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Research article

# Burden or benefit: the use of professional development in the middle grades history classroom

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## Abstract

This study investigated middle school history teachers' perceptions of professional development. The participants of this study included nine middle school history teachers in the United States. Using semi-structured interviews, a qualitative case study investigated four research questions: (1) What are middle school history teachers' perceptions of professional development?; (2) What are middle school history teachers' perceptions of professional development and its relation to the subject?; (3) What are middle school history teachers' perceptions of pedagogy?; and (4) What are middle school history teachers' perceptions of professional development and student achievement?

**Keywords** professional development; history education; pedagogy; teacher improvement

## Introduction

In 2000, the United States federal government established the Teaching American History Program (TAH), which provided millions of dollars to enhance teachers' understanding of United States history (De La Paz et al., 2011). This reform aimed to improve history teachers' expertise in subject matter and teaching methods through effective professional development and professional opportunities (De La Paz et al., 2011). Although in 2011 Education Secretary Arne Duncan emphasised the importance of history education in creating a balanced education, history teachers often encounter the adverse effects of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which created flawed incentives for state and school districts to prioritise English and mathematics at the expense of other subjects (Duffield et al., 2013; Duncan, 2011; Perrotta, 2021). This neglect can undermine the quality of a well-rounded education and limit funding opportunities for history educators. Funding for professional development in history is seldom prioritised, resulting in the marginalisation of history teachers compared with their colleagues (Hess and Zola, 2012; Swan and Griffin, 2013).

According to Grant (2003), most history teachers tend to view professional development with a negative attitude. Specifically, teachers believe that the current offerings are insufficient to meet their needs (Borko, 2004). Professional development sessions for history education have typically been brief and condensed workshops, despite research indicating that longer-term professional development is more effective (Duffield et al., 2013). To learn more about teachers and their professional learning habits, Thacker (2017) observed that teachers focused on non-traditional, informal methods of learning, either subject matter or pedagogy, over traditional, multi-subject professional development. Such findings underscore the need for specialised professional development sessions that focus on history education and its practical implementation in the classroom.

Middle-grade teacher education has often been overlooked, as schools tend to focus on mathematics and literacy, which aligns with federal educational guidelines. Middle schools tend to emphasise subjects that impact their performance, accountability and funding, often at the expense of social studies. According to the current state of research, history is specified less in the state school and district accountability system than in other tested subjects (TDOE, 2021). Consequently, middle school history and its educators often lack recognition and respect. The results frequently demonstrate a lack of pedagogical and content resources, as well as ineffective professional development. Over the past decade, state laws have focused on enhancing schools, particularly in terms of teacher qualification and training, as a crucial element for improvement (Attard, 2017).

While there is ample research on the critical components of effective professional development, it is essential to consider teachers' perceptions of what is effective and how it leads to better instruction and student achievement (Brendefur et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; De La Paz et al., 2011; Desimone, 2009). Teachers' approach and involvement in the educational process can significantly influence their students' academic success. Hence, school districts must consider the perceptions of their teaching staff and design initiatives that encourage effective teaching practices, which lead to better student academic outcomes (Pharis et al., 2019). However, these characteristics are often associated with mathematics. By studying the viewpoints of middle school history teachers on professional development, schools can tailor more effective programmes that improve teachers' learning outcomes and, ultimately, students' academic performance.

## Theoretical framework: the modalities of professional development in middle school history education

Professional development is a crucial aspect of a teacher's career, as it allows opportunities to continually enhance their knowledge, skills and expertise, ultimately leading to improved teaching practices and better student learning outcomes (Ball and Cohen, 1999; Cohen and Hill, 2000; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995; Thacker, 2017). Middle school history teachers at all levels undertake professional development to stay current with the latest research, methodologies and technologies in history, equipping them to provide the highest-quality education to their students. Professional development encompasses a range of modalities, including professional learning communities (PLCs), workshops and seminars, online courses and modules, classroom and peer observations, as well as learning opportunities offered by professional organisations. Regardless of the delivery mode, educational researchers widely acknowledge that professional development enhances the quality of teaching and

contributes to improved student learning outcomes in the classroom (Avidov-Ungar, 2016; Ball and Cohen, 1999; Thacker, 2017).

