

Examining Spiraled Elementary Curricula on Columbus: A Case Study

Maegan Wilton and John H. Bickford

Abstract

Educators' content background and use of accurate, age-appropriate teaching materials generates quality teaching. Content in every grade level should supplement content from previous grades in a spiraled format. State test results on students' math and reading indicate, but do not prove, the presence of these two presumptions. Because history is not tested, the authors examined the basis of these two presumptions for history in two school districts that require every elementary educator to teach about Christopher Columbus. Findings reveal significant interconnections between these two presumptions and have consequential implications as states consider standardized testing in other curricular areas, such as history.

In October every year, all American citizens, teachers and students included, celebrate what is known as Columbus Day. This national holiday commemorates Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of America. In doing so, Columbus is seen as a hero. However, historians know this to be less than half the story. As has been examined more comprehensively elsewhere, historians have engaged in healthy debates about Columbus's accomplishments and their significance.¹ While most historians acknowledge the land Columbus (wrongly) identified as India was already occupied, some suggest Phoenician, Carthaginian, Viking, Chinese, and Germanic exploration teams preceded Columbus to the Americas.² Whereas most historians make the case that Columbus was the catalyst for further European exploration of the Atlantic,³ other historians assert that Atlantic exploration was relatively inconsequential when compared to explorations of the Pacific and Indian Oceans.⁴ As many historians identify the resultant European financial windfalls from exploration and colonization,⁵ others suggest – for various reasons – that Europe was relatively slow in economic maturation when compared to other countries and regions.⁶ This indicates that

historians do not agree on what most textbooks assert as (and teachers perceive to be) an accepted history.⁷

The same discord is apparent when historians proffer radically different narratives about Columbus, his motivations to explore, and the negative impacts of his actions (and that of his crew). While Schweikart and Allen⁸ and Zinn⁹ construct what appears likely to be the most transparently divergent interpretative perspectives, most historians – even those separated by decades – converge in agreement that he was both an ambitious navigator and a controversial figure who caused (at least some) harm to those living in the Americas.¹⁰ But they disagreed with intensity on fundamental issues such as Columbus’ motivation and impact. And, yet, the narrative of “heroic discoverer” in search of spices¹¹ is how most Americans view Columbus. It has been convincingly demonstrated that this paradigm is likely impacted by misinformation presented in textbooks and – as the data in this study indicated – well-intentioned but ill-informed teachers.¹²

Students cannot best understand the history of Columbus, or any scientific event or mathematical concept, if teachers do not have a comprehensive awareness and do not utilize age-appropriate, engaging teaching materials.¹³ Denoted as this research project’s first presumption, educators’ knowledge and materials thus enables quality teaching, which manifests in positive students’ responses such as engagement and learning. In other words, teachers’ comprehensive understandings of content and use of accurate, age-appropriate teaching materials generates quality teaching in any subject area.

Topics presented in a spiraled format must both extend previously learned content and prepare students for future content.¹⁴ This occurs in reading and math, where teachers’ introductions of new concepts supplement students’ previously generated understandings.

Thus, denoted as this research project's second presumption, students' understandings of any event, especially a complex topic in which experts' disagreements manifest, must be complicated and complemented with new, age-appropriate information as students' mature.¹⁵ In other words, content in every grade level should supplement content from previous grade levels and background knowledge in a spiraled format.

For students to best understand a complicated topic, teachers must maximize these two presumptions. Teachers generate a comprehensive awareness, which connects these two presumptions, through both understanding and utilizing – in age-appropriate ways – the historical sources.¹⁶ Summative state and national assessment results on tested curricula such as math and reading indicate, but do not prove, the presence of these two presumptions. Because history is not tested, the authors sought to examine the basis of these two presumptions for history in two local school districts. The sites were selected because the two districts each required every elementary educator to teach a history lesson or unit about Columbus, the only national holiday awarded to a non-American citizen. These were each intended to be spiraled social studies curricula. While the state has proposed knowledge and performance standards for history and social science in elementary and middle grades (which cohere to Common Core),¹⁷ Columbus is not named nor are any materials prescribed. Thus, these two districts mandate teachers supplement the state's proposed knowledge and performance standards with national holidays (i.e., Martin Luther King Day, Presidents Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, and Columbus Day). Neither district provided any curriculum assistance or recommendations, relegating curricular choices to individual teachers' discretion while mandating a spiraled curricula about Columbus.

The authors previously published guide for a spiraled social studies curriculum on Columbus.¹⁸ In it, they examined in detail the primary source material and competing secondary interpretations while proffering differentiated content, age-appropriate methods, and authentic assessments for elementary, middle level, and high school teachers. In doing so, the authors reviewed, complimented, critiqued, and extended previously published (and popular) strategies proffered within *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*.¹⁹ Because of space constraints and to avoid redundancy, this content will be truncated. Briefly summarizing historians' conclusions (and disagreements) will position the reader to better understand the disparity between historians' understandings of and educators' teachings about Columbus.

Examination of primary sources like Bartolome De Las Casas' writings, Antonio de Montesino's sermon, and Christopher Columbus's diary suggest Columbus's navigational talent, motivation, and actions. Such sources provide a rich and comprehensive view of the history; their complexities and complications generate potentialities for multiple and competing interpretations that engage students. The question, then, is which historical interpretation? And, which primary sources did the historians use?

Historians focus on different primary sources. Some historical works are based on seemingly banal or relatively trivial journal entries such as this letter Columbus wrote to the King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain when describing the Arawaks, the Native American culture he encountered.

“Of anything they have, if you ask them for it, they never say no; rather they invite the person to share it, and show as much love as if they were giving their hearts; and whether the thing be of value or of small price, at once they are content with whatever little thing of whatever kind may be given to them.”²⁰

This reveals little about Columbus's motivations save curiosity. Other historians focus on Columbus's written comments that imply greed like, "Gold is most excellent; gold is treasure, and he who possesses it does all he wishes to in this world."²¹ Still others concentrate on Columbus's written comments that denote his involvement in trans-Atlantic slavery, like "They [the Arawaks] should be good servants...I, our Lord being pleased, will take hence, at the time of my departure, six natives for your Highnesses."²² Other historians focus on Columbus's endorsement of and participation in brutal means to obtain gold. In short, all Arawaks above the age of fourteen were given copper tokens to wear around their necks only after providing a certain amount of gold every few months; those found without a copper token were tortured until they bled to death.²³ The arguments in such secondary history books are based on such supplemental primary sources as "The Requirement," a historical term for a speech Columbus read aloud (in Spanish, no less) to the Arawaks.

