SPOTLIGHT ON EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS IN THE SCHOOLS –
YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW (SEPPS):
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE TIED TO DEMOGRAPHICS, STAYERS, MOVERS, AND LEAVERS

Demographics Characteristics and Career Paths for Social Studies Teachers in
Secondary Schools: A Review of Literature

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Introduction

There is optimism about the future. Scholars from a variety of disciplines are conducting more research than ever on teacher education... We must continue to openly discuss and debate the role of teacher education in a democratic society such as the United States (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005, pp. 756-757).

This manuscript examines the scholarly literature to shed insight into the demographics characteristics and career paths taken by secondary social studies/history teachers.

In 2005, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner edited the seminal book, Studying Teacher Education: The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education, which examined characteristics of our nation’s teachers, where they teach, and the influence of demographic variables. Gaining an understanding of how these and other factors relate to the progression of teachers’ career paths is critical, as Cochran-Smith and Zeichner report an average teacher turnover rate of 30 percent, with 6 percent never returning to the profession.

With the dean and associate dean professing interest in determining the influence of school of education alumni in the schools and on student learning, the Neag School of Education (herein, Neag School) at the University of Connecticut introduced an initiative -- A Spotlight on Education Professionals in the Public Schools - Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow (SEPPS). This initiative includes a review of literature (including information from professional organizations, NCES, AACTE, state departments, journals, etc.) of the demographic characteristics and career paths that are representative of educators from each field. This review would provide information such as background characteristics (including gender, race/ethnicity, age, type of employment), factors prevalent among stayers, movers, and leavers, and projections of future trends in the
field. While Cochran-Smith and Zeichner’s (2005) piece is now considered seminal, in many ways the information in this manuscript and accompanying documents updates the information from that 2005 book, and further elucidates field-specific teacher data (e.g., elementary, bilingual, world language, and music education). It also includes information about educators who are not teachers – including school counselors, school psychologists, and principals. Also, throughout this manuscript, we borrow from the writing of Billingsley (1993) in the area of special education to apply to the terms used across educators in all fields. As recommended by Billingsley (1993) and now illustrated in figure 1, “stayers” (retainees) is the label given to those who remain in the same position in the same school between school years; “movers” (transfers) refers to those teachers who stayed in a position but transferred to another school (in the same or a different school district), or who transferred to another type of teaching position; and “leavers” includes those who left the profession, for reasons such as retirement, finding another job in a different field, returning to school, or taking a job other than teaching at the school (e.g., school administration).

![Educators’ career path as stayers, movers, and leavers.](image)

**Figure 1:** Educators’ career path as stayers, movers, and leavers.
Secondary Social Studies Teachers

Secondary educators entrusted with teaching social studies and history curricula have the unique role of preparing students to become educated citizens. In an environment of high stakes testing which focuses primarily on literacy and numeracy skills, social studies instruction has often taken the backseat (Leming, Ellington & Schug, 2006). There is a lack of consensus about the disciplines that should be incorporated in social studies (Adler, 2008). Most educators generally agree that the collective content areas of civics, education, geography, world history, U.S. history, and economics comprise social studies. A national website dedicated to social studies educators defines it as follows:

Social Studies are the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and the natural sciences (Retrieved from http://socialstudieseducator.com on July 7, 2013).

A position statement from the National Council for the Social Studies indicates that effective social studies teaching assist students develop enduring understandings in the core content areas of civics, economics, geography, and history, and assures their readiness and willingness to assume citizenship responsibilities. Furthermore, this essential field is charged with preparing students to become community-minded adults who can both maintain and develop our democratic institutions on the local, state, national and international levels of government.

There is also a trend toward integrating social studies into other curricular areas. Many elementary educators make connections between literacy and social studies instruction by emphasizing reading and writing skills in their social studies instruction. Social studies is largely taught as a discrete subject area beginning in the secondary level (Leaming et al., 2006) which found that less than one hour a day was devoted to social studies instruction in grades K-4. Not
surprisingly, they found almost 80 percent of fifth grade teachers responding indicated that they had 10 or fewer university courses in any history or social science.