A professional learning community refers to a group of educators who convene at regular intervals to exchange knowledge, skills and insights (DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 1991; Lieberman and Miller, 1990; McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993; Secada and Adajian, 1997; Sharp and Gallimore, 1988). The primary objective of a PLC is to enhance teaching practices and improve student academic performance. Generally, a PLC comprises a group of teachers who teach the same grade level and subject area. For instance, a history PLC would include a small team of educators collaborating through discussions on topics such as planning lesson, setting up content standards, pacing and addressing student misconceptions. The existing literature suggests that PLCs are the most widely recognised and effective form of professional development for educators.

Synchronous collaborative professional learning communities represent a traditional yet practical approach to professional development in history education (Guskey, 2014). Empirical studies have demonstrated that PLCs positively impact teachers' attitudes towards professional development and their influence on student achievement (Çopur and Demirel, 2022; Phillips, 2003; Thacker, 2017). The literature suggests that effective PLCs enhance the quality of history instruction, leading to better student outcomes and improving schools' overall effectiveness (Hofman et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2013; Lomos et al., 2011). Furthermore, DuFour and Eaker (1998) argue that PLCs contribute to participants' pedagogical practices by providing opportunities for teacher collaboration. Consequently, the evidence suggests a positive relationship between teacher participation in PLCs and student achievement (Çopur and Demirel, 2022).

The conventional approach of seminars and workshops is a frequent method for professional development in middle grades education (Borko, 2004; Humphrey et al., 2005; Wilson and Berne, 1999). Despite a growing interest in alternative methods, traditional seminars and workshops continue to enhance the knowledge and skills of history educators (Ball and Cohen, 1999; Borko, 2004; Humphrey et al., 2005). Seminars are professional development sessions that offer a structured learning experience to participants. As Guskey and Yoon (2009) note, seminars enable teachers to benefit directly from specialised knowledge provided by content experts, network with colleagues from different schools and gain inspiration to explore innovative teaching approaches in their classrooms. For educators, seminars provide a valuable opportunity to gain in-depth pedagogical knowledge, insights and updates on relevant topics in history education (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009).

Middle-grade educators attend workshops that provide hands-on learning experiences, emphasising practical skills, strategies and instructional techniques. These interactive sessions, led by content and pedagogical specialists, are tailored to meet the instructional needs or topics that align with teachers' interests or areas for improvement. Generally, educational institutions and districts sponsor learning workshops to disseminate knowledge and best practices. According to Risinger (1986), in-service seminars for history teachers serve six primary purposes: developing the curriculum, disseminating materials and strategies, evaluating curriculum and instructional impact, assessing student progress, implementing specific materials or strategy and establishing local sharing programmes.

Online learning provides history teachers with the flexibility and accessibility needed to develop professionally at their own pace and convenience (Blanchard et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2006; Ross, 2011). Online professional development opportunities can be categorised into two types: synchronous and asynchronous learning. Synchronous opportunities occur in real time, including university courses, webinars and conferences (Bates et al., 2016). Asynchronous opportunities are not simultaneous, and they allow teachers to learn via online training and self-paced modules (Bates et al., 2016). Organisations such as Facing History and Ourselves, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and the Library of Congress offer webinars, courses and asynchronous modules to enhance teacher effectiveness in practice. Teachers may prefer online professional development for its convenience, individualised approach and self-directed learning opportunities (Bates et al., 2016).

Synchronous and asynchronous graduate courses and degrees offered by universities and colleges allow history teachers to improve their pedagogical content knowledge and teaching practices (Harris and Sass, 2011; Sahlberg, 2015). Participation in degree and certification programmes allows teachers to delve deeply into educational topics, specialise in content areas and contribute to broader academic research (Bound, 2011). This long-term professional development presents a pathway for career

progression, educational leadership roles and augmented salary ([National Center for Teacher Quality, 2017](#)).

Classroom observation is a widely used approach to collaborative professional development. It is a process that involves observing teachers in their classroom settings to provide feedback that can help them enhance their instructional practices ([Cosh, 1998](#)). This form of professional development is a valuable tool for improving social teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Its effectiveness stems from allowing teachers to receive direct feedback on their teaching practices and reflect on their teaching strategies in a supportive environment ([Beigy and Woodin, 1999](#)). Observations also enable teachers to learn from one another, share best practices and offer additional support ([Borich, 1999](#); [Richards and Farrell, 2005](#)).

