ABSTRACT

SHAVER, ELIZABETH ANN. Amplifying Wisdom: An Examination of the Practices of Middle-Grade Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year Recipients. (Under the direction of Dr. Meghan M. Manfra).

High-quality history education is vital for democratic citizenship, yet defining and supporting exemplary teaching practices remains a core challenge, especially in middle grades education. Preparing and supporting teachers to work with adolescent students is essential for developing students' motivation to learn and critical thinking skills. Identifying, understanding, and amplifying the wisdom of effective history teachers is essential to the growth of instructional practices and professional development across the field.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the core practices, beliefs, and pedagogical approaches of six award-winning middle-grade history teachers. Specifically, this research sought to answer three questions: (1) How have the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development? (2) In what ways do the teachers consider the development and contextual needs of their students? (3) How do the teachers describe their content-based approaches to teaching 8th-grade American history? The participants represent diverse geographical and teaching contexts across the United States.

Drawing on Shulman (1986, 1987) and, more recently, Jay's (2025) concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)**,** this research conceptualizes teacher wisdom as uniting pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and the knowledge of learners into the teachers' specific PCK. This theoretical framework was used to explore how experienced teachers transform complex historical content into accessible and meaningful learning experiences for

middle-grade learners. The findings of this study suggest that, for these teachers, the knowledge of learners is a critical aspect of PCK.

Amplifying Wisdom: An Examination of the Practices of Middle-Grade Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year Recipients

by

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APPROVED BY:

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Dr. John Lee	Dr. Peter Hessling

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my two amazing children, Zackary and Maya Shaver. Never ever give up on your dreams. You can do anything you set your mind to. I am forever proud of you.

BIOGRAPHY

Beth and her younger brother Matt were born in Richmond, VA, to their parents, Dean and Ruth Whitlow. They spent their early years as ‘television brats’, moving across the country as their dad followed his career in the television industry until they landed in California. Beth earned her bachelor’s degree in history from the University of California, Irvine, in 1999 and her master’s degree in American history from Pace University in 2019. From high school, Beth knew she wanted to be an educator. She spent fifteen years in the classroom, including eleven years in Wake County at Holly Springs High School, before entering the Ph.D. program at North Carolina State University.

Together with her husband, Harold, and their two kids, Zackary and Maya, Beth moved from California to North Carolina in 2006 in search of an affordable place to raise their children. It was here that she and her family set down roots, encouraged more family to join them, and built a lifelong community.

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First, thank you to my committee —Dr. Meghan Manfra, Dr. Paula McAvoy, Dr. John Lee, and Dr. Peter Hessling —for supporting my growth over the past five years. I am forever grateful to have you in my corner and to have the privilege to learn from and with you.

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To my children, Zackary and Maya Shaver, and my grandchild, Minna-Marie Shaver. Thank you so much for your patience and love, especially over the past five years. I love you all so much, and I am so very proud of you.

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AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

Elizabeth A. Shaver is the sole author of this dissertation. Grammarly was used to support editing, and Gemini AI was used in the creation of a table envisioning a participant's description of a resource.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

And that's why it is so much fun to teach middle school. It is because they will roast you like nothing. And they're also some of the kindest, most genuine people ever. And I feel like middle school gets a really bad rap. When people find out I teach middle school, responses I get are, "I'm so sorry" or "I think that all middle school teachers get a free pass to heaven, because I can't deal with my own kid. I don't know how you deal with all of them." But I love them so much. It's such an awkward time of their life. But it is also a time that, as your teacher, just showing up, and showing that you care about them…I cannot imagine doing anything else with my time.

Ms. Roberts (Participant 3) spoke these words at the end of our focus group, right before we finished recording. Her words eloquently reflect the heart of this study: that teachers continue to do the hard work of educating the next generation, are passionate about their profession, and strive to do it well. Providing a counter-argument to current political narratives that accuse teachers of indoctrinating students with "woke ideologies," the teachers in this study demonstrate a dedication to understanding the needs of their students, a focus on historical and critical thinking skills, and a goal of preparing them for life in the 21st century, all while adhering to state standards and resisting the whitewashing of history. Considering current political pressures, this study argues that the teachers who participated in the study work hard to prepare their 8th-grade students to learn an accurate and honest version of American history

Statement of the Problem

Today, much of the modern political discussion and media attention surrounding education is focused on both the actual and perceived struggles of public education in the United States. Over the past forty-five years, government-funded reports like the Nation at Risk

(National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983) and Holmes Report (Holmes Group, 1986), as well as federal education programs like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, have highlighted educational achievement gaps in the United States. These reports and programs tend to employ a deficit lens when addressing the country's education system, highlighting educational inequities. While the flaws in the American education system are glaring, there is little public attention to what is going right in American classrooms and why it matters to our students. According to Grossman et al. (2009) and Labaree (2008, 2010), a prominent reason for the negative narratives about American education is that most Americans undergo a twelve-year observation period as students in the American school system and continue their observations as parents and community leaders. It should be no surprise that not all their experiences are equal or positive.

Indeed, research on enacted pedagogical practices suggests that not all teachers provide their students with engaging, student-centered learning experiences in social studies classrooms (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Martell, 2020; VanSledright, 2010). Not only are these classes often considered boring or useless by students, but they also run the risk of failing to achieve the goals of education broadly (Dewey, 1916/1986) or of social studies education specifically: to prepare students for college, career, and civic life (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023). There are numerous reasons that teachers do not attempt engaging lessons, including classroom management concerns (Grant & Gradwell, 2009), the pressures of time management and pacing (Shulman, 2004; Swan et al., 2018), and a lack of confidence in their content knowledge (Reisman & Fogo, 2016). Shulman (2004) notes that the pedagogical approaches teachers take vary greatly and are often dependent on “contextual or environmental constraints and opportunities (class size, availability of materials, pupil and community characteristics,

prescribed curriculum, and so on), teachers' goals, plans, and strategies, and other conditions - both internal and external" (p. 265). To continue the work of preparing and supporting pre-service and early-career teachers in the practice of designing rigorous and engaging lessons in social studies, a greater understanding of what effective social studies teachers do is needed.

This study examines the practices of six award-winning middle-grade American history teachers during the 2024-2025 school year to gain a deeper understanding of their approaches. According to the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (n.d.) and the individuals who nominated them, these teachers demonstrate excellence through their leadership in the field of American history, creative and innovative instructional methods, and effective integration of primary sources with middle-grade students. Utilizing pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Jay, 2023, 2025; Shulman, 1986, 2004) as the theoretical framework, the focus of the study is to understand the practices of six Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients, how they describe their approaches to teaching American history to middle-school students, how their understanding of their students impacts their pedagogical decision making, and how they discuss their growth as history educators. This study documents and analyzes the practices of these teachers and the ways in which they discuss the factors that influenced their pedagogical development. Additionally, it draws lessons for teacher educators to inform best practices in methods instruction at the university level and the continued development of strong, creative, and innovative pre-service and early-career teachers.

Research Questions

Effective history education requires knowledge of historical content, pedagogical expertise, and a deep understanding of students' developmental stages and unique contexts. This study explores these concepts by asking:

RQ 1: How have the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development?

RQ 2: In what ways do the teachers consider the development and contextual needs of their students?

RQ 3: How do the teachers describe their content-based approaches to teaching 8th-grade American history?

Context of the 2024-2025 School Year

As public education is a nationally and locally funded system that serves the majority of our nation's children, it is frequently a target for political scrutiny. Following the shift in American politics over the past ten to fifteen years, and the influence of the Make America Great Again movement, tensions surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), "woke" ideologies, and LGBTQ+ identities have become controversial in educational discourse in the 2020s. The American education system, as we know it, is undergoing significant changes. Recently, the Supreme Court ruled in *Mahmoud v. Taylor* (2025) that parents could opt their children out of lessons that teach LGBTQ+ inclusive views. President Donald Trump's Department of Education attempted, and was ultimately stopped from launching, an "End DEI" portal (U.S. Department of Education, 2025) that would have allowed parents to report teachers and schools for teaching "DEI"-focused lessons. Several states and school districts continue to offer hotlines for parents to turn in teachers they suspect are teaching "woke" lessons (Arizona Department of Education, 2025; Indiana Attorney General, 2025).

The realities of job loss for 'being woke,' while rare, serve as a reminder to teachers who are considering how to address their students (i.e., pronouns) and what content to teach. A teacher in Florida was denied contract renewal for addressing a student with their preferred name

(Elassar, 2025). Another teacher resigned from her position after gaining national attention for refusing to remove an "everyone is welcome here" sign in her classroom (Hayes, 2025). A third teacher was fired for reading "My Shadow is Purple" to her fifth-grade class (Sonnenberg, 2023). Across the country, conservative organizations like Moms for Liberty (2025) are working to keep the pressure on schools and teachers to ensure *their* vision of education is the one being taught.

Putting history educators in an impossible position, not only is education under greater scrutiny, but so too is the field of history and history education. In March 2025, the Trump Administration released an Executive Order accusing museums and national parks of participating in revisionist history, replacing "objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth" (Exec. Order No. 14253, 2025, p. 1). American history teachers across the country are grappling with balancing these national and local political pressures while preparing citizens for the 21st century. The context of politics is a significant concern for teachers across the country. Although debate about curriculum content in social studies and history is not new (Evans, 2004, 2006), the current political climate in the classroom is increasingly impacting teachers. Teachers should be working to create a curriculum that is culturally responsive and where students' identities are reflected, seen, and valued (Bransford et al, 2000; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Martell, 2018). Yet, even when aligned with state standards, American history teachers specifically are feeling pressured to whitewash their curriculum, adjust content, self-censor, and to decide between a complicated, culturally responsive understanding of our past versus one that fosters American exceptionalism (American Oversight, 2025; Francois, 2025; Shaw, 2025). These curricular decisions not only impact the content that they teach, but they can

also interfere with the relationships they develop with their students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

Background: Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Founded in 1994, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History is a nonprofit organization that is "dedicated to K-12 history education while also serving the general public" (Gilder Lehrman, 2025a). Believing in the power of primary source materials, the Gilder Lehrman Institute offers free lesson plans and resources to teachers and affiliate schools, focusing on integrating primary source materials into K-12 classrooms. They also host annual summer professional development sessions at Gettysburg College and online professional development courses during the school year. Additionally, through a partnership with Gettysburg College, they offer an online Masters of American History program intended for history educators (Gilder Lehrman, 2025c).

Tailored for American history teachers, students, and scholars, Gilder Lehrman houses a collection of over 87,000 historical items, including "letters, diaries, maps, pamphlets, printed books, newspapers, photographs, and ephemera" (Gilder Lehrman, 2025e). Their collection is largely digitized and available online to the public. They partner with history scholars at universities across the country and celebrate the publication of historical non-fiction books through their Lincoln, Washington, Military, and Frederick Douglass prizes (Gilder Lehrman, 2025d).

They also celebrate K-12 American history teachers, recognizing one teacher from each state, the District of Columbia, and a Department of Defense school annually. Teachers at public, charter, and private schools can be nominated by students, faculty members, parents, community members, or school leadership; however, self-nominations are not permitted. A National History

Teacher of the Year winner is then selected from individual state winners. Each of the teachers who participated in this study won the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award in their respective state for "excellence in the teaching of history at the K-12 level" (Gilder Lehrman, 2025b).

This study focuses on middle-grade Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients and how they describe their content-based approaches, consider student developmental needs, and view their growth in the field. The ability to parse out the elements of their approaches using pedagogical content knowledge (Jay, 2023, 2025; Shulman, 1986, 2004) allowed for a clearer understanding of their practices.

Theoretical Framework: Pedagogical Content Knowledge

In 1986, Lee Shulman introduced a new framework for understanding teacher knowledge. Following reports from the Nation at Risk (National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983) and the Holmes Group (1986), both of which depicted a bleak view of the American education system, Shulman began theorizing and categorizing teacher knowledge. Highlighting educational research's "blind spot with respect to content" (Shulman, 1986, p. 7), Shulman's concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) became a framework for how researchers and teacher educators can think about teaching and translating content for student learners.

Shulman approached teacher knowledge with the premise that "the advocates of professional reform base their arguments on the belief that there exists a knowledge base for teaching" (1987, p. 4). He identified seven sources of teacher knowledge: content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and

knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values (Shulman, 1987, p. 8). In later work, he further argued that:

> The challenge is to get inside the heads of practitioners, to see the world as they see it, then to understand the manner in which the experts construct their problem spaces, their definitions of the situation, thus permitting them to act as they do (Shulman, 2004, p. 257).

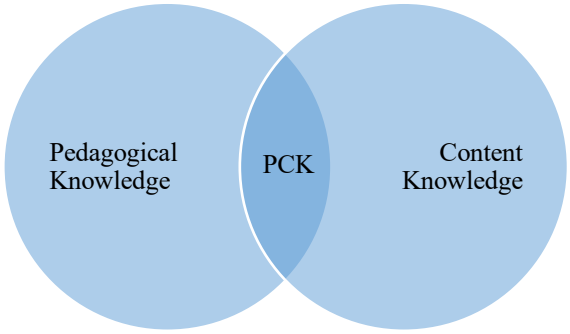
Shulman highlighted the complexity of teaching and the fact that much of the process occurs metacognitively inside a teacher's mind and behind closed doors in the classroom (Shulman, 1987), making it harder to accurately measure. In recent studies on teacher quality and decision-making, researchers have addressed the challenge of measuring teacher quality and argue that there is still a lack of research on teacher quality and "the classroom instructional decision-making associated with quality teaching" (Fitchett & Heafner, 2018, p. 2). Part of the reason for this in social studies specifically is found in the difficulty of measuring expert performance and deciding what constitutes "expertise in a field whose core values revolve around the creation of democratic citizens rather than budding scholars" (Crocco & Livingston, 2017, p. 364).

Since Shulman, there has been an evolution in the theory and in how education researchers think about teacher knowledge and PCK. Grossman (1990) understands PCK as a dynamic relationship between subject matter, general pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. Mishra & Koehler (2006) expanded on Shulman's premise of PCK, adding technology to the framework and developing the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPCK). In their research, Mishra & Koehler (2006) envisioned a Venn diagram (see Figure 1) that represents PCK as the intersection of pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge. They base this on Shulman's own recognition

that PCK "represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction" (1986, p. 8). The PCK framework seeks to understand how a teacher's subject matter, content knowledge, and knowledge of pedagogical approaches translate into classroom teaching and content-specific pedagogical strategies for their students.

Figure 1

Basic Visualization of Pedagogical Content Knowledge.



PCK is influenced by a constructivist learning theory that originated from Piaget's (1970) theory of genetic epistemology (Jay, 2025). Piaget's theory maintains that individuals construct knowledge when they "act upon (interpret, intend, construct meaning about and within) the environment" (Houser & Kuzmic, 2001, p. 444). This learning theory suggests that individuals learn and modify their understanding or perceptions of the world as they gain more experiences. Therefore, scientists continue to refine their theories and understanding of the world based on knowledge gained from experimentation (a concept that also aligns with the evolution of how researchers view PCK). Both Piaget's model and Vygotsky's (1966) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development highlight that knowledge is not static. However, they differ in how that knowledge is acquired: Piaget emphasized an individual's internal cognitive development, while

Vygotsky focused on the important role of social interaction and guided learning. This study recognizes PCK as a constructivist framework, as the methods and strategies teachers use in their classrooms continue to evolve throughout their careers and, when well developed, are often shaped by the teacher's understanding of their students and the community they serve (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Grossman, 1990; Magnusson et al., 1999).

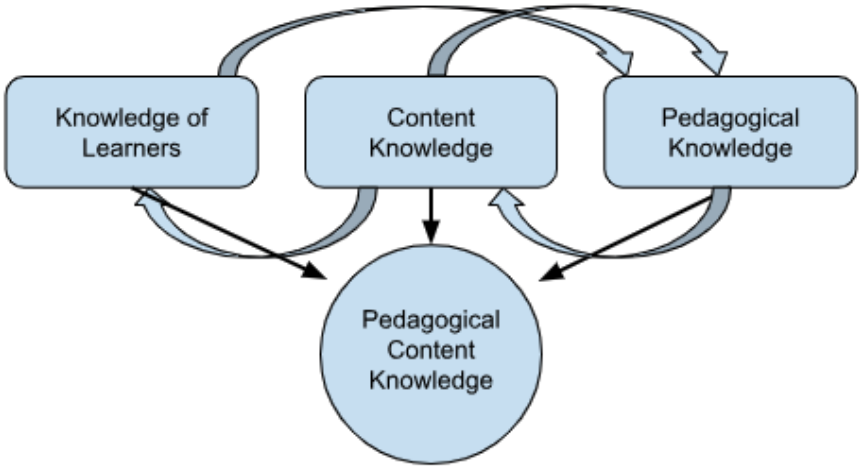
This study examines how middle-grade Gilder Lehrman recipients translate American history content to be developmentally appropriate for their students. The era of celebrating the sage-on-the-stage approach (King, 1993), where students passively absorb information, is mostly behind us. Although it still happens in classrooms nationwide, more meaningful student learning occurs when the teacher adopts a guide-on-the-side stance (King, 1993), fostering student engagement and critical thinking. As Mr. Thomas (Participant 6) stated, "I often subscribe to the idea that whoever is doing most of the talking is the one who's doing a lot of the learning." Since this research focuses on six middle-grade American history teachers who have received the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award, it is assumed that these teachers craft their lessons with a more guide-on-the-side approach. Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) offers the theoretical foundation for this study, as it explores the pedagogical knowledge (PK), content knowledge (CK), and knowledge of learners (KoL) that shape these teachers' methods for teaching American history in 8th-grade classrooms.

Recognizing that PCK is fundamentally based on the idea that a teacher's "capacity stems from the interrelation of their knowledge of content and pedagogy" (Jay, 2025, p. 118), Shulman (1987) and others (Grossman, 1990; Mapulanga & Chituta, 2018; Reynolds & Park, 2019) have also emphasized the importance of having strong knowledge of the learner when designing lessons and choosing content. Since this study specifically focuses on 8th-grade adolescent

learners, it considers the knowledge of the learner (KoL) as a vital part of a middle-school American history teacher's PCK (see Figure 2). PCK, as expressed in this study, seeks to represent the fluid nature of each element of PCK. On a moment-by-moment basis, teachers often draw from their KoL, CK, and PK as they work to translate learning for their students, continually revisiting that information and reflecting on how the elements work together. This means, for example, that while teachers are designing and enacting their curriculum, they are also considering how their KoL may adjust the content being taught or pedagogical approach in each moment. In this study, the components of PCK are expressed through their shared portfolios, interviews, and the focus group.

Figure 2

Expanded Model of Pedagogical Content Knowledge



Note: The expanded model was developed from Mapulanga & Chituta (2018) and represents the fluid nature of PCK.

Pedagogical Knowledge

Pedagogical Knowledge (PK) refers to the learning and teaching strategies that teachers employ to convey content to their students. Through teacher preparation programs, professional development, and professional learning communities, teachers discover and develop new ways to

translate subject-specific content into curricula that their students can understand. Discussed in greater detail in the literature review, when teachers consider building a lesson, they draw on their various pedagogical strategies to design approaches they believe will work best for the content and their students. These PK strategies in social studies and history education can be categorized as traditional, disciplinary, and progressive approaches (Fallace, 2010, 2017; Jay, 2025) that a teacher may alternate between over the course of a course period and unit. Importantly for this study of Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients, the PK framework is directly aligned with disciplinary history strategies. The PK aspect of a history teacher's approaches may address disciplinary strategies, including inquiry and the inquiry design model (Swan et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2019), thinking like a historian (Wineburg, 2001, 2010), and discussion-centered pedagogies (McAvoy et al., 2024; Parker, 2023; Parker & Hess, 2001).

PK recognizes the "deep knowledge about the processes and practices or methods of teaching and learning" (Mishra & Koehler, 2006, p. 1026) and considers a teacher's knowledge of assessments, classroom management, teaching strategies, and lesson planning in designing their curricula (Graham, 2011; Grossman, 1990; Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Sometimes referred to as general pedagogical knowledge (Gess-Newsome, 1999), in history education, teachers' expression of PK in lesson planning and design may reflect disciplinary aspects like: Thinking like a historian (Wineburg, 2001, 2010), inquiry design model (Grant, 2013; Swan et al., 2018), disciplinary literacy (Lenski & Theiman, 2013; Wilson & Wineburg, 1988), or discussion-based strategies (McAvoy et al., 2024; Parker & Hess, 2001). Experienced teachers who are confident in their PK know which strategies to choose and when, depending on the content and their students.

Content Knowledge

Teacher licensure and credentialing have come under scrutiny, yet highly qualified teachers must demonstrate their content knowledge in various ways. Currently, to become licensed as a teacher in the United States, most states require a content exam, such as the Praxis (Educational Testing Service, 2025), and many now also require the edTPA (Pearson Education, 2025), a portfolio-based assessment measure. Jay (2025) argues that teacher licensure and certification "all share fundamental assumptions that teachers' capacity stems from the interrelation of the knowledge of content and pedagogy" (p. 118). These licensure measures aim to ensure that highly qualified teachers enter the public school system. However, when pre-service teachers graduate from their teacher preparation programs and begin their first classroom, their content knowledge (CK) may be strong, but their ability to translate it into effective instruction for their students may be weak (Ball et al., 2008). Yet, given the broad scope of social studies instruction in public schools, it's common for a teacher to focus on U.S. history as a college student but be assigned to teach World History as a first-year teacher. Harris and Bain (2010) remind us that, "public and policymakers in the United States have worried about teachers' content knowledge, with the 'highly qualified' stipulation in the NCLB Act" (p. 9) for many years. Since it is the teacher's job to translate knowledge into PCK for students, CK is essential to this effort (Ball et al., 2008).

Shulman's (1986) formulation of PCK focused on CK in two ways. He argued that teachers must 1) understand the structures of subject matter, including how concepts and principles are organized and how to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and 2) define truths while also explaining their relative importance (Shulman, 1986). An experienced social studies teacher's strong CK, especially when combined with strong PK, enables the teacher to create

meaningful connections from seemingly unrelated ideas. However, without deep content knowledge, "many teacher candidates continue to take courses that separate content knowledge from the development of their pedagogical practice, leaving them ill-prepared to conceptualize subject matter effectively" (Powell, 2018, p. 253).

Effective history educators who have strong CK and PK have the potential to take their historical knowledge and create engaging materials and resources for their students that allow them to grow in the "process of knowledge construction" (Reisman & Fogo, 2016, p. 192). However, teachers who have less experience in the classroom and weaker CK often struggle to support students in making cross-curricular connections, developing historical narratives, or connecting ideas across eras (Harris & Bain, p. 10). Reisman & Fogo's (2016) study supported this as they found that a newer teacher's "limited subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge constrained the quality of historical instruction." (p. 200).

Knowledge of Learners

Middle-grade adolescents are in a transitional phase of their lives, moving between childhood and young adulthood, and between elementary and high school. While it is true that teachers at all grade levels need to understand their students, middle-grade learners are especially vulnerable to negative outcomes if they do not receive proper support in the classroom (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). PCK is crucial for customizing instruction to meet the needs of specific groups of students. This is particularly important at the middle school level, as teachers are less likely to have received specialized training in middle school methods (Conklin & Kalchman, 2018; Mertens, 2018). Bishop and Harrison (2021) emphasize the importance of positive student-teacher relationships and argue that:

> All adolescents deserve schools that help them become competent and confident individuals who feel a sense of agency, are proud of who they are, are optimistic about their future, feel connected to those around them, and are prepared to succeed in our ever-changing world (p. 4).

For both our practicing middle-grade teachers and middle-grade teacher preparation programs, attending to relationship building and knowing the whole child is a significant element in the development of a teacher's PCK. Effective middle-grade teachers must focus on understanding their students and have a deep knowledge of them as learners and individuals. Shulman's original framework (1987) recognized that a core teacher knowledge is both "the knowledge of learners and their characteristics" (p. 8), but he also recognized the importance of "knowledge of educational contexts (including)…the character of communities and cultures" (p. 8). Having this deeper knowledge of the learner invites teachers to blend in their PK and CK to develop culturally responsive (Paris, 2012) and relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) lessons for the students in their classroom communities. It also allows a teacher to select materials and sources that are appropriate for their students and their actual reading levels, as opposed to the ideal of where their reading levels should be.

Standard two of the newly updated teacher preparation standards by The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) put young adolescent development as a key tenet of middle-grades teacher education, recognizing the significance of a teacher's ability to have a "knowledge of young adolescents," understand the "implications of young adolescent development for responsive learning environments," and the "implications of diversity for young adolescent development" (2022, p. 3). Moulton et al.'s (2018) study exemplified this as their preservice teachers came to recognize the broad and powerful implications of middle-grade

student outcomes when the teacher steps beyond the role of lecturer and grade-giver and moves into building a "bridge of knowledge about various aspects of life and helping our students cross those bridges" (p. 69).

Working within state standards and mandated curriculum, a teacher's knowledge of their learners should work in concert with their PK and CK to develop and enhance their PCK. Building on the work of Banks et al. (2005), Gay (2000), and Ladson-Billings (1994, 2004), Conklin et al. (2021) make it clear the content that teachers select and the way they teach it have the ability "to celebrate, affirm, enhance, and build the identities of students…or conversely, can make students feel as if their identities are unimportant, inferior, or non-existent" (p. 267).

Bringing Together Pedagogical Content Knowledge

The maneuvering in and between the elements of PK, CK, and KoL and transforming it into PCK is a framework that allows insight into "how a teacher's understanding of subject matter is transformed to make it 'teachable'" (Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987, p. 60). In his book on *The Wisdom of Practice*, Shulman (2004) contends that experienced teachers should be able to understand "how to establish a pedagogically meaningful relationship" (p. 339) with their students. However, he goes on to argue that "the exemplary teacher creates a relationship around the subject matter to be learned; he or she does not ignore the curriculum and does not establish relationships around social or personal attributes alone" (Shulman, 2004, p. 339). This synthesis of PK, CK, and KoL into PCK has the potential to strengthen teaching and student learning outcomes. It is not enough for an excellent teacher to 'just' know their content, or their students, or suitable pedagogical methods. Instead, they must have the wisdom to combine the three.

As the participants in this study have all received the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award, this study focuses on how they approach middle-school American history and

how they design their lessons to promote student engagement. As award-winning, veteran teachers, their knowledge of their content, pedagogy, and learners will promote a greater understanding of how they approach PCK and teach middle-grades American history.

History Teacher of the Year Rubric

Each year, Gilder Lehrman selects a K-12 teacher from every state for excellence in their classroom. Their criteria focus on three main aspects: creativity in teaching, use of primary sources (see Table 1), and leadership in American history. This study will not concentrate on leadership in American history organizations, as its aim is to explore teaching methods, content-based approaches, and how teachers reflect on their development in the classroom; leadership in organizations is outside the scope of this research.

The History Teacher of the Year rubric (n.d.) was used as a lens in this study's initial portfolio analysis. Before this study, each teacher was selected as a History Teacher of the Year winner, and their application portfolios were evaluated using this rubric by a Gilder Lehrman panel in their respective states. Since each participant's award portfolios have already been recognized as meeting the rubric's criteria, the rubric helped me to analyze the teachers' portfolios, gain insight into the work they are proud of, and guide the development of the interview and focus group protocols.

Table 1

Gilder Lehrman Institute History Teacher of the Year Rubric

Creativity and Imagination in the Classroom	Effective use of Primary Sources
Demonstrates creativity and imagination in the classroom to excite and engage students. This can include, but is not limited to • Uses a wide variety of creative teaching methods including role play, debate, etc. to encourage learning and spark curiosity. • Incorporates enriching and authentic cultural experiences to enhance American history instruction, such as expert speakers or field trips to highlight multiple perspectives and "forgotten history." • Demonstrates a sensitivity and understanding of the student population they are serving, and provides instruction that meets their needs. • Uses teaching methods that allow students to make a personal connection to understand the importance of history on their everyday lives. • Encourages students to become globally aware, responsive student citizens, self-directed learners, and practical problem solvers, highlighting the importance of a student's role in today's society.	Demonstrates an effective use of a wide range of primary sources. This can include but is not limited to • Uses documents, artifacts, historical sites, oral histories, and other primary sources to engage students and highlight multiple perspectives, including the voices of people of color, indigenous people, and women • Encourages the use of primary sources in lessons and research assignments allowing students to interact with history using first-hand accounts • Demonstrates the ability to teach primary sources using structure pedagogy that include having students work directly with primary sources in a variety of intentional ways to increase literacy and research skills to foster academic independence
Examples of excellent demonstration of creativity and imagination in the classroom from past years include • Encouraging students to study the origins of a highway in their town to learn that it was actually an old historic trail, and advocate for renaming the highway • Organizing a student trip to rural Mississippi to volunteer at Habitat for Humanity to understand the depths of poverty and inequality in the Mississippi Delta • Encouraging students to interview individuals who lived in Washington, DC during the 1968 riots to create an oral history project encompassing different perspectives and experiences • Using "escape room" games such as lock boxes and clues to encourage historical thinking • Encouraging students to research local historical figures of color to better understand the history of their community.	*Examples of the excellent use of primary sources from past years include* • Placing "clues" in a variety of primary source documents to encourage students to read and analyze each document for their importance in the historical puzzle • Encouraging students to study monuments and icons to understand the Redeemers' influence on African American rights after the Civil War • Using the Selective Service Act to have students actively participate in a WWII draft simulation.

Statement of Purpose

This study is focused on teacher assets and highlights their wisdom of practice (Shulman, 2004). Unlike many contemporary narratives about education that tend to be negative, this study explores effective and rigorous middle-grade American history strategies and approaches. It seeks to understand the methods of teachers recognized as effective by at least one metric, the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award. This study does not provide a definitive list of what makes an effective middle-grade American history teacher, but instead underscores that "wise practitioners vary" (Shulman, 2004, p. 265) and aims to identify any common traits among the teacher participants. Shulman (2004) argued that each teacher's context is unique, so there is no one "best system of teaching" (p. 265). As such, this research draws lessons from the strategies employed by participating teachers to inform middle-grade teacher education by examining what specifically works in practice for them.

Scope of the Study

This qualitative case study employed purposeful sampling (Tracy, 2024) to select six middle-grade American history teachers who are recipients of the state Gilder Lehrman award. The following elements bound the case: each teacher a) teaches 8th-grade American history in a public middle school, b) still teaches at the same school where they received the award at the outset of this study, and c) works within the continental United States. The potential sample size is relatively small and includes only teachers who meet these criteria, but this allows for detailed descriptions of the phenomenon. IRB approval was obtained in January 2025, and each potential participant received an email inquiring about their interest in participating, along with a demographic survey after providing consent.

The data collected from each participant focused on their pedagogical practices, how they continue to use them, and the contextual factors that affect them. The data set includes:

- A demographic survey,
- Their individual Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year portfolios,
- An interview with each participant, and
- A Focus group

Using the PCK framework, this study was completed over a nine-month period. It offers insight into the pedagogical practices of the six History Teacher of the Year recipients and intends to inform ongoing research and practices in middle-grade teacher education.

Significance of the Study

In the context of the 2024-2025 school year and the ongoing political vitriol surrounding public education and curricula, this study centers on the work that practicing 8th-grade American History teachers continue to do in their classrooms, focusing specifically on their wisdom of practice (Shulman, 2004). Instead of applying a deficit lens when analyzing these teachers' practices, I adopt an asset-based approach, aiming to understand and highlight the work they are doing. In recent years, much social studies research has concentrated on either critical theories in social studies education or the specific methods used in K-12 social studies classrooms (e.g., discussion and inquiry). There has been a decline in recent work utilizing PCK in the social studies field, especially regarding how teachers enact their PCK in middle-grade classrooms. For example, a search of abstracts with the term ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ in the journal Theory & Research in Social Education yielded only three articles over the past decade.

This study primarily aims to inform university methods instructors, particularly in the middle grades, about the best practices of in-service teachers to continue developing and

improving the efficacy of middle-grades teacher education programs in the United States. This study will also seek to inform in-service teachers and the development of PCK-focused professional development in the United States. As teachers often report a lack of interest and limited 'takeaways' from their school and district's professional development offerings (Crocco & Livingston, 2017; Levstik, 2008; Patterson et al., 2022), this study focuses on the PCK strategies of six award-winning 8th-grade American history teachers whose approaches can be utilized and adapted in other history classrooms. Due to the broad educational contexts of the teachers who participated in this study and their largely aligned ideas and values regarding student growth and abilities to engage in rigorous learning, there is great potential for American history teachers across the country to learn from and grow through the practices and experiences of these teachers.