Leming, Ellington and Schug (2006) interviewed over 1,000 social studies and civic teachers in a nationwide study and discovered that more than 90 percent of schools reported that math and reading were highly important. Only 29 percent of teachers surveyed thought that direct instruction in civics and government was important. This study also asked participants what the top rationales were for including social studies in the school curriculum. The first priority for 85 percent of the teachers surveyed was “promoting acceptance of cultural diversity.” The struggle to ensure civil rights for all regardless of race, ethnicity, gender and/or sexual orientation is still very much alive in our national conversation. It would follow that educators seek to integrate a multicultural perspective into their social studies curriculum. A close second involved the content that most social studies educators feel rates the highest priority. About 84 percent of educators felt that learning about the U.S. constitution and our government was a critical reason to keep social studies viable in the curriculum. Coupled with that was the need for students to think critically about U.S. government institutions. Nearly 80 percent felt that cultivation a critical consciousness about current government practices help students to enter their civic adulthood better prepared. In fourth is the need to interact socially with others (75%) which is valued before learning about injustice in the American system (70%) and learning about American historical heroes (67%) (Leming et al., 2006). In the early 1950s, the emphasis on American historical heroes would likely have taken first place amongst social studies teachers. Raising awareness of cultural diversity and government missteps has superseded rote memorization of our nation’s forefathers. In an era where teachers must be highly qualified in their subject area, that social studies teachers report that they are underprepared by their
undergraduate and graduate coursework. According to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, all educators teaching core academic subjects must be highly qualified. Core academic subjects are defined as English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, history, geography, and arts (music, visual arts, dance and theater). All public elementary or secondary school teachers employed by a local educational agency (school district) who teach a core academic subject must be deemed highly qualified. This means that the teacher holds a minimum of a bachelor’s degree, has obtained full state certification or holds an Intern license in their state as a teacher covering the grade range of the assignment, and holds a license to teach in the state. No Child Left Behind also requires that the teacher has demonstrated subject-matter content knowledge in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches. According to Leming et al. (2006), many social studies and history teachers recognize they need a stronger background in their content area to be more effective and seek professional development in this area.

Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the United States and Abroad challenges school districts with refining professional development in much targeted ways to meet the needs of today’s teachers. Professional development should focus on student learning and improve the teaching of specific curriculum content (Andree, Darling-Hammond, Orphanos, Richardson, & Wei, 2009). For social studies teachers, professional development which focuses on increasing rigor, improving student multicultural understanding, and engaging students in social studies content is most beneficial (Andree et al, 2009).

One significant resource for teaching is technology. Greater numbers of schools are equipped with access to digital resources through the internet and Smart Boards. Fully interactive
classrooms are more plentiful. In a social studies classroom that means teachers can show live events to students and share images of primary documents or initiate cultural exchanges with students in other countries over Skype. Teachers are using these tools with differing frequency dependent on their comfort level with technology given varying levels of corresponding training. Accountability measures that ensure that all teachers are highly qualified were designed to address the need to raise the bar in all academic areas. The demand for rigor in teacher preparation was meant to increase the standards of teaching and learning in the classroom. Over time, student’s knowledge of key social studies content has eroded. The 2011 “Nation’s Report Card” indicated that U.S. students scored lower in history than any other subjects on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (math, reading, science, writing, civics, geography and economics). A majority of 4th graders were unaware of the importance of Abraham Lincoln as a U.S. President. Only 20 percent of 12th graders could identify North Korea’s ally in fighting U.S. troops during the Korean War. This lack of historical illiteracy means that we have a society of adults who do not know their own history. Newsweek magazine administered the U.S. citizenship test to 1,000 Americans in 2011. One third of those surveyed did not know when the Declaration of Independence was signed and fully 80 percent did not know who the president was during the first World War.