Professional and scholarly organisations provide middle-grade teachers with an additional avenue for professional development. These organisations, such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), National Council of Geographic Education (NCGE), Center for Civic Education (CCE) and National Council for History Education (NCHE), focus on fields including history, political science, economics, sociology, geography and education. History teachers can significantly enhance their teaching skills and knowledge by engaging in professional development activities, such as reading scholarly journals, attending national and state conferences and participating in summer institutes organised by specialised organisations ([Waters and Hensley, 2020](#)).

National and state conferences offer a platform for educators to convene and engage with their peers across the nation. These conferences provide opportunities to share best practices, explore effective instructional strategies that engage students, advocate for pressing issues in historical education and establish professional networks for ongoing support ([Lawrence and Wilson, 2014](#)). [Waters and Hensley \(2020\)](#) state that the National Council for the Social Studies conference has the highest national participation of teachers. Similarly, sponsored affiliated institutes offer comprehensive one- to four-week professional development programmes for K–12 educators to deepen their understanding of significant historical topics and enhance their capacity for effective pedagogical techniques and practices.

In the current study, researchers investigated the perceptions of middle school United States history teachers regarding professional development and its relationship to subject content knowledge, pedagogy and student achievement. This study aimed to provide insights into the attitudes of teachers in a southeastern state towards professional development and how they perceive its effects. Recent studies indicate that teachers, school and district leaders, and state stakeholders emphasise data and outcomes more due to new educational reforms ([Behari, 2014](#); [Pharis et al., 2019](#)). Current research reinforces the notion that districts should prioritise professional development to meet the needs of teachers, ensure academic progress and student achievement and cultivate effective educators ([Brendefur et al., 2016](#); [Schachter et al., 2019](#)). [Guskey \(2003\)](#) believes that effective professional development should enhance a teacher's content knowledge and pedagogical skills. However, these characteristics are often associated with mathematics and science, often at the expense of neglecting history. Therefore, this study can aid policymakers, school administrators and professional development designers in creating more effective and tailored professional learning experiences for social studies teachers, thereby enhancing teacher practice and student achievement. This research has the potential to shed light on teachers' concerns about the scarcity of content-specific professional development opportunities and their impact on teaching and students' academic performance.

## The survey

We interviewed nine middle school history teachers from nine middle schools in the western region of a southeastern state in the United States. The schools were selected using a non-random, purposeful sampling method to explore how history teachers in middle schools perceive professional development within their school and its relationship to their subject knowledge, teaching methods and improvement in student achievement. The selection of schools was based on various factors, including geographic location, grade level, state report card and community type (rural, suburban, urban). The state report card was used to gather data and evaluate each school's student success rates, including growth and achievement. Nine schools were chosen, with three representing each community type. The selected schools received varying letter grades, ranging from A to F, highlighting the differences in growth,

achievement and student success rates. Each school provided a distinct perspective on academic success rates, teacher professional development and the relationship between content, pedagogy and student achievement. Notably, a significant variation in teacher knowledge, teacher preparation, professional development and perspectives was observed in the identified schools (Table 1).

The selection was based on community type and the letter grade assigned by the state's education department, which depended on the students' success rates in standardised testing. The study included three rural schools with letter grades ranging from A to F, three suburban schools with letter grades ranging from A to C and three urban schools with letter grades ranging from A to F. The study used non-random purposeful sampling, and, as a result, the nine teacher samples chosen represented a considerable degree of variability in school characteristics. The research design involved deliberately selecting participants based on their experience and comparing public middle schools with varying community types and student success rates to inform the development of effective professional development programmes for middle school social studies teachers. The decision to focus on eighth-grade United States history teacher participants for the study was based on the state's accountability and testing requirements. Currently, in the state in which the study took place, middle-grade United States history is the only mandated state-tested curriculum within the broader middle-grade social studies courses, which include human geography and world history. Since neither human geography nor world history is subjected to the same strict testing requirements and accountability as United States history, the researchers focused solely on United States history education.

