressing lesson planning, content standards, pacing, and strategies for addressing student misconceptions. Existing literature provides evidence that PLCs are acknowledged as the most effective form of professional development for social studies educators (Salmon, 2019). Furthermore, research indicates that schools with effective professional learning communities demonstrate a greater capacity to provide authentic pedagogy and are more successful in improving student achievement (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Louis et al., 1996; Vescio et al., 2008).

## **Theme 2: Teachers Seek Content-Focused Professional Development**

In the past 20 years, research has underscored the importance of having strong content knowledge to improve teaching (National Staff Development Council, 2001; Progressive Policy Institute, 2005; Walker et al., 2006). The National Council for Social Studies (2008) also stated that continuous professional development to enhance content expertise can help social studies teachers improve their teaching and subject knowledge, leading to better student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Eight out of nine teachers sought professional development opportunities to enhance their social studies content knowledge and align with state-mandated content standards. Wayne et al. (2016) indicated the benefits of teachers' ongoing involvement in subject-specific professional development. Long-term, on-the-job professional development focused on the subject's content improves teachers' knowledge and skills, classroom instruction, and student performance. Although teachers support content and standards-focused professional development, many face challenges accessing these opportunities. Seven teachers felt their professional development did not directly contribute to their social studies content knowledge. One of the obstacles mentioned by teachers is the ongoing emphasis and heavy investment in English Language Arts. When asked if professional development helps improve their social studies content knowledge, a teacher replied:

*"Absolutely not. It's always, if it is content-based, again, it's more of an ELA-based thing. We went through a PD session we were granted to do by the state, and the second half of it was a two-part PD that we did stuff in the summer. We had subs during the year, so we could go to this training. And the whole second cohort of it, our second year, was ELA-based. The whole thing, there's never, other than when I went to the State conference for that geography-type stuff, nobody ever does PD on social studies content. We have to just crack open our textbooks and Google. That's how we have PD on our content."*

Seven teachers highlighted the heavy investment in English Language Arts as a primary hindrance to their participation in social studies-specific professional development.



Over the last decade, research has shown the advantages of content-specific professional development opportunities for K-12 social studies teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; De La Paz et al., 2011; Desimone, 2009). In 2013, a study on high school U.S. history teachers found that attending content-specific professional development sessions enhanced teacher knowledge, student engagement, and achievement (Duffield et al., 2013). Despite backing from current research, the support for social studies content-specific professional development opportunities is limited compared to other more publicized content areas. The slim importance placed on social studies-specific professional development is concerning as social studies teachers are held to the same standards as their colleagues on state-produced accountability rubrics and end-of-year benchmark testing that measures student achievement.

Unfortunately, seven out of nine teachers interviewed feel that the emphasis on content is often absent from the professional development opportunities provided to social studies teachers. Three of the nine teachers noted another obstacle in their responses: the lack of funding for social studies professional development. Many teachers mentioned initiatives their districts would pay a large amount of money for but felt these did not enhance their content knowledge or classroom practices. One teacher declared the following in their interview:

*"No. It's going to be ... whoever they've paid money to and whatever the new exciting thing is, that's what they're going to focus on. A year ago it's like, okay, you're going to learn station rotation. We want to see station rotation, and we want it every week and we're going to do this, and this is how you do it. It has to be done like this. And then this past year they're like, okay, we're not going to do that anymore. And I'm like, okay. So being a history teacher, it's like it's my job to find patterns from the past. And I'm like, so how do I know that the stuff we're doing this year is going to be relevant in a year? So it's never the actual content. It's whatever the district has chosen, this is what the big push is going to be, whether it's data or technology, and that is very frustrating."*

The lack of support, resources, and funding creates significant challenges for social studies teachers seeking valuable professional development opportunities. As a result, funding for social studies professional development is rarely a priority, meaning that teachers receive less support for their growth and development than their colleagues (Hess & Zola, 2012; Swan & Griffin, 2013).

### **Theme 3: Traditional Professional Development is Data-Focused and Driven**

All nine teachers agreed that most professional development opportunities prioritize analyzing and interpreting student data. Recent studies indicate that teachers, school and district leaders, and state stakeholders emphasize data and outcomes more due to new educational reforms (Behari, 2014; Pharis et al., 2019). Legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) have emphasized high-stakes testing, school performance, accountability measures, and student growth and achievement.