"I implore you to recognize the Church as a lady and in the name of the Pope take the king as lord of this land and obey his mandates. If you do not do it, I tell you that with the help of God I will enter powerfully against you all. I will make war everywhere and every way I can. I will subject you to the yoke and obedience to the Church and to his majesty. I will take your women and children and make them slaves. ... The deaths and injuries that you will receive from here on will be your own fault and not that of his majesty nor of the gentlemen that accompany me."²⁴

Historians also have argued that Columbus was the catalyst for the Arawaks' infanticide. Historians document the Arawaks' infanticide as either a purposeful and planned decision so their children would not grow up under tyranny or an impulsive and desperate act when fleeing Columbus's army.²⁵

While some argue that, due to drastic changes in societal norms, it is a historical error in decontextualization to judge such actions from a modern standpoint or contemporary perspective,²⁶ others point out that the Spanish royalty forbade such acts *during* Columbus's

later voyages which signify this behavior was not tolerated – much less accepted – at the time.²⁷ Such historians have argued that Columbus and his men, motivated for glory and riches and worried about punishments for promises left unfulfilled, engaged in slavery, brutally killed native people, and were catalysts for infanticide. Other historians disagreed, arguing Columbus was a noble and ambitious navigator, well-intentioned God-fearing Christian whose behaviors were not anomalous.²⁸

To paraphrase an oft-quoted claim, children must learn the past so as to avoid repeating it. Similarly, to tell only the virtuous or noble aspects of Columbus's life constructs an *inaccurate* narrative from which children can most certainly not gain a comprehensive understanding. Researchers interested in history education contend these events should not be ignored, that this debate should not be reserved simply for historians, and that students should be exposed to this content.²⁹ While this is difficult to accomplish in elementary school contexts, it is far from impossible. While students, especially those in the primary grades, do not think like older elementary students and certainly not like historians, research indicates they can learn to use some of the historians' heuristics if the content is age-appropriate and the employed methodologies are developmentally-appropriate.³⁰ Using constructivist education theory as a model, history education researchers have detailed the compulsory heuristics for students to read like a historian³¹ along with effective and age-appropriate methodology and assessment to both facilitate and measure learning.³²

As such, while the idea of critical evaluation of the history surrounding Columbus is not new or original, it is unique to examine how it is taught on the elementary level. This research paper is a case study on how this content *is* taught in two districts. These two districts were selected because they each mandate the inclusion of Columbus content in a spiraled format in

every classroom in grades 1st-6th. The authors wondered if students know about the cruelties and injustices that occurred *after* Columbus “sailed the ocean blue” in 1492? Or, more importantly, how much do the teachers themselves know? And, how do these districts teach about such a controversial man in a spiraled format? This research project, a case study examining local elementary teachers’ understandings of and teaching practices on Columbus, seeks to answer these questions.

This paper is organized into four main sections. The *Research Context* describes the examined school districts and time devoted to various curricula. The *Research Methodology* details the employed data collection techniques. The *Findings* reports the results using illustrative graphs. Lastly, the section entitled *Discussions* addresses the research questions and reflectively assesses the manifestations of the aforementioned research presumptions.

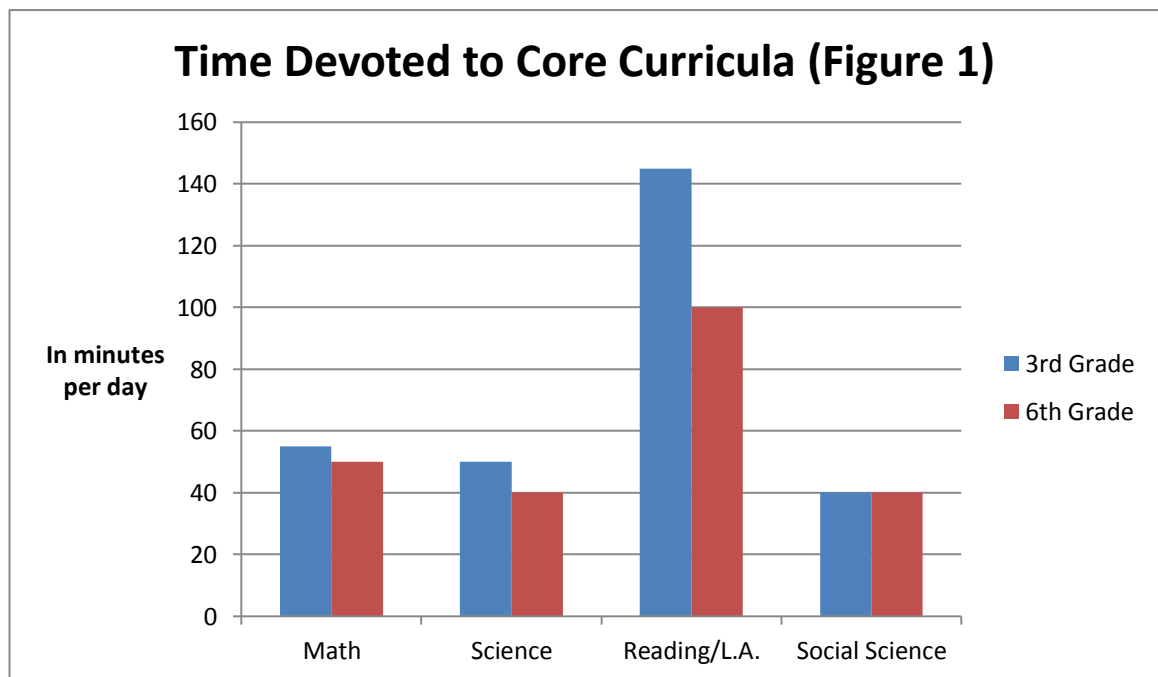
The Research Context

Both school districts were located in small Midwestern cities. Each city, according to census records, had a population of between 15-30,000; over 90% of the citizens of each city were white.³³ The public school districts each had an enrollment of between 2-3,000 students. The study consisted of the teachers in the elementary schools. During the time of this data collection, the average class sizes for both districts for grades 1st-3rd were each 22-23 students and the average class sizes for grades 4th-6th were each 24-25 students.