Key Terms

1. Enacted Pedagogy: Refers to the pedagogical strategies that is *actually* taught within a classroom context. It reflects teacher decision-making, daily interactions with students, potential school disruptions, selected methods, and other factors. While a teacher may plan a lesson in a specific way on paper, the way it is taught, in reality, often varies.
2. End-of-Course Exams: A broad term that encompasses the different terms that may be used to address state-mandated content exams at the end of a term or school year.
3. In-Service Teachers: Teachers who are currently practicing and are professionally licensed in their field. This can include teachers entering the profession by lateral entry or through residency programs.

4. Pedagogy: The broad term that reflects the practice and science of teaching children. Pedagogy is typically discussed in conjunction with the instructional methods for a specific content area.
5. Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK): Serving as the framework for this study, PCK (Shulman, 1986, 1987) considers how teachers translate their knowledge of students, content, and pedagogical approaches into learning that is appropriate and accessible for the students in their classrooms.
6. Pre-Service Teacher: A teacher who is enrolled in a teacher preparation program and has not yet been licensed as a teacher. This term does not include teachers who are lateral entry or teaching in a residency program while seeking a professional teaching license.
7. Primary Source Materials: Materials that were created at the time of the event or topic being studied by a person with firsthand knowledge or experience. This can include, but is not limited to, maps, newspaper articles, letters, governmental documents, and photographs.
8. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): Also referred to as Professional Learning Teams (PLTs), PLCs are groups of teachers who plan lessons, discuss students, and share or build strategies for their classrooms. While a PLC often exists within a school building and has dedicated planning time together, it can also be formed by teachers who share content interests or teach the same level of courses (e.g., Advanced Placement).
9. Secondary Source Materials: Unlike primary source materials, secondary sources are created after an event has occurred, by people who were not present and do not have firsthand knowledge. Examples of secondary source materials can include textbooks, biographies, journal articles, and documentaries.

10. Teacher Preparation Programs (TPPs): Often affiliated with universities, TPPs focus on preparing pre-service teachers to enter the teaching field. Traditional TPPs often include courses around methods and materials, classroom management, literacy, and content knowledge.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review explores the research on the purpose of social studies and history education, the nature of middle-grade education, and why educators with strong PCK in this field are crucial for developing capable students in a democratic society. In an era marked by intense political polarization and public debates about the role of social studies in K-12 education, today's political discourse tends to focus more on what is wrong with education rather than recognizing its strengths. The focus on education's deficits is due in part to American political polarization and is influenced by the global ecological crisis, human rights violations, and widespread misinformation campaigns (Levy et al., 2023). The importance of a strong social studies education feels more critical than ever. Dewey (1916/1980) argued that "Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife" (p. 139), a sentiment that places a heavy burden on educators. In this context, middle-grade history teachers and their specialized Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) play an essential role in fostering critical thinking in adolescent learners as they begin to understand the world around them. Adolescent learners are developmentally primed to question and challenge the status quo as they form their identities and worldviews (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Harrison et al., 2019).

Situating Social Studies Education

Defining Social Studies and History Education

Since the emergence of social studies as a field in the late nineteenth century, the debate has fluctuated between concerns about the *topics* taught in social studies classes, *how* they are taught, and *why* they are taught (Ross, 2006; Thornton, 2008, 2017). Social studies is a field that represents change. It is a broad and constantly evolving field focused on individuals and their participation in society (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023). Unlike other disciplines,

the scope of social studies offers students an understanding of the human condition, a perspective of the past, and a glimpse into the future (Levstik & Barton, 2023).

The origins of social studies date back to the late nineteenth century, when the United States was experiencing a rapid shift toward industrialization and expanding its participation in the global economy. Throughout its history, social studies have been grounded in reinforcing the existing values and norms of American democracy and citizenship. In its early stages, this idea was largely based on the concept of citizenship transmission (Barr et al., 1977; Barth & Shermis, 1970; Nelson, 2001), a broad definition connected to the ideas of democratic education and participatory citizenship in the republic (Thornton, 2017).

Formed in 1921, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) was organized to systematize social studies and provide a vision of the future (Evans, 2004; Thornton, 2008, 2017). In the fall of 2023, the NCSS revised its long-standing position statement on the role of social studies in the American educational system, arguing that the essential foundation of social studies education is centered around citizenship. The NCSS believes that powerful social studies education should be grounded in three pillars:

> **Pillar 1:** Powerful social studies places learners at the center of the learning endeavor.
>
> **Pillar 2:** Powerful social studies is founded 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 fosters civic engagement necessary for a well-functioning democratic society and global community (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023).

The objective of social studies education, then, is to foster critical thinking, collaboration, and disciplinary literacy so that students can appreciate and think critically about their roles as

national and global citizens as they prepare for college and their careers. Dewey (1936) argued that “training for good citizenship is one thing when conditions are simple and fairly stable. It is quite another thing when conditions are confused, complicated, and unsettled” (p. 166). Citizenship education in social studies teaches students to think critically and that criticism and dissent are integral to democracy (Nelson, 2001). Unfortunately, in the current political climate, social studies education and citizenship preparation in the United States have become increasingly complicated in public schools due to conservative local, state, and national political positions and an increasing focus on American exceptionalism (Exec. Order No.14190, 2025).

Under the umbrella of social studies education, history education is commonly understood as a curriculum covering past events in a nation or the world. Dedicated courses in history tend to begin at the middle-grade level in the United States and continue through grade twelve. Although state standards differ, history course offerings across the United States often require at least two American history and two world history classes over the course of middle and high school. The benefits of history education are found in its potential to “humanize us in ways offered by few other areas in the school curriculum” (Wineburg, 2001, p. 5). Yet, despite its potential, history education still challenges teachers and researchers to make the past relevant, critical, and inclusive (Popa, 2022; VanSledright, 2010).

History education has long been a key part of social studies. As early as the National Education Association’s (NEA) Committee of Ten in the 1880s and the subsequent Committee of Seven’s recommendations in 1896, the field of history education was established “as a legitimate discipline for secondary schools” (Evans, 2004, p. 7) and became an essential part of social studies curricula. However, history and social studies often serve as cultural and political “lightning rods" (Evans, 2006, p. 318). As curricular gatekeepers, teachers constantly negotiate

between their formal and enacted pedagogical strategies (Ross, 2014), balancing standards and their own PCK to make learning accessible and meaningful for students. Still, teachers are often the ones left holding the proverbial lightning rod when political climates change.

Why Social Studies Matters

As the purpose and goals of social studies education are to foster civic engagement in the republic and global community while preparing students for college and career (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023), a critical question asks: What *is* citizenship education (Ross, 2006)? One perspective is quite straightforward and argues that *a* purpose of citizenship education is to assist immigrants in the process of assimilation (Evans, 2004). Indeed, education has long played a role in Americanizing first and second-generation immigrants. Often, these children who attended American schools could effectively leave their homes and fully assimilate into American culture. A second, much broader perspective argues that citizenship education is based on a citizen's "ability to judge men and measures wisely and to take a determining part in making as well as obeying laws" (Dewey, 1938, p.120). Parker (2008, 2023) largely agrees with this sentiment and argues that school systems have two options: They can either produce individuals with limited interest in civic participation, or they can teach students to "maintain the kind of community that secures their liberty" (Parker, 2023, p. 42).

Through learning in social studies classrooms, students can develop the ability to criticize and dissent, as they are key components of our democracy (Nelson, 2001). In fact, Nelson (2001) argues that "social studies have a primary responsibility for liberating students from ignorance on social topics and developing critical thinking for making social decisions" (p. 30). Dewey's (1938) perspectives on social studies education align well with this idea, and he argued that

social studies are so important that it should "give direction and organization to all branches of study" (p. 219).

Social studies and history education offer a natural setting for learning, analyzing, and discussing complex and controversial issues. Since social studies focuses on people and the world around them (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023), highlighting injustice in the world and throughout history encourages students to critically examine their surroundings. Likewise, history education helps students feel connected to the people they study. When done effectively, "we come to see ourselves as inheritors of a tradition that provides mooring and security against the transience of the modern world," and it can teach us "the limitations of our brief sojourn on the planet" (Wineburg, 2001, pp. 6-7). However, when approached with critical thinking and inclusivity, history students can learn to approach history with critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2007) and be encouraged to engage "with issues kept in the shadows or excluded from their attention, especially in regard to unequal power relations in society" (Schor, 1992, p. 57).

The role of social studies educators is to prepare students to enter adulthood capable of engaging in contemporary society (Dewey, 1916/1986, 1936, 1938; Parker, 2023). This includes teaching disciplinary skills like critical thinking (Dhand, 1992; Kim, 2023; Misco, 2014), inquiry (Grant, 2013; Grant & Salinas, 2008; Saye et al., 2018), and discussion-based learning (Levy et al., 2023; National Council for the Social Studies, 2016; Parker & Hess, 2001) to help students actively participate in American society as it is now and will be (Tillman, 2004). According to these research perspectives, social studies is not about maintaining the status quo. Instead, it should challenge students to understand history, culture, and civics in a way that enables them to apply their knowledge to the complex world they live in and the future world unfolding before

them. The core values of social studies are rooted in democracy; what changes is how society interprets these values. This is where effective social studies education intersects with civic and life preparation; this is where social studies can truly prepare students for the future.

Approaches to Social Studies and History Education

Today, debate and division still exist over teaching methods in social studies education. Earlier in the century, Evans (2006) identified five major competing approaches to social studies and history education: (a) traditional historians and history learning, (b) social studies as a social science reflecting a broader discipline, (c) efficiency educators who use techniques from business and industry, (d) social meliorists who focus on developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and (e) social reconstructionists who believe that social studies can transform society (Evans, 2006). Building on Evans (2006) and other social studies theorists, Fallace (2017) proposed a more refined view of pedagogical approaches to social studies, organizing them into "strands," which he defined as traditional, disciplinary, and progressive (Fallace, 2017).

The traditional, disciplinary, and progressive approaches to social studies education do not exist as fixed entities within a teacher's classroom or practices. Instead, each approach can be present within a single teacher's classroom and across different lessons (Jay, 2022). Notably, Fallace (2010) discusses how he teaches the three approaches in his own social studies methods courses, as well as the theoretical foundations behind them. While his approach is admittedly constructivist and he tends to favor the progressive approach over the traditional, he acknowledges that no single approach is necessarily better or worse than the others (Fallace, 2010). Since this study focuses on middle-grade American history teachers recognized for excellence, examining each approach and the related literature provides an opportunity to

position the research and the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) within the broader field.

Using PCK (Shulman, 1986, 1987) as the theoretical framework, it helps us understand how a teacher's knowledge of teaching methods (pedagogical knowledge), content knowledge (CK), and knowledge of their learners (KoL) all work together. The study applies the PCK framework with the disciplinary social studies teaching methods categories developed by Fallace (2017). When teachers plan and deliver lessons, they must combine different types of knowledge relevant to their specific discipline. They must decide which teaching approach is best for the topic, how to utilize their subject expertise and teaching skills to implement it, and predict how their students are likely to engage with the material. Teachers are expected to be flexible, shifting between different approaches within a single lesson or across multiple classes to best meet their students' needs.

Traditional Approaches

Fallace (2017) defines a traditional approach to social studies and history education as one that is focused "on the transmission and retention of prescribed facts, narratives, images, and content that ought to be committed to memory" (p. 44). This approach uses a common narrative, or "collective memory" (VanSledright, 2010, p. 12), pedagogy that "attempt(s) to transmit a body of predetermined and prescribed content to students, regardless of the social and/or political outlook of the author" (Fallace, 2017, p. 44). He notes that most students who have been through the American education system have been taught social studies this way. The traditional approach to social studies and history education embodies a transmission (Barth & Shermis, 1970; Fallace, 2017; Jay, 2022) or banking (Freire, 1970/2007) approach to education that encourages students to memorize facts rather than challenge counter-narratives.

That is not to say there is no space in social studies and history classrooms for lectures, memorization, and nationalistic popular narratives. Sometimes, teachers rely on direct instruction to build students' background knowledge before encouraging them to engage in critical thinking and inquiry activities on a topic (Fallace, 2010; Parker & Lo, 2016). For example, using their PCK, teachers may decide to deliver a traditional lecture before guiding students through an Inquiry Design Model (IDM) lesson on Japanese Internment (C3 Teachers, 2025). In this example, students first need to contextualize World War II, understand American sentiments about immigration and nativism, and grasp American domestic and foreign policy in the 1940s. The IDM lesson adopts a disciplinary and progressive approach (Fallace, 2017; Jay, 2022) to American history, but before students can actively participate, they need access to the American narrative and relevant background knowledge. Although there is a clear argument that IDM and project-based learning approaches do not necessarily require a lecture-based approach prior to the student-centered activity (Miller, 2018; Parker & Lo, 2016), it is not uncommon for practicing teachers to adopt the approach.

Notably, the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year rubric (n.d.) does not identify traditional pedagogical approaches. Instead, it seeks to recognize teachers focused on student-centered learning, including diverse perspectives, analysis of source material, and global competencies. Again, that is not to say the Gilder Lehrman teachers do not use traditional approaches in their classrooms, but they are more likely to balance them with more disciplinary and progressive pedagogical practices.

Enacted Traditional Approaches

In practice, many social studies and history teachers continue to rely on teacher-centered instruction, which often involves lectures and questioning that elicit a right or wrong response,

despite having been taught inquiry methods in their teacher preparation programs (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Martell, 2020). The stories shared in traditional classrooms can reinforce the status quo (Shulman, 2004), present a collective memory narrative (Fallace, 2010, 2017; Grant & Salinas, 2008; VanSledright, 2010), and promote American exceptionalism (Barth & Shermis, 1970; VanSledright, 2010). Reasons why a teacher may not attempt student-centered and inquiry-based approaches often include four factors: (a) lack of opportunities for the teacher to practice the approach, (b) classroom management concerns, (c) limited time to cover the curriculum, and (d) lack of support from the school community (Martell, 2020).

Extensive research has examined the link between methods courses, student-teaching apprenticeships, and enacted pedagogical approaches once teachers obtain licensure and are in their classrooms (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Fitchett & Moore, 2022; Martell, 2020). A key issue in student-teacher preparation is the gap between university methods course instruction and the practices and expectations of the collaborating teacher during student teaching practicums (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015), as they develop their initial pedagogical knowledge (PK) and content knowledge (CK). Specifically, many education researchers have focused on student teachers' time and opportunities to experiment with the PK learned in their coursework (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Studies indicate that when pre-service teachers are exposed to disciplinary and progressive methods in their programs, but their collaborating teachers are untrained or unsupportive of these approaches, they tend to default to the traditional methods typical in their environment (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Horn & Campbell, 2015). Consequently, they are less likely to adopt the disciplinary and progressive methods when they start teaching in their own classrooms.

The frequent reliance on traditional approaches in classrooms may stem from concerns about classroom management and teachers' beliefs about how much control they should have over student behaviors (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Grant & Gradwell, 2009; Martell, 2020; Shulman, 1986; Wright-Maley, 2015). Often, new teachers worry about their classroom management skills and the evaluation methods principals use during observations (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Valencia et al., 2009). Grant and Gradwell (2009) acknowledge teachers' concerns about student behavior and note that students may resist more rigorous lessons if they are accustomed to less engaging ones. Although there are strong arguments supporting how student-centered lesson plans can help teachers improve classroom management (Parker & Hess, 2001), novice teachers who lack experience with student-centered activities, have not developed confidence in their PCK, or were taught by teachers using traditional methods often rely on lecture and memorization to maintain control of their classrooms.

Teachers also rely on traditional methods in their social studies and history classes when they are concerned about the time it takes to teach the curriculum and develop lessons (Martell, 2020). Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind, states have depended on standardized tests to measure student growth, achievement, and teacher effectiveness. State-mandated tests often cause teachers to focus their efforts on testable material, and as Grant and Salinas (2008) argue, “multiple-choice testing leads to multiple-choice teaching” (p. 255). In recent years, funding for mandated social studies testing in many states has decreased, shifting focus to English, writing, and mathematics. As of 2018, only thirteen states reported having mandatory standardized tests for middle-grade social studies (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). While the decline in funding for social studies curricula is concerning, there is still hope

that secondary teachers may have the flexibility to adopt broader and more progressive approaches to social studies and history education.

Finally, teachers may prefer traditional methods due to the limited community support they receive in their school settings. In his longitudinal study, Martell (2020) notes that the teacher community within a school can serve as a barrier to disciplinary and progressive methods. Experienced teachers might resist or dismiss 'new' approaches for various reasons, such as the time required to develop lessons (Shulman, 2004; Swan et al., 2018), commitment to their established practices (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Phelan, 2005), or lack of training or professional development on these methods (Crocco & Livingston, 2017). Again, for pre-service or early career teachers trained in their teacher preparation programs to use disciplinary and progressive strategies in social studies education, but who are placed during their practicum or hired into a school or professional learning community where these approaches are not utilized, there is a greater likelihood that they will abandon those methods in favor of the professional learning community's approach (Martell, 2020).

Maintaining the Status Quo

A second aspect of traditional social studies and history education instruction emphasizes the narrative presented in the classroom. Fallace (2017) and Jay (2022) describe traditional narratives as focusing on historical events and figures from a specific perspective that offers only one answer or conclusion. Engaging in this approach is not necessarily tied to being conservative or liberal, but it aims to promote a collective memory philosophy (Fallace, 2017). Concentrating on a single narrative encourages students to understand history solely from that viewpoint. The traditional method risks dismissing other perspectives and ideas or even fostering inaccuracies and curricular violence (Hawkman et al., 2024).

Especially in American history classrooms, a traditional approach may rely on a 'founding fathers' narrative; one that highlights the predominantly white men who fought for, organized, and have since been the dominant figures leading the country (Hawkman et al., 2024). While these figures are important to study, this approach can overlook the common man, women, and marginalized people who contributed to the nation and challenged it to improve. When diverse voices and stories are silenced in the classroom, it can send the message to students that people who look like them, think like them, and love like them are insignificant in the nation's history (Hawkman et al., 2024).

Over the past decade, progressive narratives and approaches have faced criticism in many conservative and conservative-leaning states, especially in social studies and history education. Levstik (2008) points out that many opponents of progressive approaches to history in the United States worry that presenting the country as imperfect "will not only detract from a traditional national narrative of progress but weaken students' pride in national accomplishments and support for perceived national goals" (p. 52). Since the primary goal of social studies and history education is to prepare the next generation to participate actively in a diverse nation and world (National Council for the Social Studies, 2016, 2023), teaching without including diverse perspectives and narratives does a disservice to students and prepares them for a world that does not exist.

Disciplinary Approaches

According to Fallace (2017) and Jay (2023), a second approach focuses on strategies specific to the field of social studies. This disciplinary approach to social studies does not focus on simply transmitting information but instead emphasizes "the cognitive and epistemological growth of students" (Fallace, 2017, p. 45). Teachers using this approach aim to involve students

in the “intellectual processes of the academic discipline" (Jay, 2023, p. 45) through “open-ended inquiries into authentic problems in history and the social sciences” (Fallace, 2017, p. 45). In history classrooms, these strategies are often part of a teacher’s PCK and are rooted in a constructivist approach to education, encouraging students to become critical consumers of information and their surrounding world (Popa, 2022).

Teachers who use their PCK to craft lessons using a disciplinary approach to history education often include inquiry, project-based learning, and historical thinking skills. These disciplinary pedagogical strategies provide history teachers with engaging ways to introduce students to new ideas and promote critical thinking. Lessons created with disciplinary methods align with the ideals of the NCSS (2023), and their ongoing support for meaningful social studies helps students see “the value of school history and how it relates to their lives” (Popa, 2021, p. 171). Disciplinary approaches in social studies and history classrooms require teachers to have strong PCK, as they need to design student-centered lessons using their CK and PK, but in a way that is relevant to the student learners currently in their classrooms.

The Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year rubric (n.d.) highlights disciplinary approaches to history education as examples of what an excellent teacher *may* do in their American history classroom. Specifically, the rubric describes potential activities using words like ‘role play,’ ‘multiple perspectives,’ ‘problem solvers,’ and ‘interact’ (see Table 1). While inquiry and project-based learning are not explicitly mentioned in the rubric, pedagogically, they align directly with how a teacher may approach their lessons with “creativity and imagination in the classroom” (Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year Rubric, n.d.). Crucial to disciplinary approaches to history education, the rubric directly addresses the use of primary sources, the significance of first-hand documents, disciplinary literacy, and the importance of

multiple perspectives. In line with the focus on citizenship as the primary goal of social studies and history education (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023), the disciplinary strand emphasizes the responsibilities of active citizenship by teaching and practicing critical thinking, as well as critically assessing source materials.

Inquiry

In education, inquiry appears in every course of study. At its core, inquiry seeks to frame questions in student-centered ways that encourage students to explore an idea, event, or concept. In history education, inquiry asks students to "begin to construct their own interpretations and understandings of past events through the reading and interpretation of primary and secondary sources" (Blevins et al., 2020, p. 36). The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, developed by the National Council for the Social Studies (2013), was created to support individual state standards. Its goals are to prepare "students for their postsecondary futures, including the disciplinary practices and literacies needed for college-level work in social studies academic courses and the critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills needed for the workplace" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. 6). The Inquiry Design Model (IDM) is a key part of the C3 Framework. An IDM is designed to focus on compelling and supporting questions that invite students to think deeply about a topic and explore it through multiple sources, as well as a summative task that asks them to develop an argument in response to the compelling question (Swan et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2019; 2020). Over recent years, the C3 Framework and its inquiry approach have gained recognition both in academia and among practicing teachers. In fact, many states have adopted inquiry-based learning into their standards. As of 2021, sixteen states had either "framed, modeled, or adopted" the C3 framework, and

sixteen have “cited, endorsed, or excerpted” it in their K-12 social studies standards (New et al., 2021).

The NCSS (2023) and the C3 framework (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) argue that students need to practice critical thinking skills to effectively engage in civic and public life. Challenging the traditional banking approach to teaching, which involves pouring knowledge into students who are seen as uninformed (Freire, 1970/2007), inquiry encourages students to think critically about the subject, evaluate sources, and develop arguments to answer important questions. The main idea behind the C3 Framework and inquiry is that students must be active learners, developing the ability to critically analyze documents and the world around them. There is a widespread belief that our Democratic republic cannot survive unless students understand their changing cultural and physical environments, know the past, read, write, and think deeply, and act in ways that serve the common good (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. 5).

Many in-service teachers are indeed being exposed to and integrating inquiry into their K-12 classrooms. On the tenth anniversary of the C3 framework, the NCSS’s practitioner journal, *Social Education,* highlighted the history of the C3 framework and teachers’ active use of inquiry (Lee et al., 2023). The five practicing teachers emphasized the benefits they see in their instructional practices and student outcomes, arguing that when using the C3 framework, “students were engaged and interested in doing challenging work” (p. 390), it invites “students to be curious about history and how they can contribute to their communities given what they learned” (p. 391), and can provide “a safe space for questioning, where students are both challenged and encouraged to question the world around them” (p. 392). Inquiry-based lessons offer the promise of student-centered learning, where students are the “central constructors of

new knowledge" (Saye, 2017), and initiate exploration and problem-solving in the discipline. In a field that does not utilize physical laboratories for experimentation, inquiry in social studies offers students the opportunity to practice applying ideas and developing identity in an academic setting. Saye et al. (2018) argue that when students are exposed to lessons that promote higher-order thinking, deep knowledge production, substantive conversation, and connection to the real world through disciplined inquiry, they are primed to "produce work with value beyond the classroom" (p. 865).

However, the C3 framework and IDM come with notable drawbacks and challenges. Despite practitioner-focused publications, professional development opportunities, and teacher education programs that promote inquiry in K-12 classrooms, pedagogical habits have "remained relatively unchanged" (Martell, 2020, p. 279). The first challenge is that IDM lessons are complex to design and require considerable time and effort to create. For teachers in schools without training or value IDM, the chances that individual teachers or professional learning communities will dedicate their planning resources to IDM are slim. Furthermore, designing and delivering an IDM-focused lesson demands significant PCK from the teacher (Martell, 2020). Both the C3 and IDM also demand considerable time to implement. Finally, teachers who are concerned about classroom management are less likely to adopt inquiry-based lessons. Inquiry-based lessons are inherently student-centered and require more teacher organization and trust in their classroom management strategies. Educators with less confidence or lacking strong classroom management strategies tend to revert to teacher-centered practices (Grossman et al., 1999; Martell, 2020). Although the developers of the C3 framework and IDM believe inquiry should be integrated into daily classroom practice rather than used sporadically (Swan et al.,

2018), teachers who lack training, support, or confidence may find inquiry-based lessons beyond their reach, limiting opportunities for their students.

Project-Based Learning

The Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year rubric (n.d.) emphasizes pedagogical approaches such as role-play and debate, along with the importance of global awareness and multiple perspectives, as indicators of excellence in the American history classroom. Experienced social studies and history teachers often have the flexibility to leverage their extensive PCK and build authentic learning opportunities. Project-based learning (PBL) is a student-centered educational approach that, when implemented effectively, promotes a deeper understanding of disciplinary knowledge and improves student skills, including cognitive, emotional, and social competencies (Zhao & Wang, 2022). It also has the potential to foster "autonomy, constructive investigations, goal-setting, collaboration, communication, and reflection within real-world practices" (Kokotsaki et al., 2016, p. 267). PBL "requires teachers to create a classroom culture of creativity and engagement" (Laverick, 2019, p. 3), where students feel comfortable engaging in authentic intellectual work (Laverick, 2019; Parker & Lo, 2016), problem-solving, and critical thinking. Approaching social studies lessons this way encourages students to participate in topics that are meaningful to their lives, while fostering democratic principles by "providing a foundation that enables students to invest themselves in work that aims to rewrite the world" (Block, 2020, p. 3). Importantly, PBL strategies are closely linked with inquiry-based learning, as inquiry is a core part of this approach (Block, 2020). Inquiry aids in developing critical thinking and analysis by offering "authentic questions and problems within real-world practices" (Kokotsaki et al., 2016, p. 268).

Two key design requirements of effective PBLs are creating lessons that are relevant to students' lives and ensuring they align as authentic intellectual work (Parker & Lo, 2016; Saye, 2017). The idea behind authentic intellectual work in social studies teaching is to center lessons on topics and events relevant to students and their experiences. Originally proposed by Newmann et al. (1996), their framework views authentic intellectual work as a means towards achieving meaningful social studies learning when lessons focus on the "construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school" (p. 282). PBL lessons that incorporate authentic intellectual work are designed to be student-centered, encouraging students to go beyond simple memorization. Importantly, PBL and authentic intellectual work-focused lessons require teachers to shift their PK away from traditional methods and utilize their KoL to design lessons for their specific class of students.

Like other student-centered pedagogies, PBL requires teachers to step back from direct instruction and let students take the lead. PBL need not be the dessert but can serve as the main dish (Miller, 2018; Parker & Lo, 2016), enhancing student content knowledge, breadth of understanding, and overall academic performance on its own (Saye et al., 2018; Zhao & Wang, 2022). However, like the issues surrounding theory and practice with inquiry-based lessons, integrating PBL and authentic intellectual work-based lessons remains uncommon in social studies classrooms (Levstik, 2008; Saye et al., 2018). One possible reason is the deskilling of teachers (Brkich, 2014). To design a lesson that meets the goals of PBL, teachers need not only confidence in classroom management (Barton & Levstik, 2003) but also in-depth CK and the ability to create student-centered lessons.

Primary Sources & Historical Thinking Skills

Integrating primary sources into history classrooms allows textbooks to be replaced with firsthand accounts of stories and lived experiences, making learning more authentic. Traditionally, primary source materials are defined as sources created by those who experienced an era or event, often reflecting the perspectives and views of that time. Textbooks, however, tend to reflect current societal influences (Crocco, 2008; Korbin, 1996) and are often written to serve the interests of larger purchasing markets, leading students to believe there is only "one accurate account of the past" (Korbin, 1996, p. 5). Relying on textbooks in history education introduces bias (Misco, 2014) and tends to focus on rote memorization, leading to boredom (Levstik & Barton, 2023; Levy et al., 2023; VanSledright, 2004). Central to research on primary source-based learning, Wineburg (1991, 2001, 2021) has long emphasized the importance of primary sources in the classroom and the need for historical thinking to foster critical analysis and understanding of those who lived in the past.

Primary sources should not be the only resource history teachers rely on, nor should they be delayed until high school. These materials are essential for creating engaging and innovative lessons across all K-12 history classes. For example, primary source materials are a common and powerful part of K-12 IDM lessons (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013; Swan et al., 2018b). In these lessons, teachers can mix primary, secondary, and media-based sources to promote critical thinking about compelling and supporting questions, helping students gain a deeper understanding of history's complexities through inquiry (Grant, 2013; National Council for the Social Studies, 2013; Swan et al., 2018b). Primary source materials enable teachers and students to 'hear' from those who are often excluded from traditional textbooks. Conversely, textbooks provide a limited view of history and its contributors, often obscuring the realities of

many people's lived experiences and preventing students from building historical empathy (Lee, 2005; Lee & Ashby, 2001).

A benefit of using primary sources in the history classroom is the development of historical thinking skills, which encourage students to consider the context of the source, who wrote it, and why, as well as whether other sources confirm the account (Reisman et al., 2019; Wineburg, 1991). By engaging in this process and teaching students to analyze primary source materials, history teachers can help them go beyond the past and apply these skills to the modern era, effectively creating "training grounds for citizenship, and discussions (that) afford students opportunities not only to hear diverse viewpoints but also to substantiate their claims with evidence" (Reisman, 2015, p. 3). Teaching historical thinking skills through primary sources in the K-12 classroom is not solely about preparing the next generation of social scientists or historians. Instead, if students learn to analyze and understand primary source documents, these skills can easily be applied to analyzing modern texts and media, thereby directly supporting the growth of citizenship participation.

Primary sources support the use of historical thinking skills in history classrooms (Dhand, 1992; Korbin, 1996; Reisman & Fogo, 2015; Wineburg, 2001). When implemented thoughtfully and intentionally, teaching critical thinking and historical thinking skills through primary sources helps students interpret written texts within their historical context and encourages them to understand, if not empathize with, the author's perspective (Barton & Levstik, 2003). Especially in a post-truth era (Harsin, 2018; Kellner & Share, 2019), evaluating sources critically is vital for students preparing to participate civically in democracy. Primary source-based history education and historical thinking skill integration require students not just to accept documents based on the authority of the author (Barton & Levstik, 2003), but to

question the sources and examine their own biases (Dhand, 1992), so they are protected against "any outrageous story they may be told" (Barton & Levstik, 2003, p. 39).

There are many strategies and resources available to K-12 teachers to support lesson planning and the use of primary sources in their classrooms. This is especially important because not all history teachers, particularly at the elementary level, have specialized pedagogical or content training in the field. Reisman & Fogo (2016) argue that these strategies and resources can greatly help teachers who lack strong CK and rely on pedagogical practices that stress the memorization of facts. These resources provide teachers the chance to learn about, practice, and teach with primary sources, including sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization (Reisman et al., 2019; Reisman & Fogo, 2016; Wineburg, 2001). Websites like the Digital Inquiry Group (n.d.) offer primary source lesson plans that include materials for both teachers and students, as well as modified and original sources, and activities that promote critical thinking and historical thinking skills. The Digital Inquiry Group is not alone in this effort. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the C3 Teachers website, and numerous local, state, and national museums also provide lesson plan resources to help teachers incorporate primary sources into their lessons.

Barriers and Concerns

Although research has long supported the impact of student-centered learning and the need for rigorous, critical thinking in the social studies classroom, the reality is that not all history teachers are implementing these lessons. Barriers and resistance to primary source, inquiry, and other discipline-focused lessons are widespread. Numerous studies (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Martell, 2020; VanSledright, 2004, 2010) have explored why teachers do not engage in rigorous, student-centered activities with their students. These studies generally argue

that teachers are either stuck in a pattern of lecturing, reading the text, answering questions, and repeating (Barton & Levstik, 2003), believe they lack the time to develop or implement a student-centered lesson plan (Shulman, 2004; Swan et al., 2018b), feel they lack (or believe they lack) CK (Reisman & Fogo, 2016), or are concerned about student buy-in when lessons are more rigorous and go beyond what students have experienced in previous classes (Grant & Gradwell, 2009; VanSledright, 2010).

These concerns are valid. A teacher's day involves teaching, supporting students, meetings, grading, and lesson planning. Their contract hours leave little time to develop new student-centered learning units or seek professional development specific to history. Shulman (2004) shares this concern and argues that time is the biggest challenge for all teachers. However, more recent research suggests that time does not have to be a significant obstacle when designing and implementing rigorous, student-centered lesson plans. In a case study of a single teacher, Reisman & Fogo (2016) found that limited CK "constrained the quality of historical instruction" (p. 200) but also recognized that publicly available lesson plan resources can play a significant role in supporting teachers with limited CK. Swan et al. (2018b) discussed concerns about time in relation to the scope of course curricula. Recognizing that teachers often need to decide what content to cut in their curriculum, they advocate for the integration of IDM unit plans that focus on critical thinking, rigor, and depth in a topic, rather than covering more topics superficially (Swan et al., 2018b).