The NCLB (2002) initiative emerged from the apprehension that the American education system was trailing its international counterparts. It held schools accountable for enhancing student achievement through mandated standardized tests and minimum

performance benchmarks. As per the legal requirements, third to eighth-grade students must undergo reading and math assessments. This initial emphasis on high-stakes testing prompted teachers to monitor student assessment data meticulously. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was ultimately overturned and succeeded by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. The enactment of this legislation perpetuated the persistent focus on school accountability measures and student achievement through the administration of ongoing benchmark tests, thereby underscoring the significance of consistently analyzing student data. The focus on standardized tests, student scores, and overall school performance has burdened educators, educational institutions, and districts to consistently analyze, interpret, and extract insights from student data.

While professional development predominantly revolves around data, it is essential to note that all participants stressed the significance of not fixating solely on data. Instead, they advocated for providing opportunities to delve deeper into understanding their students' knowledge. Additionally, seven teachers underscored the importance of familiarizing themselves with their students, including their abilities and backgrounds. One teacher communicated:

*"Us sitting in our classrooms and looking at what our students know and don't know, and right now it's just me looking at the data, but it doesn't necessarily have to be data. It could be that exit ticket you did or whatever. If you're allowed to spend time on your planning and your classroom, I'm not talking after school like I'm doing right now, but during your planning, doing those things, that's going to increase student achievement, not a group. Yes, strategies help. All those things help, but we have to know where our students are and what our students are actually achieving and be able to boost their own achievement. A strategy is not that for me. Me knowing who the students are is that for me."*

Another teacher stated a similar opinion in their discussion on this topic:

*"Well, I guess it would depend upon the quality of the professional development. I feel like teachers with the highest test scores are the teachers with the highest investment in their students."*

The dynamic nature of the education landscape stresses the importance of teachers' comprehensive understanding of their students to elevate student achievement and development. Consequently, teachers should be afforded opportunities to acquire the skills necessary for data evaluation and enhancing student learning, thereby improving their capacity to analyze data effectively. Professional development sessions should furnish pertinent information to empower teachers in delivering impactful instruction and addressing the diverse learning needs of their students (Desimone, 2009). Additionally, professional development should concentrate on augmenting teachers' understanding of their students, which has the potential to yield favorable educational outcomes for all learners (Wayne et al., 2016).

### **Limitations and Implications**

In conducting this study, several measures were implemented to ensure accuracy, reliability, and validity. However, some limitations were identified. One significant limitation was the small sample size, as only nine participants were selected from Western Tennessee. This small number may restrict the study's ability to accurately represent the entire

population of social studies teachers in the state. Additionally, the study exclusively focused on public middle school teachers, which means that the findings may not apply to elementary or high school teachers. The lack of tangible benefits for participants may have also contributed to some individuals declining to take part in the study.

The findings from this study provide insights into the perceptions of middle school social studies teachers at a micro level. Given the focus on middle school social studies teachers in Western Tennessee, the results suggest several avenues for future research. Future studies could involve a larger number of teacher participants and include various school sites to broaden the scope and impact of this research. Additionally, expanding the investigation to encompass multiple school districts across different states could yield more comprehensive data and reveal additional themes. Including social studies teachers from elementary and high school levels could also enhance the research by highlighting similarities and differences in professional development across all levels of education.

### Conclusion

The study suggested practical professional development opportunities are crucial for middle school social studies teachers. The research highlights the importance of tailoring professional development to teachers' specific needs, providing relevant information that aligns with their classroom practices, and collaborating with colleagues who teach the same subject and grade level. All nine teachers communicated the importance of effective professional development, highlighting the need for relevance, applicability, practicality, collaboration, and focus on content. Research has identified key elements of effective professional development, including a focus on content, active learning, collaboration, effective practice models, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration (Darling-Hammon, 1997; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; De La Paz et al., 2011; Desimone, 2009).

Eight teachers expressed concern about the lack of social studies-specific professional development offerings. The ongoing content-specific professional development tailored to social studies practices and state-mandated content standards would benefit teachers, enhancing their pedagogical techniques and positively impacting student achievement on social studies end-of-year assessments. Furthermore, increasing the availability of social studies-specific professional development that encompasses applicability, relevancy, and collaboration would boost teacher engagement and enthusiasm about their outlook on professional development.

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### About the Authors

**Presley Shilling** is an assistant professor of secondary education at Eastern New Mexico University. Dr. Shilling's research interests include social studies education, effective professional development, inquiry-based pedagogy, and middle grades education.

**Jeffrey M. Byford** is a professor of social studies education at The University of Memphis. Dr. Byford's research interests include examining critical issues, creating a decision-making curriculum, and developing a Cold War curriculum.

**Alisha Milam** is a clinical assistant professor of secondary education at Mississippi State University. Dr. Milam's research interests include the science and art of teaching, cognitive construction of knowledge, and social studies education.