Located in middle class sections with well-groomed lawns and a variety of playground equipment throughout the area, visitors to the schools observed clean hallways, classroom walls decorated with the children’s work, posters with words of encouragement, and well-maintained facilities. The cities each thrived in a county of rural farmland and contained various corporate businesses, which is due in part to the economic stability that a comprehensive public

university and regional hospital provided. The aforementioned dynamics of these cities likely positively influenced its school district.

Using data collected from the *Illinois School Report Card*,³⁴ the researchers assessed the time spent on each core subject in grades third and sixth. Because the time was remarkably similar between the districts, the information was combined into one graph. In the 3rd and 6th grade, teachers spent an average of 40 minutes a day teaching social science. To put this into perspective, teachers spent less time on social science than any other subject. (See figure 1 below.)



This non-social science focus might be due to the districts' response to state assessments. All Illinois schools were assessed in reading, mathematics, and science – but not social science – during each school year.³⁵ That 85.4% of the students in grades 1-3 and 91.5% of students in 4th-6th met or exceeded the state test standards in all areas tested demonstrates the school districts' relative success in meeting its goals for 2008-2009. In other words, the districts clearly did well in areas assessed. The state's decision, as this research will

demonstrate, to not test social science curricula likely negatively impacted its teaching to some extent. However, as previously noted, this research – while limited in size – is a case study whose findings have demonstrable implications.

Research Methodology

This research investigates local teachers' content knowledge of Christopher Columbus and is based on two presumptions. First, the researchers hypothesized that what teachers know (and do not know) about Columbus is both substantial, and significantly influences *how* they teach about him. Second, the researchers presume that spiraled curricula in a given grade should complicate and complement students' previously generated understandings.

In order to have a comprehensive data pool, the researchers interviewed a representative number of elementary teachers in every grade 1st through 6th. This resulted in about six teachers per grade level, thirty-four educators total (seventeen for each district), which represented roughly 40% of the teacher population. While the researchers intended to interview at least three teachers in each grade level in each district, not all 5th and 6th grade teachers taught social studies.

Upon explaining the purpose of the study to individual teachers, the interviewer asked if they would like to be involved in the study. If the individual teacher consented, the interviewer explained in detail the study and answered all questions about the informed consent document. The interviewer queried the teachers individually; each interview utilized an open-ended, generative format. In doing so, the interviewer asked questions (see below) and allowed the interviewee to respond in as much detail as they felt necessary. Interviews lasted more than thirty minutes, with some going past an hour. These interviews garnered data on teachers'

background knowledge about Columbus and materials utilized. Figure 2 details the questions asked.

Interview Questionnaire (Figure 2)	
Question 1	How much time is spent on the teaching of Christopher Columbus?
Question 2	How and what do you teach about Christopher Columbus?
Question 3	What materials do you use to teach Christopher Columbus?
Question 4	What are the students' reactions to your Christopher Columbus curricula?
Question 5	Have you ever thought about adding to or taking away from the curricula in regards to Christopher Columbus?
Question 6	Would you like the results from the study emailed to you?

The researchers requested copies of all teaching materials. These were photocopied, digitally scanned, and analyzed using content-analysis.³⁶ The researchers then methodologically triangulated data generated from these teaching materials and interviews with teachers.³⁷ The researchers collected and stored the data using pseudonyms and subject identifiers to protect confidentiality. To minimize the research participants' potential feelings of awkwardness or embarrassment, the interviewer reminded the participants that all accurate answers were adequate for the purposes of the research. While avoiding generalizations about curricular, methodological, or pedagogical trends in elementary schools outside of these districts, the research findings are illustrative of emergent patterns within these two school districts.

Findings

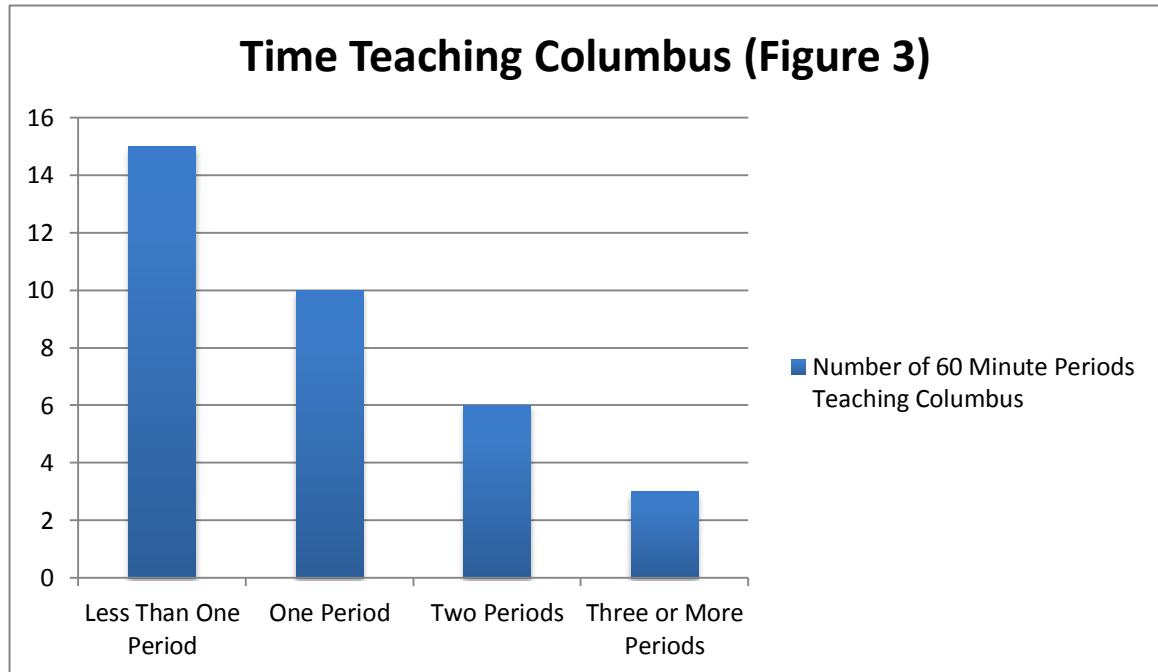
This research project generated seven consequential findings, which combine to form the basis for the seven subsequent subsections. For purposes of clarity, it is important to first summarize the findings. In *Time Spent*, the researchers analyzed the amount of time spent on teaching Columbus to find that teachers spent little, if any, time on Columbus, the only non-

