

Providing authentic and responsive experiences: insights from an embedded social studies methods course at a PDS school

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Abstract

Purpose – Taught in a P12 school, an embedded preservice education course provides a uniquely contextualized learning experience by leveraging the resources of the host school to integrate preservice teachers into the culture of the host school. This article presents the development, structure and impact of an embedded middle-level social studies methodology course as part of a formal school-university partnership over a three-year span of time.

Design/methodology/approach – Presented through four reflective vignettes, this article documents the experience through the perspectives of the professor of the course, a social studies teacher at the school, the principal at the school and a former student in the course.

Findings – Through the creation of reflective vignettes, we were able to consider how, through the use of a structure using characteristics of a professional learning community, the embedding of the social studies methodology course provided authentic and responsive learning for both preservice teachers and the teachers in the social studies department. By intentionally positioning preservice teachers and teachers to interact as colleagues, the embedded course increased the sense of ownership and professionalism for all participants.

Originality/value – Unique to our embedding of a social studies methods course was the inclusion of teachers from the partner school as both leaders and learners. Through documenting our four perspectives, we demonstrate how the course positioned preservice teachers to feel like a part of the school and offered teachers opportunities for growth.

Keywords University partnerships, Professional development schools, Embedded courses, Teacher leadership, Social studies education

Paper type Case report

While the [American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education \(2018\)](#) advocates for embedded clinical experiences, preservice teachers (PSTs) can also benefit from methods courses embedded within a school ([Hamilton & Margot, 2024](#); [Skinner, 2024](#)). Embedding preservice education courses in partner schools has been a characteristic of our Professional Development Schools (PDS) Network for two decades ([Compton-Lilly et al., 2025](#); [Eargle, Holden, Eberlin, & Sanders, 2025](#); [Field, Blakney, Burton, Dunlap, Faile, & Jackson, 2010](#); [Lotter, Smoak, Blakney, & Plotner, 2019](#)). An embedded methods course is a type of boundary-spanning work that characterizes a school-university partnership ([National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021](#)). [Cosenza et al. \(2023\)](#) noted that boundary spanning work highlights the “importance of both institutions collaborating in a



space that embraces the values of both partners without compromising ideals and goals” (p. 147). We entered our collaboration to embed a social studies methods course in a middle school, knowing that it would require shared values, flexibility and a dedication to both teacher development and preservice education.

As social studies educators, we have observed that the literature on social studies collaborations in a school-university partnership remains generally sparse (Chase & Merryfield, 1998; DiGiacomo, Han, Trapp, & Kahloon, 2022; Eargle, 2013; Gieselmann, 2008; Hohenbrink, Johnston, & Westhoven, 1997; Skinner, 2024; Vontz, Franke, Burenheide, & Bietau, 2007). The existing literature ranges from developing after-school initiatives for student success (Gieselmann, 2008) to understanding how social studies teachers conceptualize civic education (DiGiacomo *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, researchers focus on how partnerships have improved social studies teacher practice and have shifted teacher receptivity to working with PSTs (Chase & Merryfield, 1998; Eargle, 2013). Finally, the literature is characterized by professors’ reflections on how partnerships helped them rethink existing social studies methods courses (Hohenbrink *et al.*, 1997; Skinner, 2024; Vontz *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, we contribute to the existing literature by documenting the process of embedding a social studies methods course to both prepare PSTs and provide professional growth for teachers.

In this article, we document how *Methods and Materials for Teaching Social Studies in the Middle School* - referred to henceforth as *Social Studies Methods* – is being embedded at R. H. Fulmer Middle School (FMS). We began our work in the spring of 2023 with three questions designed to embed the course at FMS (Figure 1). While *Social Studies Methods* does not include a clinical experience, we developed it as an embedded course with layers of interactions and learning (Figure 2) to provide preservice teachers and FMS social studies teachers with a unique learning experience. The interactions have taken on qualities of a professional learning community (PLC). Wald and Castleberry (2000) defined a PLC as a collaborative model in which research-based learning is active, relevant, adaptable and experimental. Bowgen and Sever (2014) noted that the differentiated learning within a PLC can result from classroom observations, identifying areas of improvement and modeling instruction. A study of PLCs across international contexts demonstrates a positive impact on teacher self-efficacy (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025). Given this, it is no surprise that Polly *et al.* (2003b) noted that PLCs serve an important role in PDS partnerships. The literature on PLCs, or similar groups, in a PDS has recently included inquiry-driven book studies among teacher leaders (Holden & Eargle, 2025) and creating a PLC model among students in a *Social Studies Methods* course (Skinner, 2024). We differ from Skinner (2024) in the creation of a PLC-style model that intentionally positions social studies preservice teachers and teachers to learn alongside and from each other.