Progressive Approaches

The three strands of social studies education are not separate approaches used in isolation but weave together to create comprehensive social studies and history curricula. Jay (2022) notes that:

> In Fallace's formulation, traditional social studies seeks to prepare students to engage in the body politic by transmitting a prescribed body of essential cultural knowledge; the disciplinary strand develops the skills and perspectives of academic experts; and the progressive strand explores the connection between citizenship, schools, and learning in a social context. (p. 343).

Unlike the traditional and disciplinary strands of social studies and history education, the progressive strand focuses less on the structure of the lesson and more on the perspectives being taught and how the knowledge interconnects (Fallace, 2017; Jay, 2022). Fallace (2017) described progressive social studies education as "the learning of content in the context of real-world problems and the application of knowledge to real-world issues" (p. 57). Jay (2022) expanded this definition of progressive social studies, emphasizing the student's role in society. As the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award (n.d.) recognizes teachers who "highlight multiple perspectives, including the voices of people of color, Indigenous people, and women" and "incorporate enriching and authentic cultural experiences to enhance American history…to highlight multiple perspectives and 'forgotten history'" (pp. 3-4), the focus on teachers who use a progressive history strand as part of their PCK is central to the values of Gilder Lehrman.

Citizenship for Social Justice

The National Council for the Social Studies has long emphasized citizenship as a key part of social studies education (Thorton, 2017). In 1992, the NCSS adopted official language clarifying the purpose of social studies, highlighting not just citizenship education but also that social studies teachers should instruct in a way that "helps young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse democratic society in an interdependent world." (National Council for the Social Studies, 1992). Later, in their seventy-

fifth anniversary retrospective bulletin, the NCSS (Davis, 1996) issued a somewhat critical pamphlet on its historical role and stance regarding citizenship education (Shaver, 1996), ethnic and cultural diversity (Garcia & Buendia, 1996), and social crises (Nelson & Fernekes, 1996). Since then, the NCSS has maintained its progressive philosophy that aims to use social studies as a tool to prepare students for citizenship and to help transform our world. In April 2023, the NCSS issued a revised position statement on social studies, reaffirming the focus on citizenship as the foundation of social studies education.

Citizenship education can take many forms in the classroom and has long been a responsibility of public education (Dewey, 1916/1986). However, to meet the responsibilities of social studies curricula, social studies and history teachers have a more explicit duty. In their recent article, Conklin et al. (2021) argue that:

> An essential goal of a school curriculum is to educate students so that they will develop the knowledge, dispositions, attitudes, and skills needed to help create, sustain, and live in a diverse democracy, public spaces, and global community in which all groups can and will participate with equal protection under the law (p.355).

To achieve this mandate, K-12 students must be exposed to diverse narratives, perspectives, and ideas. It is not enough for social studies classrooms to focus on a single narrative of history; instead, students deserve exposure to people who look, think, love, and pray differently than they do. Using source materials in history classrooms provides teachers with a way to meet these mandates and help students develop their civic knowledge on both a national and global level.

Progressive social studies education, which values social justice, is based on principles aimed at ensuring that *all* students receive an excellent education. This educational philosophy believes that "citizenship education for social justice focuses on the common good" and aims to

balance “striving for unity, while also honoring diversity” (Marshall et al., 2016, p. 63). In history classrooms, progressive approaches to lesson planning can focus on whose history is being taught and whether the curriculum is balanced between white, straight men and women, racial and ethnic groups, and individuals aligned with the LGBTQ+ community (Shor, 1992). In education literature, advocating for progressive education for social justice has a long history. Notable theorists include Freire (1970/2007), who promoted humanizing educational approaches to liberate the oppressed, hooks (2014), who believed education should be used to disrupt systems of domination, and Ladson-Billings (1998), who argues that education is the ideal setting to recognize Critical Race Theory and challenge whiteness in the narrative.

Although the current political context is troubling, history teachers do still have opportunities to include diverse perspectives and counter-storytelling in their classrooms (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998), especially when their standards highlight their importance. By utilizing primary sources, teachers can highlight the voices of marginalized groups and demonstrate that historical perspectives, identities, and voices are not exclusively the domain of those from a European background. This approach challenges the common tendency of otherness (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004) in the history curriculum and shows that a diverse, inclusive view is both possible and historically accurate. To clarify, Eurocentric voices and experiences are valuable and should be included, but they should not be the only perspectives presented in any history class.

Barriers to Progressive Social Studies

While it is not a new or unique debate, over the past decade, national conversations and politics have become increasingly divisive when discussing public education, social justice, and the importance of including diverse narratives in the K-12 classroom. In the United States, many

adults struggle with conversations about “economic inequality, civil rights, inclusivity, and equity” (Levy et al., 2023, p. 27). That struggle is only heightened when the discussions involve teaching these topics to their children in public school classrooms. Even teachers committed to developing a progressive social studies curriculum face tangible backlash and fears of losing their jobs.

Since 2019, many teachers engaged in social justice-oriented progressive social studies education have been accused of teaching Critical Race Theory in their classrooms and indoctrinating students in “woke” ideologies (Bailey & Drenon, 2023; Flores & Barnum, 2024; Harrison, 2025). This attack on progressive education has been reinforced and sustained by the media, conservative politicians, and organizations. The conservative Heritage Foundation (2024) sponsored Project 2025, providing a blueprint for the Trump Administration, and opposition to the teaching of “woke” ideologies in public schools and advocating for the elimination of the Department of Education—a Trump policy agenda item that has already begun. These attacks on teachers and public education undermine public confidence in our schools (Levy et al., 2023) and cause teachers lacking administrative or district support to make decisions that silence vital conversations and voices.

Middle-Grades Education

Although there are exceptions, the American public education system is usually organized into three levels: elementary school (grades K-5), middle school (grades 6-8), and high school (grades 9-12). Education between elementary and high school was first organized as junior high schools at the turn of the 20th century to "better serve the needs of young adolescents” (Manning, 2010, p. 192). Then, in the United States during the 1960s, a focused middle school movement emerged to address both students' curriculum growth and their

developmental and social-emotional needs (Schaefer et al., 2016). Known as the father of the American middle school (McEwin, 1992; Schaefer et al., 2016), Dr. William Alexander (1963) celebrated the Winnetka Public Schools, who argued that the responsibility of middle schools is:

> To stimulate in the child a love for learning, as an attitude of inquiry, a passion for truth and beauty, a questing mind. The learning of right answers is not enough… beyond answers alone, we must help children ask the right questions, and discover their answers through creative thinking, reasoning, judging, and understanding (p. 21).

Since then, middle-grade education and research surrounding it have continued to evolve around discussion of the perceived efficacy of middle-grade curriculum (often concerning standardized testing) and the developmental needs of adolescents between elementary and high school (Schaefer et al., 2016).

Middle-Grade Developmental Needs

Although there is some variation across the United States, the term middle school generally refers to grades six through eight and supports students who are developmentally in early adolescence, which is defined as the period between ages ten and fifteen (Harrison et al., 2019; National Middle School Association, 2010). This is a crucial time for adolescents as they transition from childhood in elementary school to young adulthood in high school. Additionally, middle school is also when many students experience puberty, a time when adolescents face profound physical and mental changes (DeMink-Carthew, 2018; Heard & Yakimowski, 2024; National Middle School Association, 2010), and they are also learning to navigate their mental health, relationships, and motivation to learn. For teachers who teach middle-grade students, their knowledge of their learners, including their developmental needs, contextual background, and learning strengths, is imperative to their PCK.

The experiences that young adolescents have in middle school can have a significant impact on their futures (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). These experiences encompass their relationships with peers, student-teacher interactions, and their engagement with content in their classes. Particularly important for young adolescents, concerns about the emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) and its effect on academic achievement in middle schools are a key theme in middle school literature. SEL is generally understood to refer to:

> The process through which people develop and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities; understand and manage their emotions; set and achieve personal and collective goals; feel and demonstrate empathy for others; establish and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible, caring decisions (Bishop, 2023, p. 2).

West et al. (2020) further classify SEL into four developmental components: self-management, growth mindset, self-efficacy, and social awareness. Emphasizing SEL in middle school classrooms is crucial because students become more concerned with peer approval during this stage of emotional growth. They encounter an increased frequency of bullying and mental health issues, especially in the post-COVID-19 era (Bishop, 2023). Recent research has shown a decline in "social awareness and self-efficacy" (Bishop, 2023; West et al., 2020) and academic motivation (Nicolai et al., 2023) among young adolescents. Therefore, SEL in middle-grade education is essential and can significantly improve their social and academic outcomes (Bishop, 2023).

A second developmental focus for young adolescents is their motivation to learn. As middle school students consider their academics and their 'why,' they often ask themselves, 'Can I do this?' and 'Do I want to do this, and why?' (Nicolai et al., 2023). Motivation to learn is a

crucial issue in middle school classrooms (Scales et al., 2020) for both teachers and students. It is often the lowest among historically marginalized groups (Scales et al., 2020), who are also the ones that "disproportionately suffer from harmful consequences of bias, discrimination, and systemic oppression" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 4). The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) contends that effective middle-grade education must be responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) to meet the needs of all learners. Middle school teachers and schools can influence students' motivation by fostering a responsive learning environment and designing curricula that recognize and affirm all students, address social justice, and "justly ensure(s) that each student feels socially connected and valued, becomes competent and skilled, and develops independence and responsibility" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 4).

All students come to school with funds of knowledge (Conklin et al., 2021; Paris, 2012) that consist of previous schooling, family norms, and cultural mores that shape this knowledge and are imperative for a teacher to recognize as part of their PCK. Schools, and social studies teachers specifically, can lean on their specialized PCK to validate their students' knowledge and integrate it into the classroom and curriculum. The validation of students' funds of knowledge (Conklin et al., 2021; Paris, 2012) and building strong student-teacher relationships "may be *foundational* for motivation" (Scales et al., 2020, p. 647). By creating a strong culture and community, intentionally designing learning that is "active, purposeful, and democratic" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9), and fostering student-centered, equitable leadership (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), schools can create environments that provide positive feedback and support academic motivation (Nicolai et al., 2023). This is especially important for marginalized students, who are more likely to receive "inequitable feedback compared to their white counterparts" (p. Nicolai et

al., 2023, p. 14) and are at risk of internalizing unsupportive feedback by middle school, which can lead to decreased motivation to learn.

Social Studies in Middle Grades Education

Due to the emphasis in many states on mandated testing in mathematics and English language arts, social studies in elementary education is often overlooked (Brophy & Alleman, 2008). For example, Levstik (2008) cites two separate studies (Rock et al., 2004; von Zastrow & Janc, 2004) that highlight the insufficient social studies instruction at the elementary level. She argued that although the state standards require social studies instruction, teachers receive minimal professional development and spend little preparation time on social studies. As a result, the number of implemented elementary social studies lessons is low, and when they do occur, they are often superficial. When students enter the middle-grade classroom, it is usually their first experience with changing teachers and classrooms. It is also often the first time they have a dedicated social studies class with a specific social studies teacher.

Social studies content in middle school is similar to that in high school; the main difference is ensuring the lessons are developmentally appropriate. For all students learning social studies, the three goals are for the lessons to be student-centered, relevant, and applicable to students' lives, while also promoting civic engagement (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023). These goals align well with research on middle school pedagogy, which states that successful middle schools should have environments that are "welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all," present "curriculum (that) is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse," and present that "fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.9). For adolescent learners engaging in disciplinary and progressive history, these lessons may require a greater need for scaffolding and the thoughtful selection of primary

source materials compared to those designed for high school classrooms; however, middle-grade learners can participate in rigorous learning, and their abilities should not be discounted.

Especially considering the importance of valuing students' funds of knowledge (Conklin et al., 2021; Paris, 2012), when middle school social studies lessons are designed to be progressive (Fallace, 2017; Jay 2022), focus on social justice, and are developmentally responsive (Harrison & Bishop, 2021), students are more likely to engage in the learning process. Effective middle school social studies teachers recognize that students enter the classroom with their funds of knowledge and with misconceptions about the past. Learning to navigate between recognizing and valuing individual histories and cultures while addressing misconceptions and building empathy (Lee, 2005) can be challenging. However, when done well, it can help all students develop new perspectives and a broader understanding of the complexity of the world around them (Conklin et al., 2021; Hawkman et al., 2023; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Current research on middle school teachers and classrooms tends to emphasize the importance of positive relationships for young adolescents (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Scales et al., 2020), the value of social-emotional learning (West et al., 2020), and the need for responsive curricula (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; DeMink-Carthew, 2018; Hawkman et al., 2023; Kim, 2023; Lash, 2024). In the latest edition of The Successful Middle School, AMLE included "the term diverse to the description of curriculum for young adults" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 3) to emphasize their commitment to inclusion and respond to criticisms against the organization. These focus areas in middle school social studies reinforce the importance of civic education and remind us that when students feel valued, have a sense of belonging in school, and see themselves reflected in the curriculum, these environments have "profound implications for how

youth, especially black youth, come to understand themselves and their communities as civic actors" (Levy et al., 2023, p. 12).

Scripted Lessons

A debate is ongoing in the United States about the role of schools and teachers in students' lives and what exactly teachers are teaching. Some argue that schools and teachers are indoctrinating children into "woke" ideologies and call for either defunding public schools or implementing a standardized curriculum (Meltzer, 2024; Williams, 2025). Additionally, many students across the country are receiving poor instruction and falling short on various measures of academic growth, especially in low-income and urban schools (Chapman & Elbaum, 2021). Scripted lessons are *one* method used to counter political accusations against teachers and to support new and struggling teachers in their classrooms.

Gaining popularity after the No Child Left Behind Act and the rise of standardized accountability measures (Rigell et al., 2022), scripted curriculum became a convenient way for states and districts to standardize instruction across classrooms and schools. They are often focused on high-stakes tested areas like mathematics and English language arts (Chapman & Elbaum, 2021; Smith & Banack, 2024) and frequently include literal scripts for teachers to follow (Narayanan et al., 2024; Rigell et al., 2022). In some cases, curricula are expected to be implemented exactly as written, with no deviations. In other cases, teachers are encouraged to adapt the curricula for their classroom context (Chapman & Elbaum, 2021; Valdez, 2020). This can be reassuring for some teachers who appreciate the structure and find relief from some of the pressures and time commitments associated with lesson planning.

The most significant critique of scripted curricula is that they often promote a narrow, Eurocentric view of learning. For example, in their analysis of a K-8 scripted curriculum, Rigell

et al. (2022) found that emphasizing and normalizing whiteness was the main racial theme of the curricula. Specifically, in the middle school curriculum, themes such as "whitewashing history," "racism couched as nationalism," and "a lack of joy" appeared between sixth and eighth grade (Rigell et al., 2022, pp. 861-853). In another study, Smith & Banack (2024) tried to teach a young adult novel by a Black author to her sophomore ELA class in Tennessee. However, her school adopted scripted curricula that aligned with state legislation banning public schools from using "instruction, curriculum, instructional program, or in supplemental instructional materials… (that discuss how) this state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist" (Tennessee Department of Education, 2021), which the state regarded as applicable to this book. In the end, the teacher had to compromise and find other ways to include marginalized voices and experiences in her classroom. Teachers in schools that have scripted curricula and have the flexibility to adapt the lessons to meet the specific needs of the students in their classrooms must be creative with their PCK as they look for opportunities to broaden the perspectives being taught and the ways in which they are being delivered.

Conclusion

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) encompasses a teacher's content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and an understanding of the learners in their classroom. The means and methods in which a middle school American history teacher engages their students are specific to the course they teach and the developmental needs of middle-grade adolescents. The teachers use their knowledge to decide the disciplinary methods that are best to translate the knowledge to their adolescent learners, ensure that their needs are met, and grow their students in their content and critical thinking skills, all while working to prepare their students for college, career, and civic life (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023).

The literature presented reminds us of the stakes in educating adolescent learners and preparing them to be critical thinkers and civic participants in the future. Barton and Levstik (2023) argue that strong social studies education has the potential to inform students about the human condition, offer a perspective on the past, and provide a glimpse into our future. Yet, for this full potential to be achieved, students must encounter teachers who continually work to develop their pedagogical practices and content knowledge while seeking to know their students and their individual needs. At the middle-grade level, students need teachers who understand, or seek to understand, the nuances of middle-grade learners and the best approaches for both the content and the students in their classrooms. This study situates award-winning middle-grade American history teachers who discuss using these approaches and suggests avenues for supporting pre-service and early career teachers in the implementation of rigorous history education.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study explores the pedagogical practices of six award-winning middle-grade American history teachers in public schools within the continental United States. These teachers are state-level winners of the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award. Each year, Gilder Lehrman selects a state winner from K-12 public, charter, and private schools who, according to the Gilder Lehrman rubric (n.d.), demonstrates leadership in American history, creates innovative and imaginative lessons, and employs excellent teaching practices with primary sources in their classrooms.

Focusing on the promotion of strong social studies education and developmentally appropriate pedagogical approaches, this study investigates the practices of Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year winners to inform and integrate core practices in the development of new teacher education. The research questions are informed by the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year rubric (n.d.) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Jay, 2023, 2025; Shulman, 1986, 2004), and explore these middle-grade teachers by asking:

RQ 1: How have the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development?

RQ 2: In what ways do the teachers consider the development and contextual needs of their students?

RQ 3: How do the teachers describe their content-based approaches to teaching 8th-grade American history?

Using the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year rubric (n.d.) as a heuristic for the initial analysis of participant portfolios, a baseline understanding of how Gilder Lehrman qualifies excellence in the eighth-grade American history classroom was analyzed through two

of the three categories: creativity and imagination, and effective use of primary sources. As this study focuses specifically on the pedagogical practices of teachers, the third category, which focuses on leadership in the field of American history, does not fall within the scope of this study. Additional national and state organizations have identified excellence in the American history or social studies classrooms, including the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and the National Board for Professional Teaching (2016). NCSS (n.d.) specifically identifies "creativity, innovative strategies, critical thinking, and leadership" (p. 1) as markers of excellence and qualifications for this award, and the National Board for Professional Teaching (2016) argues that accomplished social studies and history teachers are those who incorporate primary sources and historical thinking skills along with critical thinking regularly into their classroom routines. This study argues that excellence in social studies instruction, as defined by Gilder Lehrman, is aligned with the NCSS's standards (n.d.) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2016), and offers a valid, accepted, and specific lens to understand the strategies and contextual factors of these six middle-grade teachers.

Qualitative Case Study

The qualitative approach to research seeks to understand and detail the world as individuals experience it through interpretations of "observations, interviews, documents, media, and artifacts" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 7) so that we might make meaning of the participant's world and interactions with it (Patton, 2015). The qualitative approach in this study focuses on the teachers as the experts in their classrooms. It seeks to understand how they run their classrooms and gives insight into their decision-making for middle school learners. Rather than quantifying student outcomes and test scores, this study focuses on the teachers and their practices to achieve a "strong handle on what 'real life' is like" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 7). This is especially important

in this study as the purpose is not to provide a quantified understanding of the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year rubric or student outcomes for History Teacher of the Year winners versus non-winners. Instead, the goal is to understand the nuances of the teachers' pedagogical practices, philosophies, and growth in the field through investigating how they discuss their PCK in the 8th-grade American history classroom.

The qualitative case study method invites the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, an individual, or a group of people, thereby providing "an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). In education, case study research invites the researcher to enter the world of the teacher, allowing them to centralize the participants' voices in the study and center their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences. Case study research is often designed to "show different perspectives on the issue (Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p. 99) and is bounded by a clear definition of the boundaries that "fence in" (Merriam, 1998) the study.

The case study approach was selected for this study as it allows for descriptive analysis (Merriam, 1998) of teachers who have won the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award over the past four years. Through data collection, analysis, and thick description (Merriam, 1998; Tracy, 2024), this case study centers on the participants' voices, acknowledging their wisdom, perspectives, values, and experiences as leaders in their field. As these teachers work and live in different contexts around the continental United States, they all share the phenomenon of earning the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award as a middle school history teacher. Through focusing on 8th-grade American history teachers, the six participants in the study represent a broad range of teaching locations, student populations, and

experiences. This breadth of experiences invites a more nuanced vision of how these teachers approach middle grades history education.

In education, much of the teachers' decision-making and lesson planning occurs either in isolation or out of the view of parents and students. Teachers make constant decisions before and during teaching, so much so that the untrained observer can assume that teaching is easy or natural when done well (Labaree, 2008). Over a typical day in any given classroom, "teachers need to do more than simply implement particular techniques; they need to be able to think pedagogically, reason through dilemmas, investigate problems, and analyze student learning to develop an appropriate curriculum for a diverse group of learners" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005, p. 392). By designing this research as a qualitative case study, I aim to peer behind the curtain and begin to seek an understanding of the processes, techniques, and rationales of these teachers as they work to promote strong history and civic education in their 8th-grade American history classrooms.

Teacher Recruitment and Selection

Four elements bound (Merriam, 1998; Tracy, 2024) this case study. First, all teacher participants live and work within the continental United States. All middle-grade award winners who live in Alaska, Hawaii, and Department of Defense overseas schools were eliminated from the potential sample due to the significant time difference between the researcher in North Carolina and the school locations; a greater than three-hour time difference would have proven inconvenient for the participants, and attention to respecting their time was critical. Second, while middle-grade education can be defined as broadly as grades six through eight in the United States, and there is potential for individual schools to teach American history at different grade levels, all teacher participants at the outset of the study taught in an eighth-grade American

history classroom. This design decision allowed the grade level taught to remain constant. Third, all teacher participants teach in a public school, and fourth, all teach in the school and grade level where they won their award. By bounding the case in this way, there has been a greater opportunity to identify themes among the participants, and it has enhanced the possibility that the research questions can be thoroughly addressed.

Sampling

Purposeful (or purposive) sampling (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2024) was used to recruit teachers for this study. Limiting the focus to public school teachers who work with eighth-grade students allowed for at least two common threads to emerge between the participants. Gilder Lehrman publishes the state and national History Teacher of the Year winners yearly on its organizational website (2025). The site includes each recipient's state, name, teacher's photograph, and school site. Gilder Lehrman archives all winners from the past twenty years on this site. All teachers who qualified for the study based on the bounding requirements received an interest email from me. Of the twenty-nine potential participants, six teachers responded to the email inquiry, completed the demographic survey (see Appendix A), and consent forms (see Appendix B & C). These six teachers represent the participants in the study.

Data about the school sites were also collected for this study. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2024) provides a framework that categorizes school settings into four larger locales, each with three subcategories (see Appendix D). This framework was used to gain information about each school and aided in the understanding of each teacher's community context. Due to the small potential sample size of teachers in the study and the desire to protect their anonymity, the teachers' locales are noted as the macro categories (e.g., city, town, suburb)

and omit the micro categories (e.g., fringe, distant, large). Additional school data was sourced from the US News and World Report (2024) and the Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022) to better understand each school site and the student and teacher populations.

Finally, the researcher was awarded a $1200 dissertation grant from the College of Education. The grant proceeds were awarded equally to each participant ($200 Visa gift card per participant), along with a certificate for three continuing education credits from the College of Education. Both awards were issued on August 9, 2025.

Participants

Each participant was invited to choose their own pseudonym for themselves and their schools (see Table 2). While the teachers represent a broad range of locales (NCES, 2024) and teaching contexts across the continental United States, each teacher graduated from a traditional teaching program and has either earned, or is in the process of earning, their master's degrees.

Table 2

Teacher Participants

Participant	School	Years Teaching	Gender Identity	Ethnic Identity	Highest Degree	School Locale Setting*
Ms. Williams	Park City Middle	14	Female	White	Master's	Town
Ms. Doe	The Awesome School	19	Female	White	Master's	Town
Ms. Roberts	Wolfpack Middle	12	Female	American Indian	Master's	City
Mr. Angeles	The Bridger School	6	Male	White	Master's	Rural
Mr. Taylor	Creekside Middle	16	Male	White	Master's (In Progress)	Suburb
Mr. Thomas	The Johnson School	17	Male	White	Master's	Suburb

Note: *Denotes reference to the NCES (2024) framework

In their interviews, most participants independently discussed the context of politics in their state and districts, as well as the role that current political discourse plays in their schools and classrooms. The role of state and national politics on teachers and their classrooms is reflected in the findings of this study. For that reason, the political context of their states and schools is included in the teacher profiles. For the purposes of this study, a state is defined as liberal if it has voted for a Democratic candidate in the majority of presidential elections since 1996, and conservative if it has voted for a Republican candidate in the same elections. No states fell outside of this parameter. Unless the participant described their school context as conservative or liberal in the interviews, the same strategy was used to determine the political context of the school districts. In the context of national politics surrounding the Trump administration's position on and funding of public education, conversations about scripted lessons, diverse perspectives in the classroom, and concerns of student informants emerged as a

recurring theme in the interviews and data analysis. It is therefore critical to consider the political landscape for each teacher and the work they do to ensure students continue to develop as critical thinkers and civic participants in the 21st century.

Participant Introductions

The following vignettes provide a snapshot of each of the teacher participants in this study and are intended to introduce the teachers, rather than provide a comprehensive biography of them. Greater detail on their positionality and pedagogical approaches can be found in the findings of this dissertation.

Ms. Williams. Ms. Williams teaches at Park City Middle School in a suburban school. She has been teaching for fourteen years and has both her bachelor's and master's degrees in education. She teaches in a more conservative region of her liberal state and has a mandated state exam at the end of her course. Ms. Williams values a welcoming classroom community that supports all of her students who come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. She uses humor and highly structured classroom strategies to ensure that all students "know what's expected of them." By focusing on student growth and creating a challenging academic atmosphere, Ms. Williams is a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the resources she uses in her classroom to ensure they continue to meet the needs of her student community.

Ms. Doe. Ms. Doe teaches at The Awesome School in a town setting. She has been teaching for nineteen years and holds a bachelor's degree in history education and a master's degree in history. She teaches in a conservative town within a conservative state. Ms. Doe values a classroom culture where expectations are high and students know that they will be expected to participate every day. She emphasizes that once students have "made the decision to enter, they made the decision to start" the day's lessons. She approaches her classroom with humor,

embracing her “kooky” personality and lessons. Ms. Doe seeks to center and celebrate each student’s culture in her lessons, while also ensuring that all students have the necessary tools and resources to succeed in her class.

Ms. Roberts. Ms. Roberts teaches at Wolf Pack Middle School in a city setting. She has been teaching for twelve years and holds a bachelor's degree in history education and a master's degree in American history. She teaches in a conservative city within a conservative state. Ms. Roberts does not have a state-mandated end-of-course exam for her subject, but does feel the pressures of political forces that have broadened her communication style but not deterred her from teaching hard history topics to her student learners. She is a self-proclaimed history nerd who celebrates that she has “so much love and passion for what I teach, that I can't hide it in my teaching if I tried,” and centers her students as junior historians who are learning and interpreting the past.

Mr. Angeles. Mr. Angeles teaches at The Bridger School in a rural setting. He has been teaching for six years and has his bachelor's and master's degrees in political science. He teaches in a conservative town within a conservative state. Mr. Angeles is a singleton social studies teacher at the school, teaching all social studies classes for grades 7-11, and does not have a state-mandated test at the end of his course. He prides himself on his sense of humor and the classroom culture he has created. Because of his rural setting and being the only social studies instructor, he works hard to build vertical alignment between his classes and age levels, specifically focusing on disciplinary reading and writing. Mr. Angeles seeks opportunities across the country to engage in professional development, supporting his growth as a teacher and enabling him to develop a professional learning community (PLC).

Mr. Taylor. Mr. Taylor teaches at Creekside Middle School in a suburban school. He has been teaching for sixteen years and holds a bachelor's degree in social studies education, with his master's degree currently in progress. He teaches in a liberal-leaning town within a conservative state, and he has a state-mandated test at the end of his course. Mr. Taylor uses humor and a flexible approach in his classroom, aiming for every student to leave with a love and appreciation of their heritage and the knowledge that they can achieve great things. Utilizing his knowledge of classroom technology, Mr. Taylor meets students where they are, supports their growth in reading and history, and reminds them that with every assignment they receive, they are capable of achieving it.

Mr. Thomas. Mr. Thomas teaches at The Johnson School in a suburban setting. He has been teaching for seventeen years and has his bachelor's and master's degrees in the field of education. He teaches in a liberal town within a liberal state and does have a state-mandated exam at the end of his course, as well as required scripted lessons that take up approximately fifty percent of his curriculum. Mr. Thomas prides himself on transforming the lessons when possible into lessons that are more engaging, and with his additional instructional time, looks forward to incorporating engaging projects and lessons that teach empathy and build on student interests. In his classroom, he leans into his self-proclaimed nerdiness and sense of humor to build positive relationships with his students.

Data Collection

Four separate data sources were collected from the participants of the study and included a demographic survey, the entirety of their History Teacher of the Year application portfolio, a one-hour interview with each participant, and a focus group that included five of the six

participants. This study employed the following step-by-step process for data collection and analysis:

1. Introductory email to potential participants (see Appendix E) that included:
    a. Qualtrics survey
    b. Exemption consent form
    c. Broad consent form
2. Request for their application portfolios
3. Coding and analysis of application portfolios before the interviews
4. Participant interviews (see Appendix F)
5. Analysis of interviews
6. Focus group (see Appendix G), and
7. Coding and analysis of all collected data.

Demographic Survey

Each teacher who met the requirements of the study received an initial introductory email from me, introducing myself and inviting them to participate in the study. This included a link to the Qualtrics demographic survey, an exempt consent form, and a broad consent form. The intent of the demographic survey was to ensure that each teacher met the study's criteria, consented to participate, provided their age/gender/ethnic identity, and individual educational background. Of the teachers who were initially contacted and two follow-up emails, six teachers ultimately agreed to participate in the study.

Document Collection

Initial emails to all potential participants were sent in early January 2025. Apart from Ms. Roberts, all six participants who consented to the study submitted their award portfolios by

January 27, 2025. Ms. Roberts was unable to locate her original portfolio submission and therefore did not submit any documents for this study, but she did participate in the interview and focus group.

The documents collected for this study are considered personal and broadly defined in qualitative studies as "any first-person narrative that describes an individual's actions, experiences, and beliefs" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 134). Merriam (1998) argues that:

> Personal documents are a reliable source of data concerning a person's attitudes, beliefs, and view of the world. But because they are personal documents, the material is highly subjective in that the writer is the only one to select what he or she considers important to record. Obviously these documents are not representative or necessarily reliable accounts of what actually may have occurred. They do, however, reflect the participant's perspective which is what most qualitative research is seeking. (p. 116)

At a minimum, each portfolio included a letter of recommendation from a supervisor and a lesson plan that integrated primary sources. Some teachers also submitted an overview of their submitted lesson, student work samples, and statements of philosophy. Initial analysis of the award portfolios allowed an entry point to the perspectives and approaches of the teachers before we met for our interviews and focus group. This study design allowed me to ask tailored questions about their lessons and core teaching practices.

As the application portfolios were submitted for the History Teacher of the Year award, the assumption inherent in this study is that, at the point of submission to Gilder Lehrman, the teachers believed the portfolios to be evidence of some of their best work. In their 2018 study, Saye et al. asked each participant to provide "their most intellectually challenging lesson" (p. 868) to the research team for observation and analysis so they could best focus on the

"intellectual quality of instruction" (p. 866). Following this approach and focusing on excellent examples of teacher pedagogical practices, the collection and analysis of each teacher's submitted award portfolio allowed insight into what Gilder Lehrman and teacher participants deem excellent social studies instruction at the time of submission. However, a limitation of this study is that there is no analysis of *enacted* pedagogical strategies through in-person or virtual classroom observations. Observing each participant teach their lesson would provide additional data points and insights into their enacted practices and could be considered for a future extension of this study.

Interviews

Interviews began on April 9, 2025, and concluded on May 15, 2025. All interviews were conducted over Zoom and scheduled according to the participants' needs and availability. While the interviews were designed to last an hour, apart from one, they averaged seventy-five minutes in duration and were completed in a single session. The one outlier was Mr. Taylor, who missed his initial interview and rescheduled for two, thirty-minute sessions during his planning periods. The semi-structured interview design allowed for flexibility with each teacher and for the opportunity to craft specific questions about their submitted lessons (see Appendix F). Each interview was recorded and transcribed using Zoom's integrated artificial intelligence-generated transcript feature. This approach was addressed in the consent forms and was reiterated to each participant at the beginning of their interview session.