One potential reason for the lack of content area mastery is the erosion of teaching time for social studies. Due to high stakes testing, many elementary teachers indicate that they spend little time on social studies compared to Language Arts and Math (Leaming et al., 2006). Teachers likely spend more time preparing content in subject areas that they perceive are more important. High stakes testing in other areas has likely reprioritized the need for high quality social studies instruction.
Supply and Demand of Secondary Social Studies Teachers

In a 2003 study by Ingersoll and Smith (2003), it was discovered that overall the demand for teachers has risen since 1984 due to the increase in student enrollment. Ingersoll found that 47 percent of secondary schools had vacancies in social studies for the 1999-2000 school year and 14 percent of secondary schools indicated they had difficulty finding suitable candidates for their social studies vacancies. But, in a 2008 study of educator supply and demand, it was indicated there is a surplus of social studies educators in the U.S. and there are a fairly even number of social studies candidates and positions nationwide.

But, Ingersoll feels that many pre-service teachers in all fields do not end up entering the teaching ranks. In the 1993 Baccalaureate and Beyond study, researchers found that only 42 percent of students who pursued education as undergraduates found employment as teachers in their first year out of college. By year five after graduation, only 58 percent had taught. That means that 40 percent or more of undergraduate majors in education were seeking other employment or advanced degrees. There is also a great deal of literature that indicates that teachers in all fields are more apt to leave the profession in the first five years due to burn out, lack of support, and lack of resources. The majority, or 46 percent, of teachers who leave the profession do so after five years (Ingersoll, 2003).

Demographics Characteristics

Data about the racial, gender and ethnic makeup of today’s teachers illustrates important changes in the field of teacher preparation. Overall 75 percent of teachers are female and 25 percent are male. According to The Condition of Education 2011 produced by NCES, 84 percent of elementary and middle school teachers were female during the 2007-08 school year. There was a rise in the number of female secondary teachers from 55 percent in 1999-2000 to 59
percent in 2007-08. Racially there were changes between the two data points. There was an increase in Hispanic elementary teachers from 6 percent in 1999-2000 to 8 percent in 2007-08. During that same time span, Hispanic secondary teachers rose from 5 to 7 percent. The other notable shift was in on the secondary level where White teachers decreased from 86 percent in 1999-2000 to 83 percent in 2007-08. The average age of the U.S. teacher was 42.5 years of age during the 2003-04 (IES, SASS).

In 2008, data indicates that 64.1 percent of secondary social studies teachers are male while 35.9 percent are female. Thus, the gender-divide in social studies deviates from the national averages for teachers as a whole. Racial and ethnic makeup of social studies teachers somewhat mirrors that of the composite teaching force. White social studies teachers made up the majority at 86.5 percent in 2008. At that time 83.5 percent of the entire teaching force was white. Black educators made up 6.9 percent of the U.S. teaching force but only 5.3 percent of the social studies subgroup. Hispanic educators account for 6.6 percent of teachers in the U.S. but only 5.7 percent of social studies teachers. Similarly, Asian educators made up 1.3 percent of educators and only 1.1 percent of social studies teachers. American Indian or Alaskan native educators comprised 0.5 percent of all educators and 0.6 percent of social studies teachers. Lastly, 0.2 percent of all educators identified themselves of being of 2 or more races or biracial. There were 0.6 percent of social studies teachers who indicated the same. (NCES, 2012) Thus, the population of social studies teachers in the U.S. is representative of teachers as a whole; however the field is more dominated by men than women.

**Mobility and Attrition**

According to the 2004-2005 *Teacher Attrition and Mobility Study* conducted by NCES, social studies teachers make up approximately 16 percent of the nation’s teaching workforce. Of
those surveyed, close to 82 percent of the social studies teachers intend to remain in their current position. On a national average, 7 percent of teachers move each year. In 2004-05, only 4.8 percent of social studies teachers were moved to different positions or elected to change schools. This is the second lowest average; only art teachers moved at a lower rate at 4.4 percent.