American to have a national holiday. In *Perspectives Taught*, the researchers scrutinized the educators' teaching materials to locate the perspectives used to teach about Columbus and found the employed historical content did not provide students with multiple or competing perspectives, which historians have deftly developed. In *Materials Used*, the researchers examined the materials the educators used to teach the content on Columbus and found the employed teaching materials did not incorporate primary historical sources. In *Teachers' Repeated Superficiality and Students' Engagement*, the researchers investigated how the spiraled curriculum extended students' understandings from previous years; they found that the content was repeated ad infinitum – with little, if anything, added – in all grades of the elementary schools, which possibly explained why teachers reported students' apathy and disinterest. In *Teachers' Historical Understandings*, the researchers examined the teachers' educational backgrounds and found most were not versed in the history and used outdated information. In *Teachers' Willingness to Adjust the Curriculum*, the interviewers explored the teachers' motivation to adjust the content or increase time spent on Columbus; they found teachers who were uninterested in modifying their Columbus curriculum. Finally, in *Constraints from Standardized Testing*, the researchers examined the impact of the state's assessment on the time allowed for and educators' interest in teaching history and concluded the state's assessment protocol appeared to negatively impact both districts' time allotments for and educators' perceptions of the importance of teaching history.

Time Spent

In order to determine the amount of class time devoted to Columbus, the interviewer asked “How many forty-fifty minute social science class periods are spent on the teaching of Christopher Columbus?” Figure 3 denotes findings that indicate the relatively small amounts of

time per year devoted to this topic, the only historical topic taught in a spiraled format in either district.



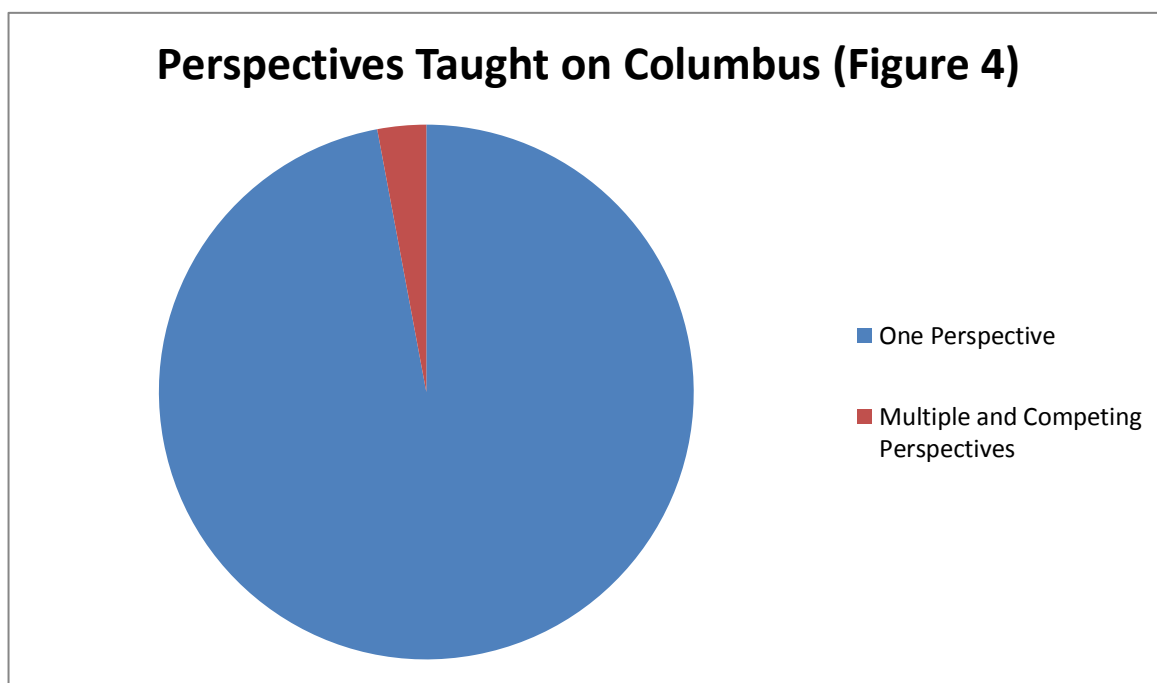
From this data, one can deduce two basic and seemingly incongruent findings. Taken positively, all of the elementary teachers spent at least some time teaching about Columbus and over half spent one period or more. Since the data represents teachers in grades 1st-6th and since the districts mandated spiraled content, this suggests students studied Columbus annually for a significant amount of time when compared to other historical figures. From a history education perspective, it is encouraging to see this time devoted to a significant historical figure.³⁸ However, seen differently, more than half of the teachers interviewed spent one social science class period or less on Columbus.

As mentioned previously, this is likely a resultant implication of the state not testing social science content. While the study's sample size is limited to two school districts, anecdotal evidence (and logic) suggests this pattern manifests in other districts throughout the state. One could argue this to be brief, at best, or superficial, at worst. Furthermore, one can

easily become disheartened after examining the limited historical perspectives that teachers utilized.

Perspectives Taught

To examine the different perspectives used to teach about Columbus, the interviewer asked, “What do you teach about Christopher Columbus?” The overwhelming majority of teachers’ responses indicated that they taught the “simple facts” (names and dates) about Columbus or positive details about his accomplishments (i.e. his navigational talent and “discovery”). Because both are based on one-dimensional portrayals of Columbus, these were grouped under the term, “Single Perspective.” Knowing historians’ divergent interpretations, it was disheartening that only one teacher employed multiple and competing perspectives to teach about Columbus. Figure 4 displays these findings.