Three years into our collaboration, we returned to those initial questions (Figure 1) to document our work in this article, which serves to meet Breault’s (2010) call for storytelling by PDS partners as a means of sharing innovative structures and practices without the burden of research frameworks or arriving at generalizable findings. To do this, we describe the context of FMS and the school’s history as a PDS school in the University of South Carolina (USC) PDS Network. Next, we explain how we embedded *Social Studies Methods* at FMS. Then, we offer four vignettes to capture our unique perspectives – that of the course instructor, an administrator, a social studies teacher and a former student – as reflections on the impact that *Social Studies Methods* has on both PSTs and FMS teachers. In this regard, the vignettes of the

1. How can we provide PSTs with an experience that is unique to FMS?
2. How can we integrate the FMS social studies department into the *Social Studies Methods* curriculum?
3. How can offering *Social Studies Methods* at FMS serve as an opportunity for the social studies department to receive professional development?

Figure 1. Initial brainstorming questions from 2023. Source(s): Authors’ own work

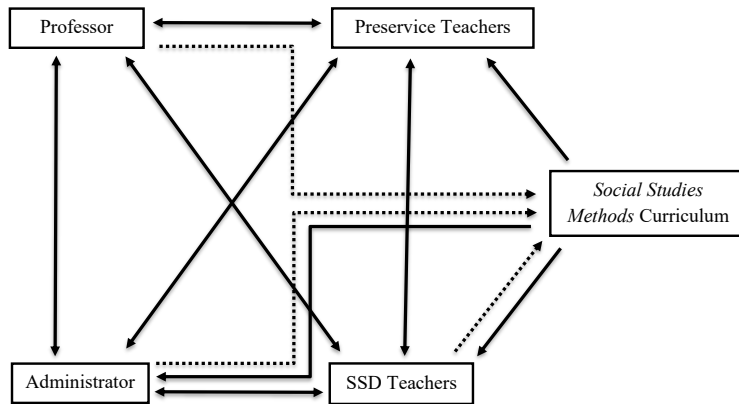


Figure 2. Relationship diagram for *Social Studies Methods*. Source(s): Authors' own work. Solid arrows represent learning. Dotted arrows represent curricular input

professor and administrator offer insight largely into the design of the course, while the vignettes of the teacher and former student provide insight largely into learning and growth within the model. We conclude by offering general observations and ideas for moving forward.

Contextualizing Fulmer Middle School

R. H. Fulmer Middle School is located in West Columbia, South Carolina, and serves students in grades 6–8 as part of the Lexington Two School District. West Columbia is a suburban city near Columbia, the capital of South Carolina. As visitors drive to FMS from Columbia, they pass by residential neighborhoods, small businesses and local industries in healthcare, education, retail and manufacturing. When viewing a map of the attendance zone ([ZIP Data & Maps, 2025](#)), one sees that FMS draws students from urban, suburban and even rural areas, contributing to the varied backgrounds and experiences represented within the school community.

According to the [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\) \(2024\)](#), FMS enrolled a total of 548 students during the 2023–2024 school year. This included 174 sixth graders, 194 seventh graders and 180 eighth graders. NCES also reported that Fulmer had 297 male students compared to 251 female students. Demographically, FMS serves a diverse student population and has a minority-majority enrollment. Of the 548 students, 43% identified as white, 35% as Black, 15% as Hispanic and 6% as two or more races. The remaining 1% identified as American Indian/Alaska Native or Asian. NCES further reported that FMS is a Title I school, with 100% of its students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, reflecting the greater economic background of the student body. A school where teachers excel by using systems and processes to support student growth and achievement, FMS has been redesignated four times as a National School to Watch and as a Model Professional Learning Community at Work.

In 2017, FMS began the process of becoming a professional development school with the University of South Carolina. At the time, Megan Carrero was the principal of FMS and Melissa Baker was the USC professor serving as the university liaison to FMS. Together, they explored how the partnership might be structured. By visiting the University of Georgia and attending a National Association of Professional Development Schools conference, Carrero and Baker saw what could potentially happen with a PDS partnership. At the time, FMS was undergoing construction of a new wing that included front offices, classrooms, the cafeteria and the media center. Because FMS wanted to collaborate with USC to embed courses, Carrero

worked with the architect to add a retractable wall to the media center that could be used to create a classroom. This space became known as the “Carolina Room.” This PDS vision also included PSTs working in classrooms in various capacities. This was done to increase practical understanding of the theory PSTs were learning, as well as to expose teachers to the latest research and theory in teaching.