Following each individual interview, I watched each session, read through the transcripts, and formatted them accordingly. In doing so, this allowed me to confirm the accuracy of the AI-generated transcription and remove verbal fillers such as the overuse of "like," "um," and "you know." Following the verification and cleaning of the transcript, each participant received a copy

of their transcript and was asked to confirm that they were comfortable with the transcription and if they had any redactions they would like to make.

Focus Group

Using a Doodle poll, five of the six participants agreed to meet on Memorial Day, Monday, May 26th, for the focus group; Mr. Taylor was unable to meet on this day and time. The focus group took place on Zoom and utilized the Zoom recording and transcription functions. All participants were asked to introduce themselves, where they teach, and their favorite history topic. They were also asked to keep our conversation confidential and, if they desired to reach out to participants in the study, to please go through me to ensure that the recipient of the communication also agreed to share personal information. Originally scheduled for one hour, the focus group in practice lasted seventy-five minutes and was designed to dig into some of the themes revealed in the individual interviews and elicit pedagogical conversations between the five participants (see Appendix G). Aligned with the process used for the interviews, I listened to the recording, read through and verified the transcript, and removed verbal fillers. Additionally, I sent individualized transcripts with the names and school sites of every other participant redacted in a PDF format. This version of the transcript was sent to each participant for member checking. Once verification was completed, a final version of the transcript was developed using the participant's pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in a qualitative case study is done simultaneously with data collection as the researcher works to make meaning out of the data (Merriam, 1998). The goal of data analysis in this study intends to achieve meaningful coherence, which Tracy (2024) defines as a study that "(a) achieve(s) their stated purpose; (b) accomplish(es) what they espouse to be about; (c) use(s)

methods and representation practices that pattern well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) attentively interconnect(s) literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings" (p. 307).

Coding, Categorization, and Analysis

This study utilized both hand coding and qualitative analysis software. Early in the analysis, the ability to tangibly hold the data, use color coding, and make jottings in the margins allowed for a more concrete view of the data and physically manipulate data categories in a way that analysis software does not invite (Patton, 2015). The submitted application portfolios were the first data to be coded and analyzed, followed by the interviews. As designed, the coding and analysis of the documents were essential as they guided the development of the interview questions.

Initial Document Analysis

Before any interview occurred, hand coding and initial analysis of each participant's portfolio were critical to the design of the interview protocol. Each participant's portfolio was printed and underwent two coding cycles (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020; Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña (2016) notes that often coding schemes (called categorization by Merriam, 1998) may not be determined until there has been a "pilot test" (p. 74) of the coding approach. Each portfolio was read through twice, with jottings in the margins and highlighting of emerging ideas and themes (Merriam, 1998).

Using an open coding method (Saldaña, 2016), the pilot and first phase cycle of coding sought to expose themes between the teachers and their lesson plans. However, I quickly realized that many of the themes that were emerging were directly related to the History Teacher of the Year rubric (n.d.). Therefore, I shifted to isolating and expanding on individual elements of the

rubric (see Table 3). This approach allowed for a priori coding of the documents. As the Gilder Lehrman rubric categorizes each element, details potential pedagogical approaches, and offers examples from prior applications, I broke apart the elements of the two focus categories: effective use of primary sources and creativity and imagination in the classroom. Additionally, after reading through each portfolio and reflecting on the jottings, I added a third category that focused on teacher use of disciplinary writing and resources used in their classrooms.

Table 3

Isolated and Expanded Elements of the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year Rubric

Effective Use of Primary Sources	Creativity and Imagination in the Classroom	Writing & Resources
Advances Historical Thinking Skills	Cultural experiences	Sources & resources used
Uses documents, artifacts, historical sites, oral histories, and other firsthand accounts	Sensitivity and understanding of the student population	Examples of disciplinary writing
Allows students to interact with history using firsthand accounts	Globally aware, responsible student-citizens, self-directed learners, practical problem solvers	
Structured pedagogy & direct use of primary sources	Wide variety of creative teaching methods	
Highlights multiple perspectives and BIPOC individuals	Personal connections	

Importantly, as hand coding was used in this phase of the study, a codebook was created to track the categories, the individual teachers, and how their portfolios align with the categories. This includes quotes from the lesson plan details, examples of lesson plan implementation, primary sources used, etc. The spreadsheet serves as a case study database (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018), promoting data organization and accessibility. This first phase of coding and document analysis guided the formulation of interview and focus group questions.

Interview and Focus Group Analysis

Following the analysis of the participant portfolios and design of the interview protocol, each teacher participated in a semi-structured interview and focus group over Zoom. Each interview was transcribed using Zoom's AI transcription function. Following each interview, I downloaded the AI transcripts, copied them into a Word document, re-watched each interview, and adjusted the transcript to reflect the accurate dialogue, removing all references to the participants' names and locations. While this study extends beyond member checking and seeks member reflections (Tracy, 2024), I initially asked each participant to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and invited them to redact any information they were uncomfortable with remaining in the study. Two of the six participants requested that some details be removed from the transcript as they were concerned about confidentiality.

Interview and focus group analysis shifted from the History Teacher of the Year rubric to a broader understanding of each participant's philosophies and practices, as well as their discussions on habits, routines, and approaches to teaching 8th-grade American history. Interview analysis began with reading the transcripts of Ms. Williams and Ms. Doe and included jottings in the margins and memoing. Following this, each jotting was compiled in a spreadsheet, alphabetized, and then clustered together based on what "looks alike' and 'feels alike" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 103). Descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2021) were then generated based on the jottings, and a pilot test was conducted on Mr. Angeles' first ten pages of transcripts. Ultimately, there were sixteen broad codes that encompassed the jottings (see Appendix H).

It became apparent when looking at the quotes selected during the first round of coding that a second round of coding was necessary, as the codes were not yet allowing me to see broader categories or general themes and concepts (Saldaña, 2021). However, they did guide me

towards beginning to see patterns in and between the codes and their categories; therefore, pattern coding was used as a second-round coding scheme (Saldaña, 2021). Starting again with Ms. Williams, I pulled all her codes and quotes into a Google Doc and began to read through her codes and identify "higher-level themes, concepts, and other analytic abstractions" (Saldaña, 2021, p.323). Following the pattern coding of the entirety of Ms. Williams' initial codes, each first-round code category was pattern coded for each participant using Google Docs.

It was at this point that I moved the coding over to Atlast.ti and replicated the pattern coding into the program. In attempting to visualize the data and how it related to each other, I struggled with using Google Docs and Google Sheets to 'see' how the data was connecting. Through using the categorization features of Atlas.ti, I began to see the connections between the patterns emerging (see Table 4).

Table 4

Emerging Codes Between First and Second Round Coding

Examples of First Round Codes	Examples of Emerging Pattern/Cluster Codes
Development as self, teaching realities, coaching expectations, politics, the effect of politics on education, and advice	Student teaching experience, reflective practitioner, state standards, politics, and history nerd
Bullying, safety, school conditions, welcoming, relationships, knowledge of students, respect, structure, habits, behavior, 'vibe,' engagement, and humor	Safe environment, positive relationships, knowledge of community, classroom structure, lesson structure, and classroom community
Content acquisition, primary sources, historical thinking skills, resources, writing, scaffolding, and direct instruction	Primary source, historical thinking skills, resources, technology, writing, scaffolding, and direct instruction
Goals of social studies, civic participation, connections to the real world, preparation for high school, gradual release of responsibilities, and learning outcomes	Civic participants, critical thinkers, and student growth

Post-Coding

Following pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021) and the moving of data analysis to Atlas.ti, I then spent time writing analogies, metaphors, and similes using the new pattern codes, continuing to visualize the connections in and between the ideas as I searched for themes. This process led me to build similes around the theme of a building as I imagined teachers constructing their lessons and classroom environments to best support their students and learning outcomes. For example, an early simile using the theme of developmental needs led me to write: Classroom structure, classroom values, and scaffolding are like the structure of your home. Once it is built on a solid foundation, the house provides shelter and the potential for growth.

The following themes eventually emerged from pattern coding, consideration of the relationship to PCK, and the writing and analysis of similes: professional practice and development, middle-grade student development, approaches to history education, and preparation for the future.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the trustworthiness of a study is not focused on replicating the study at hand. Instead, it seeks to ensure that the data collected and analyzed can be trusted and that the conclusions drawn present the case accurately and appropriately. This study defines trustworthiness using Tracy's (2024) "big tent" criteria and specifically focuses on credibility, meaningful coherence, ethics, and significant contribution to the field of social studies education.

Credibility in this study was approached through crystallization and member reflections. Crystallization refers to the reflection of multiple data points, perspectives, and participant contexts to achieve a "more complicated, and therefore more credible picture of the context" (Tracy, 2024, p. 296), as well as the experiences and perspectives of the teachers participating in

this study. As this sample of Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year winners does not represent *all* Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year winners, crystallization allows for their unique contexts and experiences as 8th-grade history teachers to be reflected and refracted as light does through a crystal, resulting in a unique prism of their practices and experiences (Tracy, 2024). Member reflections, as opposed to member checks, were employed as a method for trustworthiness in this study. Initially, each participant was invited to verify their interview transcript, clarify any points, and redact any information they were uncomfortable with. Next, following the second round of coding and the drafting of the findings, each participant received a personalized Google Doc containing their brief biography and each instance where they were directly quoted or referred to, along with the context of the quote. Due to the small number of individuals who met the study's criteria and to address concerns around ethics and confidentiality (Tracy, 2024), each participant was invited to comment and reflect on their biography, quotations, and context of their quotes. The intent of this process was first to ensure that my analysis of their practices was indeed accurate, but also to invite an even deeper analysis based on any reflections or reactions they had to the work. Although it was not required, five of the six participants responded to the request and offered feedback.

To achieve meaningful coherence, as briefly discussed above, a goal in the design of this study was to ensure that the literature, methods, theoretical framework, findings, and implications are all clearly aligned (Tracy, 2024). For example, the design of the research questions and interview frameworks are both directly connected to the PCK theoretical framework, and all three align with the goals of qualitative case study research.

Ethical considerations in this study adhere to the IRB code of ethics. All IRB certifications are current through the research institution, and IRB exempt status was obtained

prior to the collection of any data in January 2025. While this study is believed to have minimal risk for the participants with its focus on PCK (Jay, 2024, 2025; Shulman, 1986, 2004), situational ethics (Tracy, 2025) plays an important role as this study focuses on public school teachers in a political context where teachers are under attack and often fear job loss. The most significant risk in this study is the potential for participant triangulation. The potential participant pool is relatively small and is further reduced by the bounded nature of the case. Because demographic information was collected and included, and as Gilder Lehrman publishes all winners, it is theoretically possible for individual participants to be identified from this study. Due to this, adherence to respect for privacy and confidentiality is critical.

The study's findings revealed the significance that politics plays in their classrooms and how they approach history education. As such, because of the divisiveness of politics and the intersection between politics and education in the current political climate, under the politics heading in the first finding, all participants' names were removed, and gender-neutral pronouns were used. The goal of this approach was to take an additional step in protecting the identity of the participants; at the very least, to ensure that no direct quote or idea could be attributed to an individual.

The final approach to trustworthiness in this study is my intent to provide a significant contribution (Tracy, 2024) to the field of social studies education. Over the past two decades, the field of social studies has moved away from PCK in the field of research. Returning to PCK and the practices and experiences of the award winners has the potential to offer heuristic significance (Tracy, 2024) to the field of social studies education. Especially following the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024, education and teachers have been in the crosshairs of political discourse. In the face of these setbacks, this study aims to serve as a reminder of the daily work

teachers are doing across the country, in various contexts, to ensure that each of their students is learning and they are doing their part to prepare them for civic life in the 21st century.

Positionality

I entered this research space as a former public-school teacher turned university researcher and instructor. I am a former state winner of the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award in North Carolina (2020) as a high school Advanced Placement United States history teacher, and I completed my master's degree program through their teacher-centered American history program. Gilder Lehrman has had a positive impact on me and my educational career. I am also deeply committed to ensuring that all students have access to an excellent social studies education at all grade levels. For me, that often means incorporating primary sources and working to ensure that lessons are engaging, exciting, and accessible in all social studies classrooms.

While I share similar longevity in the classroom as the teachers in this study, my early career experiences varied significantly from theirs. Following graduation with a bachelor's degree in history, I entered an alternative licensure program and received an emergency teaching license in my state of residence. I began my teaching career with no license and no tangible teaching experience or credentials. All my courses were in the evenings, and my "student-teaching" experience took place in my own classroom during my second full year of teaching. These experiences have helped to shape my vision of teaching and education and the significance of pre-service teacher education for classroom-bound individuals.

While Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2020) note that a researcher's "*values, attitudes*, and *beliefs*" (p. 7) are unavoidable in qualitative research, my positionality as a former History Teacher of the Year recipient requires me to recognize and clarify my positionality on the study

and then set them aside to be able to best understand the perspectives, values, and approaches of the participants. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why middle-grade winners of the award were chosen as the focus of this research, rather than high school teachers. While I have three years of middle-grade teaching experience in world history, most of my teaching experience (eleven additional years) was focused on high school American history. The focus on middle-grade winners of Gilder Lehrman award will allow me to address my positionality and will offer me new insights and perspectives as a career educator.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study, organized around four central themes that emerged from the analysis. First, the teachers reflected on their professional practices, highlighting the tensions between expectations and realities, and the ways they developed as reflective practitioners. Second, they emphasized the importance of supporting middle-grade student development, focusing on identity, relationships, and the diverse needs of adolescents. Third, the teachers shared their approaches to history education, describing how they engaged students in disciplinary thinking and balanced curricular demands with authentic learning experiences. Finally, participants discussed their preparation for the future, including the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they believe students would need to thrive as informed citizens.

For the six teachers who participated in this case study, their vision of a successful school year focused on student growth. The teachers did not mention test metrics as indicators of success, but instead, each emphasized individual student growth. They discussed their love of history and how they strive to pass that enthusiasm to their students. The teachers acknowledged that enhancing critical thinking, fostering an appreciation for history, and helping students understand the importance of civic participation offers more value to them as history teachers than a standardized test score.

Our conversations about state standards, mandated end-of-course exams, and district expectations were part of the context of the teaching profession. However, these discussions paled in comparison to their passion for American history education, with many describing themselves as “history nerds” as they excitedly shared content with me. State accountability requirements are indeed a focus for these teachers, but they argued that by designing lessons that

enhance students' understanding of the past, foster the ability to think like a historian (Wineburg, 2010), write analytically, and think critically about the world and their place in it, they can meet and even surpass these accountability measures. Situating history as a discipline within social studies, the teachers possess strong content knowledge (CK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), and knowledge of their learners (KoL). They constantly consider how to translate these knowledges into pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) for their 8th-grade learners. Although they did not explicitly mention PCK in the interviews, each teacher discussed the concepts that embody PCK and how these influence their lesson planning, classroom culture, and overall approach to middle-grade history education.

After two cycles of coding, the themes that emerged from analyzing the interviews and focus groups focused on teachers' professional practice and development, their approaches to history education, middle-grade student growth, and preparation for the future (see Table 5). Reflecting on a constructivist approach to teaching and teacher education (Piaget, 1970), this study highlights that a teacher's knowledge and practice are not static, nor is their implementation of PCK. Instead, these teachers recognized that they meet their students midway through their education. As Mr. Taylor noted:

> The way that I see it is kind of like the old Johnny Cash song. You do your part on the assembly line, and then you send it on down the line, and if you do your part correctly, then the next person gets the part where it's at, and they can finish the product.

These teachers carefully considered their students' needs and goals as they prepared them for high school. They regularly reviewed and adjusted their goals based on each year's specific student needs to support their growth as adolescent learners.

Table 5

Themes and Patterns that Emerged from Data Analysis

Themes	Categories	Definition	Examples of Pattern Codes	Examples of 1st Round Codes
Professional Practice and Development	Growth in the Profession	Experiences and contextual realities that help to shape a teacher's PCK.	Student teaching experience, reflective practitioner, state standards, politics, history nerd	Development as self, teaching realities, coaching expectations, politics, the effect of politics on education, and advice
	Contextual Teaching Realities			
	Classroom Identities			
Middle-Grade Student Development	Hierarchy of Needs	Decisions that the teachers make in designing a classroom environment that is conducive to 8th-grade learners and inclusive of learning styles and backgrounds.	Safe environment, positive relationships, knowledge of community, classroom structure, lesson structure, and classroom community	Bullying, safety, school conditions, welcoming, relationships, knowledge of students, respect, structure, habits, behavior, 'vibe,' engagement, humor
	Middle-Grade Classroom Design			
Approaches to History Education	Scaffolding	Tangible history education strategies that build historical content knowledge and allow opportunities for students to express what they have learned.	Primary source, historical thinking skills, resources, technology, writing, scaffolding, and direct instruction	Content acquisition, primary sources, historical thinking skills, resources, writing, scaffolding, and direct instruction
	Primary Source Materials			
	Historical Thinking Skills			
	Resources & Technology			
Preparation for the Future	Critical Thinking	Reflections on how the teachers think about history education in a middle school classroom and the work they are doing to grow students for their academic and civic futures.	Civic participants, critical thinkers, and student growth	Goals of social studies, civic participation, connections to the real world, preparation for high school, gradual release of responsibilities, and learning outcomes
	Civic Participation			
	Individual Student Growth			

Note. This table represents the four themes that emerged from this study and the coding patterns that led to their development.

The essence of PCK lies in a teacher's ability to bridge the gap between their own expertise and their students' understanding (Shulman, 1986, 2004). As a result, PCK depends on a teacher's skill in recognizing and meeting the developmental needs of students in their classrooms. Middle-grade learners are in a transitional phase as they shift developmentally from childhood to young adulthood, transitioning between elementary and high school. Although middle-grade students are adolescents, they often feel sensitive about being "treated like a child" (Ms. Roberts); they still require structure and developmental scaffolding to be both supported and challenged. To clarify, the teachers in this study did not prioritize middle-grade student development over teaching and learning history, but they emphasized that students in their classrooms cannot learn history until their developmental needs are met.

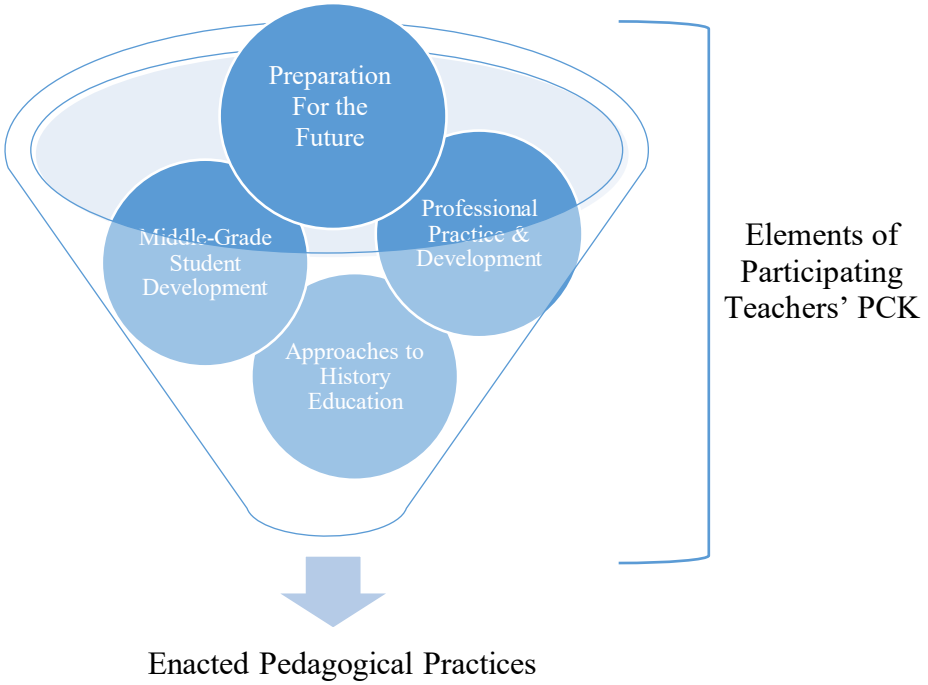
An example of these developmental needs and how these teachers seek balance between meeting their needs and teaching content can be found in Ms. Roberts' discussion of refugees in her community. She spoke with me about her conversations with students regarding President Trump's 2025 use of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) to increase the deportation of immigrants from the United States. When her students came to her to express their fears, she recognized that they needed her to explain the district's policies and reassure them of their safety before they could engage with her in learning history.

The findings of this study highlight the interrelationship between the four themes (see Figure 3) and aim to represent the dynamic nature of teaching 8th-grade American history for the participating teachers. The funnel serves as a metaphor for pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). It reflects the four themes that emerged in this study and the equal influence they had on their PCK and ultimately their enacted pedagogical strategies. As reflective practitioners, the teachers' PCK is discussed in terms of how their approaches were continuously influenced by

their attempts to address the development of students enrolled in their classrooms, the American history approaches they anticipated would work, and their efforts to prepare them for the future. Again, the teachers did not use the terminology of PCK in our conversations; instead, they discussed their approaches, which were later analyzed and categorized for this study.

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework Depicting How the Teachers Describe Teaching Middle-Grade American History



Using the funnel metaphor and centering the teachers as reflective practitioners, their PCK was discussed as being continually influenced by their students' needs, their curriculum, and their development as educators. Figure 3 seeks to represent the complexities of their approaches to teaching 8th-grade American history and the work they were doing to support their student learners. The teachers each discussed their role as reflective practitioners and their own growth in the field as they worked to address the developmental needs of their students, the strategies they use to teach American history, and how they consider each student's individual

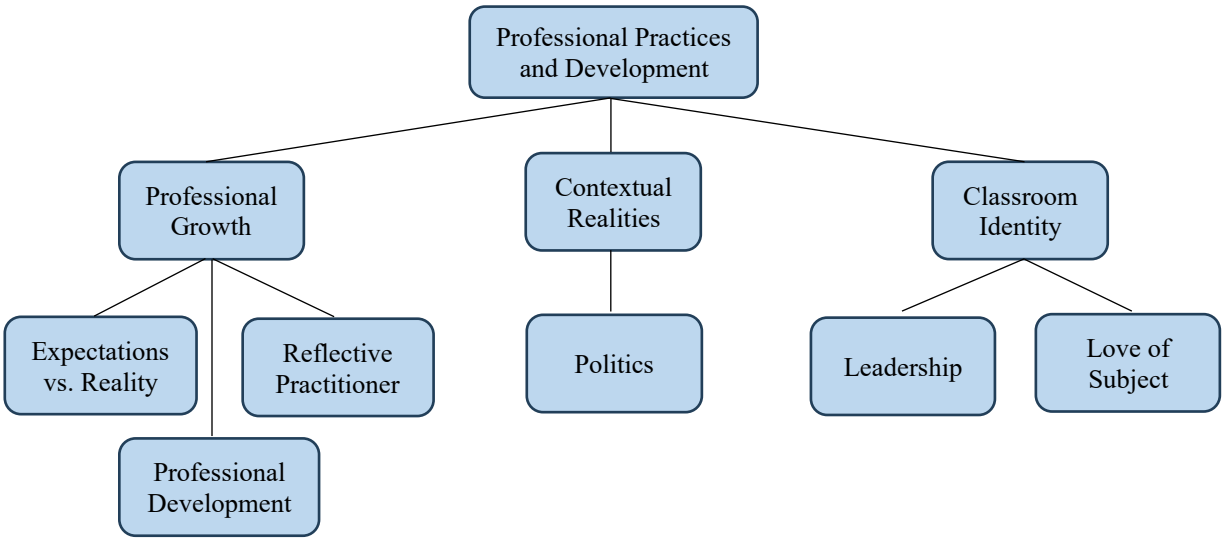
preparation for the future. As reflected in Figure 3, each of the findings from the study has implications for these teachers' pedagogical knowledge (PK), their content knowledge (CK), and their knowledge of learners (KoL), all of which influence their combined PCK.

Professional Practice and Development

The first finding addresses teacher growth in the profession, contextual teaching realities, and classroom identities (see Figure 4), and highlights the development and maintenance of their PCK. The conversations surrounding their professional practice and development addressed research question one: How have the Gilder Lehrman History Teachers of the Year teachers' pedagogical practices changed over time, and what has influenced or challenged their development? While this study is not intended to address every aspect of their career development, part of the answer to how these teachers' pedagogical practices have changed over time is found in the influence of time and experience. The professional practice and development of middle-grade educators in this study were shaped by the intersecting factors of career-long professional growth, the contextual realities of their school communities, and their evolving identities as classroom teachers.

Figure 4

Visualization of the Factors That Impact the Teachers' Professional Practice and Development



Note. This figure represents each theme and sub-theme identified in the first finding, professional practices and development, and supports the ability to answer Research Question 1.

Professional Growth

The teachers in this study each extensively discussed the different approaches they took to develop their pedagogical knowledge (PK), content knowledge (CK), and the knowledge of their learners (KOL) throughout their careers. In their own ways, each discussed the challenging learning experiences they faced after leaving their teacher preparation programs, the importance of professional development (PD), and their decisions to pursue advanced degrees as factors that shaped their long-term growth. Interestingly, except for Ms. Roberts, each teacher in the study has teaching experience outside of the middle school classroom. Mr. Angeles is in a unique position as the only social studies teacher in the grade 7-11 program at his school, which requires him to teach five preps every day. Both Ms. Williams and Ms. Doe have taught classes or supported pre-service teachers at the university level, and Mr. Thomas, Ms. Doe, and Mr. Taylor each have experience teaching at the high school level.

Expectations vs. Reality

The first instance of growth that all in-service teachers experience occurs the moment they enter the classroom as the adult in the room. Reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of their teacher preparation programs, the teachers each discussed how their early career expectations and experiences began to shape their growth in the classroom. Mr. Thomas noted that he:

> Felt really, really prepared in some ways to be a teacher, and I say in some ways, because there's nothing that prepares you to be in a classroom by yourself, with no one to help you. But as prepared as someone could be to walk out into the work world.

This general sentiment was shared amongst most of the teachers in this study as they expressed how it felt to enter the profession. Ms. Williams expressed how the stress and high expectations of her program prepared her to ease into her first year of teaching, and Mr. Taylor shared how he "learned a lot about classroom management…learned a lot about how to work with students (and)... learned how to circulate the classroom. I learned what teaching looks like in practice."

The most notable reflection on their student teaching experience came from Ms. Roberts. She spoke about her teacher preparation program with general positivity but mentioned two separate elements she felt unprepared to handle. First, although she acknowledged that there is likely no way any program could fully prepare early career teachers for the impact of current politics, she noted that she "was not prepared to have to be able to explain important historical skills and why they're necessary, to the general public." The second discussion focused on teaching students with below-grade-level reading skills. When our conversation focused on reading and analyzing primary source materials, Ms. Roberts emphasized that it "was something that (she) was not adequately prepared for…(she) had no idea how unprepared students would be

with reading levels." This has been a deliberate area of growth for her, as she has worked to scaffold resources to ensure the same documents are used to teach all students but are leveled to meet their individual needs.

Despite widespread discussions about teacher shortages nationwide, Ms. Doe and Mr. Angeles both reported difficulties in securing their initial teaching positions. While searching for a public-school teaching role, Ms. Doe began teaching at a local university, and Mr. Angeles started working as a substitute teacher, eventually becoming a full-time paraeducator and homebound instructor for students with disabilities. Both positions provided these teachers with growth and learning opportunities in education, offering a wide range of experiences that have influenced their knowledge of the field and their discussions on specific approaches to middle-grade history education. Mr. Angeles specifically mentioned his time as a paraeducator and how it impacted his development in teaching writing skills.

The significance of time and experience in the field has shaped how these teachers discussed growth as professional educators. Mr. Thomas was very explicit when he discussed his early career, stating that "I sucked," and expressed a wish to go back and apologize to the students he taught early in his career. Within the field of social studies, it is not uncommon for new teachers to teach a different course each year or have several 'preps' each day. The experiences of these teachers support this. Due to the wide range of subjects under the umbrella of social studies, teachers can teach classes from core history or government, and electives like psychology or Breaking History's Secret Codes (class pseudonym), as Ms. Doe was assigned.

Ms. Doe and Mr. Thomas both discussed their broad experiences and how these affected their growth in the profession, both positively and negatively. Ms. Doe framed her experiences as a net positive, describing her teaching of grades six through twelve and college freshmen

through seniors. This experience has allowed her to see and understand the vertical alignment between student needs and learning outcomes, and she considers it "one of her greatest strengths." Mr. Thomas, on the other hand, discussed how his wide range of experiences early in his career was a hindrance to becoming comfortable in the classroom. He reflected that:

> I had to teach multiple different curricula, all within my first years. I couldn't really get comfortable with anything. So, I did two years of US History, two years of economics and civics. I did a year of world history…So, within my first 5 years, I taught 3 different curricula, and also, in my school, I was the only 9th-grade social studies teacher. So, I had no one to get help from.

Later in the interview, he elaborated on this idea, noting that it wasn't until he transferred to the middle school and had the opportunity to teach the same curriculum multiple times that he started to become comfortable with his teaching, signaling an increased confidence in his PCK.

In part due to their early experiences in their classrooms and in their teacher preparation programs, the realities of early-career teaching significantly impacted these teachers and how they consider their professional growth in their careers. The impact of their early career experiences helps to understand their impetus to continually develop their practices and grow as educators.

Reflective Practitioners

The importance of being a reflective practitioner emerged as a key element in fostering professional growth. While this concept is closely linked to their classroom identity, the way these teachers discussed the time they dedicate to learning, reflecting, and understanding the impact of their lessons on students aligns more clearly with professional growth. The idea of being a reflective practitioner was the most frequently identified code under the theme of

professional practice and development (n=29). Ms. Doe reflected on the importance of being a reflective practitioner when she said, “teaching is like learning how to drive a stick. You're gonna kill it sometimes, but you will quickly restart it and be on your way again.”

Our conversations focused on the theme of growth and how challenging the early years of teaching were for them. Ms. Williams shared that in her early years, she spent a lot of time thinking about “traditional metrics,” but as she progressed in her career, she began to “go out and observe other teachers and their practices, and that has helped reshape my idea of success.” Each of the six teachers emphasized the importance of failure in teaching and how it has influenced their teaching methods. Significantly, they did not see failure as an isolated event at the start of their careers but as a continual part of their classroom culture that motivates ongoing reflection, even as experienced, award-winning professionals. When thinking of advice he has given to new teachers, Mr. Taylor noted that:

> Sometimes when I give an assignment, it does not go how I thought it was gonna go at all. When I go around and talk to other teachers, especially new teachers, I tell them all the time, try new things and fail! Because some of my best assignments have come from an assignment that either completely crashed and burned, or maybe the way it was delivered failed, but then, tweaking it, it became one of my best lessons.

Mr. Angeles shared a similar philosophy on failure and reflected on the realities of classroom teaching when he remarked that, “there are gonna be some days where you'll be like, ‘yeah, I did the best lesson ever.’ And then there's gonna be some days where you’re like, ‘we'll need to work on that!’”

As reflective practitioners, these teachers recognized the value of not simply repeating lessons from the previous year. Instead, they emphasized the importance of continually trying

new approaches and creating tailored lessons that address the specific needs of their students, highlighting their continued development of their PCK. Ms. Williams talked about setting aside elements from her Gilder Lehrman portfolio to incorporate the musical Hamilton for students to analyze instead. Ms. Doe explained how she thinks about extending each lesson a bit further than before and continues to "give more" to her students. Mr. Taylor described how he has evolved his Gilder Lehrman portfolio lessons over the years and adapted the primary sources to better meet the changing needs of his students.

The growth of these educators as reflective practitioners has been driven by their students' learning needs. Each teacher briefly discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning. They reflected on their students' needs and how the role of technology in the classroom has changed. This experience has encouraged them to keep challenging themselves and developing their PCK. Once again, Ms. Doe's view on teaching and being a reflective practitioner captured the mindset of these teachers when she said:

> I think I work a lot harder than I used to. I think we have more on our plate as teachers, though too. But I also think I know so much more about how to be a good teacher for students. So that's part of the reason that I have 10,000 more things on my plate.

The focus around their positionality as reflective practitioners was ultimately centered on the knowledge that their CK, PK, and KoL will never be perfect and that there is no perfect lesson. Instead, their approach to 8th-grade history education was discussed as a continual work in progress that requires ongoing time and effort as reflective practitioners.

Professional Development

Teachers often report that school and district-based professional development sessions lack relevance to their content, their students, and the historical skills they are working to engage

their American history students with (Crocco & Livingston, 2017; Levstik, 2008; Patterson et al., 2022). In fact, when discussing PD and offering advice for new teachers, Mr. Thomas suggested that he would "encourage you (to go to) some kind of PD every summer… because the PD that we get assigned by our school district is horrible." Later in our interview, he situated his experiences with place-based PD into context when he reflected on PD at his school:

> Usually, it's the PD stuff the first week back to school, or you know, those random days, and it's like you sit in a room…And, 'Oh, here's our test data. Let's break this down.' Or they bring in somebody who only applies to a couple of teachers in the building. The rest of us have to sit there. We're on our phones.