While history education researchers argue teachers’ presentations of multiple and divergent interpretations of content are paramount to engage students and elicit students’ historical thinking,³⁹ the data indicate the vast majority (33/34) of teachers did not do so. The

lack of opposing and contradictory perspectives failed to provide students with a gateway to examine the many different interpretations of Columbus.⁴⁰ Historians' divergent and disparate interpretations (which center on Columbus's navigational skills, motivations to explore, greed, involvement in slavery, and brutal treatment of the Arawaks) were simply excluded.

It is highly important for teachers to provide students with multiple and competing perspectives, while also being sure that these sources are from reliable primary sources.⁴¹ The teachers provided simple facts like dates and names for students to memorize. History educators frequently point out that content memorization does not indicate historical thinking and rarely results in active engagement.⁴² Using the data-gathering techniques, the researchers could not determine the cause of teachers' avoidance of multiple and competing perspectives. It might have been a result of teachers' lack of knowledge about the history. It might, also, have been a result of teachers' perceptions that elementary students could not synthesize divergent interpretations of the same event. Research indicates either hypothesis is tenable.⁴³

Ironically, as noted through examination of collected teaching materials, the educators who provided their students with one perspective also provided more in-depth content about Columbus, but they focused only on traits that can be seen as positive or admirable. These teachers, for instance, utilized literature that detailed his navigation skills, his ability to motivate, his bold leadership, etc. Teaching only the "hero" aspect appears superficial because it avoids the historical data that suggests other non-heroic behaviors and less-than-admirable intentions. The teacher who provided multiple and competing perspectives facilitated students' rumination about the different interpretations of Columbus, his intentions, and his impact. Social studies education researchers⁴⁴ would likely argue that this teacher's students could then more accurately assess Columbus's actions and evaluate their impact. Significantly, this

teacher also noted that her students investigated Columbus over a period of five days, far longer than any other teacher surveyed.

The use of multiple perspectives enables students to analyze historical content from competing viewpoints and capture a more comprehensive view of the history of Columbus. When analyzing the information that is taught, it is also very important to know the source from which that information was derived. Since the employed perspectives stem from particular historical resources, it is meaningful to examine the teaching materials used for Columbus content.

Materials Used

During data collection, the researchers noticed a direct correlation between the answers from the question, “What materials do you use to teach about Christopher Columbus?” and the answers from the previous question, “What do you teach about Christopher Columbus?” Stated simply, teachers who taught only one perspective about Columbus often incorporated picture books, poems, and arts-based teaching materials. While these materials can be very useful in introducing Columbus, they lack the reliable historical content needed to properly address the historical events. Further, these materials focused on the positive results that emerged from Columbus’s travels to the Americas, which is limiting, at best, and potentially biased, at worst. While some of the historical content was derived from primary sources, it lacked the information needed for students to construct a more comprehensive narrative of the events that took place. Stated simply, the employed materials lacked the multiple viewpoints of the history of Columbus.

The teacher that taught using multiple perspectives utilized comprehensive and historically accurate materials based on reliable primary sources. This is quite positive because

it enabled students to actively construct a more comprehensive understanding of Columbus. However, it also can seem less than ideal when it is noted that this teacher was the only educator identified who employed such a pedagogically-sound method. While the sample size for this finding is certainly restrictive, the pattern – while not able to be generalized – is clear. While such limitations are inherent with all case studies, they are still illustrative and meaningful. As before, it could not be detected if the teachers were unaware of the adaptability of primary source material for young students or if teachers felt their students were unable to read, interpret, and comprehend detail-rich primary sources. Research indicates either assumption is reasonable albeit speculative.⁴⁵

Certain teaching materials capture the interest of different students. The aforementioned teacher did just that. However, most others did not. This is unsettling considering the abundance of highly engaging, historically accurate literature that is inclusive of the latest historical, anthropological, and archaeological research of this era; further, these secondary sources include developmentally-appropriate primary source adaptations.⁴⁶ One then wonders how students responded to the educators' teaching practices and employed materials.

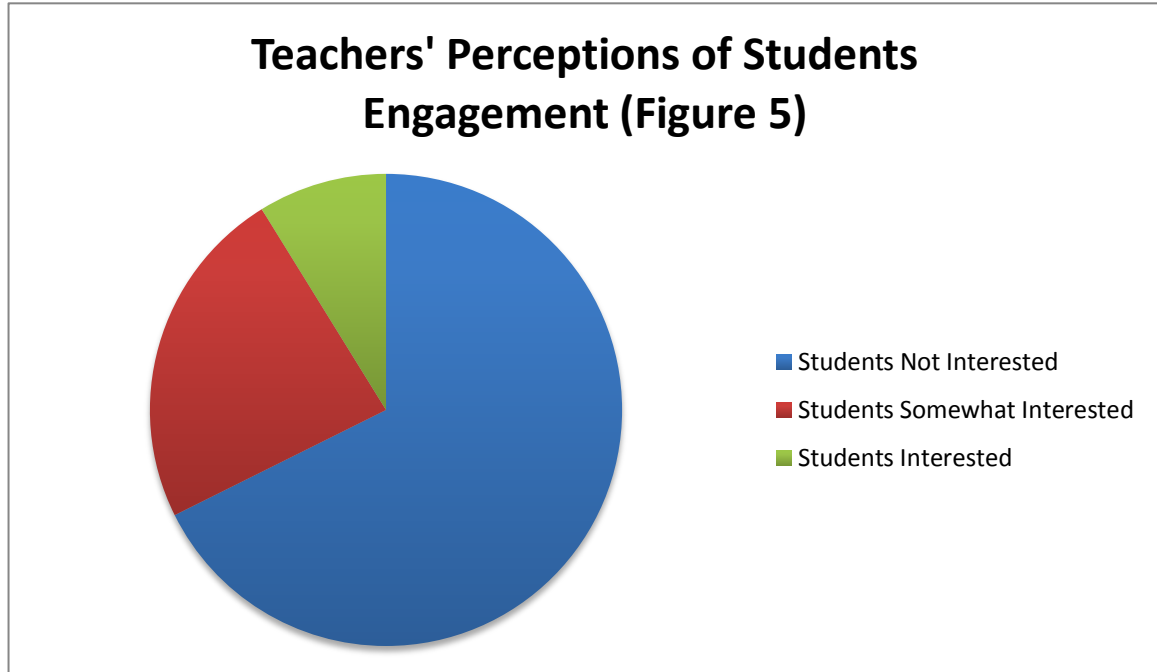
Teachers' Repeated Superficiality and Students' Engagement