Embedding *Social Studies Methods*

In USC’s undergraduate middle-level preservice education program, PSTs specialize in two content areas among the following areas: English, Math, Science and Social Studies. In doing so, PSTs take 18–23 credit hours in each content area. Additionally, PSTs engage in field experiences with teachers in both content areas. *Social Studies Methods* is a required course for PSTs who have selected social studies as one of their two content specializations. The course is taken during the fall semester of PSTs’ senior year while they are concurrently enrolled in the first of two internships. The goal of the course is to provide discipline-specific approaches to bridging theory and practice in the social studies classroom. The *Social Studies Methods* curriculum addresses topics such as inquiry in social studies, standards-based lesson planning, teaching difficult/controversial topics and taking informed action. The major assignments include the Community Mapping Project, the Classroom Observation Inquiry, a Peer-Led Discussion and the Lesson Plan Case Study.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, *Social Studies Methods* was offered as an embedded course in a middle school with the PDS Network; because of the pandemic, it was not embedded from 2020 to 2022. In the spring of 2023, Eargle, Carrero and Wilburn met to discuss embedding the course at FMS in the fall. As the three brainstormed a plan for implementation, the questions in [Figure 1](#) served as a guide. Regarding the first question, teachers and district personnel were identified as guest speakers. In doing so, this provided PSTs with an FMS perspective on teaching and learning while utilizing the expertise within the school and district. Additionally, to address the second and third questions, it was agreed that the administration would arrange for Eargle to meet with the social studies department (SSD) and provide logistical support for the SSD to join the class on a field trip to a local historic site and to join guest speakers from professional organizations ([Table 1](#)). When meeting in August 2024 and August 2025, with Wilburn now the FMS principal, it was agreed that the same level of support would continue. Three years later, we have developed an embedded experience in which the professor, principal, teachers and preservice teachers all interact, the principal and teachers influence the course curriculum and both teachers and preservice teachers learn through the course ([Figure 2](#)).

Reflective vignettes: four unique perspectives

In this section, we each provide our reflections on *Social Studies Methods* being embedded at FMS. In developing this section, we first met to discuss our respective roles, perspectives and experiences. While not research questions per se, we agreed to use our questions from 2023 ([Figure 1](#)) to guide the development of our vignettes. Additionally, we agreed, based on our initial discussions, that the themes of *affirmation* and *authenticity* were evident and would help unify our responses. We each drafted our individual vignettes. Then, through comments on the shared document and frequent in-person discussions, we identified areas within our individual vignettes to engage in conversation with other vignettes and aligned our vignettes with the existing literature. During this months-long revision and refining process, the theme of *relevance* emerged. This process served as a type of member checking ([Merriam, 2009](#)) and the conversations we had allowed us to better document our practice, challenge our thinking and reflect on our experiences ([Hagiwara, Rivera, & Ramos, 2011](#); [Jowsey, Carley, Hedges, & Tapuni, 2020](#)). The result is four carefully developed, interacting vignettes positioned in the larger research on school-university partnerships. To model reflective practices as colleagues, we intentionally use first names in our vignettes.

Table 1. Integrating EDML 563 into FMS

Fall 2023	Fall 2024	Fall 2025
<p>SSD provided input on the major assignment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add the Community Mapping Project 	<p>SSD provided input on assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep the Community Mapping Project • Add the Classroom Observation Inquiry • Change the Lesh (2011) assignment 	<p>SSD provided input on assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep the Community Mapping Project • Keep the Classroom Observation Inquiry
<p>SSD presented on World History curriculum development to PSTs SSD and PSTs toured a local museum together and collaborated on how to use the site for instruction</p>	<p>SSD presented on World History curriculum development to PSTs SSD and PSTs toured the historical site together and collaborated on how to use the site for instruction</p> <p>PSTs observed Geography and SC History instruction</p>	<p>SSD presented on World History curriculum development to PSTs SSD and PSTs toured a new historical site together and collaborated on how to use the site for instruction</p> <p>PSTs observed and SC History instruction</p> <p>SSD joined EDML 563 for inquiry and interdisciplinary lessons modeled by Dr Eargle and Guest Speakers</p>
<p>Guest Speakers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:10–2:00 – EDML 563 • 2:00–3:30 – EDML 563 & FMS teachers • 3:30–4:30 – FMS teachers 		<p>Guest Speakers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:10–2:00 – EDML 563 • 2:00–3:30 – EDML 563 & FMS teachers • 3:30–4:30 – FMS teachers
<p>Note(s): <i>Social Studies Methods</i> meets on Monday afternoons from 1:10 to 3:50</p> <p>Source(s): Authors' own work</p>		