While the positive intent of the schools and school leaders' PD design is not in doubt, the growth of teachers' PCK in history education, at least for these teachers, is often found outside of the school building.

When discussing PD more broadly, the conversations reflected the significant value they placed on their continual growth as educators and ultimately their PCK. The concept of not remaining static in their field is part of the theme of professional growth and was even discussed as a key element to Ms. Roberts overcoming her disenchantment, and she noted that the "master's program in American history had a huge impact on me" (Ms. Roberts). The range of experiences these teachers shared about PD was one finding I found surprising. The teachers in this study sought out PD opportunities online and across the country and discussed options that addressed their PK and CK. Interestingly, only one teacher, Ms. Williams, talked about working on her National Boards, which combines each element of PCK in the application process (National Boards for the Teaching Profession, 2016). She ultimately summarized the importance

of PD when she said that her "professional growth has shaped how I approach continuous improvement and peer mentoring."

In seeking out PD these teachers all discussed the value and resources available from two digital groups: the Digital Inquiry Group (DIG) (formerly the Stanford History Education Group) (n.d.) and the DBQ Project (2025). PD in this sense was non-traditional since it was initiated by the individual teachers working on their professional growth and seeking new teaching tools. Each teacher discussed the role that DIG and the DBQ Project websites have played in their development as they accessed resources and transformed them into content for their 8th-grade learners. For example, Mr. Angeles shared how he learned that he can adapt DIG resources as gallery walks and laughingly asked, "Wait! You can do that?!"

Focused specifically on CK, many of the teachers discussed the learning and community-building opportunities that they have experienced as participants in site-based PD programs. Mr. Angeles was especially excited to talk about the learning opportunities at Mt. Vernon and at Gilder Lehrman's summer PD sessions at Gettysburg College. With his position as the only social studies teacher in his building, he noted that the "Gettysburg PD was the best balance of actual PD and self-care." Mr. Angeles and Ms. Roberts both spoke about the power that these PDs have had in helping to build a community of friends in history education. At the end of our focus group, Ms. Roberts highlighted the importance of this when she celebrated meeting "people who are in the trenches with you, like everyone here in this focus group. It's like you are my people. You get it!" The teachers in this study all spoke positively about site-based PD and the importance, as veterans of the classroom, of supporting student-teachers and early-career teachers to participate in these opportunities and conferences. Ms. Doe detailed how she has

encouraged student-teachers to attend and learn from conferences and how important it is for teachers to seek out additional PD opportunities throughout their careers.

The potential that PD offers for practicing teachers' growth in PK and CK was clear throughout the interviews and focus group. Indeed, these veteran educators recognized the role that the PD opportunities played in their own growth of their teaching community and as a key factor in their development. Mr. Angeles implied that, for him, the opportunity to be around other history teachers and social studies professionals has been a key to his growth as a history teacher.

Master's Programs. Building on the concept of PD, the ways in which many of the teachers discussed their master's programs and ongoing learning exemplify how they think about PCK in their classrooms. Specifically highlighted by Ms. Williams, Ms. Roberts, and Mr. Angeles, their conversations about their development in their respective graduate programs emphasized their growth in the field and its impact on their classroom communities.

In her discussion about COVID-19 and teacher burnout, Ms. Roberts talked about the Gilder Lehrman Masters of American History program and how it revitalized her teaching, perspective, and strategies. At the time of our interview, she had just finished her coursework and was preparing to travel to Gettysburg College for the graduation ceremony, and she remarked that for her, the master's program:

> Changed things for me, being able to interact with these amazing historians who are doing this state-of-the-art research in a program that was specifically geared for history teachers. (It) really took my classroom to a very hands-on type of experience where the kids are doing the heavy lifting with their brains themselves.

More focused on learning environments rather than specific methods, Ms. Williams discussed her Master's in Brain-Based Learning and how her research on colors, aromas, and classroom lighting has influenced her classroom environment. Also related to middle-grade student development, Ms. Williams' development in her master's program gave her the knowledge needed to reflect on her students and design an effective classroom environment for them. Mr. Angeles also described his master's program as an opportunity to grow as an instructor, shifting away from a teacher-centered approach and instead incorporating more primary sources and student discussions in student-centered ways.

Professional growth for these teachers was grounded in their experiences as early-career teachers, their commitment to being reflection practitioners, and continued time spend participating in professional development. Their growth as teachers, how they approach it, and why, is a significant factor in their professional practices and development and contributes to understanding how these teachers' practices have change over time and the factors that have influence or challenged their development.

Contextual Teaching Realities

The second theme that emerged as a factor in the development of professional practices of these Gilder Lehrman History Teachers of the Year winners was the contextual realities in which they teach. As with all teachers, the context of a school, district, and state can significantly influence what and how they teach. A teacher's understanding of these contextual realities aligns closely with middle school student development (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) and students' hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). These realities, when discussed in relation to teachers' professional practice and growth, play a crucial role in their knowledge of learners (KoL) and effective PCK.

As noted earlier, the teachers in this study are from schools across the country and live and work in a wide range of communities. However, a common theme that emerged among all teachers, regardless of their locations, is the theme of poverty. Whether the school is in a place that is "so rural, the location wants it to be designed as a frontier," (Mr. Angeles) or in a suburban area, each teacher spoke about how they consider their students' well-being and how it influenced their teaching decisions. What is clear from these teachers is that their understanding of the community and their learners (KoL) is crucial to their professional practice as American history teachers. Importantly, conversations around poverty were coded and categorized in two ways. First, poverty is a significant element of the contextual teaching realities of the teachers and impacts their pedagogical practices and both influences and challenges their pedagogical decision making. These connections are therefore found here. However, poverty is also addressed as a middle-grade developmental need as these teachers consider not just their own context, but how their approaches must consider the students and their own needs as humans so that they can learn successfully in their classrooms.

Each teacher examined the role and culture of poverty in their communities. Mr. Thomas, for example, discussed the 'choice' aspect of his school, and although he teaches in a high-poverty and crime environment, the students who attend his middle school do so because their parents understood the application process and the program. The impact of informed parents who advocate for a 'choice' school influences the student body's demographics, especially when compared to the demographics and crime concerns of the neighboring high school. Importantly, each teacher in this study talked in depth about the two extremes in their classrooms and how they aim to create an environment that supports and develops all students. They reflected on how to bridge the gap between students from affluent families and those from working-class or low-

income backgrounds, all of whom learn together in the same classroom. They discussed students whose parents are doctors, lawyers, and professional athletes, as well as students whose parents are drug addicts, alcoholics, homeless, or incarcerated. They also considered students whose families have been in that community for generations and those who are refugees or have recently arrived. This understanding of the community and efforts to understand the students sitting in their classrooms emerged as key elements of their professional practice.

Politics

A second theme that emerged from the discussion about professional practices and the importance of understanding each teacher's unique teaching environment is politics. Across the focus group and individual interviews, politics was coded sixty-two times, despite only one question directly addressing it (In what ways have educational policies or reforms affected your teaching practices?). With one exception, issues related to the politicization of education and its influence on classrooms became a common topic among teachers in their interviews and the focus group. As noted in the methods chapter, due to the political context surrounding public education in the 2020s, in this section, all names are fully anonymized, and gender-neutral pronouns are used in an effort to protect participants from unintended harm.

State, local, and national politics influences and challenges the practices of these teachers and affect how they view their content-based approaches in the classroom. The teachers consistently highlighted the importance of using state standards as the guiding principles for their classrooms, explaining how these standards can justify pushback against the curriculum. One teacher discussed how their state curriculum served as a response to politics, helping to shield teachers from political pressure from parents and community members. Nonetheless, the teachers

expressed the need to "make yourself bulletproof" when communicating with parents, community members, and the primary sources they select for their classrooms.

Communication with parents and community stakeholders was a prominent part of this discussion, especially regarding concerns about student informants in the classroom. Although this was discussed with several teachers, one teacher was the most candid, expressing dismay at the lengths they have had to go through in order to increase curricular transparency with their parent community. This teacher was very open about the importance of strong and consistent communication between teachers and stakeholders throughout the school year; however, the political motivations behind these efforts left them feeling disheartened, though they also felt grateful not to be a first-year teacher anymore, and better equipped as an education professional to address parent concerns. When using primary source materials in their classroom, they rely on the words of the past, so that "if a parent is mad about their child feeling differently about Christopher Columbus…well, they read *his* journal!" A second teacher also expressed frustration about the political context and student informants when discussing the district hotline to "report a teacher if they do, or say something that is politically motivated…like 'they talked about gay people.'" While this teacher benefits from state standards supporting the teaching of diverse perspectives and voices, many teachers worry that this type of rhetoric could have a chilling effect on history lessons.

The selection of sources and resources used in the classroom also emerged as a political reality that affected their decision-making. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were discussed as cultural 'bogeymen' (Crenshaw, as cited in Hixenbaugh & Hylton, 2021). Our conversations reflected the misunderstandings of CRT that are often fostered in conservative media and special interest groups. A teacher discussed how community members

and parents accused them of teaching CRT because they were "spending too much time on black history," and a school board member told them that "I think you are teaching CRT, and you cannot prove me otherwise." Similarly, a teacher discussed interactions with parents who confused critical thinking with Critical Race Theory and the proposed legislation that sought to make it illegal for students to be taught something that contradicted what they learned at home. In their conversation about bringing culturally inclusive materials into their classroom, another teacher noted that "DEI, right now, are dirty words in education," but stressed that, regardless of politics, students needed to see themselves in the curriculum.

Ultimately, however, the teachers in this study revealed that even with political pressures working against them, they still strive to incorporate a wide range of primary source materials and creative approaches to ensure their students gain an accurate and critical understanding of American history. As professional history educators, these teachers demonstrated resilience in the face of hyper-partisan politics nationwide. While they are not subverting the laws, they are using their CK to find ways to leverage standards as tools and justifications for teaching thoughtful, accurate history. In their master's program, one teacher specifically took a class on CRT to better grasp the theory and discussed how they learned to frame lessons and information that satisfy conservative groups without sanitizing the content. Ultimately, as veteran teachers, even though they did not use the terminology, they did discuss the significance of applying their extensive PCK in their work. This ensures that their students see themselves in the curriculum and learn to be critical of the nation's past, enabling them to become informed citizens in our nation's future.

Classroom Identity

Classroom identity and how teachers continue to evolve as they consider their positionality with their students, colleagues, and community stakeholders help to understand how these teachers' practices have changed over time. Beyond winning the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award, each teacher in this study is a veteran of the classroom who has reflected on how they and their classroom identities have evolved. Both Mr. Angeles and Ms. Williams focused on this evolution in the classroom and their paths toward becoming their authentic selves. Mr. Angeles shared how it took him time to develop the "Mr. Angeles style of teaching," and Ms. Williams reflected on her early career, using the metaphor of a butterfly—learning from others until she was ready to emerge with her own unique approach and classroom identity.

Leadership

As experienced classroom teachers, part of their identities is rooted in the leadership roles they assume as part of their growth. Although the Gilder Lehrman rubric (n.d.) does address teacher leadership, it specifically focuses on leadership in the field of American history. This study's findings instead emphasize leadership more broadly and explored how leadership intersects with their identity and development in the profession, particularly in areas such as pre-service teacher support and leadership in curriculum development and advocacy for their students.

Most of the teachers in the study, especially those at schools near colleges and universities, work with preservice teachers and support their professional growth. The one exception was Mr. Angeles, whose school site is remote enough that they do not receive many student teaching candidates. As highly respected teachers in their field, each of the other five

teachers either collaborates with preservice teachers at local universities and colleges or mentor student teachers in their classrooms. The most important takeaway from this discussion was not just their work with preservice teachers but also the values they aim to instill in them.

In discussing their roles as collaborating teachers, instructors, and more broadly as experienced educators with advice to share, each teacher addressed their concerns about student and early career teachers and how to foster resilience and initiative in them. Mr. Thomas directly addressed this in his focus group discussion on pre-service and early career teachers when he said that, "you have to be able to be resilient because you're gonna take some hits, and you need to be able to bounce back and realize that." Through the interviews, each teacher expressed humility and discomfort when talking about their accomplishments but also demonstrated a clear understanding of what effective history education entails. Through their leadership and expertise, these teachers are not trying to keep their strategies to themselves but aim to share their learned PCK with an expanding community of educators. In the focus group, there was consensus among the teachers on the importance of encouraging new teachers to pursue professional development and to take the initiative to attend sessions to build community, PK, and CK. Without sugar-coating middle-grade education, they have advised pre-service teachers to go beyond lectures (Ms. Roberts), build trust within the wider community (Ms. Williams), and avoid teachers who speak negatively about their students (Ms. Doe). Ms. Williams shared her openness with student teachers, honestly telling them how tough teaching can be and that she "cried her first week," a sentiment met with many nods of agreement in the focus group, reinforcing the idea that student teachers should know early career teaching is challenging.

Leadership for the teachers in this case study has influenced their development as 8th-grade American history teachers. They see their position as experienced teachers as guides to not

just the students in their classrooms, but for pre-service and early career teachers as well. They do not view entering the teaching profession as a sink or swim moment, but instead as an opportunity to share their wisdom as they support new teachers' ability to grow and thrive in the classroom.

Love of subject

Each of the teachers expressed their individual love of the subject in our conversations and shared their personal sense of humor that they use to approach history education. While I did not ask questions about ideas that frustrate them regarding the profession, I also did not ask questions about why they love their subject. Yet that love came out clearly and authentically in each interview and was a significant aspect of their classroom identities and professional practice. In their own ways, these teachers all consider themselves history nerds. Even though the only content question was "what is your favorite subject to teach," what they are teaching and how it excites them was evident in each interview and focus group.

Encompassing each of the other aspects of professional practice and development and providing a segue into the next three findings, these teachers use their love of history and their CK as the conduit to connect with their adolescent learners to history. Ms. Doe told me that she is "the biggest history nerd in the building," but she uses that love to address the needs of middle-grade students (Finding 2), influence her approaches to middle-grade education (Finding 3), and shape how she thinks about their preparation for the future (Finding 4). She is not alone in this; each of the teachers uses history and their passion for it in this way. Ms. Roberts celebrated how she knows she has been successful when students tell her, "I love history now and I hated it before," and Mr. Taylor expressed his enthusiasm for helping his students see the beauty of their community and their future potential by looking to the past.

Conclusion

For these teachers, their development in the profession and growth of PCK have evolved over time through participation in professional development, dedication to being reflective practitioners, and the development of their classroom identity, each of which has formed the foundation of their positionality and growth as educators. However, how they have developed as award-winning educators has been partly influenced by the context in which they teach and external factors that exert pressure on them. As educational professionals working in various teaching contexts, these teachers do not necessarily conform to the politics of those without educational backgrounds or experiences, but have continued to work within the system to ensure that not only is the learning environment rigorous, but that it also continues to tell an accurate and inclusive story of the nation's history. These middle-grade teachers each love what they do; they love history and believe that to become the best educators they can be, they need continued growth in the field and ongoing support to meet the evolving needs of their student communities.

Middle-Grade Student Development

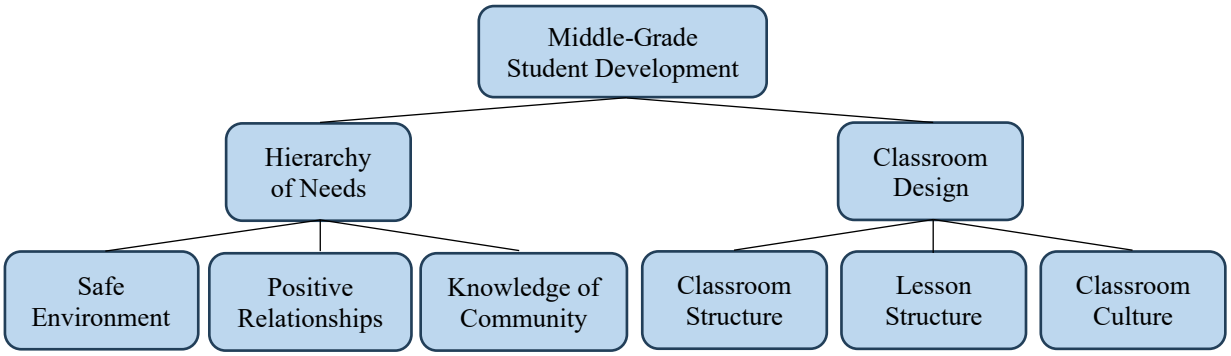
Central to how these teachers discussed teaching American history was their recognition that basic student needs must be met before meaningful learning can occur. Each of the teachers in this study positions middle-grade student development as essential to implementing their see and their ability to teach history content effectively. Although they never mentioned the saying that 'students don't care to learn until they learn you care,' each one designed their classroom communities around this axiom.

Addressing research question number two, in what ways do these Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year teachers consider the developmental and contextual needs of their students, the teachers in this study focused on two key elements. First, the significance of

identifying students' hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), and second, the importance of designing a classroom environment appropriate for their adolescent students' developmental needs (see Figure 5). Each teacher emphasized the importance of meeting the changing needs of the students sitting in front of them as essential for successful middle-grade history education. Although this focus on middle-grade student development does engage a teacher's pedagogical (PK) and content knowledge (CK), the most significant factor is the influence of each teacher's knowledge of their learners (KoL) and how they consider their needs and the community as they develop their physical classroom space and their lessons.

Figure 5

Visualization of the Factors that Impact the Teachers' Understanding of Middle-Grade Student Development



Note. This figure represents each theme and sub-theme identified in the second finding, middle-grade student development, and supports the ability to answer Research Question 2.

Hierarchy of Needs

Each of the teachers in the study described their deep understanding of the community where they live and teach. Clearly linking education to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Ms. Doe focused on this idea as she reflected on her students and said:

> If you are struggling to find a place to sleep at night, you're working overnight to provide for your home, I could really care less about the test. It's Maslow at its finest.

> Let's get your basic needs met and know that you are safe here. And let's get some basic life lessons in that you can try…If you don't remember every fact of history from this class at that point... Is that really important? We have to satisfy all Maslow before we can get you excelling at primary sources.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) suggests that humans' basic needs, in this case adolescents', must be satisfied before they can progress psychologically to the next level. In this way, these teachers framed their students' needs by emphasizing the importance of creating a safe learning environment, fostering positive relationships with students, and gaining a deep understanding of the school community and the families they serve. Importantly, addressing each element of the hierarchy of needs is an ongoing process that teachers revisit daily, if not moment by moment. Their needs are not a checklist that must be achieved before moving to learning curriculum. Instead, it is a constant assessment of students and their needs so that learning can occur.

Safe Environment

The first theme that emerged as part of students' hierarchy of needs is the emphasis teachers placed on creating an environment where students feel safe and comfortable to learn. As twenty-first-century students, there are significant outside factors that impact students and their senses of safety. The influence of tribalism in American politics, bullying, and social media clearly impacts students' relationships with each other and their mental health (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Cell phone use and social media have become such distractions that schools nationwide are moving toward cell-phone-free campuses to help foster safe learning environments (Cochran, 2025; Prothero & Langreo, 2025). Additionally, middle school students are in their developmental adolescence, often experiencing puberty, which can intensify their need for belonging in school and social settings (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Conklin, 2014).

Although I did not ask the question, I was surprised that when conversations about safe environments arose, none of the teachers in the study mentioned gun violence or school shootings.

The ways in which the teachers discussed the conditions of a middle school classroom are indeed connected to classroom culture and design. However, when considering how to develop a safe learning environment, the teachers discussed classroom *culture* and creating a *safe space* somewhat differently. Respect in the classroom seemed to be the first step toward building a safe environment and ultimately establishing the classroom culture. The teachers who directly addressed safe classroom environment emphasized a learning space where students could feel comfortable being themselves. Ms. Roberts eloquently focused on this idea when she stated in the focus group that:

> I feel like that's the most important thing about my classroom, that everyone feels safe, and that means everyone's beliefs are respected…except that we will never agree to disagree on human rights. Human rights always come first.

Ms. Roberts spoke extensively about respect and its importance in her classroom, proudly noting that regardless of her students' backgrounds or immigration status, they have often told her they can "breathe a sigh of relief when they came into her classroom." Both Ms. Williams and Ms. Doe shared similar experiences and discussed their commitment to preventing bullying in their classrooms. They aim to create a space where students feel comfortable and eager to have honest conversations about history and the world, knowing they are in an environment where they will not be criticized by their teacher or peers. This does not mean that the teachers discussed ignoring the outside pressures. Instead, they seek avenues to discuss them and inquire how to appropriately respond.

The emphasis on safety in the classroom and fostering a sense of belonging helps these teachers build positive relationships with their students and increases their ability to have strong knowledge of their learners (KoL). The finding suggests that for these teachers, creating a safe learning environment is the first step in addressing the students' hierarchy of needs in middle-grade classrooms. The subsequent steps can then be implemented in their classrooms and adjusted as needed.

Positive Relationships

The importance of positive relationships in the classroom is well documented in the literature (Conklin, 2014; Hall, 2023; Scullin, 2020). Students want and need to feel that their teachers value them both as individuals and as learners. Considering the focus on the best practices of these Gilder Lehrman winners, it is not surprising that this theme emerged, as each teacher emphasized the importance of positive relationships in their classrooms. Discussions concerning building positive relationships were coded 140 times, compared to knowledge of community (n=75) and safe environment (n=37).

Framing their conversations around positive relationships and their 'whys,' Mr. Thomas emphasized that "if you don't have relationships with the kids, then (nothing else) works," and Ms. Williams focused on relationships when she stated that:

> I believe that relationship building serves as the foundation and makes everything else possible. Because without those genuine connections with students, I feel like even the best, scaffolds or clearest structures, can really fall flat. I mean, when students trust me and feel valued, I feel like they're willing to take more risks or accept my feedback or work with me on something that's challenging. And I feel like relationships really build or guide how I implement other elements.

For teachers in the study, they argued that creating an environment where students feel valued. and teachers take the time to understand their backgrounds, helps meet their developmental needs and advances content learning.

Part of their relationship building involves having a clear knowledge of each learner (KoL) in their classroom. Every teacher in this study spoke extensively about how their students' learning needs change from year to year, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussions about reading levels, understanding cardinal directions, and supporting emergent multilingual learners were all part of relationship building and efforts to improve students' learning outcomes. Mr. Taylor emphasized this by highlighting the importance of meeting each student where they are developmentally, sharing that his classroom expectations are simple: "I expect them to work hard and give effort, and that no one will fail my class if they do those things." Mr. Angeles shared a similar view, recounting a conversation with a student who was struggling academically. When he offered to sit down and "figure out what we can do to manage to get your grade to a passing level," the student asked if he was serious. He replied, "I have literally been trying to do that since January!" Ms. Williams also mentioned that when considering individual progress. She expressed her understanding that her previous approach may not work with her current class. She works to "figure out if that struggling reader (who is) engaging with the primary source maybe needs more of a scaffolded approach towards it, or maybe they would benefit from like a little checklist on their binder or folder or whatever." While I highlight these three examples, they reflect a broader theme discussed across all six teachers during their interviews and focus group. These teachers know their students well and seek to understand them deeply.

As with many themes in this study and in education overall, the role of positive relationships directly connects to the teaching strategies these teachers discussed using in their classrooms, including how they choose sources and make decisions about scaffolding and differentiation. Mr. Thomas shared how he tries to include small historical vignettes in his class when he considers his students, hoping it might be something that "this person might be into." Mr. Angeles highlighted his focus on "choice and voice" in his assignments, which is especially important given his small class sizes. Ms. Doe shared a proud moment when she was able to select a topic and source that involved a student who had recently immigrated. She brought the student into the conversation by highlighting her country's history, telling me that it only took "two days. Who cares!! I would do this for any other cultural group in my classroom. Why wouldn't I do it for her?"

When I asked the teachers to walk me through their classroom routines, they each shared how they start their day's routine of meeting students at the door, checking in with them, and making sure that each student felt seen as they entered the room. In this way, they engaged with students about their lives, learned about recent sporting events or performances, and gained insight into their friendships and crushes. Then, when the class starts, they talked about extending that energy into their openings and continuing relationship building. Ms. Doe was explicit about her use of this time to build relationships when she said she's "gonna figure out what's going on, and show value and interest in them, and spend the time with them one on one." Mr. Thomas also shared his view on this approach when he described his opening routine each day, where he asks a history question and a non-history question, like, "If you had a superpower, what superpower would it be?"

Each of the teachers in this case study expressed their belief that strong student-teacher relationships are essential for student success and growth. Mr. Taylor summarized how it feels when you know you have built a positive relationship with your student when he said:

> You know there's nothing like whenever you run into an old student and you don't have to say hi to them first. But they say hi to you first. That's when you know that you gave them a good experience whenever they don't duck their head and act like they don't see you.

Knowledge of Community

The third factor influencing how teachers consider addressing their students' hierarchy of needs is the importance of understanding the community where they live and work. In developing their pedagogical practices, these teachers discussed their knowledge of the community they serve and how it relates to the specific needs of their students. By recognizing that effective teachers are those who teach the whole child, these teachers work to understand their community so they can meet their students' needs and create an environment where students are prepared to learn and grow.

Poverty. A prominent theme that emerged as part of the knowledge of community, is the need to understand poverty. Regardless of their teaching location, each teacher in the study discussed the impact of poverty on their students and the community. Importantly, the teachers did not describe this using deficit language. Instead, they focused on how they can best support and love their students so they can learn and grow in the classroom. Both Ms. Doe and Mr. Angeles started the conversation by discussing how to support students in simply getting to school in the morning. Mr. Angeles drives a suburban to support their school's small bus system, but he mentioned that it wasn't unusual for the principal and superintendent to make a trip to

pick up a student from home if they missed their ride or their parent couldn't bring them. Ms. Doe reminded us that middle school absences and tardies are not necessarily the student's fault when she said:

> I'm sorry, a middle schooler that can't get to school… They can't drive! This is not their fault, right? The vast majority of the time, we literally have students call in and say, 'I don't have a way to get school. My mom's not here, or I can't wake her up. Can you come, get me?'

Part of the conversation about poverty and meeting students' needs focused on providing supplies and caring for the whole child. Mr. Angeles and Ms. Doe both mentioned feeding students, free and reduced lunches, and the importance of not assuming what a student's needs might be. Both Ms. Doe and Ms. Williams specifically brought up classroom supplies. While school funding did not come up in any interview, there is a clear tension between providing the supplies students need, what the school offers, and what teachers pay out of their own pockets. While she always works to ensure her students have what they need to be successful in her classroom, with one particular student, Ms. Doe gives them five pencils a month and offers bonus points if they still have them at the end of the month. This approach allows her to play a game with the student who keeps losing them, building a relationship, using her humor, while also working on teaching him responsibility. Ms. Williams' approach also involves humor and includes an idea she got from a friend. She puts name tags on each pencil with "old people names" and created the "George Washington Memorial Nursing Home." In this organizational strategy, each "table has four residents," and students are responsible for keeping track of them. Ms. Williams joked about kids looking around and saying, "oh, no, we gotta find Roland!"

The teachers also discussed the serious nature of poverty and their responsibilities as mandated reporters and supporters of students. They addressed issues like homelessness, drugs, alcohol, unemployment, lack of utilities, incarceration, violence, and crime. They talked about fights in the hallways, working with social workers to get students clean clothes, and the abuse and neglect some students face. Ms. Doe reflected on her students and her belief in learning with and from them:

> Dealing with students in poverty can be really hard, and understanding that has made me a better person. It made me more aware of people. You know, they have taught me… My students teach me every year, too. It's a two-way street.

Diversity of Population. In our conversations about student populations and the demographics of the community where they live and work, a common theme was how they thought about diversity within their community. Importantly, in most cases, this wasn't discussed in racial terms but more often in terms of economic diversity and immigration status. Mr. Taylor pointed out that the region where he teaches and lives isn't racially diverse but is economically diverse. He noted that:

> There are some people who go to our school that live in nice communities that have HOAs, you know, half-million-dollar homes. And then we have students that live in trailer parks. We are very diverse in the haves and have-nots. And then we have a lot of "grand families"...our (region) has a lot of grandparents raising their kids for various reasons.

Ms. Roberts emphasized the importance of understanding, celebrating, and recognizing the diversity of her students and their backgrounds, both in her teaching strategies and in the learning experiences students gain from exposure to diverse people and ideas. She argued that:

> The American experience is very foreign to some of their classmates. So, I think that's one of the hardest parts is bridging the divide. But I would say that's also one of the strengths, that my classes are incredibly diverse. And so my students are exposed to that. They are exposed to lots of different viewpoints, and that I think everyone grows from that.

Loving the Community You Are From. The third point these teachers discussed was the importance of having an appreciation and love for the community they come from. Whether their family recently arrived as refugees or has been farming for five generations, the teachers in this study consider students' backgrounds and communities when designing classroom environments that support the growth of all their students. When Mr. Taylor talked about his classroom, he has photographs hanging up of his own experiences to remind students that even if they come from a rural area, they "can go and do great things!" Mr. Taylor also emphasized the importance of challenging regional stereotypes and believed that his students would leave his class with a "love and appreciation of their heritage."

Teachers from other regions expressed similar views about the importance of loving your heritage and taking time to appreciate it, and the role it plays in their PCK. Mr. Angeles and Ms. Doe discussed the significance of farming in their communities and incorporating relevant historical themes into their lessons that may resonate with students. Whether it's addressing literacy and helping students gain trade certifications (Mr. Angeles) so they can manage the family farm, or Ms. Doe highlighting the significance of tractor colors and the history of John Deere in farming communities, the focus remains on community connection. Ms. Williams summarized the importance of building strong community knowledge by advising new students

to “give new teachers the advice to build rapport with students, families, colleagues, because learning happens best in classrooms where they feel safe, seen, and supported.”

For each of the teachers who participated in the study, they discussed the work they have put into knowing their students and building strong relationships with them so that learning can occur in their classroom. The ways in which they discussed student needs began with Maslow (1973) and recognized that if students are going to learn in their classrooms, that they need to feel safe, seen, and respected.

Classroom Design

The teachers in this case study dedicate significant time and effort to designing the classroom environment in which they teach. They consider the developmental and contextual needs of their students (RQ2) to create the most effective learning environment. This applies to Mr. Angeles, who teaches social studies to grades seven through eleven; Ms. Roberts, who teaches in an urban setting; and Mr. Thomas, who teaches in a suburb. When designing their classrooms and determining how to best address their students' developmental and contextual needs, each teacher thoughtfully considers classroom structure, lesson planning, and classroom culture. These three elements of classroom design, along with their unique approaches, help them create a learning environment where they can effectively teach their middle-grade students.

The intentional design of middle-grade American history classrooms for these teachers is a significant step that aids in supporting a developmentally appropriate atmosphere to teach and learn American history. As experienced teachers, they recognize the interconnection between their PK, CK, and KoL as they create classrooms where their adolescent students can be academically challenged and reach their individual goals.

Classroom Structure

The opening question in each interview focused on starting the conversation and helping each participant feel comfortable in the interview space, asking them to describe their classroom environment. While the goal was to offer a simple question to begin the discussion, their responses revealed a theme related to classroom design and how classroom structure impacts meeting the developmental and contextual needs of their students (RQ2). It became clear that the teacher participants reflected deeply about their classroom structure, how their design is intentionally planned to meet the needs of their students, and how they continue to modify their structure as needs evolve.

The first element of classroom structure focused on the physical environment. When describing their classroom layouts, teachers most often emphasized the importance of flexibility and student grouping. Mr. Angeles described his room as a "smaller space" with kidney tables, Ms. Roberts drew a picture of how she organizes her desks in small groups, and Mr. Taylor explained that he started the year with tables but quickly realized that he "did not like it at all," so he switched with the teacher next door. They consider how easily students can move around the room, maintain proximity to each student, and how the furniture supports effective learning spaces. For example, Ms. Williams discussed her "American flag cabinet" by her door so students can pick up "any physical piece of paper they need," and Ms. Doe explained how she organizes tubs so that if a student is missing a supply or paper, those resources are accessible, giving students the autonomy to get what they need.

Part of the classroom structure for these teachers, however, was reflected in their classroom management strategies. Each of the teachers spoke very clearly about their classroom expectations and how they "control the chaos" (Ms. Doe), but Ms. William's classroom

management structure stood out as an exemplar. She uses three separate systems on her PowerPoint presentations, sometimes switching expectations between slides. She has a noise level expectation ranging from zero to four, a CHAMPS system (Conversation, Help, Activity, Movement & Participation = Success), and levels of Authority (e.g., Dictatorship, democracy). In the top right corner of each slide, she might have "3-M-Democracy," indicating students should speak with a level 3 voice, move around the classroom, and work with their peers. While each teacher described their approaches to ensuring students understand expectations, Ms. Williams was the clearest, leaving no room for interpretation for her 8th-grade learners.