**Table 1.** Teacher and school site characteristics.

Teacher participant	Community type	Enrolment: 2023/4	Grade band	Years of experience	State letter grade	History success rate (%)
1	Rural	405	6–8	13	A	62.9
2	Rural	370	5–8	4	C	48.7
3	Rural	526	6–8	7	D	17.6
4	Suburban	1,143	6–8	23	A	64.9
5	Suburban	773	6–8	15	B	66.1
6	Suburban	1,094	5–9	6	C	67.1
7	Urban	271	6–8	19	A	78.4
8	Urban	364	6–8	9	B	81.5
9	Urban	621	6–8	4	F	23.7

## Validity and reliability

A collective case study approach was used to evaluate the perceptions of nine middle school history teachers. The study consisted of nine face-to-face interviews with teachers from various school districts located in suburban, rural and urban areas. The researchers defined professional development as formal and informal learning that enhances teachers' knowledge and practices and improves student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Each of the nine interviews was conducted in the participants' respective classrooms located within their schools, ensuring privacy during the interview process. The duration of the interviews varied from 24 to 37 minutes. On average an interview lasted 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Data analysis followed Diener and Crandall's (1978) model in social and behavioural research. Notes were taken for each interview describing non-verbal cues and posture within each bound system. Each interview was then coded, and the resulting themes were noted. Then, collaborating themes were established within the bound system (urban teachers) through triangulation with field notes. The exact process was completed for the second bound system (suburban teachers) and the third bound system (rural teachers), and similarities and differences were noted between the three groups. Special attention

was given to data that appeared to challenge previous research studies. Each category from the first bound system (urban teachers) was then compared to that of the second (suburban teachers) and third (rural teachers) bound systems to trace the development of history teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards professional development.

## Findings

The researchers explored four questions regarding participants' perceptions of professional development, concentrating on content, pedagogy and student achievement. The subsequent research questions directed the study: What are middle school history teachers' perceptions of professional development? What are middle school history teachers' perceptions of professional development and its relation to the subject? What are teachers' perceptions of middle school teachers' professional development and pedagogy? What are middle school history teachers' perceptions of professional development with student achievement? The following teachers' answers appeared to be unvarying. Although they mainly considered one-size-fits-all professional development to be ineffective, teachers believed that content-specific professional development had noticeable benefits if performed correctly. Although teachers recognised that the possible benefits of professional development in tested content areas held benefits, social studies teachers believed that professional development should apply to pedagogy and classroom practices. Furthermore, aligning content and state-mandated standards and interpreting student examination data proved beneficial.

As a result of the study, the researchers identified three common themes shared among middle school history teachers, which were:

- (1) effective professional development should be relevant and applicable to impact pedagogy and classroom practices
- (2) teachers seek professional development opportunities that strengthen their content knowledge and align with state-mandated standards
- (3) traditional professional development practices place a strong emphasis on the examination and interpretation of student data.

### Teachers believe that professional development should be relevant and applicable

Pedagogical knowledge involves understanding the learning process, using effective teaching methods and knowing students' needs. Some professional development opportunities aim to improve teachers' subject-matter knowledge, while others focus on improving their pedagogy, such as teaching practices, classroom management, lesson planning and assessment methods (Garet et al., 2001). Eight out of nine interviewed teachers agreed that professional development must be relevant and applicable to their classrooms to benefit their teaching directly. Participant 5 is a good example of this process:

I have led significant professional development at the national, state and local district levels. When I lead a professional development session in general, no matter what it is on, whether it is assessment, questioning, or development of aligned content to standard-aligned content, whatever it is, I want it to be applicable and implementable. So, even if it is something that most teachers will find monotonous, I want to bring an ability to take something back with teachers that they can use the next day. When I approach what my session will look like, I focus on how the professional development can be usable immediately, regardless of what it is. I want it to be something that any teacher in any subject can take a strategy or a tool and utilise it in their classrooms.