Considering that the majority of teachers did not present multiple perspectives or reliable primary source content, one wonders about students' engagement with the content. Their ability to construct a comprehensive narrative is limited, at best, when the content does not elicit discussions about varied interpretations.⁴⁷ Furthermore, this paradigm elicits such questions as, what new information is presented in 4th, 5th, and 6th grade that students did not

already learn in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd? And, how can re-teaching the same content engage or interest students?

Previously, the authors speculated about how the seemingly redundant content, when repeated over a 6 year period, lasting anywhere from one class period to a week or more each year, would not likely engage students. There is ample evidence to suggest that such replication of social science content not only takes place in various school contexts,⁴⁸ but that it also negatively impacts students' interest and engagement.⁴⁹ Many educational theorists vehemently criticize incoherent and ineffectively planned curricula.⁵⁰

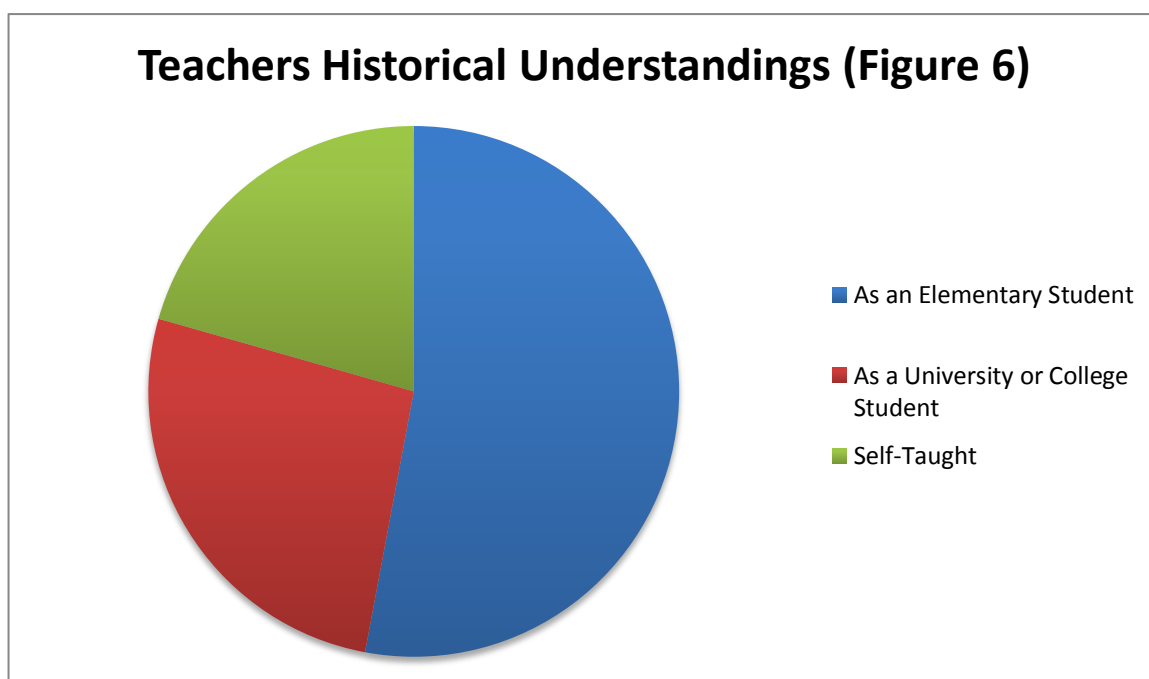
To gauge the teachers' perceptions of students' responses to their teaching practices, the interviewer asked "What are the student's reactions to your Christopher Columbus curricula?" More than half responded that their students were not interested, while the remaining responded that their students displayed some level of interest. These findings (which appear below in Figure 5) are consistent with previous research on superficial elementary social science content, disinterested elementary students, and less-than-creative elementary educators' methodologies for teaching social science content.⁵¹



Less than one-tenth of teachers described their students as interested, while over ninety percent perceived their students as “not interested” or “somewhat interested” in the material. If one can believe in the accuracy of self-reporting,⁵² these are dismal statistics. If one skeptically questions the accuracy of self-reporting, it is likely that less than one-tenth of teachers felt their students were interested. While a small sample size does not allow for generalizations, it does indicate a pattern that teachers perceived students to be bored with presented information. This appears to be strongly correlated with the annual repetition of the same content. Based on teachers’ self-reporting of students’ lack of engagement, questions abound about teachers’ perceptions of students’ abilities to digest rich and multiple primary sources and make connections to competing interpretations. Questions also emerge about the teachers’ lack of strong historical background knowledge of Columbus, which impacts their abilities to teach such content.

Teachers’ Historical Understandings

Since educators' historical background knowledge influences their teaching practices on Columbus, it is important to examine the teachers' understandings of Columbus. To better understand the teacher's historical background knowledge, the interviewer asked, "Where have you learned about Christopher Columbus?" More than half (18 out of 34) relied on content they learned as elementary school students. A relatively similar percentage completed at least one college or university course that included content about Columbus (9 out of 34) as those who claimed to have buttressed their understandings through independent studying (7 out of 34). These findings appear in Figure 6.