Lesson Structure

Building on the importance of classroom structure, the teachers considered similar factors when developing their lesson plans and routines. Their knowledge of learners (KoL) supports their ability to plan lessons using their PK and CK, ensuring students always understand their position in the classroom and what is expected of them. Importantly, their KoL as individuals, along with their developmental needs of middle-grade education, work together to create lessons where students recognize they can succeed.

Part of the approach to lesson structure involves establishing expected classroom routines. Each teacher has a unique method, but there were common elements among them. For example, Mr. Thomas starts each day with an opening question that students are expected to answer as they enter the room. His questions always include a review question and a "non-history question of the day," which allows him to connect with his students outside of the content. Mr. Taylor also has an opening routine, but his focus is on state trivia, using a gamified approach to spend a little time each day preparing students for their end-of-course test.

One of the most significant themes that emerged from the interviews and focus group was the importance of having classroom expectations around participation and student-centered activities. While this can also relate to classroom structure and culture, I considered it here as part of the teacher's lesson planning, since it influences how they design their lessons and set participation expectations. In line with the original assumptions of this study, each teacher sought opportunities to empower students in their learning. As Ms. Roberts noted, her lesson designs, which focus on using primary source materials, have moved her away from the "sage on the stage" model (King, 1993). She noted that her "job is to help them (students) navigate" the ideas, rather than do the learning for them. Each teacher discussed the habit of fostering student-centered learning and the expectation of participation. Ms. Doe was clear about this, and often repeated her classroom mantra during our interview: "You made the choice to enter, you made the choice to start," and makes clear her expectation that she will hear from each student at least once during the class period every day.

The specific history education strategies that the teachers use will be discussed as part of finding three; however, it is important to note here the range of activities that the teachers consider bringing into their lesson structure. For these teachers, each day may tend to start and end in the same way, but the middle part of class time varies greatly to engage students. This is not to say that lectures do not happen in their classrooms. They all noted that they do lecture, but it seems to be the exception rather than the norm.

Classroom Culture

Potentially due to the broad scope of the concept, classroom culture was the most frequently used code in this study (n=204) and reflects the significant role it plays in supporting adolescent developmental and contextual needs. Once a respectful and safe classroom

environment has been established, a teacher has the flexibility to continue developing the individualized classroom culture for their 8th-grade students. Classroom culture, as part of classroom design, is closely aligned with creating a safe environment and addressing students' hierarchy of needs. However, here, the focus is on how the classroom feels and how students work and communicate with each other, rather than their physical safety in the classroom.

In describing their classrooms, the teachers expressed immense pride in how they decorate their rooms and emphasized the role that the physical space plays in shaping their classroom culture. Each teacher talked at length about the posters on their walls, the photographs they display, and what they want students to learn and feel while in their classrooms. The word I kept hearing from each teacher, which was woven throughout our conversations, was "welcoming." Mr. Taylor shares pictures of himself and the activities he has had the opportunity to do as someone raised in his community, reminding students that they too can achieve these things and meet these people. Mr. Angeles laughs about his diverse collection of historical and cultural items in his classroom, including his artwork of Benjamin Franklin on a triceratops. Mr. Thomas proudly discussed his years of photographs on the cabinets from sporting events and historical activities he's engaged in with his students. Both Ms. Doe and Ms. Williams highlighted the importance of light in their classrooms, emphasizing the need for both muted over-head lighting and natural sunlight. Ms. Roberts guided me around her room (via her computer) and shared all of her historical and inspirational posters designed to remind students of what is possible.

The second major element of class culture focuses on creating a mutually respectful learning environment. For these teachers, the importance of a respectful classroom is twofold. It not only provides a collaborative space where students feel comfortable sharing their ideas

without fear of being bullied or chastised, but also supports a climate where they can have, as Ms. Roberts shares, “uncomfortable conversations in class, because, unfortunately for my students, my classroom is kind of the first time that they encounter a lot of the more negative aspects of U.S. History.” The way this classroom culture is developed varies from class to class and teacher to teacher, but all emphasized the importance of establishing a respectful environment and honoring each other’s voices and ideas. Mr. Thomas summed up this idea when he noted that:

> You have to have a relationship with these kids. You have to know what's going on in their lives, and if you're a little bit vulnerable with them, and you tell them about what's going on in your life, and you share, it kind of becomes a little more of a collaboration.

Finally, a third aspect discussed by these teachers, which they see as crucial to their classroom culture, is the importance of ensuring that students see themselves positively represented in the curriculum. While each teacher operates under different state standards, their choices about what and who to teach vary. However, as Ms. Doe stated, “we want to make sure it's (our content) representative of our students as well. Yes, each of us have state mandates, but we want to make sure each of our students’ cultural backgrounds are included.” Each of the teachers consider this an important part of their classroom culture and decision-making process that influences their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Mr. Angeles looks for materials to promote the inclusion of Native American history, Mr. Taylor focuses on voices from his local and state community, and Ms. Roberts displays posters that affirm each student’s identity and role in her classroom.

Conclusion

For the teachers who participated in this case study, the importance of continually recognizing the development and learning needs of each student must be continually recognized so that they can fully focus on curriculum instruction in their classrooms. They discussed their students as unique individuals who all hold equal value in their classrooms. And even if they were a "turd yesterday...and started the food fight in the cafeteria" (Ms. Doe), these teachers clearly expressed that each student belongs in their classroom, has the right to be forgiven for yesterday's mistakes, and deserves to feel safe, supported, and to have a positive relationship with their teacher. The knowledge of their learners (KoL), including their community, background, and heritage, all factor into these teachers' PCK and how they approach their profession.

Approaches to Middle-Grade History Education

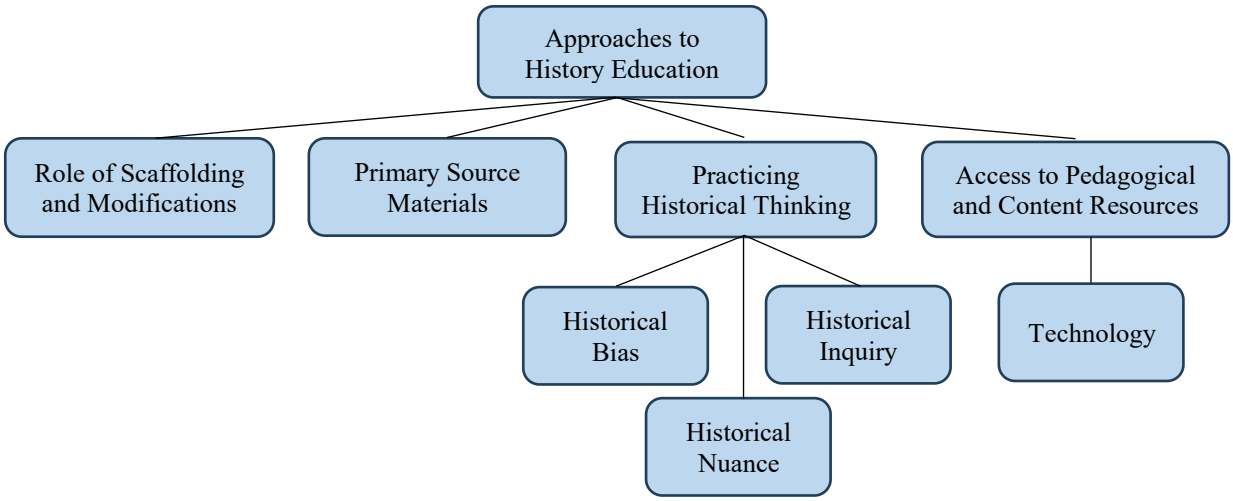
The findings from this study highlight that a third element of the participating teachers' PCK is found in their approaches to 8th-grade history education. Their lesson designs reflect their specific knowledge of their learners (KoL), content knowledge (CK), and pedagogical knowledge (PK). The teachers in this study did not report that they see their classroom and meeting student needs as a checklist where, once completed, they can move on to the task of history education. Instead, as we reflect on the funnel metaphor (see Figure 3), their approaches to middle-grade education work in concert with each of the other three findings: knowledge gained from their growing professional practice and development, middle-grade student development, and preparation for the future.

Finding three focuses on the specific pedagogical strategies that these teachers use to translate their CK and KoL into middle-grade pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Their

approach to middle-grade history education addresses research question number one: How do these Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year teachers describe their content-based approaches to teaching 8th-grade American history? This finding reports on the teacher toolkits each brings to their classroom and how they envision delivering rigorous, student-centered middle-grade instruction to their adolescent learners (see Figure 6). The teachers in this study emphasized that they work hard to provide authentic, rigorous instruction to their students, while also creating the scaffolding and modifications necessary for each student to succeed with each assignment and develop their knowledge and skills.

Figure 6

Visualization of the Pedagogical Strategies the Teachers Bring to their Middle-Grade American History Classrooms



Note. This figure represents each theme and sub-theme identified in the third finding, which focuses on approaches to middle-grade history education. It supports the ability to answer Research Question 3.

Role of Scaffolding and Modifications

The teachers who participated in this study reported that they do not believe in watering down the curriculum for their students. They each discussed sharing honest history with their students and the impact they believe the learning has on them. However, because they work with

adolescents, each teacher shared their approaches to ensuring that each document is accessible to their 8th-grade students. For these teachers, scaffolding and modifications involve structuring lessons around students' developmental and contextual needs. They consider reading levels, pedagogical approaches, and the gradual release of responsibility to foster student autonomy with their strategies. This case study illustrates how a teacher's PCK influences how they scaffold and modify assignments and create lessons that are accessible to their diverse 8th-grade learners.

For these teachers, designing lessons that are scaffolded or modified begins with building relationships with their students (Finding 2). Understanding their student populations not only influences how they support them as adolescents in the classroom, but it also helps them structure activities to foster student engagement and develop historical thinking skills. Ms. Williams emphasized this idea during the focus group when she stated that:

> If I know my students really well, and I have a good relationship with them, not just academically, but even socially, I know what their likes and dislikes are. I feel like that helps me design more effective modeling or scaffolds and things like that.

Later in the conversation, she linked this to the idea that students' needs change significantly each year, and that it is "hard to say this is the approach that will work for everybody." As shown throughout the interviews and focus groups, these teachers expressed an understanding that students' needs evolve from year to year, so their lessons cannot be repeated unchanged every year or across different classes.

The concept of who receives a scaffold or modification, when they receive it, and how to address the stigma surrounding the supports was discussed in several interviews and reflects the strength of their PCK. Ms. Doe approaches student needs with a "rising tide lifts all boats"

metaphor. She stated directly that she believes that when implementing accommodations in any classroom, “we need to think more universally about them.” As an example of this approach, she discussed a student with visual impairments who required larger text. She passionately detailed:

> Why am I just blowing this up like for my three students? Why don't I just blow it up for everybody? It helps everybody, right? Why can't everybody get a finger guide? Who cares? You know, like these modifications aren't dumbing it down or simplifying or eliminating choice. It's literally just giving all students the same tools to be able to succeed. You have to level the playing field, right, in your classroom, for all students to be able to succeed.

Although not all the teachers discussed modifications with the same broad vision as Ms. Doe, they all shared the goal of removing stigmas around them. Mr. Thomas and Mr. Angeles talked about using technology to scaffold and their ability to push different documents to students based on who needed which version. Ms. Roberts explained her approach by including all versions of the document on the same page.

A key factor these teachers consider when planning scaffolding and instructional approaches is focused on reading levels and the evolving needs of students, especially regarding primary source materials in the middle-grade classroom. No matter their teaching setting, each teacher expressed concerns about students' reading levels and how they work as history teachers to enhance students' reading skills in their history classes. Mr. Taylor explained this by saying, “I have some classes every year that just seem to pick up on things a little bit quicker, and others that do need more scaffolding, and so I kind of tailor it to each of those classes.” He also emphasized that reading primary source materials in an 8th-grade classroom “is a very high-level task, for where they’re at developmental,” making scaffolding and diverse resources essential for

their progress. Ms. Roberts and Ms. Williams share these views and stress the importance of scaffolding for students' reading at elementary levels (Ms. Roberts) and using Universal Design for Learning to accommodate different learning styles. Ms. Williams expressed that in doing this, she was creating "an inclusive classroom that affirms every learner's voice and experience."

The strategies that this group of teachers discussed using to bring rigorous history education to their students are varied and showcase their PCK. As they considered the scope of their standards, student-centered learning approaches, and the importance of teaching rigorous history in a middle-grade setting. They highlighted the numerous strategies they use to support student growth in content knowledge acquisition and the development of historical thinking skills. For example, Ms. Roberts and Mr. Thomas each shared how they incorporate scaffolded primary source materials on the same sheet for all students (e.g., see Table 6). Mr. Angeles shared a similar approach and aims to keep engagement and confidence high by limiting the relevant information to one page. However, it's important to note that the teachers provide scaffolding across all their teaching methods, not just when using primary sources. Specific strategies discussed in the interviews and focus group, were using videos to re-teach or reinforce an idea (Ms. Williams & Mr. Thomas), employing chunking strategies to break down concepts (Ms. Williams & Mr. Taylor), utilizing visual and mental models (Ms. Doe), and applying graphic organizer strategies (all participants).

Table 6

Imagined Example of Ms. Robert's & Mr. Thomas' Approach to Scaffolding the Declaration of Independence

Original Text	**Adapted Text**
We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.	We believe that some things are so true we don't need to prove them. For example, everyone is created equal. We all have special rights from our Creator that no one can take away. Some of these rights are: • Life: The chance to live and grow up. • Liberty: The freedom to make our own choices. • Happiness: The right to look for things that make us happy. To keep these rights safe, people create governments. A government gets its power from the people it serves. If a government starts doing bad things and doesn't protect our rights, the people have the right to change it or get rid of it and start a new one. The new government must be set up in a way that will keep everyone safe and happy. We shouldn't change our government for a small or quick reason. People usually put up with bad things for a while. But if a government keeps being unfair and hurts the people over and over again, then it's our right and our duty to get rid of that government. This way, we can set up new rules to protect ourselves in the future.
En Espanol Sostenemos como evidentes estas verdades: que todos los hombres son creados iguales; que son dotados por su Creador de ciertos derechos inalienables; que entre éstos están la vida, la libertad y la búsqueda de la felicidad; que para garantizar estos derechos se instituyen entre los hombres los gobiernos, que derivan sus poderes legítimos del consentimiento de los gobernados; que cuando quiera que una forma de gobierno se haga destructora de estos principios, el pueblo tiene el derecho a reformarla o abolirla e instituir un nuevo gobierno que se funde en dichos principios, y a organizar sus poderes en la forma que a su juicio ofrecerá las mayores probabilidades de alcanzar su seguridad y felicidad. La prudencia, claro está, aconsejará que no se cambie por motivos leves y transitorios gobiernos de antiguo establecidos; y, en efecto, toda la experiencia ha demostrado que la humanidad está más dispuesta a padecer, mientras los males sean tolerables, que a hacers e justicia aboliendo las formas a que está acostumbrada. Pero cuando una larga serie de abusos y usurpaciones, dirigida invariablemente al mismo objetivo, demuestra el designio de someter al pueblo a un despotismo absoluto, es su derecho, es su deber, derrocar ese gobierno y establecer nuevos resguardos para su futura seguridad.	

Note: This figure was created using generative AI (Google Gemini) to visualize the ideas of Ms. Roberts and Mr. Thomas and was not provided directly by them. However, it was shared with them for their feedback to ensure this is an accurate representation of the approach she takes. The translation of the Declaration of Independence into Spanish was provided by the U.S. Department of State (2020).

The goal of educational scaffolding, much like the scaffolding on a building under construction, is to remove it once a learning goal is achieved. These teachers discuss the removal or reassessment of scaffolding, along with the idea of a gradual release of responsibilities, as part of their classroom strategies. In this way, the teachers are focused on meeting students where they are when they enter their classrooms, supporting their development, and preparing them to read and understand more complex texts.

Ms. Roberts made this clear when she stated:

> And gradually, we just kind of increase the difficulty of the sources and slowly remove scaffolding. So, at the very beginning, I start walking them through primary sources, and the primary source might just be like a paragraph. And then they start doing some on their own, and we check it, and we talk about it. And by this point, I had my students for 5 min at the beginning of class today read over Alexander Stephens' Cornerstone Address.

Ms. Williams and Mr. Taylor also emphasized the importance of gradually releasing responsibilities, and Ms. Doe detailed and drew out for me her reading and writing strategy for teaching students the 'power word' in questions, as well as how to distinguish between describing, analyzing, comparing, and contrasting.

By taking the time to understand the learners in their classrooms, the teachers in this study expressed an understanding of how to make each assignment and primary source activity accessible and achievable for their students. Whether through scaffolding assignments to develop skills or modifying them to meet the needs of students with disabilities, these teachers strive to deliver age-appropriate historical learning to their student communities.

Primary Source Materials

In their 8th-grade American history classes, these teachers reported how they regularly incorporate primary source materials into their lessons. Closely tied to scaffolding and practicing historical thinking skills, the decision to include and how to select these sources is deliberate, thoughtful, and often requires revisions. It is no surprise that the teachers in this study use primary source materials, as they are a key element in the Gilder Lehrman rubric (n.d.). Although the focus on the participants' portfolios was not specifically analyzed as part of the study's findings, an initial review of the portfolios used during the development of the interview protocol provided insight into the wide range of sources the teachers utilize. From local newspapers discussing regional history and dismantling stereotypes (Mr. Taylor), to photographs, maps, and navy reports hypothesizing about Amelia Earhart's possible crash site (Ms. Doe), and songs, national documents, and the change over time of maps (Ms. Williams), these teachers employ primary sources to meet standards and content in rigorous, age-appropriate ways.

It is important to note that the focus of the interviews centered largely on primary source materials. This was not necessarily intentional, but rather due to time constraints and the perspective of the Gilder Lehrman rubric (n.d.). The second element of the rubric addresses creativity in lesson plans, but in our conversations, the emphasis was on how teachers use creativity when applying it to teaching with primary source materials. This does not mean that the only pedagogical approach teachers use is primary sources. Nothing could be further from the truth. However, given the scope and limitations of this study, the results mainly reflect how teachers view creativity as an essential part of their primary source-based lesson plans.

The importance of primary sources for these teachers lies in providing diverse perspectives to their students and offering a view of the past from those who experienced it. Ms. Roberts, Mr. Angeles, and Mr. Taylor each emphasized the importance of moving away from textbooks and instead using primary source materials to tell the story. For example, Ms. Roberts shared her memory of her experience in 8th-grade American history and how she "hated (her) middle school history teacher's class. We just read from the textbook and answered worksheets. It was so stupid, and it was a waste of time!" They also discussed the role of bias in their textbooks and stressed that they want students "to think about the other groups (not included in the textbooks)" (Mr. Angeles), and they acknowledged that the only way for students to "fully understand what happened is sometimes to go back to those actual primary sources" (Mr. Taylor).

Their approach and selection of primary source materials for their classrooms are crucial to them. When comparing his own methods to the scripted curriculum he is provided, Mr. Thomas noted how dry and monotonous the scripted lessons are and described them as "read this primary source. Answer these three questions. Read this primary source. Answer these three questions." Instead, these teachers discussed how they choose sources to build skills and foster engagement. For example, Ms. Roberts talked about her first lesson of the year where she uses primary sources. Her state standards start with a unit on the interaction between Europeans and native North American peoples, which allows her to teach both native histories, primary sources, and historical thinking skills through photographs—something students of all reading levels can understand and engage with. When thinking of her students as junior historians, Ms. Roberts employs this initial approach to give them confidence and help them realize they are engaging in the work of practicing historians.

While some teachers have increased their focus on primary source materials due to state mandates and required testing, they each emphasized the importance and central role in their classroom. Ms. Doe shared that she "believes (in) rich text reading and writing every day," Ms. Roberts said she uses primary sources "at least every other day, if not more," and Mr. Angeles stated that he works to "talk about a primary source almost every single day." Importantly, their strategies for doing this vary. While their students become more proficient in analyzing and synthesizing primary source material throughout the school year, the methods they use often differ, keeping lessons fresh and students engaged in the learning process. Each of the teachers shared examples of this throughout our conversations:

> Ms. Williams discussed the focus on Document-Based Questions in her class because of the end-of-course test required in her state, but she is always seeking new approaches and strategies. She talked about her method of using breakout rooms, analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of the Articles of Confederation, and employing inquiry techniques to uncover the purpose of the cotton gin through photographic analysis.
>
> Ms. Doe discussed the value of the National Portrait Gallery's 30-second look activity, where she shares a painting or photograph for 30 seconds, then has students analyze it. She also looks for opportunities to incorporate mock trials, dramatic readings, and escape rooms to bring sources and ideas to life. She takes pride in mixing things up each day so that her students never quite know what to expect.
>
> Ms. Roberts focused on the role of learning to be a practicing historian, and she collaborates with other American history teachers in her department to develop and improve primary source-based lessons. She and a new teacher have collaborated on a

small project in which students compare and contrast colonial perspectives and then write diamante poems based on their findings.

Mr. Angeles emphasized the importance of incorporating a variety of sources that challenge students' thinking about the status quo. While teaching the Holocaust, he has developed a lesson that includes diverse viewpoints on how different nations accepted Jewish refugees. Consistent with his state curriculum standards, he aims to include native peoples' voices from various periods into his classroom.

Mr. Taylor discussed using primary sources to help his students gain a deeper understanding of their region and the work of their ancestors. He knows that primary source analysis is a "heavy pull" for 8th-graders but employs technology and chunking techniques to improve their reading and analytical skills.

Mr. Thomas shared how he actively seeks opportunities to include underrepresented voices in well-known stories. When teaching about the Trail of Tears, he incorporates primary sources about Andrew Jackson and also introduces a source by Samuel Cloud, a teenager who was on the trail. His approach both provides additional context and experience to the narrative while engaging teenagers' interest levels.

Primary source materials are resources that this group of teachers frequently discussed using in each classroom setting. They highlighted a variety of strategies and scaffolds, each focused on building students' knowledge of history, as well as their growth as readers and junior historians.

Practicing Historical Thinking Skills

The ways these teachers discussed historical thinking skills (HTS) are key to their PCK approaches to their content. Traditionally, HTS skills focus on concepts like contextualization,

change over time, point of view, and intended audience (to name a few). This also applies to these teachers. They emphasized these skills to help students analyze sources and history. However, these teachers also discussed challenging their 8th-grade students by using a broader approach to HTS through concepts like bias, sourcing, and inquiry.

In teaching 8th-grade American history content, the teachers often emphasized the importance of historical and critical thinking skills over rote memorization. Mr. Taylor shared his advice for new social studies teachers:

> In my years of teaching social studies, I find it more important to understand the sequence of events than holding fast to kids remembering the specific date…You can recall 20 dates. But why? Why are they important? What happened at that event? Why are we talking about it?

Each of the teachers generally agreed with this sentiment. While a few teachers noted that a handful of dates were necessary points for contextualization, the focus of our conversations around their content-based approaches was on developing stronger historical and critical thinking skills. Importantly, they expressed that these skills are not limited to supporting students in history and social studies classrooms. Instead, they argued for the cross-curricular nature of the skills and why they are teaching them. Mr. Thomas emphasized this idea when he noted that, "I'm trying to teach them critical thinking skills that can be applied to all their classes," even though history is "awesome and it's the most fun class."

Historical Nuance

An important aspect of HTS skills that the teachers focused on is recognizing the nuances of history. The teachers discussed students' tendency to categorize historical figures as good or bad, their desire to help students understand the context of each era and have conversations about

how we should view these figures today. Examples of these discussions appeared in my conversations with Ms. Roberts and Mr. Thomas. Ms. Roberts talked about her use of Alexander Stephens' Cornerstone Address, where he detailed the importance of slavery in the newly formed Confederacy. In her lesson, students read the primary source, analyze it using HTS, and then engage in a conversation about why his statue remains in the United States Capitol National Statuary Hall Collection. She shared her excitement about having this nuanced conversation with her students regarding how we view our past, who we choose to commemorate, and the role that historiography plays in it.

Similarly, Mr. Thomas discussed his history teacher of the year portfolio lesson about Nat Turner. After using primary sources and HTS analysis, he asks his students to create a historic marker about Turner. When considering history in different eras, Mr. Thomas discussed how he prompts his students to question, "How do we have two different versions of the same event, and nobody's lying?" This is particularly true in his Nat Turner lesson, where student responses can range from arguing that Turner was "one of the greatest heroes in history," to "he is one of the worst people in the history of our country," and "he had good intentions, but he followed them up with bad actions." For adolescent learners especially, these lessons that history is not always straightforward and they often contain nuance help them develop both their critical thinking about the past and the present.

Historical Bias

Historical bias significantly influences how teachers think about HTS in their classrooms. Students can be taught to identify bias within the source material itself. Whether the bias originates from the original author and their unique perspective (e.g., Jefferson's perspective on the national bank) or an organization that published a source and analysis (e.g., textbooks),

students in these classrooms are being trained to examine sources with a discerning eye. For example, in Ms. Roberts' class, bias is discussed as:

> One of the really big things that we start with. We talk about how to detect bias. But we also talk about how every primary source is biased. And it doesn't mean you can't use it. It just means you need to be aware of it and teach them how to work around it and how to detect bias in documents.

In fact, the importance of bias in sources is so crucial for these teachers that Mr. Thomas mentions it as "the number one thing they walk out of my room with…that they question how reliable different sources are."

Mr. Taylor's approach to analyzing bias in sources aligns with that of other teachers, but he specifically hopes that students will consider how bias might influence their perception of themselves and their region's history. In his Gilder Lehrman portfolio lesson, Mr. Taylor focused on a local industry conflict involving working conditions and unions. He explained that he chose this lesson because it is crucial for students to develop an accurate and nuanced understanding of their own past and to learn how to distinguish between factual and biased information, especially since newspapers at the time were heavily biased against unions and workers.

Historical Inquiry

Inquiry-based were discussed as a strategy in these classrooms that enhances students' understanding of history and their HTS. For these teachers, employing focused inquiry is essential for helping students understand the past and how they interpret history. Inquiry is something that lives in their history classrooms and is not something that just occasionally visits (Swan et al., 2018). Although they did not discuss approaches like the Inquiry Design Model (C3

Teachers), they did discuss how they structure each lesson around focused inquiry questions to promote student engagement and curiosity.

The way each teacher approached inquiry was different, but it was clearly reflected in their lesson plans and conversations. Mr. Thomas discussed his approach of asking students to put themselves in the shoes of people who experienced events. He makes it clear that he does not ask questions or run simulations about events that could harm students; instead, he asks them, for example, to think about the Indian Removal Act. As students often view the past through 21st-century lenses, he asks questions like, "Would you actually leave your land? Would you try and go to court? Would you refuse to leave? Would you fight?" In doing so, he encourages students to apply their HTS and explore the complexities and realities of these situations through inquiry. This method is intended to help students move past simple bravado like 'I'd fight!' and realize that it was not that straightforward. Across their units and lessons, these teachers described framing their lessons through inquiry and asking questions like "why was Martin Luther King, Jr. being critical of other pastors?" (Mr. Angeles), using CSI-style inquiry lessons (Ms. Doe), and then using the perspectives gained to produce written analysis or other formative and summative assessments.

For these Gilder Lehrman teachers, they argued that using primary source materials to teach historical thinking skills, including nuance, bias, and inquiry, is critical to learning history. They addressed the dual function that these skills play in teaching them how to view the past and how they critique the present. In this way, they recognized that the work they are doing is not just about gaining an appreciation and understanding of the nation's past, but the skills learned supports the growth of 21st century citizens.

Access to Pedagogical and Content Resources

The final aspect discussed by the teachers regarding their content-based approaches to history education was their use of historical and pedagogical resources in the classroom. In our conversations, discussions about resources often emerged naturally (n=48). As award-winning teachers, they emphasized the importance of knowing where to find resources, which resources to use 'as is,' and which ones need to be modified for their community of learners. The ability to select and adapt resources was a key part of their PCK and showcased their creativity in the classroom.

Access to content resources is essential for all history teachers, especially those who do not rely on scripted curricula or use textbooks in their classrooms. As Mr. Taylor noted, his classroom does not use the textbook much anymore and said, "I've had students open their textbook three times this year!" Similar sentiments were shared by other teachers, who often turn to online resources to incorporate historical materials and activities. Examples discussed included the Digital Inquiry Group (n.d.), the DBQ Project (2025), Newsela (2025), and digitized sources available through Gilder Lehrman (2025e). A key theme in these conversations was the importance of students' ability to read and access these resources. Mr. Thomas discussed his use of Newsela (2025) and his ability to review Lexile scores and adjust articles based on his PK and KoL when selecting materials. Since most schools and districts do not provide approved anthologies of sources for classroom use, websites offering primary sources in the 21st century provide teachers with much-needed primary content, offering the tools necessary to move beyond 20th-century textbooks.

Online pedagogical resources also serve as a constant source of inspiration for these teachers and the development of their PCK. While they do write their own lessons and create

their own content, they do not feel that they need to reinvent the wheel for every topic or lesson. Instead, they look to the wisdom of others for ideas on how to improve their lessons or utilize resources that align with their content. Ms. Williams discussed the impact that breakout rooms have on her students and their learning. She shared that, at first, her students were skeptical about them but now beg her to bring in more after experiencing the Lewis and Clark breakout room (BreakoutEDU, 2025). She emphasized the importance of these activities in her classroom, especially for her adolescent learners, and the pressure of their end-of-course exam. Ms. Doe discussed the importance of using protocols in her classroom and the impact of Project Zero (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2025) on her students' ability to use HTS and analyze primary source materials. Mr. Angeles spoke about the effectiveness of a stock market simulation he uses with his students when teaching economics and the market crash of 1929. He was particularly excited about his students applying their content knowledge to the activity and how they used their Cornell notes to succeed in the lesson.

Importantly, access to pedagogical and content resources is directly linked to their professional growth in the field. Teachers continue to emphasize the importance of finding the best resources for the students currently in their classrooms, not those from previous years. Using resources is not a shortcut or a pedagogical crutch in any way. Instead, it is a means for them to keep building their pedagogical toolboxes, so they can continually reflect on which tools are suitable for different students as they move through the metaphorical building (Figure 3).

Technology

Technology was at the core of the teacher's classroom instruction and resources. As is becoming more common after COVID-19, each of the teachers' classrooms was described as a one-to-one setting, where every student has their own device. However, not all schools and

teachers view the devices in the same way. Ms. Roberts discussed how her school is shifting back toward a more paper-centered classroom, but Mr. Angeles shared how he uses his one-to-one devices daily in his classroom. Indeed, in his Teacher of the Year portfolio, his superintendent's letter of recommendation specifically highlighted this attribute of his classroom practices. Ms. Doe also reported her focus on providing all resources in both digital and paper formats for each assignment so students can choose based on their preferences.

The conversation about Artificial Intelligence (AI) appeared in both the interviews and the focus group. A theme of this conversation was trustworthiness, with only one mention of student misuse of the technology (Mr. Angeles). These teachers reported that they view AI technologies both as a resource for the classroom and as an opportunity to consider bias and lateral reading (Wineburg, 2019). Both Mr. Angeles and Mr. Taylor discussed lessons that involve using AI to generate images. In both cases, the teachers discussed the prompts they entered into the generative AI chatbot, how students initially learned from the generated responses, and how they refined their searches to obtain more accurate information. Ms. Williams agreed and pointed out that the rise of technology and AI has prompted her to "evolve her teaching methods" to keep up with the needs of her students.

In the 21st century, technology has significantly impacted teachers and their classrooms. From smartboards (Ms. Williams, Ms. Doe, & Mr. Thomas), learning-focused applications like Nearpod (Mr. Angeles) and Schoology (Mr. Thomas), to opportunities for gamified learning strategies (Mr. Angeles & Mr. Taylor), technology has been an essential tool in developing their PCK. Mr. Taylor shared his pride about becoming an Apple Distinguished Educator, which highlights his technology-centered classroom and his dedication to continually growing his teaching using technology. For him, using Apple technologies in his classroom has allowed him

to move around more freely, present his slides from any point in the room, and share student work and celebrate their historical thinking in real time. In the post-COVID-19 context, all of these teachers discussed the technology available in their classrooms and the importance of learning to use it as a valuable tool.