During this same survey year, social studies teachers accounted for a high rate of “leavers” from the profession at 13.4 percent third in line after art educators (18%) and special education teachers (20.4%). This is an increase from the 1994-95 data that indicates there was a 9.4 percent total turnover (both movers and leavers) in the field of social studies nationwide (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). It should be noted that in 1994-95 social studies attrition was ranked 8th out of eight professions including in descending order mathematics, science, special education, elementary, special education, vocational technology, and English. Like other teachers who leave the profession, it is likely that many social studies teachers cite pay, lack of autonomy, professional isolation, and lack of professional opportunities as reasons to transfer their skills to other pursuits. (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

**Reasons for Mobility and Attrition**

A further study by Fitchett (2008) examined secondary social studies educators’ intentions regarding staying or leaving the teaching profession. Perceptions of secondary social studies teachers were compared to other core subject areas. Fitchett found that social studies teachers differ from other core subject areas in demographics, professional perceptions, and teacher intent. While Fitchett found that social studies teachers tended to be white males, he found that minority and women social studies teachers were more likely to become “leavers” or to leave the profession altogether. He concluded that social studies teachers working with
difficult to serve populations (higher minority, lower socioeconomic students) had the most staying power in the field.

Advanced degrees also had bearing on whether teachers remained in the field. Those with a Masters in an education field were less likely to intend to stay while teachers with a Masters in a social studies related field were more likely to continue teaching (Fitchett, 2008).

A key factor for those dissatisfied with their new teaching assignments is the lack of effective mentoring. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found that 40 percent of those who moved or left their position had no orientation or mentoring as a teacher during the 2000-01 school year (Smith & Ingersoll, 2003).

**Who are the Secondary Social Studies Teachers of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow?**

In a society where American citizens can more readily name the three American Idol judges than the First Amendment freedoms granted by the Constitution, quality social studies instruction is a great need. The McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum conducted a survey in of 1,000 American adults to assess their knowledge of the First Amendment. They found that only 1 person out of 1,000 was able to name all five freedoms correctly. They are the right to free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom to petition government and freedom of assembly. Though we have moved away from teaching rote memorization in schools, many feel certain content must be universally mastered.

In a position statement published on the National Council for the Social Studies website, the organization outlines the critical features of “Powerful Teaching and Learning” in the field. The goal is to create authentic learning opportunities that inspire deep knowledge and understanding of the subject area. The statement challenges teachers to design meaningful curriculum for students in integrative lessons. NCSS invites teachers to combine the rich
disciplines of history, economics, geography, political science, sociology, anthropology, archaeology, and psychology to enrich the learning experience for students in primary and secondary classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to initiate dialogue in social studies classrooms that get students thinking about their own values and those upon which our nation was founded. This vision also encompasses the need for intellectual challenges, rigorous curriculum and critical thinking in social studies classrooms. Lastly, lessons should be active and engaging to promote both “hands-on” and “minds-on” learning. This means that students should be working collaboratively and individually with varied resources while “constructing meaning” and participating in “interactive discourse.” To be successful in creating a rigorous social studies curriculum embedded in an engaging curriculum, a teacher must develop over time in a supportive environment. Staying in a district in the same teaching position facilitates this growth. Educational leaders including principals, curriculum coordinators and department chairs understand the need for targeted professional development for social studies educators. Those social studies teachers who do not feel supported in their efforts to improve student outcomes in social studies likely move or leave the profession altogether.

There is a great deal of discourse about the current state of social studies teaching in the U.S. Increasing rigor, curricular access through digital means, expanding time devoted to social studies instruction and developing new ways to engage students in the many disciplines that make up “social studies” is a challenge for all teachers and educational leaders. The national organizations, which represent social studies teachers, are steadfast in their resolve that great import needs to be lent to their pursuits in order to build both social understanding and civic efficacy in future generations. The advent of the Common Core includes all of the components discussed in the NCSS’s vision for the future – engagement, meaningful learning, rigor, and
opportunities for discourse in social studies classrooms across the country. Studies show that social studies teachers enjoy their work, prepare diligently, seek new learning opportunities and stay in their role to see their students’ through their primary and secondary education. These factors suggest a high level of job satisfaction and a commitment to both teaching and learning. Although discourse in the field does exist, secondary level teachers in social studies look forward to continue as is they are in a shortage area.
References


