

Spencer Foundation Grant Awarded to Professor Ryan Knowles to Investigate Teachers' Literature Choices in Social Studies Education

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Child in elementary classroom at Edith Bowen Laboratory School

Ryan Knowles, associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL) in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at Utah State University, was recently awarded a research grant from the renowned Spencer Foundation, a private organization that funds research initiatives that investigate ways to improve education and promote student success. The funding will enable Knowles and his team to quantitatively examine the decisions elementary school teachers are making about social studies curriculum and what factors might be driving their decisions.

Knowles's research at USU focuses on social studies and civics education with an emphasis on large quantitative studies. "I am interested in how schools prepare students to participate in social and political life, to understand how government works, and also how we talk about political differences across ideologies," he says.

Knowles will collaborate on this project with assistant professors Amanda Deliman and Rachel Turner, colleagues in TEAL and co-PIs who are similarly focused on social studies education. Deliman and Turner will provide expertise on curriculum and literature, while Knowles, who also teaches graduate-level statistics at

USU, will provide statistical analysis, a major component of the project.

The impetus for the study is rooted in the consequences of federal education programs such as No Child Left Behind during the Bush administration and Race to the Top under the Obama administration. In the past 25 years, the nation's schools have seen a major decline in teacher autonomy that has impacted social studies and civics education in the elementary classroom. Knowles attributes this decline to the increased pressure on educators to excel in standardized testing.



Professor Ryan Knowles

"With the emphasis on standardized testing and accountability, the standardized test makers and curriculum developers are driving curriculum," explains Knowles. "Because teachers have to teach what the students are going to be tested on, they don't have time to teach social studies because it's not on the tests."

Creative techniques, such as using children's books to integrate social studies into time carved out for reading, enable teachers to focus on social studies topics without dedicating specific time for it. "One of the reasons we want to focus on children's literature in the study is because that's become the fallback for teaching social studies," Knowles explains.

"Using children's literature in early education has a profound impact on children's cognitive and emotional development," adds Amanda Deliman, children's literature expert in TEAL. "By reading stories that reflect various cultures, experiences, and challenges, children learn to

relate to others, cultivating a sense of community and social responsibility.”

The study will be a voluntary five-minute survey of approximately 25 questions that will be emailed to a variety of elementary school teachers across the country. A few questions will gather teachers' demographic information such as their race, the grade they teach, and even the political party they identify with. There will also be some questions about what affects the teacher's curriculum decisions. The bulk of the survey will list 15 to 20 books, along with brief summaries, and an option for participants to select whether they would choose each book for their classrooms.

“We're trying to focus on a lot of different topics and themes around social studies,” says Knowles. “Some of them are about community engagement like how to make a difference in the community and taking care of the environment. Other topics focus on the Civil Rights era and on contemporary issues like Black Lives Matter. We're addressing these bigger issues of our time but then hitting them in different ways—more historical or more contemporary—and then trying to see what books teachers are willing to use in their classrooms.”

The study will gather and analyze teacher data that could number well into the tens of thousands. It will encompass as many teachers as possible, conditional only on which states will grant the investigators access to comprehensive email lists of elementary school teachers. Knowles anticipates a response rate of between 10 and 20 percent, depending on the quality of the email lists they receive from the states, and he hopes that at least 20 states will give them access to their lists.

Knowles is particularly interested in learning whether the teachers' decisions are influenced by controversial state laws. “We're interested in testing whether the state laws strengthen or weaken those influences—if it makes rural teachers less likely to teach certain books and urban teachers more likely to teach certain books,” he says. “I think we'll pick up teachers' perceptions of the strength of a particular law or movement in the state.”

Considering the potential impact of this research project and others like it, Knowles says, “There are different ways to impact policy decisions, and I think academic research is playing a role by having a voice and making an argument in the larger discussion. If I'm going to trust anyone in this process,” he continues, “it's going to be the teachers. They have to navigate all the different factors that influence how and what they teach. I'm hopeful this study will highlight that and give some context about how

they're navigating it so future education programs, state boards of education, and standards writers will understand how to support teachers where they need it most.”

“We are truly honored to receive the Spencer Foundation grant,” adds Deliman. “We hope to uncover insight into how teachers effectively incorporate literature that reflects diverse perspectives in ways that deepen empathy and understanding in school children.”