Conclusion

Although the Gilder Lehrman rubric (n.d.) and the submitted lesson plans of the teachers for the award guided the design, interview protocol, and focus group protocol, what comes through clearly in this study is the dedication these teachers have to providing appropriate strategies and materials to their students. They have extensive PCK strategies that they use to engage each of their students in the content. They think deeply about ensuring they help their students grow throughout the school year and prepare them for high school and career expectations. They meet their students where they are at the beginning of the year and gradually remove scaffolding until the students can work independently. In doing this, they also work hard to ensure that their students are represented in the content as often as possible and that the history presented is analyzed critically to better understand the past and move toward the future.

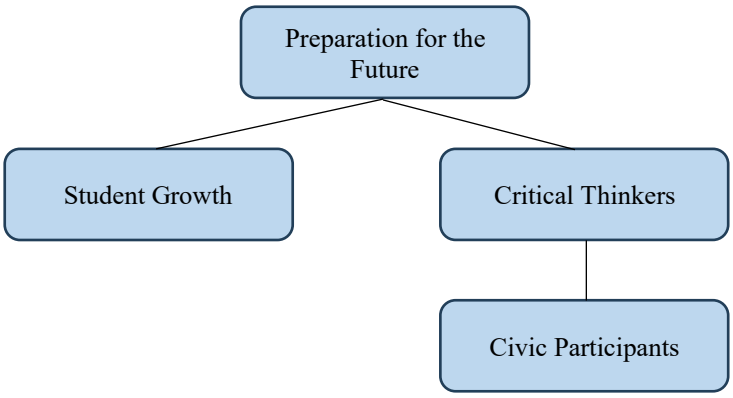
Preparation for the Future

The fourth and final finding from this case study focused on how teachers emphasize student growth and their preparation for the future. Their focus on student development and readiness for what's next addresses research question number two: In what ways do these teachers consider the development and contextual needs of their students? As 8th-grade teachers in traditional schools serving grades six through eight (except for Mr. Angeles), they all recognized that, as middle school educators, they meet students midway through their educational journeys as they help prepare them for the next academic stage. It became clear that

content was important to these teachers. They felt responsible for teaching standards, preparing students for any end-of-course exams mandated by their state, and developing historical thinking skills. Still, they also emphasized the importance of student growth in readiness for high school and beyond. They highlighted the importance of supporting critical thinking and their roles as civic participants for life (see Figure 7). By considering their students and how best to prepare them for the future, the teachers described how they address the contextual and developmental needs of their students (RQ2). They intentionally design their classrooms and implement their PCK to prepare students for the next phase of their education.

Figure 7

Visualization of how the Teachers Express Preparing Students for the Future



Note. This figure represents each theme and sub-theme found in the third finding, approaches to middle-grade history education. It supports the ability to answer Research Question 2.

Student Growth

First and foremost, the teachers each recognized their positionality as 8th-grade teachers, and they understand that part of their job is focused on preparing students for high school. Ms. Doe shared that "what is omnipresent right now is transitioning them to high school," and she is doing her best to ensure they are prepared for the expectations there. Mr. Taylor relied on his

experiences as a high school teacher himself and how he uses that knowledge to vertically align his 8th-grade class and intentionally "fill the gaps." Ms. Williams shared the same view but specifically discussed how she works to position students to grow into high school. At her school, students are tracked through leveled classes, and she views her goal as helping students progress from their current level to the next. She explained how she works to prepare her honors-level students for Advanced Placement courses, help her on-level students advance to honors, and support her at-risk students in becoming prepared for on-level courses. She recognizes that they may not always earn the highest grades, but ultimately, she believes they can do the work because she's "been challenging them all year."

Notably, the teachers emphasized the importance of creating individualized metrics for students by leveraging their knowledge of learners (KoL). These teachers each recognized and celebrated the individuality of their students, understood that they start each year with different academic strengths and weaknesses, and had different standards for what defines a successful school year. Yes, some teachers are beholden to mandated state testing; however, they did not discuss the state exams as the ultimate measure of success. Instead, they focused on understanding where their students are when they enter their classrooms and build strong history students from there as they prepare them for high school. Importantly, they did not discuss student growth with a deficit mindset. Instead, they centered on valuing each student's starting point in the classroom and working with them to develop into stronger learners.

The idea of focusing on individual student strengths and providing personalized opportunities for growth outside of high school preparation was discussed across each interview and the focus group. The teachers shared different examples of student needs and gaps in knowledge, and how they worked to meet each student where they were. Mr. Taylor shared an

example of the scaffolding he has implemented in his classroom when he realized that "sometimes they don't even know their compass directions, but…that's what our job is. Our job is to fill those gaps and to give them what they need to know." Because of this, he discussed easing students into using primary source materials at the beginning of the year, then he "dive(s) deeper as the year goes along." Ms. Williams broadly agreed, and when she discussed the importance of student growth and other teachers in her school who choose not to use primary sources for their at-risk students, Ms. Williams bristled and said if they do not introduce them to all students, "they'll never get better! That's my philosophy. They got to get better."

Mr. Angeles' context is so significantly different from that of the other participants in the study that it is worth discussing his views on individual student growth separately. Because he is the only social studies instructor that students at his school will see between seventh and eleventh grade, he has a unique opportunity to both create clear vertical alignment between his classes and observe the long-term effects of his work. While he admits that there can be drawbacks if his relationship with a student falters, he ultimately views his context as a net positive. An example of this is how he discusses student growth in writing across his classes. He spoke very clearly about his vertical design of student writing and how he can maintain a consistent thread through each of his classes as he works with his students to "get going in 7th grade…go more focused in 9th grade…and 11th graders really focus on the idea of being able to extend beyond." He emphasized that he works not only on paragraph structure and length, but also on developing historical thinking skills at each grade level.

Due to the diverse needs of their students, a common theme among the participants was the importance of embracing opportunities that allow students to express their knowledge in various ways. Mr. Angles emphasized in both the focus group and his interview the importance

of “choice and voice” in his classroom so that, on certain occasions, students can choose the assessment style that best fits their way of communicating their knowledge. While this approach is not always feasible, the teachers see these strategies as ways to support student growth. They describe it as getting students to buy into the class and providing opportunities for students to express their creativity (Ms. Roberts & Mr. Taylor) or to learn through games (Mr. Taylor & Mr. Angeles). When they achieve this, students are not only learning the content but also developing as learners.

Support structures were expressed as a key strategy in their efforts to foster student growth in the classroom. Ms. Williams clearly described this as something she learned during her master's program and applied in her preparation for her National Boards. She focused on incorporating executive functioning strategies into her class, especially for at-risk students, and created individualized checklist plans for them. She reflected on this strategy and noted that students told her the format “really took the guesswork out of it for me to make sure I was doing what I needed to” and to think “ok, yeah. I did that right!” Although Ms. Williams discussed her strategy in the most depth, each teacher talked about the support structures they use for their specific students. Mr. Angeles discussed his use of a proficiency scale, Ms. Roberts described her incorporation of the Universal Design for Learning (2024), and Ms. Doe shared her focus on workplace skills, teaching students to be prepared to learn and work when they enter her classroom community.

Part of the conversations around student growth were focused on the significance of celebrating individualized victories. Ms. Doe argues that, as educators and school systems, we tend to celebrate the same students each year. She remarked that:

> Growth for each of them looks different. But it should be celebrated all the same, and I think that's one thing schools should work on. How do we celebrate kids? Because it always seems to be the same 5% that gets celebrated!

Mr. Angeles discussed how the growth of his students may look different due to their remote context, but there is so much to be proud of in their development at the end of the school year, and he expressed excitement about the work he gets to do with his students. Especially for adolescent learners, whose learning trajectory can be significantly influenced by their experiences in middle school (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), focusing on individualized growth for each student is crucial.

Critical Thinkers

As these teachers considered their students' preparation for the future, they explicitly use their PCK to balance that with recognition of the adolescent students sitting in front of them. They prioritized fostering critical thinking skills, believing it is a vital imperative for their students. They seek to meet students where they are and challenge their current critical thinking abilities while preparing them for the next phase of their education. Especially with the rise of technology in our world and in the lives of these students, these teachers shared how they are implementing specific strategies they believe will support student growth.

Importantly, the role of critical thinking in the future begins with where the students are now. Ms. Williams clearly discussed her focus on executive functioning skills with her at-risk students so she can support them and help develop their ability to think critically. She explained that if she can improve their executive functioning skills first, then she can build toward deeper critical thinking. From there, each teacher shared a vision of critical thinking in their history classrooms by focusing on what is important to students as adolescents. They use inquiry to ask

students how they think about an issue in the past "in the modern context" (Mr. Angeles). In some lessons, Ms. Williams appeals to students' emotions and the importance of relationships for adolescents when she contextualizes history lessons by asking, "when has there been a time where you feel like somebody's done you wrong? Made you really mad? How did you handle it? How could you have handled it?" Ultimately, the teachers in the study shared their aim to connect with students and their current adolescent development to foster their critical thinking and analysis of the past.

Part of the conversation about understanding student development involved the reality of information overload caused by technology. As they considered their students and technology, they explore ways to use it to their advantage or attempt to remove it from their classrooms. Recognizing that it is a tool that is constantly evolving in our world, one of the key discussions around critical thinking was recognizing and responding to both bias and incorrect results when using the internet. Although her school is working to have students complete more paper-based work, Ms. Roberts discussed collaborating with students to input ideas into Google and having them question whether they can trust the AI-generated summaries that now appear at the top of the page. Mr. Taylor connected technology, primary sources, and critical thinking by emphasizing the importance of primary sources over Wikipedia articles. He helps his students understand that Wikipedia articles are like the "Sunday night quarterback after we watch the game earlier in the day," as nothing beats seeing the real thing and understanding its impact on people.

In many ways, teachers focused on fostering critical thinking skills, especially in their history classrooms, by creating opportunities for students to make connections to the present era. Ms. Roberts was excited about the few students in each of her classes who take what she teaches

and look for chances to deepen their understanding and relate it to the world or pop culture. In today's political climate, many teachers also discussed how their work with critical thinking about past events is spilling over into their classrooms and current political debates. They shared how students brought up questions after a teacher covered the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, around the same time Trump invoked the Alien Act and launched attacks on immigrants and refugees. Another teacher talked about class discussions on tariffs while they were teaching the Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts that led up to the War of 1812. A third teacher recalled students' responses when discussing the Indian Removal Act, and how they made connections to immigration raids today. Importantly, as Ms. Doe emphasized history education, politics, and critical thinking, she reminds her students that "my job is just to answer the facts and let you make your own decisions. I never tell you what to believe."

Civic Participants

Their focus on preparing students for the future included a discussion of history and civic participation, but these were not coded as often as other elements. This does not mean that teachers do not consider civic participation as important as critical thinking and student growth. Rather, I did not specifically ask about it in an interview, and it sometimes did not emerge naturally. Still, the PCK of these teachers clearly shows how they engage students in civic participation and prepare them for the future.

The first time civic participation was discussed in our conversations focused on how students can think about applying what they have learned in history classes to the real world. Ms. William and Ms. Doe each clearly described how they view the application of knowledge and how they know their lessons are effective. Ms. Williams shared that she measures success when students are "taking initiative, developing leadership skills, applying the things they've learned

in school, and creating some kind of civic engagement or service project from it." Ms. Roberts talked about civic participation in terms of how her students have learned to write letters to their representatives to discuss actionable ideas they've learned in her class and share their opinions on how the government should respond. She said that the greatest learning came in two ways. First, in learning about the writing process itself, and second, in their reactions and excitement when the representatives responded. She explained that many of those emails included statements like: 'I understand your point. Here's why we can't do this thing.' but even more meaningful was how students felt they were truly listened to. She said, 'Yeah, that's what our government does. It's what they're supposed to do. They're supposed to listen to you.' As Ms. Roberts pointed out, they might not remember the causes of the Civil War, but they will know how to contact their state and federal representatives. Ultimately, while Ms. Roberts and Ms. Williams discussed this most directly, the teachers in this study are focused on "not just mastering historical content, but having students become more engaged citizens and applying their learning beyond the classroom" (Ms. Williams).

A second way that teachers considered civic participation was through their use of current events in their classroom communities. They ask students to place current conversations in American news in context with the history they have learned, asking them to see change over time and to contextualize the history they are studying. Ms. Doe conducts current event activities when she sees alignment with her curriculum. She asks students to bring in articles related to what they are learning in class. While she laughed, she told me about how she assigns this to her students.

> I don't care what articles you pick. My rule is just no Kardashian crap…I don't care about the McRib…Now, if you can talk to me about when Kourtney Kardashian testified before

> Congress about the makeup industry. Now I'm listening. If you could talk about the economic impact of the MC Rib now, I'm interested. But if you can't do that, then I'm not as interested.

Civic participation, even though not widely emphasized, is closely linked to critical thinking and student development as these teachers prepare their middle school learners for the world ahead.

Conclusion

Tied closely to the ideals of education promoted by Dewey (1916/1980, 1916/1986) and aligned with the goals of social studies education (National Council for the Social Studies, 2024), the teachers in this study take seriously their role in preparing students for their academic and civic futures as members of society. Although they are often not invited to high school graduations as their former students move on to life outside of public education, they still see themselves as playing a crucial role in students' development for the future. They want their students to know that they can “affect the world around them” (Ms. Roberts), “see how the events of the past have shaped the world we live in today” (Ms. Williams), and make a positive impact on their local communities.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore how these six middle-grade Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients approach teaching rigorous American history to their 8th-grade learners. The research questions for this case study were:

RQ1: How have the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development?

RQ 2: In what ways do the teachers consider the development and contextual needs of their students?

RQ 3: How do the teachers describe their content-based approaches to teaching 8th-grade American history?

The four findings from this study focused on the teachers'(a) professional practice and development as educators, (b) their understanding of middle-grade student development, (c) their approaches to middle-grade history education, and d) the ways in which they center students' preparation for the future. Each of the four findings works in concert with the others to express the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Jay, 2023, 2025; Shulman, 1986, 2004) and how they discussed teaching American history. As expressed in Figure 3, each of the four findings is a significant factor that influences their PCK, offering insight into their enacted pedagogical strategies.

Expanding On Prior Literature

Much of the literature on education broadly, social studies, and history education focuses on their potential to prepare students for civic life (Dewey, 1915, 1916/1986; NCSS, 2023; Parker, 2023; Tillman, 2004). The literature and empirical research suggest that numerous flaws exist in education, and that classrooms, particularly those in social studies and history, are not

reaching their full potential (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Martell, 2020; VanSledright, 2010). However, the teachers in this study, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute, offer a different perspective. Each year, the Gilder Lehrman Institute recognizes fifty-two American history teachers for excellence in their classrooms across the country, as well as in Department of Defense schools. Over the past twenty years, more than one thousand American history teachers have been honored for excellence, a number that does not include the many teachers nominated each year by their peers, students, and the community.

While this study does not claim to represent all teachers or all Gilder Lehrman award winners, it does provide evidence that there are indeed educators who are embracing the democratic purposes of education (Dewey, 1915, 1916/1986) and social studies education (Dewey, 1938; NCSS, 2023). Each teacher who participated in this case study discussed their approach to curriculum, students, and personal professional growth, with the goal of preparing their students for college, career, and civic life (NCSS, 2023). They work toward these goals by meeting their students' developmental needs, teaching their content, and preparing them to become engaged citizens in the future. The teachers in this study continually seek opportunities to further develop their PCK even after receiving awards and recognition for excellence. What is clear is that for these six teachers, there’s no single measure indicating they have fully matured in their practices and completed their professional growth. Instead, they emphasized the importance of continually improving and advancing their craft.

Scholarly Significance

The significance of this study lies in its asset lens and the emphasis on the wisdom of practice (Shulman, 2004), highlighting the importance of highly qualified and committed teachers in middle-grade history classrooms. Especially since many middle-grade teachers were

not originally trained to teach in the setting (Conklin & Kalchman, 2018; Mertens, 2018), having strong teachers in middle schools is vital. Teachers who prioritize ongoing personal growth and understand the developmental needs of their adolescent learners are essential for their students' growth and development as 21st-century citizens. Similarly, having teacher-leaders in schools who value professional growth, understand the developmental needs of their students, and advocate for rigorous learning opportunities can support early-career and pre-service teachers in adopting an asset lens to middle-grade history education (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). The most recent Association for Middle Level Education position paper (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) supports this idea, asserting that "effective leadership is critical to a school's success" (p. 47). They also argue that schools and school leaders who embody an authentic commitment to focusing on student assets and "demonstrate courage and collaboration" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 48) support their students in preparing for civic life (NCSS, 2023), including confronting injustices.

Teaching is hard work. Shulman (2004) makes the argument that classroom teaching is "perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented" (p. 504). A Pew Research poll of teachers (Schaeffer, 2024) supports this claim, citing that the most common response to an open-ended question was that they want the public to know that teaching is a hard job. The participants in this study did not refute this claim. However, they also did not linger on the intensity of their jobs. Instead, they each shared advice for teachers entering the field, their love for their students, and their dedication to being lifelong learners. When only a third of teachers report that they are satisfied with their jobs overall (Schaeffer, 2024), this study argues that there is great significance in learning from highly qualified teachers who persist in the profession and how

universities and schools can continue the work of preparing students for the stress and complexities of teaching middle-grade history.

Centering Students

The findings from this study revealed how these teachers discussed the importance of prioritizing students and student needs, and specifically the significance of centering the knowledge of the learner as a critical aspect of teachers' PCK. Each participating teacher shared how they continually revisit their PCK based on the students in their classrooms, rather than a perceived ideal of what an 8th-grade student should be. These findings suggest that for these teachers, the ways they consider their students' development and contextual needs are equally focused on understanding each individual student's identity and developmental needs, as well as the academic strategies necessary for success in their classroom.

These teachers argued that before students can learn and retain historical content, the developmental needs of their students must be met, including creating an environment that fosters growth and development (Conklin, 2014). As middle school is the time when many adolescents are beginning puberty, the physical and mental changes that accompany puberty have the potential to impact their mental health, relationships, and motivation to learn (Conklin, 2018; DeMink-Carthew, 2018; Heard & Yakimowski, 2024). Although the topic of puberty did not emerge in our conversations, the significance of meeting students where they are through the establishment of clear structures and fostering a community where the students feel comfortable, supported, and respected was expressed as fundamental. For example, both Ms. Roberts and Ms. Williams addressed bullying in middle schools. Ms. Williams noted that while she knows that bullying may still be occurring out of sight, she stresses that at the "beginning of the year, I really make that clear that it's not tolerated in my room." Ms. Roberts centered conversations

around bullying and respect in the modern political context and shared how she has "introduced more class norms, and how to have productive group discussions."

Part of the discussion about creating safe learning environments focused on how each teacher described their classrooms as places where they attempt to address students' hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1973). For all students, establishing a safe environment includes building positive student-teacher relationships and having a strong understanding of the community in which they teach (Bousalis, 2022). Each teacher spoke very clearly about the different approaches they use to foster their relationships with students. Mr. Taylor shared his asset approach to discussing the potential of people from rural communities. Ms. Roberts discussed her experiences seeking information about district policies regarding immigration and enforcement raids, so that her students felt safe enough to learn in her classroom. Ms. Doe shared her positionality on poverty and how she deals with cellphones in the classroom if a parent is calling from jail. In our interview, she shared that she allows students to step out because "the parent can't call back. This is their only opportunity to talk to their parent, and the parent is trying. That is more important than the ten minutes of class, at that point." As expressed in our conversations, each of the teachers in this study argued that students must feel safe and respected in the classroom if they are going to be asked to participate in a classroom that challenges them to grow as students and citizens.

Middle school learners can undertake the challenging work of critical thinking and historical education (Conklin, 2018). Waiting for high school to practice rigorous critical thinking skills underestimates the potential of adolescent learners (Bousalis, 2022; Conklin, 2018). The teachers who participated in this study challenge their students daily, and they are held to high expectations in each of the very different classroom contexts. Whether they are in

Mr. Angeles' classroom in a rural context or Mr. Thomas' classroom in a suburban setting, the students in their classrooms are being prepared to think critically about the world around them. Importantly, because they are adolescent learners, each teacher considers the students who sit in front of them and the structures needed for their growth as critical thinkers and junior historians (Ms. Roberts).

In their efforts to center students and challenge them academically, these teachers rely on their PCK to implement scaffolds to support their students. Although they each discussed how they believe in using a variety of sources to convey the complex nature of the United States' history, they recognized that in doing so, they often need to adjust, adapt, or modify the sources so that their learners can access them (Digital Inquiry Group, 2025). Mr. Angeles shared his strategy for ensuring that a primary source can be excerpted to fit on a single page, allowing for the adaptation of versions to be sent digitally to students, thereby eliminating the sense of being stigmatized. Ms. Roberts and Mr. Thomas shared how they also create one-pagers, but organize theirs with the original text, modified text, and a Spanish translation. In using these approaches, teachers highlight their pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and understanding of their learners to create a classroom environment where each student knows that their teacher will "never give an assignment that you're not capable of doing" (Mr. Taylor).

Throughout this study, the teachers recognized that the strategies they use in their classrooms are rigorous, but they also support their students' growth. Since middle-grade students are likely to question why they are learning something and struggle with motivation to learn (Nicolai et al., 2023), the teachers discussed their processes and procedures for engaging students, aiming to prepare them for high school and excite their interest in learning. The focus

on these teachers and their wisdom of practice (Shulman, 2004) can inform the field of social studies education and remind us of the potential of the middle-grade history classroom.

Rigorous History Education

A key to understanding these Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients lies in their specific PCK. They build strong relationships with students and seek to understand their community. They are dedicated to helping students build confidence in doing the disciplinary work of history. These teachers know their students, and they understand why knowing them is critical (Scales et al., 2020). They understand where they come from, their communities, their strengths, and areas for growth. They know how to scaffold materials to bring challenging American history topics and difficult conversations about the nation's past into their classrooms (Conklin et al., 2021; Reisman et al., 2018; Saye, 2017). Because of the incorporation of knowledge of learners into their PCK, these teachers describe their content-based approaches as ones that foster critical thinking and prepare their students for the future. For example, by the end of the school year, Ms. Roberts' students are prepared to read Alexander Stephens' Cornerstone Speech and analyze it with minimal scaffolding. They then engage in a nuanced discussion about the speech and how we view Stephens today. This is not an AP United States History course. These are 8th-grade adolescent learners in a public city school— a city school facing many of the same concerns and issues that schools nationwide encounter.

When considering the developmental growth of their adolescent learners, the teachers in this study ultimately expressed their belief that their students can tackle challenging (Conklin, 2018) and disciplinary (Fallace, 2017; Jay, 2022) social studies. Many also expressed that students should be taught using progressive approaches (Fallace, 2017; Jay, 2022). They did discuss traditional methods of history education, such as lecture-based approaches, but often

used them to provide background information before transitioning into a student-centered learning activity. Since the amount of curricular time set aside for social studies education is being reduced in elementary schools nationwide (Brophy & Alleman, 2008; Crocco & Livingston, 2017; Levstik, 2008), students will arrive in the classroom with their own funds of knowledge (Conklin et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2016; Paris, 2012), though they may lack substantial content knowledge. While some argue that disciplinary approaches, such as project-based learning, can serve as the main course (Miller, 2018; Parker & Lo, 2016), and do not always require traditional lectures, these teachers still use traditional lectures to provide a foundation of background knowledge before moving into more disciplinary strategies (Fallace, 2017). Notably, when they do incorporate traditional lectures, they add structures and scaffolding to promote student engagement and development. For example, Mr. Angeles shared how he teaches students to use the Cornell Notes approach when he delivers a lecture. However, he then discussed how he encourages students to use them to support their application of knowledge when participating in a student-centered activity. Ultimately, their discussion of traditional methods in the classroom reflects their specialized PCK, viewing these approaches as opportunities to set the scene for what students are learning, rather than being the central focus of the unit or lesson.

Each of the teachers is engaging in rigorous disciplinary history with their 8th-grade students across their diverse learning contexts. Shulman (1986, 1987, 2004) argued that teacher wisdom resides in their knowledge of teaching and curriculum and is expressed as PCK. This view recognizes the skill and nuance required to transform a teacher's content knowledge and knowledge of their learners into curriculum and learning experiences that are suitable for students' age and developmental levels (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Each of the teachers,

through our conversations and as displayed in their Gilder Lehrman portfolios, is approaching history education using inquiry strategies (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013; Saye, 2017), project-based learning (Laverick, 2019; Zhao & Wang, 2022), and creative integration of primary source materials.

The strategies that these teachers discussed using, and as shared in their portfolios, are varied. They discussed project-based learning opportunities where students can have "choice and voice" in how they present their learning outcomes (Mr. Angeles), engage in breakout rooms that use inquiry to discover the outcomes of a how a historical event (Ms. Williams), or build historical empathy through thinking about what it may have been like to live through an event (Mr. Thomas). Ms. Doe captured how these teachers discussed thinking about keeping their content relevant and engaging when she said that she maintains a traditional lesson plan format in her classroom, but within it, students can expect something "kooky every single day of the week."

Progressive Approaches with Primary Source Materials

Part of the answer to how these Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year recipients discussed their content-based approaches to teaching 8th-grade American history was in how they think about primary source materials, and who to teach and when. Progressive social studies education is focused less on structure and more on the perspectives being taught (Fallace, 2017; Jay, 2022). Teachers who use their PCK to approach progressive social studies may consider asking students to apply their knowledge to "real-world issues" (Fallace, 2017, p. 57), emphasize their own role in society (Jay, 2022), and it has the potential to center students' funds of knowledge (Conklin et al., 2021; Paris, 2012). While the Gilder Lehrman rubric (n.d.) does center marginalized voices, the diverse approaches to progressive history education by these

teachers were a significant finding in this study, especially considering the current political vitriol against 'woke' teachers and diversity, equity, and inclusion in public classrooms.

The teachers involved in this study prioritize ensuring that their students encounter positive representations of themselves, their heritage, and diverse perspectives in their curriculum. Importantly, the idea of showcasing diverse viewpoints and positive images of students was discussed in different ways. Previous research on culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies indicates that when students encounter diverse perspectives and positive images of themselves in the curriculum, it can improve their outcomes and boost their motivation to learn (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Martell & Stevens, 2018; Paris, 2012). Specifically in middle schools, students from all backgrounds benefit when they learn not only about their own culture and heritage but also about different people, ideas, and experiences (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Scales et al., 2020).

Although they did not classify their practices as progressive (Fallace, 2017; Jay, 2022), the teachers discussed how they approach their standards and incorporate diverse perspectives into their lessons. While most of Mr. Taylor's students are not racially diverse, they are economically diverse, and he shared how he seeks out opportunities to present positive representations of people from their region so students can envision those outcomes for themselves. Even with his partially scripted curriculum, Mr. Thomas explained how he still finds ways to include primary source vignettes that reflect students' backgrounds or interests. Ms. Williams talked in the focus group about the importance of incorporating diverse narratives to keep the curriculum fresh and sustain student engagement, emphasizing the need to "recognize and value students' backgrounds and identities, making sure they create an inclusive classroom that affirms every learner's voice and experience." Ms. Doe also shared how she works to

incorporate the histories of different farming equipment to speak directly to her students from farming families and inform her students from non-farming backgrounds. These singular examples of their work to include diverse perspectives represent a small portion of our discussions and do not reflect the breadth of perspectives they seek to include in their curricula.

For these teachers, using primary source materials is essential for introducing diverse perspectives in their classrooms and encouraging students to challenge their current thinking (Jay, 2023; Wineburg, 2001, 2010). Wineburg (2010) argues that the tension between the familiar and the strange in learning history is that "the strangeness of the past offers the possibility of surprise and amazement, of encountering people, places, and times that spur us to reconsider how we see ourselves as human beings" (p. 83). These teachers explained that they approach their use of primary sources in their 8th-grade classrooms similarly, often replacing textbooks to highlight the voices of people from the era or to encourage students to step outside their 21st-century understanding of the world and begin to see the perspectives of the authors.

Finally, each teacher in the study framed their approaches to 8th-grade history education through a progressive lens, challenging students to think critically about the past and apply historical thinking skills to contextualize it in the present. In part, progressive social studies education emphasizes the connection between the study of the past and the present (Fallace, 2017; Jay, 2022). Related to the historical thinking skill contextualization, these teachers expressed the ways in which they seek to practice these skills in their own classrooms. Ms. Roberts spoke about teaching the Alien Act of 1798 when she taught the Adams Administration, and the questions her students brought to class the day after Trump invoked it in 2025 (Santos, 2025). Similarly, Ms. Doe shared that after teaching the War of 1812, students began to come to class discussing tariffs and worked to make connections. In their own ways and contexts, each

teacher in the study discussed their approach to connecting their study of history to the modern era and the work they do to make learning accessible and relevant to their middle-grade learners (Bishop & Harrison, National Council for Social Studies, 2023).

The findings of this study highlight that these 8th-grade teachers are using their PCK to bring diverse and thoughtful approaches into their classrooms. They use primary sources and rigorous approaches to foster critical thinking and prepare them to be 21st-century participatory citizens.

Lifelong Learners

The teachers who took part in this study each highlighted the importance of ongoing growth in their professional practices. When reflecting on their development from pre-service teachers to their current positions, every teacher shared how much they have evolved in their practices and perspectives. However, even though they are all award-winning teachers, they also emphasized the continuous effort they put into meeting the ever-changing needs of their students. Importantly, these teachers all expressed varying degrees of modesty when speaking about the Gilder Lehrman award and were not interested in centering their accomplishment, despite it being the most important criterion in determining their participation. Instead, they shared how their work continues, implying that the growth of a teacher may never be done.

Shulman (1986) recognized a blind spot in educational research regarding the topic of "knowledge growth in teaching" (p. 8). He questioned the preparation of teachers to instruct content areas they have never learned, wondered how learning for teaching occurs, and how teachers translate their knowledge into content their students will understand (Shulman, 1986). These questions guided his theorizing of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1986, 1987). In analyzing the six teachers in this study, the opportunity to learn how they frame growth

and describe their evolution in their practices offers insight into their "knowledge growth in teaching" (Shulman, 1986, p. 8).

Although the criteria for the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award suggest a level of expertise, and since each teacher has six or more years of experience, there is an assumption that these teachers could be considered experts. However, Crocco and Livingston (2017) remind us that:

> Expertise is often considered in terms of credentials, which are sometimes taken, as is experience, as a proxy for expertise, which may or may not be the case. Expertise can, however, also be understood in terms of performance, and assuredly it is not necessarily linked to a set number of years of practice (p. 364).

Interestingly, the teachers did not claim to be experts themselves. Instead, they discussed their effective strategies in detail and shared how they continue to refine those strategies and practices over time. They emphasized that each of them is a work in progress. Mr. Angeles shared the joy he gets from traveling out of state to in-person professional development and called it the "best balance of actual PD and self-care." Ms. Roberts expressed her personal fulfillment when she has the chance to attend history-based professional development, learning from and with others who share her passion for the topic and profession. Instead of portraying themselves as experts, they view themselves as lifelong learners who still have more to learn yet also have a lot to share. That is not to say that they are not experts. It also does not imply that they do not view themselves as experts. Instead, it revealed the tension that exists in defining what makes one an expert and suggests a greater conversation around how teachers discuss their successes in their careers.

As these teachers continue to reflect on their professional practices, pedagogical methods, and growth as veteran middle-grade teachers, they also emphasize the importance of sharing their wisdom with pre-service and early-career teachers. Research suggests that strong mentorship from experienced teachers can help inspire pre-service and early-career teachers to become more comfortable and effective in their roles more quickly (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Newmann et al., 1996). Between our interviews and the focus group, numerous conversations emerged regarding how experienced teachers can utilize their practical wisdom (Shulman, 2004) to support new teachers. Ms. Doe expressed her belief in the importance of working with new teachers, "before we lose them," and in ensuring that they are assigned to a teacher who supports their growth through an asset lens when forming opinions about students and their potential. Her point is well-founded. Beyond concerns around teacher longevity, students benefit when they have teachers who believe in them (Scales, 2020).

In conclusion, the way these teachers positioned themselves as supporters of their students, mentors, historians, and school leaders reminds us of the complexity of PCK and the impact that they can have in a school and on their students. As Ms. Doe stated, at this point in her career, she thinks she "works a lot harder than (she) used to." She went on to say that "I think we have more on our plates as teachers. But I also think I know so much more about how to be a good teacher for students. So that's part of the reason I have 10,000 more things on my plate." Learning to amplify the wisdom of teachers who have been recognized for excellence has the potential to continue to support the growth of our teaching community.

Implications

The findings from this study offer implications for the field of social studies education at the university level, in schools and districts, and for qualitative research broadly. As the findings

are centered around individual teachers and their PCK, there are opportunities to continue to grow pre-service and early career social studies and history educators in the professional practices. Understanding the *full* extent of a teacher's PCK and decision-making is almost impossible to do, especially as much of their thinking about their practices is metacognitive (Bransford et al., 2005; Jay, 2025; Shulman, 2004). Researchers, school districts, and universities should continue to work to observe teachers in practice, talk with them about their practices, and analyze their lesson plans, but we still will not understand the full extent of their PCK. Yet, the PCK strategies that teachers do use in their classrooms, how they discuss them, and the wisdom they have gained over the course of their careers can play a significant role in the development of pre-service and early-career social studies and history teachers.