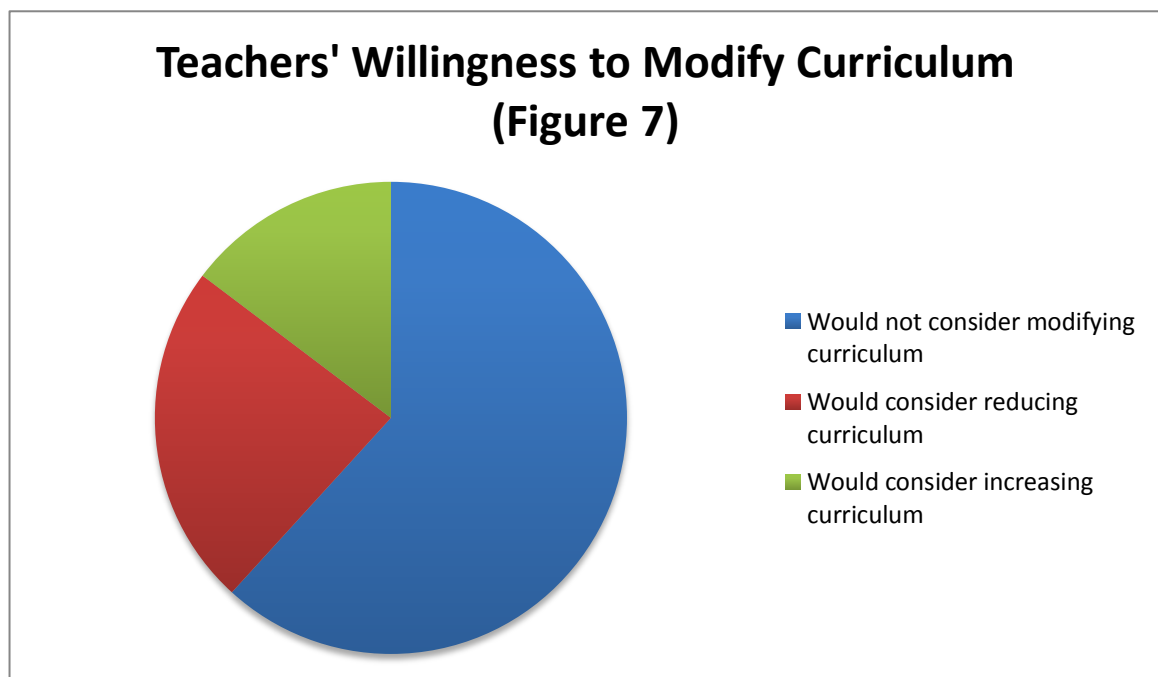


Given the aforementioned inherent flaws in relying on self-reporting,⁵³ the researchers approached this data with caution. Based on previously documented patterns, it seems safe to conclude the vast majority of these educators have not been exposed to what history education researchers would describe as comprehensive historical content.⁵⁴ This likely resulted in teachers' apparent reliance on the "simple facts" provided in textbooks or generic historical fiction accounts of Columbus's navigational talent. This, in turn, probably contributed to the

teachers' construction of an outdated, simplistic, and inaccurate narrative about Columbus. To be precise, *outdated* denotes the exclusion of the latest historical knowledge; *simplistic* indicates a single perspective; and *inaccurate* represents an exclusion of material that presents the disputed and contentious nature of this content. Considering this, the researchers sought to measure the teachers' interest in and motivation to make adjustments to their teaching.

Teachers' Willingness to Adjust the Curriculum

In order to more accurately examine the teachers' motivation and interest in teaching the content more comprehensively, the interviewer asked, "Have you ever thought about adding to or taking away from the curricula in regards to Columbus?" These findings are reported in figure 7.



It was disappointing that only five (out of 34) of the teachers wished to add to the curriculum and the vast majority intended to either keep or reduce the current curriculum. Combining the educators' lack of background knowledge, this did not surprise the researchers. Most teachers reported stronger interest in and more motivation for teaching reading,

mathematics, and science. When coupled with teachers' reported perceptions of students' disinterest, it surprised the researchers that more were not responsive to suggestions for improvement. While teachers' age was a potential factor that could possibly detract from teachers' motivation to adapt and improve, the data presented no discernable patterns between experience and willingness to adapt. One then wonders how time constraints and standardized tests impact the curricula and teachers' motivation for improving curricula and methodology.

Constraints from Standardized Testing

Following state protocol, the school districts did not test students in any social science area. Every teacher interviewed reported devoting far more time to tested curricula, such as mathematics, reading, and science. Data garnered from the Illinois School Report Card⁵⁵ regarding the distribution of time for each curriculum confirmed the researchers' suspicions about the lack of time students' spent learning the content.

All the teachers interviewed mentioned (and some emphatically asserted) that the state's adherence to standardized testing limited (or severely constrained) their teaching. Of interest, slightly more than half of the interviewed teachers mentioned that standardized tests caused them to question including *any* content on Columbus. Simply put, teachers focused on subjects that were included in the standardized tests and wondered about direct benefits of teaching non-tested content. Social science did not receive as much instruction time as other subjects because of the tests and the need for positive test scores negatively impacted teachers' motivation to include or improve teaching what more than one teacher described as "unnecessary content".

While some researchers contend that social science is being effectively taught in certain cases in elementary schools,⁵⁶ others report contradictory findings.⁵⁷ Due to a lack of state-

level focus with regards to standardized tests, the elementary teachers did not perceive it to be important and, hence, gave it very little attention. This is consistent with previous research on elementary teachers' dissemination of social science content.⁵⁸ One may worry about how much control the standardized tests have on the curriculum. This question alone could have its own research paper, but space limitations constrain the researchers from addressing it here. For the sake of clarity, the focus remains that teachers (and the districts) marginalized social science content time. This resulted in outdated, simplistic, and inaccurate elementary school curricula about Columbus. That the spiraled curricula were mandated, though, suggested the districts' perceptions of its importance. That the mandated spiraled curricula were ineffectively taught likely resulted from teachers' time constraints, non-employment of multiple and competing perspectives, and non-employment of rich primary sources. These were likely caused by teachers' historical unpreparedness, unwillingness to adapt, and constraints from standardized testing.

Discussions

Based on a thorough review of the data, many patterns emerged. When compactly summarized, elementary teachers at these districts devoted little time to teaching Columbus and utilized simplistic historical content that did not represent the most current historical understandings. Furthermore, the historical content did not employ reliable, engaging, and developmentally-appropriate primary sources, nor did the content provide multiple and competing interpretations about Columbus. The vast majority of teachers employed mostly historical fiction texts that celebrated Columbus's navigational skills and/or generic textbook summaries of facts and dates.