Seven teachers believe that professional development positively impacts their pedagogy and teaching practices when applicable to their classrooms. Teachers expressing a desire for professional development opportunities relevant to their classroom goals is a trend that has been around for a while. Research (Long, 2006; Sparks, 2004) indicates that educators' dissatisfaction with professional development stems from its perceived irrelevance or lack of applicability. Furthermore, all nine participants expressed that professional development should integrate the same components and



strategies that teachers use when instructing students. According to [Darling-Hammond et al. \(2017\)](#), effective professional development should encompass active learning, content-specific teaching practices, opportunities for collaboration, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection and modelling to demonstrate best practices. These components parallel the expectations placed on teachers when delivering content-focused lessons to their students. Numerous educators stressed the significance of effective professional development, emphasising the need for ample time for collaborative efforts among peers.

## Teachers seek content-focused professional development

Since the early 2000s, research has underscored the importance of having strong content knowledge to improve teaching ([National Staff Development Council, 2001](#); [Walker et al., 2006](#)). The National Council for the [Social Studies \(2008\)](#) also stated that continuous professional development to enhance content expertise can help social studies teachers improve their teaching and subject knowledge, leading to better student outcomes ([Darling-Hammond et al., 2017](#)). Eight out of nine teachers stated that they seek professional development opportunities that enhance their social studies content knowledge and align with state-mandated content standards. Participant 2, who earned a master's degree in teaching, stated:

So, to have an effective professional development, it would have to be categorised by your grade content or maybe even world history and US history. It would be beneficial to compare the standards you teach with those taught by others.

Since the mid-2010s, research has shown the advantages of content-specific professional development opportunities for K–12 social studies teachers ([Darling-Hammond, 1997](#); [Darling-Hammond et al., 2017](#); [De La Paz et al., 2011](#); [Desimone, 2009](#)). In 2013, a study on US high school history teachers found that attending content-specific professional development sessions enhanced teacher knowledge, student engagement and achievement ([Duffield et al., 2013](#)). Despite backing from current research, the support for social studies content-specific professional development opportunities is limited compared to other, more publicised content areas. The slim importance placed on history-specific professional development is concerning, as history teachers are held to the same standards as their colleagues on state-produced accountability rubrics and end-of-year benchmark testing that measures student achievement.

Unfortunately, seven out of the nine teachers interviewed feel that the emphasis on content should be more present in the professional development opportunities provided to teachers. Three teachers noted another obstacle in their responses: the lack of funding for professional development. Many teachers mentioned initiatives for which their districts would pay a large amount of money, but they felt that these did not enhance their content knowledge or classroom practice. Participant 7, who teaches in an urban school district, stated:

No. It will be whatever the most recent thing, not the theme, but whoever they have paid money to and whatever the new exciting thing is, they will focus on. A year ago, it was like, OK, you will learn station rotation. We want to see station rotation, and we want it every week. We will do this, and this is how you do it. It must be done like this. And then this past year, they said we will not do that anymore. Moreover, I am like, OK ... So being a history teacher, it is my job to find patterns from the past. How do I know that the stuff we are doing this year will be relevant in a year? So, it is never the actual content. Whatever the district has chosen, this is what the big push will be, whether it is data or technology, which is very frustrating.

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

## Teachers perceive traditional professional development as data focused

All nine teachers agreed that most professional development opportunities prioritise analysing and interpreting student data. Recent studies indicate that teachers, school and district leaders, and state

stakeholders emphasise data and outcomes more due to new educational reforms (Behari, 2014; Pharis et al., 2019). The focus on standardised tests, student scores and overall school performance has burdened educators, educational institutions and districts to consistently analyse, interpret and extract insights from student data. When asked how she would design a session to improve student outcomes, Participant 9 suggested:

So, if I needed to create a session, and my goal was to improve student achievement, I would approach it in a few capacities. I would look at it from a few vantage points. One, I would look at it and let me explain why I am qualified to do this. Thus, I would give some data points and references to the past as to why this strategy worked. I would then shift significantly into the use of data. So, I made choices based on data. This was the data I was provided at the beginning. This is how I measured the gradual growth progression; this is my final data. So, I would do a portion of the data disaggregation I used for it, and then I would go step by step into the strategies I used to identify students who needed to move.