University Level

Most teachers in the study discussed the difficulty of the transition from pre-service to early teaching, but they were generally satisfied with what they learned during their teacher preparation programs. Because of the complexity of teaching (Shulman, 2004), it is not uncommon for early-career teachers to feel overwhelmed when they enter their classrooms and realize they are now the adults in charge. It is likely not possible to completely eliminate that feeling, as much of a teacher's professional growth occurs in practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2021). However, university programs have opportunities to directly support the development of PCK.

The primary way universities can support pre-service social studies teachers is by dedicating more time to developing their PCK in methods coursework (Darling-Hammond et al, 2005). This involves strengthening their pedagogical knowledge (PK), content knowledge (CK), and strategies to deepen students' knowledge of their learners (KoL). Research on social studies

education recognizes that teaching PCK can be difficult in methods courses because of the wide scope of social studies as a field (Powell, 2018). However, there is potential to focus on a specific aspect within social studies in a methods course by highlighting content instruction and ways to deepen CK, aligned with the standards and PK strategies they choose. Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) make the argument that "*what* teachers learn matters at least as much as how they learn" (p. 295). Still, opportunities for multiple undergraduate methods courses are often limited. For example, within the University of North Carolina system, it is common for undergraduate middle school education programs to require no more than one dedicated social studies methods course, which is often separate from their social studies content coursework (East Carolina University, 2025; North Carolina State University, 2025). Spending more time learning content and social studies-specific methods at the university level may make the transition from pre-service to early career teacher smoother.

As a middle-grades methods instructor, exploring content-based approaches and their perspectives on middle-grade learners has been enlightening and has significantly influenced how I plan to prepare my future students to become teachers. A key takeaway from the findings is the confirmation of what is achievable in a middle-grade classroom. Reflecting on my previous syllabi and experiences working with pre-service teachers reveals clear opportunities to expand my lessons and expectations for developing their early PCK. This will involve a deeper focus on strategies for building relationships with students and understanding the context of their schools better. Since it is common for state standards for educators to include knowledge of community as a measurable expectation for teachers (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2024; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2013) and considering

that social studies specifically emphasize people and communities (NCSS, 2023), including this in a social studies methods course makes sense.

After speaking with the teachers in this study, I am reminded of the importance of setting high expectations for middle-grade learners. The teachers involved each hold high expectations for their students and work to remind them that they can accomplish the work required in class. While scaffolding is used to help them reach their goals, there is no reason to believe that any student in the classroom cannot do the work. Middle-grade learners in American history classrooms can and should be reading and analyzing primary source materials, practicing inquiry, and learning to write in the discipline. There is no reason teachers should wait until high school to introduce primary source materials and historical thinking skills, and there is no reason to exclude at-risk students from these opportunities.

A second area of focus for university researchers is the continued effort to bring practicing teachers into research spaces and elevate their voices. Action research is one avenue, as it has the potential to create an environment of democratic collaboration between the practicing teacher and the researcher (Lytle, 1993; van Manen, 1990). However, in qualitative case study research, continuing the work proposed by Tracy (2024) of asking teachers to reflect and give feedback on the data and analysis offers greater transparency to the study. Five of the six teachers in the study responded to my request to reflect on the quotes I used in this study and the surrounding analysis of them. While some responses were superficial and simply agreed with the work, wishing me luck, others took more time, asked questions, and offered clarifications. Taking the time to ask participants to reflect on the words we use in our work, and ultimately to our own benefit, has the potential to build greater trust between the researcher and her participants, as well as between the university and the schools.

Schools, Districts, & University Partnerships

There is great potential to leverage the knowledge of the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year winners by their schools and districts. As teachers who have been recognized for excellence in their classrooms, there are opportunities for schools and districts to lean on their wisdom to support all social studies educators. By leveraging the wisdom of practice (Shulman, 2004) from experienced and award-winning teachers, schools can celebrate and utilize the breadth of knowledge and skills already present in their districts. Especially as so many teachers report that school and district professional development (PD) lacks relevance for them and their practices (Crocco & Livingston, 2017; Levstik, 2008; Patterson et al., 2022), shifting the model to center PD around generalized and content-specific PD led experienced (if not award-winning) teachers who are members of their own community could positively impact the tangible takeaways from school and district-based PD sessions.

There is also great potential for schools and districts to build community within their specific contexts. Especially considering the state teacher assessments that emphasize knowledge of community, schools, and districts, they can do more to support this growth and to involve more parents, guardians, and community members (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2024; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2013). There are notable barriers to this, such as the need for funding, teacher buy-in, and community support. Nevertheless, strong community and school relationships can help support student development and increase teachers' understanding of the communities they serve, especially when teachers do not live there.

Finally, support for pre-service, in-service, and early-career teachers can all benefit from ongoing partnerships and mentorship between school districts and universities (Bastian et al.,

2025; Merchant & Garza, 2015). In some principal preparation programs, it is common for university professors and graduate students to continue supporting principals early in their careers and push into the schools. While it is not feasible for professors and graduate students to support every early-career teacher, there are opportunities for sustained professional development collaborations between school districts and universities. Importantly, since this study highlights veteran history teachers who have received an HTOY award, this PD model envisions university professors, graduate students, and teachers each delivering professional development sessions over a day, several days, or possibly a week during the summer. Although it would require extensive organization, communication, and commitment, involving practicing teachers and sharing their strategies, along with the strategies that professors are studying, has the potential to support all practicing social studies educators and professors.

The Gilder Lehrman Institute, in partnership with Gettysburg College, can serve as a possible model for this concept (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2025f). Each year, they invite history professors from across the country and select master teachers to participate, offering several days of content-focused lectures, book talks, and lessons centered on practical pedagogical methods. Although my model doesn't include history professors, it would still give all teachers a chance to improve their PCK by learning from fellow teachers and university professors.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Study

As designed, much of the participating teachers' PCK is not visible in this study because it depends on their submitted portfolios, interviews, and a focus group. This study would benefit from spending more time with the teachers, including long-term classroom observations, either in person or recorded. If recorded, significant data could be collected by asking teachers to

annotate their lessons and self-identify the PCK strategies they are using at any given time, then follow up the annotations with a second interview. These interactions and observation periods would provide more insight into the teachers and their practices, offering a clearer picture of their PCK.

The study could have benefited from including more perspectives. Specifically, insights from the students of these teachers and work samples would provide greater depth in understanding the teachers' work and the relationships they are developing with their students. Currently, this study asks how the teachers consider the developmental and contextual needs of their students, but adding the students' voices and possibly designing a mixed-methods study focused on teacher practices and student growth would strengthen the findings and our understanding of their PCK.

Finally, with the gift of more time, greater time spent on member reflections would further enhance the trustworthiness of this study (Tracy, 2024). Each participant was able to reflect on their direct quotes and each instance where their pseudonym was used. However, providing additional chances to discuss the findings and analysis would only strengthen the research and maintain a positive, trusting relationship between the researcher and her participants.

Conclusion

Exploring the wisdom of practice (Shulman, 2024) in social studies education can further enhance the field, especially in teacher preparation and professional development. Both practicing teachers and university scholars have much to learn from teachers recognized as excellent in their field. However, Shulman (2004) clearly states that not everything an experienced teacher does constitutes quality instruction, and he warns that as researchers, we

should be cautious not to fall "into the trap of simply treating anything practitioners are observed to do as worthy of emulation" (p. 254). Yet, the teachers in this study have been recognized for excellence, and as expressed in their lesson plans, interviews, and focus group, are presenting rigorous, thoughtful history education to their 8th-grade learners. There is great potential to be found in learning about the wise practices that teachers bring to their classrooms on a daily basis.

Part of what we learn from these teachers, beyond how they discuss their lessons and students, is found in their persistence. These teachers are all experienced and continue in their work despite politics, the pressures of state testing, intense parent communications, and challenging students. We have much to learn from them and others like them. Amplifying their voices and wisdom is one way to help push the field and our social studies forward.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Demographic Survey

Last Name

First Name

Did you win the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year award between 2020 and 2024?

Do you teach 8th-grade American history in the school where you won the award?

Is your school a public (non-charter) school?

<Exempt Consent Form Included>

Do you consent to participate in this study?

<Broad Consent Form Included>

Would you like to give broad consent in this study?

Preferred Email address

Preferred Phone Number

Preferred Content Method

How old are you?

What is your gender identity?

What is your ethnic identity?

How many years have you been teaching?

How many years have you been at your current school?

What is your Bachelor's degree in?

Do you have a Master's degree? What is it in?

Do you have a doctorate? What is it in?

Appendix B: Exempt Consent Form

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Exempt Consent Form

Interviews, Focus Groups, and Benign Behavioral Interventions

Title of Study: Amplifying Wisdom: An Examination of the Practices of Middle-Grade Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year Recipients
IRB Protocol: 26784
Principal Investigator(s): Elizabeth A. Shaver; eashaver@ncsu.edu; (919)723-8290
Funding Source: NC State Dissertation Grant (anticipated)
NC State Faculty Point of Contact: Meghan M. Manfra; mmmanfra@ncsu.edu; (919) 515-5514

You are being asked to participate in a research study about the practices of middle-grade American history teachers who have won the Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year Award. Participation is strictly voluntary. To participate in this study, you must be 18 years of age or older, reside in the continental United States, and:

- Have won the GLI HTOY award within the past four years
- Teach 8th grade American history
- Teach in a public (non-charter) school

If you are selected to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Complete a demographic survey
- Submit your original award application materials
- Participate in a one-on-one interview
- Participate in 1 focus group with the other study participants
- Participate in member checking of data and analysis

The purpose of this study is to better understand the practices of GLI HTOY winners, how they view the impact of their pedagogical practices on their students, and how their practices have changed over time. Ultimately, this study intends to consider the implication of their practices on university methods instruction. Each participating teacher will be asked to submit their award application materials to the researcher via email. The interviews and focus group will each occur over Zoom and will be recorded. If you are uncomfortable with being recorded or sharing your application materials, you should not participate in this study.

The research questions are:

1. How do the GLI HTOY teachers describe the best practices of 8th-grade American history classrooms?
2. How do the GLI HTOY teachers perceive the impact of their approaches on their student community?
3. How have the GLI HTOY teachers' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development?

You can choose not to participate in the study or stop participating at any time by contacting the principal researcher, Elizabeth Shaver, at eashaver@ncsu.edu.

While we ask everyone in the focus group to keep what's said during our discussion private, we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of your responses. Please only share what you're comfortable with others knowing.

Participants will be recorded during the research activities. If you do not want this information collected, you cannot participate in this research. We will use these recordings for transcription and analysis purposes. The Zoom recordings and award application materials will be deleted after 5 years. Additionally, the research will keep participant contact information indefinitely for potential future research and conference opportunities.

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this research. While every attempt will be made to anonymize the participants and the data, because of the small sample size, there is still potential to triangulate participant identities. Every participant will select a pseudonym and assist the researcher in selecting a pseudonym for their school. Additionally, the location of each school will be identified only by their pseudonym and their locale (i.e., large city, fringe rural, distant town). Finally, there are no direct benefits to you from participating in this research.

Due to my role as an educator, I have an obligation to report child neglect and abuse, sexual abuse of an adult aged 28 years old or younger, and harassment of students. This means that if I observe instances of, or you tell me about, abuse or endangerment of children, I am obligated to report that. The risks associated with reporting this information include potential job loss and/or police investigations.

Appendix C: Broad Consent Form

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Participant Broad Consent Form

Title of Study: Amplifying Wisdom: An Examination of the Practices of Middle-Grade Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year Recipients
IRB Protocol: 26784
Principal Investigator(s): Elizabeth A. Shaver; eashaver@ncsu.edu; (919)723-8290
Funding Source: NC State Dissertation Grant (anticipated)
NC State Faculty Point of Contact: Meghan M. Manfra; mmmanfra@ncsu.edu; (919) 515-5514

In this study, we are collecting data that is considered identifiable and private. Your data are identifiable because they contain your name and school site. Your data are considered identifiable even though we are removing and anonymizing your name and other direct identifiers. We are unable to remove every piece of information that would allow your identity to be figured out due to the small sample size of potential participants in the study.

We would like to keep, use, and share this identifiable, private data for future unspecified research. The specific research is currently unknown and could be unrelated to the purposes of the current study. This is why we need to ask you for additional consent, called "broad consent."

Please know that you do not have to provide broad consent in order to be in the original study. Your decision will not affect your participation or compensation in the current study. It is not a condition of your enrollment or employment at any institution. Providing broad consent is completely optional and there is no personal benefit for you. You may indirectly benefit as your data will be used for research that can support or improve many areas of education.

If you provide broad consent:
We will do the following with your identifiable, private data:

- Delete all recordings of your participation in interviews and focus groups
- Store and maintain additional data (for an indefinite period of time), including, but not limited to, your award application materials and transcripts of interviews and focus groups.
- Use your data for future research purposes (for an indefinite period of time)
- Share your data with other researchers or entities for their research use. The other entities may include research and academic institutions.

Your data may be used for other research. However, you will not be told the purposes, results, or any other details of the specific research studies that will use your data. You will also not be asked for consent each time your data is used or shared. This means your data could be used for studies that you may not have consented to if you were asked.

Your data may also be used to create products or to deliver services. These products or services may be sold and/or make money for others. If this happens, there are no plans to tell you, pay you, or give any compensation to you or your family.

The main risks in providing broad consent are that in the future, you may not agree with how your data will be used, your identity could be figured out, and your data could be accessed by unintended parties. We will manage who can access your data and store it using regularly updated security plans. However, we will be unable to control what happens to the data after we share it with others.

If you don't provide broad consent or complete this form:
We will not store, use, or share the identifiable, private data collected from you beyond the purposes stated in the previous consent form that you agreed to and signed for the Amplifying Wisdom: An Examination of the Practices of Middle-Grade Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year Recipients study. If you do not complete this form, we will assume you are not providing broad consent.

If you want to withdraw your broad consent
Please contact the researcher, Elizabeth Shaver, at eashaver@ncsu.edu and (919) 723-8290. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Meghan M. Manfra, at mmmanfra@ncsu.edu and (919) 515-5514.

If you want to withdraw your broad consent and have your permission revoked for the use of your data for unspecified future research, we will delete your data from our records so that we can no longer use your data for future research. However, if your data have been shared with others for other research studies, we may not be able to affect how others use your data.

If you have questions:

- Please ask the research team to explain anything in this form that you do not clearly understand. Please think about this broad consent, ask questions, and/or discuss it with family or friends before making the decision to say "Yes" or "No" to broad consent.
- If you want to discuss your rights as a person who has agreed to, refused, or declined to respond to an offer of broad consent or believe that your rights were violated as a result of your agreeing to this broad consent, please contact the NC State IRB Director at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out a confidential form online at https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/.

Please select one option and provide your name and today's date

- **Yes, I would like to provide broad consent.** My identifiable, private information can be kept and used for future research studies. I acknowledge that I have read this form and any questions have been answered. I have been informed that I can withdraw my consent at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.

- **No, I do *not* want to provide broad consent.** I do not give permission for my identifiable, private data to be kept or used for other research studies. I acknowledge that I have read this form and any questions have been answered. **I know I can still participate in this research if I say No.**

  _____
  Name

  _____
  Today's Date

Appendix D: NCES Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates

Locale	Definition
City	
Large	Territory inside and urbanized area and inside a principal city with a population of 250,000 or more
Midsize	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000
Small	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000
Suburb	
Large	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more
Midsize	Territory outside a principal city and inside and urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000
Small	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000
Town	
Fringe	Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area
Distant	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area
Remote	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area
Rural	
theFringe	Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster
Distant	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster
Remote	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Appendix E: Initial Recruitment Email

Good Morning!

First, congratulations on being named a Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year! It is a great honor and achievement! I also won the award in 2020 in North Carolina and still feel a great deal of pride in that.

My name is (Elizabeth) Beth Shaver. I am a PhD candidate at North Carolina State University in the College of Education and am pursuing my degree in Teacher Education and Learning Science (TELS) in social studies. Prior to starting my doctoral journey, I taught middle and high school social studies for 14 years in North Carolina and California.

I am writing to you today to gauge your interest in participating in my dissertation research study, Amplifying Wisdom: An Examination of the Practices of Middle-Grade Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year Recipients. I am seeking six to eight 8th-grade American history teachers who won the GLI award between 2021 and 2024 and teach in a public school. Depending on response rates, please note that not all interested teachers may be selected to participate.

This qualitative case study intends to explore the best practices of middle-grade GLI award winners, how they view the impact of their practices on their students, and how their practices have changed over time. The results of this study will support the continued development of university methods instruction and professional development for pre-service and in-service social studies teachers. The research questions are:

1. How do the Gilder Lehrman (GLI) History Teachers of the Year (HTOY) describe the best practices of 8th-grade American history classrooms?
2. How do the GLI HTOYs perceive the impact of their approaches on their student community?
3. How have the GLI HTOYs' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development?

Participants in this study will be asked to:

- complete a brief demographic survey and two consent forms (included below),
- submit via email your GLI HTOY application portfolio in full,
- participate in 1 interview (approximately 1 hour on Zoom, recorded), and
- participate in 1 focus group with all participants (approximately 1 hour on Zoom, recorded).

All interviews will be scheduled to accommodate your teaching schedule and the focus group will likely occur on a weekend. Additionally, all participants will be invited to review the transcripts and focus group discussions to verify accuracy and confirm their comfort with the recorded content. This study is expected to ask for between 5 to 7 hours of your time spread between January and April 2025.

As a thank you, all participants who complete the study will receive a $150 Visa gift card at the conclusion and a certificate of 3 continuing education credits from North Carolina State University's College of Education to use towards licensure renewal.
If you are interested in participating in this study, please click on this link for the brief survey, which includes demographic information, an exempt consent form, and a broad consent form by January 24, 2025. I will notify you no later than January 31 if you are selected to participate and, at that time, will request your award portfolio.
Thank you for your time and all you do for your students and teaching community. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions.
Sincerely,

Beth Shaver
North Carolina State University
PhD Candidate
TELS Social Studies
IRB Approval # 26784

Appendix F: Interview Protocol

Amplifying Wisdom Research Study

The research questions are:

1. How do the GLI HTOY teachers describe the core practices in their 8th-grade American history classrooms?
2. How do the GLI HTOY teachers perceive the impact of their approaches on their student community?
3. How have the GLI HTOY teachers' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development?

Theoretical Framework:

Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Purpose:

The study's main focus is to understand the practices of award-winning history teachers, the impact they believe their practices are having on their students, and how their practices have changed over time. Ultimately, it aims to document and analyze the practices of GLI HTOY winners and draw lessons for developing teacher education and professional development strategies to promote strong social studies education. This includes developmentally appropriate pedagogical approaches for the university classroom.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Greet the participant and ask for permission to record the interview.

Begin recording. Once recording, review consent and ask if the participant has questions and ask them to give verbal consent to recording on camera.

Introduction & Tone Setting

1. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the process or what is being asked of you?

2. I'd like to start by asking what pseudonym you would like to use for yourself and your school. I plan to address you as "Ms" or "Mr" (*depending on the participant*) and suggest an adjective and a feature of your community for your school (i.e., Windy Valley Middle School)

3. Would you please describe your classroom layout? If I were to walk into your classroom, what would I see, hear, or even feel? (P)

Block 1: Teaching Middle-Grades History

RQ1: How do the GLI HTOY teachers describe the <u>core practices</u> in their 8th-grade American history classrooms?

1. As teachers, please walk me through a day in the life of your classroom. What are your routines? What would I see as a colleague? (RQ 1 & P)
    a. Now, imagine I'm a student in your class. What would I experience? What would I value about your classes? (RQ 2 & PCK)

2. What scaffolds do you use, or have in place, to support your student's ability to read and understand primary source materials? (RQ1, RQ2)

3. What do you believe are the most important skills that students learn in your classroom? (RQ2, PCK)

"The Gilder Lehrman History Teacher of the Year rubric highlights three big ideas: Creativity and imagination in the classroom, effective use of primary sources, and leadership in the field of American history. Having read your award portfolio, I'd like to dig into creativity and imagination and primary sources with you for a few minutes."

1. In your portfolio, I noted *[personalize question*] as examples of creativity in the middle-grades classroom. Would you please elaborate for me on why you selected this lesson to include in your portfolio as an example of creativity? (RQ 1, PCK)
    a. How do your students respond to this lesson? (RQ 2)
    b. Have you developed this lesson over time? What has changed? (RQ 3, PCK)

2. Your lesson focused on [*personalize*] and used [*personalize*] as primary source resources.
    a. When in the school year do you teach this lesson? (PCK)
    b. How do you first introduce primary sources to your students at the beginning of the year? (RQ 1, RQ2, PCK)
    c. What is your end-of-year goal for your students when working with primary source materials? (RQ1, RQ2, PCK)

Block 2: Impact of Practices on Student Learning

RQ2: How do the GLI HTOY teachers perceive the impact of their approaches on their student community?

"As a Gilder Lehrman award winner myself, I am very conscious that the portfolio is a snapshot of the excellent work you continuously do with your students. I'd like to transition now away from your award portfolio and discuss your teaching approaches and the impact you see them having on your student community more broadly."

1. I'd like to begin these questions with your students in mind. Please tell me about them.
    a. As a whole, what do you think are their most significant glows and grows? (RQ2, P)
    b. What are your ultimate learning goals for your student community over the course of the year?

2. How do you think about the skills and knowledge that students gain in your classroom in relation to elementary and high school learners? [i.e., how does middle school learning build from elementary and towards high school; vertical alignment] (RQ2, PCK)

3. Earlier, I asked you about scaffolds and strategies for reading primary sources. Now, I'd like to ask you to think a bit more broadly. What non-primary source-based strategies and/or scaffolds do you use to ensure that all of your students can and do achieve the goals of your lessons and remain engaged? (RQ2, PCK)
    a. Have you always used these strategies? (RQ 3)
    b. If not, what made your shift toward it? How did you learn about the strategies? (RQ 3 & PCK)
4. What are some ways that you work to make history relevant to your students? (RQ1, RQ2, PCK)

Block 3: How have the GLI HTOY teachers' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development?
RQ3: How have the GLI HTOY teachers' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development?

"In this final section of questions, I'd like to ask about your development as a teacher and how your practices have changed over time. I remember my first few years of teaching and how drastically different they were from who I became as a teacher. I'm interested in hearing about your evolution in the profession."

1. I entered teaching on an emergency license in California while I was enrolled in a teacher preparation program, and I completed my student teaching in my own classroom in year three of teaching. Please tell me about your teacher preparation experience.
    a. In what ways did you feel most prepared? Least prepared? (RQ3)

2. What teaching practices have you incorporated in recent years that weren't part of your approach before? (RQ3, PCK)

3. In what ways have educational policies or reforms affected your teaching practices? (RQ3)

4. What technological changes have most impacted how you teach? (RQ2, RQ3)

5. How have your students influenced changes in your teaching methods? (RQ2, RQ3)

6. Finally, are there any questions I haven't asked today that you were hoping we would talk about?

Appendix G: Focus Group Protocol

Amplifying Wisdom Research Study
Focus Group Protocol: Gilder Lehrman Institute History Teachers of the Year (1 Hour)

The research questions are:

1. How do the GLI HTOY teachers describe the core practices of 8th-grade American history classrooms?
2. How do the GLI HTOY teachers perceive the impact of their approaches on their student community?
3. How have the GLI HTOY teachers' pedagogical practices changed over time? What has influenced or challenged their development?

Purpose:

The main focus of the study is to understand the practices of award-winning history teachers, the extent to which they continue to integrate the practices, and the influence of their contexts and backgrounds on their approaches. Ultimately, this study aims to document and analyze the practices of GLI HTOY winners and to draw lessons for developing teacher education and professional development strategies to promote strong social studies education. This includes developmentally appropriate pedagogical approaches for the university classroom. The focus group intends to explore collective insights, compare approaches, and identify themes among award-winning 8th-grade American history teachers.

Introduction:

I wanted to thank you all again for your time and interest in participating in the focus group today. As part of the larger study, I am interested in digging into a conversation with you to collectively explore your pedagogies, creative approaches to history education, student impact, and growth in the profession. I will pose five broad questions, and it is my hope that we will build a conversation with each other about our contexts, approaches, and vision for middle school history education. With that in mind, please be sure to allow your colleagues to finish their thoughts before you jump into the discussion, and also, please do not feel obligated or pressured to contribute. I will be copying and pasting each broad question into the chat, but I expect that I will be asking some follow up questions as well. My plan is for each set of questions to take between 10 to 15 minutes.

As was stated in the consent forms, all of your names, schools, states, and regions will not be included in my study or in any publications. However, as we are introducing ourselves to each other today, I ask that to protect each other's privacy, we keep the discussion confidential and refrain from using individuals' names outside of this group. Also, I would like to ask again if I have your consent to record this focus group?

Finally, as I am interested in collaborating and sharing wisdom, if you would like to reach out to a member of this focus group, I ask that the request go through me so that I can ensure that both parties are comfortable with sharing contact information with each other.

Introduction (5 minutes)

- Read introduction
- Invite each teacher to introduce themselves: Your name, where you teach, and your favorite historical topic.

Core Practices (20 minutes)

1. After speaking with each of you individually, some common themes in your pedagogical approaches include the importance of structure (rules, habits, expectations), scaffolds, organization, modeling, and relationship building. I'd like to ask you to make an argument for which one you see as the most and least critical in your classroom. Please feel free to build off of each other and respond to each other's thinking.
    a. Probe (Depending on how the items are ranked):
        i. How does ____ impact student learning in your classroom? (Repeat)
        ii. In what ways does your classroom context and community affect your approaches?
        iii. Has anyone had a second thought about how they ranked their items based on others' responses? How so?
        iv. What 'ah-ha' moments or 'ah-ha' questions have emerged for you from listening to others' responses?
2. All of you have been recognized for using primary sources in creative ways. I am interested in your inspirations for building your creative lessons. What would you say are the origins of your approach?
    a. Probe:
        i. How have colleagues or professional development transformed your teaching or lesson development? Is there another factor that you can pinpoint that has transformed your pedagogical approaches?
        ii. Which of these strategies, or others, have you found most effective for engaging students with complex historical concepts?
        iii. Student reading levels have been a common theme in your interviews. How do reading levels impact your approach to teaching?
        iv. In what ways does your classroom context and community affect your approaches?
        v. Are there any ideas we have discussed so far that you are 'mulling over' how you might apply them in your classroom?

Collective Impact and Assessment (15 minutes)

1. How do you measure success in your classrooms beyond standardized assessments? What evidence most meaningfully demonstrates student growth to you?
    a. Probe:
        i. Has your perspective on what constitutes 'success' changed over time?
        ii. How do you know when your strategies and approaches are truly making a difference?
        iii. How do your approaches differ based on your student populations?
        iv. Does anyone have a different opinion or experience?

Evolution of Practice in Context (15 minutes)

1. In our individual conversations, many of you mentioned how your teaching has evolved. What external factors (educational policies, school culture, community expectations) have most significantly shaped your teaching practices?
    a. Probe:
        i. How have you navigated these external pressures while maintaining your pedagogical vision?
        ii. How do you see *your* teaching of middle school history changing in the next decade?

2. What advice would you offer to new teachers entering the field today about developing their practice over time?
    a. Probe:
        i. What do you wish someone had told you when you began teaching?
        ii. What skills and/or knowledge do you hope student teachers will come to your classroom/school with?
        iii. What skills and/or knowledge do you hope to impart to your student teachers?

Closing Discussion (5 minutes)

- Having heard from your colleagues today, what new insights or ideas might you take back to your own classroom?
- Based on your experiences as GLI History Teachers of the Year, what final insights would you share with other 8th-grade American history teachers? Do you have any lingering questions?
- Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important for understanding the collective experience of exceptional middle school history teachers?

Appendix H: Round 1 Code Book

Coding Category	Sub-Categories	Connection to Research Question	Examples of Initial Jottings that Connect	Definition
Resources, Activities, & Content Acquisition		RQ1	Primary sources, personalized resources, variety, DBQ, student movement, student grouping, activities, websites, knowledge gained, student centered, research-based practices, discussion	Primary sources, personalized resources, variety, DBQ, student movement, student grouping, activities, websites, knowledge gained, student centered, research-based practices, discussion
Diverse Perspectives and Viewpoints		RQ1	Diversity, cultural inclusion, diverse learners & expereinces, hard history, student interests, student focused plans, relevance, including a variety of voices and perspectives	Moments when teachers seek to include diverse perspectives into their curriculum to meet the needs of their diverse learning populations. This can include BIPOC sources, hard histories, differing viewpoints, or specific lessons designed to meet the unique needs/interests of the class community
Historical Thinking Skills		RQ1	Document analysis, historical thinking skills, inquiry, critical thinking, writing, thinking strategies, perspective taking, reading, questions, skills over test, skill build, primary sources, strategy, purpose, learning strategies	Moments and activites when the teacher practices historical thinking skills with their students. This can include HIPP activities, activities where studetns are practicing critical thinking, or historical writing
Structure, Organization, & Expectations		RQ2	Class management, organization, structure, routine, personal space, safety, fair/fairness, respect, high expectations, flexibility, classroom layout	Discussions where teachers detail how they run their classrooms. This category thinks about classroom management and classroom structure. This category seeks to understand what is in place in the classroom in order to teach the content to 8th graders.
Classroom Persona & Values		RQ2	Engagement, activity, creativity, trust, student love of class, "the why", challenge, compassion, empathy, guide on the	Discussions were teachers detail the values they hold in history education and the teaching persona they bring to their classroom. Beyond

			side, humor, calm, classroom culture, engagement, excitement, love of subject, persona, treating students as people, relationships, passionate, philosophy, decor, display student work, welcoming	structures they put in place, this category seeks to understand the personailities of the teachers and how they build relationships with their student learners.
Understanding 8th graders & Ensure all students are learning	Evidence of student learning outcomes	RQ2	Clarity, accomodations, break down ideas, clarity, Developmental, accessibility, accomodations, explicit, differentiation, diverse experiences, diverse schools, knowing students, growth, UDL, support for all students, student success, student learning needs, rigor, prep for high school, SEL, dealing with cheating	Moments where teachers discuss the work that they do to make the learning approachable and leveled for the students in their classrooms. This includes differentiation, scaffolding, leveling sources, modifying sources, and seeking opportunites for student growth and increased rigor. This is not part of classroom management or classroom structures but more about the pedagogical content decisions that are made for their student learners
Connections to real life		RQ2	Connections, current events, diversity, cross curricular connections	Moments when teachers discuss or include in their lesson plans curricular connections to students' lives. This can be the inclusion of diverse perspectives, current events, etc. These moments seek to support relevance of curriculum to students lives.
Contextual Realities		RQ2	Poverty, life skills, needs of students, supplies, controlled chaos, reading levels, Maslow, community, diversity of community	Moments where the teachers discuss the contextual needs and realities of their students. This does not include strategies taken to teach them, but is instead about understanding the students and community
State Requirements/School Requirements	Teacher Realities	RQ3	Leveled classes, HS alignment, school structure, coaching/SS stereotypes, state standards, state tests, teacher monitoring, working in the system, solo teacher/island, teacher control, systems, Side gig, SS stereo-types,	Examples of external forces that influcence a teacher's classroom, job, pedagogical decision making. This can be school expectations, district, or state. It can also include conversations around expectations of social studies teachers and stereotypes like coaching. It may also include

			moving jobs, teacher pay, classroom conditions	participation in non-classroom leadership and responsibilities
Technology		RQ3	Computer Distractions	Examples of technology use in the classroom and pedagogical decisions around it. These converstaions are strictly dealing with student access to technology, and not the teachers seeking sources online. These conversations can be around activities, research or distractions that can come from technology in the classroom.
COVID		RQ3	Changes since COVID	These conversations address the changing of students, schools, and learning since the COVID 19 pandemic. To code this, teachers must explicitly reference COVID 19
Politics		RQ3	Education, polities, informants	Discussions around educational politics and how they impact the teachers' approach and ability to teach with autonomy. This can include how students respond to politics, parental involvment and oversight, or school/district/state oversight. This can also be related to how teachers describe their state, city and district
Development as Self	Role as Teacher Advice for New Teachers	RQ3	Content knowledge, history nerd, developing as teacher, adapt, breadth of expereince, innovation, professional development, reflective pratitioners, school leadership	These moments are times when the teachers discuss their growth in the field and how they have adapted and grown over time. This can include leadership, what they have learned through their practice and how they think about their early career, and professional development. May also refer to pursuing advanced degrees