The various teachers' Columbus curricula seemed to repeat in all six grades of the elementary schools with little, if any, nuanced additions. This appears to be a demonstration of redundancy. Students, even young children, can think on many levels and the curricula should elicit such cognition.⁵⁹ While students, especially in primary elementary grades, do not think like historians, research indicates they can learn to use some of the historians' heuristics if the content is age- appropriate and the employed methodologies are developmentally-appropriate.⁶⁰ The content presented did not spiral effectively because it did not supplement or complicate previous years' understandings, nor was it connected substantively to content in future grades. The inter-grade Columbus curricula were spiraled in name only because it did not appear to challenge the students with new content. As the students mature in age, teachers should present more intricate information on the subject,⁶¹ which was not the case. This all seemingly contributed to (teachers' perceptions of) students' apathy towards the content and students' (mis)understandings about the disputed interpretations of this contentious topic.

The aforementioned findings were likely the result of many variables. The teachers had outdated and simplistic understandings of Columbus; they worried about teaching content that was not included in the state's standardized test; and the schools limited their time to teach social science (possibly due also to expectations from standardized tests). These variables appeared to manifest in educators' ambivalence about the importance of teaching history.

Based on these findings, teachers unintentionally, and due to an assortment of outside variables, historically decontextualized Columbus.⁶² This decontextualization, which is akin to sterilization, occurred when teachers focused only on teaching the positive aspects of (or names and dates surrounding) Columbus's history. Students cannot actively construct a comprehensive (much less nuanced) understanding of Columbus if they are only provided

positive information. They are left with a less-than-accurate awareness about Columbus, his motivation, his actions, and the impact of his actions on the Arawaks.

One may argue that the information at hand is not appropriate or is too controversial for certain age groups. This is a valid claim. Similarly, many teachers noted a genuine interest in teaching about the positive aspects of Columbus's life and accomplishments. They contended that because Columbus Day is a national holiday, then he should be celebrated as a hero and the lessons should include only the age-appropriate content. The authors assert, however, that if the content – when told comprehensively – is too brutal, too atrocious for youngsters, then the topic should be set aside for older grades when children are more able to comprehend its totality. The authors speculate that most historians, teaches, and parents would strenuously object to a unit on Adolf Hitler that focused solely on his abilities to elicit national pride and industrialize Germany. If sterilizing Hitler's impact on Germany, Europe, and the world to include *only* positive or "heroic" aspects is misrepresenting history, the same holds true for Columbus. The authors do not assert that Hitler and Columbus are equivalent forms of evil. They do stress that neither figure should be decontextualized, that "heroification" is not helpful, and that if the content is too contentious to be presented comprehensively at the elementary level then it should be set aside for older students.

It has been claimed that teachers decontextualize history and engage in "heroification" when they unintentionally omit or intentionally censure details that complicate historical figures' lives and historical events. This "degenerative" path constructs a one-dimensional narrative of the "hero" as pious and without fault.⁶³ While avoiding controversy, this process is at best less-than-comprehensive and, at worst, intellectually dishonest. Historians, teachers, and parents would likely object to the heroification of Hitler, but why do the same groups not

object to teachers' heroification of Columbus? The answer to might lie in the American public's acceptance of Columbus Day as a national holiday or the ubiquity of landmarks named in his honor or for the sake of avoiding controversy by focusing on the positive aspects or to be less confusing for young students or for some combination of the aforementioned. This heroification, though, is simplistic to students who are able to comprehend disagreements, divergent opinions, and dishonesty. They are adept in identifying the social dynamics that impact interpersonal conflicts on the playground, might. They argue over a score or a perceived slight and easily recognize multiple perspectives. Research findings have indicated that controversy engages students in content.⁶⁴ Teachers can utilize this paradigm of controversy by presenting competing narratives that contradict each other. As it now stands, Columbus is only seen as a hero. The authors assert this heroification likely is the result of many of the aforementioned findings, which can be grouped into two patterns: teacher preparedness and external regulations.

In this case study, the teachers were less-than-prepared to teach a comprehensive unit on Columbus. They did not have the historical content background. They appeared ambivalent about learning new material and reported students' apathy towards the content they presented and their teaching practices. These assertions, however, are not intended to simply blame the teachers. The current public education system, and more specifically the state's regulations, impacts what and how educators teach.

Most elementary educators employ age-appropriate, engaging, and spiraled reading and math content, in part, because of the state's focus on assessing those curricula.⁶⁵ The same is not true for social science and history because the state did not measure schools' effectiveness based on students' successes on standardized assessments in social science and history. As

previously reported, to positively impact students' achievement on the tested curricula and to efficiently utilize teachers' time, the local school district limits teaching social science and history. As it now stands, social science – one of the four core curricula – receives disproportionately less class time and less teacher focus. Further, the non-focus on social science and history leaves teachers and the district with an ineffectively planned spiraled curriculum on Columbus.

Teachers' content knowledge proved insufficient as they relied on less-than-comprehensive content. This resulted in decontextualized and hero-based teaching practices among elementary faculty. The district's spiraling of content proved ineffective. This generated artificial understandings among students. While Columbus did accomplish much, a comprehensive examination complicates the story. To celebrate only his navigational skills or to teach only the dates does not represent history nor does it demonstrate quality teaching.

As such, this case study identified the absence of the aforementioned two presumptions in these elementary social studies contexts. While limited in size and scope, these findings have consequential implications as states consider standardized testing in other curricular areas and as various political and educational groups examine and present common core content standards. While one can debate the effectiveness of the former or specific content to be included in the latter, it would be hard to praise this district's spiraling of this content and these teachers' background knowledge and teaching practices on this content. While this case study's findings cannot be generalized on a state or national level, they are indicative of what is currently happening in two local contexts and do suggest a pattern that is less-than-ideal.

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⁸ Schweikart and Allen, *A Patriot's History of the United States*, chapter 1.

⁹ Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, chapter 1.

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