Several teachers emphasised the significance of analysing student data and its impact on improving student learning outcomes. Participant 3 mentioned:

Most of ours is a student database – at least this year. We have a new administrator in the building, and he is phenomenal. He is good with data. However, I do not think that is a bad thing because he can take that data, analyse it, interpret it and help teachers who struggle with data understand it. Furthermore, they can better serve their students if they understand the data.

While professional development predominantly revolves around data, it is essential to note that many educators stressed the significance of not fixating solely on data. Instead, they advocated for providing opportunities to delve deeper into understanding their students' knowledge.

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

## Discussion

The findings of our study produced a range of teacher perceptions and raised several issues. During this study, nine middle school history teachers from nine schools described their perceptions of and experiences with professional development. Additionally, teachers described how professional development relates to their pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge and student achievement. Teachers considered professional development advantageous when it encompassed applicability, relevancy and collaboration. Teachers emphasised the recurring reliance on data analysis and interpretation in their ongoing professional development offerings. Last, teachers discussed their experiences and limitations as educators, highlighting the limited opportunities they receive compared to their colleagues who teach other content areas.

All nine teachers communicated the importance of effective professional development, highlighting the need for relevance, applicability, practicality, collaboration and focus on content. Research has identified key elements of effective professional development, including a focus on content, active learning, collaboration, effective practice models, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; De La Paz et al., 2011; Desimone, 2009). Eight teachers expressed concern about the lack of history-specific professional development offerings. The researchers believe that ongoing content-specific professional development tailored to practices and state-mandated content standards



would benefit teachers, enhancing their pedagogical techniques and positively impacting student achievement in end-of-year assessments. Furthermore, the researchers believe that increasing the availability of social studies-specific professional development that encompasses applicability, relevancy and collaboration would boost teacher engagement and enthusiasm about their outlook on professional development. Grant (2003) and Borko (2004) note that most social studies teachers hold a negative view of professional development, believing that current offerings are inadequate and irrelevant.

The current study suggests that practical professional development opportunities are crucial for middle school history teachers. The research highlights the importance of tailoring professional development to the specific needs of teachers and of providing relevant information that aligns with their classroom practices. It further emphasises the value of teachers collaborating with colleagues who teach the same subject and grade level. The study indicates that professional development in history education is often not prioritised over other subjects, such as English-language arts and mathematics. Additionally, the research reveals that professional development frequently incorporates a data component in its framework.

In K–12 public schools, high-quality teacher professional development is considered a critical aspect of educational reform that can contribute to effective teacher pedagogy and improved student achievement (Ball and Cohen, 1999; Elmore, 2002; Guskey, 1995a, 1995b). Since the 1990s, researchers, school administrations and educational specialists have identified standard features of effective professional development, which include content focus, active learning, collaboration, effective practice models, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond and Sykes, 2003; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Elmore, 2002). Study findings on the effective use of professional development by school leaders and educational specialists can benefit social studies teachers beyond their initial pre-service training, enabling schools to develop and design unique, effective content presentations, refine their pedagogical skills and improve student learning and academic achievement (Mizell, 2010; OECD, 1998).

## Conclusion

Findings from the current study revealed the perceptions of middle school history teachers at a micro level. The study highlighted middle school teachers' perceptions of professional development and its relation to subject knowledge, pedagogy and student achievement. The research centred explicitly on middle school history teachers within the western region of the state where the study was conducted. As a result, the findings suggest several possibilities for future studies. Subsequent investigations could be expanded by encompassing a more significant number of teacher participants and school sites, thereby amplifying the scope and scale of the current study. Furthermore, extending this study to encompass multiple school districts across multiple states may yield more comprehensive data and unearth additional themes. Additionally, including teachers from the elementary and high school levels could broaden the research range, potentially illuminating similarities and differences in the professional development offerings across the three tiers of education.

The current study highlighted the necessity for history content-specific professional development opportunities. Teachers expressed limited access to content-specific opportunities compared to their colleagues teaching English-language arts and mathematics. Additionally, teachers emphasised the importance of having relevant and applicable professional development programmes that allow for collaboration with peers teaching the same subject and grade level. Conducting a similar study on educators teaching diverse content areas could yield valuable insights.

## Data and materials availability statement

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article (and its supplementary information files).

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of Memphis ethics board.

### Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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