Jeffrey (Jeff) C. Eargle: a professor's perspective

Two weeks prior to the Fall 2022 semester, I was assigned to teach *Social Studies Methods* and, consequently, used the existing syllabus and the on-campus location. As the semester progressed, I reflected on potential changes to the course, which included embedding the course at a middle school. Drawing from my work with an embedded course in the secondary program ([Eargle et al., 2025](#)), I understood the potential impact that returning *Social Studies Methods* to an embedded course format could have for PSTs and the partner school. For me, embedding a course means providing an experience that PSTs can only receive because we are at the partner school, one unique to the context of the school. Knowing FMS's reputation for supporting PDS initiatives and for hosting embedded courses, I arranged to meet with Megan and Jonathan to discuss embedding the course in the fall of 2023. I was struck by their enthusiasm for embedding *Social Studies Methods* in a way that would provide professional development for the SSD. As the conversations progressed, I sensed that Megan, Jonathan and I were comfortable leaning into creativity and experimentation with the course. This has continued since Jonathan became principal in June 2024.

Building a relationship with the social studies department. While I felt that I easily developed rapport and a degree of trust with Megan and Jonathan, I knew that developing a similar rapport with the SSD may take more time and effort. In August 2023, I met with the SSD and asked for their input on the assignments. I offered either the Community Mapping Project or the Classroom Observation Inquiry [1]. The teachers, considering the demographics of FMS, backed the Community Mapping Project. While I had been involved in a version of the Classroom Observation Inquiry in the past (see [Eargle, 2013](#)), the Community Mapping Project also aligned with my concept of an embedded course. In August 2024, Jonathan joined

my meeting with the SSD to help advocate for the Classroom Observation Inquiry. In that same meeting, Chesnee suggested that I alter the assignment on [Lesh's \(2011\)](#) book and keep the Community Mapping Project. For me, it was helpful to receive feedback from both the former students and the SSD. Overall, this meeting allowed teachers to have input on the curriculum.

Creating meaningful interactions. At the same time, my goal was to develop trust with the SSD. During the meeting with the SSD in 2023, Gabe helped me steer conversations toward support for working with PSTs to provide meaningful support. While an older text, [Lesh's \(2011\)](#) book is specific to disciplinary teaching in the social studies classroom and addresses shifts in mindsets needed to embrace inquiry. This book helped us frame what we wanted PSTs to observe and learn when interacting with the SSD. This was seen during the course when Gabe presented with two colleagues on developing a unit on ancient Rome for 6th Grade World History, PSTs could draw parallels to Lesh discussing his own challenges in developing relevant, student-centered instruction. In this, Gabe and his colleagues were authentically modeling best practices ([Lesh, 2011](#)) and professional collaboration as a PLC ([Wald & Castleberry, 2000](#)). In 2024, during classroom observations and the Classroom Observation Inquiry data collection, PSTs were able to discuss how they observed theory, from [Lesh \(2011\)](#) and other readings, put into practice across the SSD, again mirroring a PLC ([Bowgen & Sever, 2014](#)). This was possible because, by 2024, the teachers in the SSD were viewing themselves as teacher educators and were willing to open their classrooms for observation.

A significant aspect of how we have embedded *Social Studies Methods* at FMS is finding opportunities for the PSTs and SSD to interact in authentic ways. In 2023, the SSD joined the class when speakers from various state-level professional organizations were in the class ([Table 1](#)). Planning with the speakers in advance, from 2:00–3:30 PSTs and teachers were positioned to collaborate during activities and discussions. Additionally, the SSD joined the PSTs on field trips to historic sites ([Table 1](#)), acting as both co-learners and leaders. At these locations, I paired members of the SSD with PSTs for them to discuss how the sites could be used in practical ways. In this structure ([Figure 2](#)), just as Chesnee explained below, I observed how PSTs became increasingly comfortable working with teachers as they gained a greater understanding of social studies instruction. Finally, just as Jonathan, Gabe and Chesnee explained below, I noticed how the SSD listened to the ideas of the PSTs with genuine interest because the PSTs were positioned as professionals, as colleagues. Thus, the class itself became a PLC ([Wald & Castleberry, 2000](#); [Bowgen & Sever, 2014](#)) for both preservice teachers and teachers.

This structure also impacted the FMS social studies teachers. When bringing in guest speakers ([Table 1](#)), I surveyed the teachers for input on what they would like the guest to share during the 3:30–4:30, to personalize the professional development to their needs. Often, that hour was an open discussion. Gabe and I have regularly discussed how, during the sessions with guest speakers, he was not only learning from the discussion, but he felt that his approach to teaching was being validated by the speakers. Additionally, on the field trips to museums and historic sites, the teachers expressed gratitude for our - mine and Jonathan's - work in arranging for them to participate. By demonstrating my commitment to their growth in 2023, it was the SSD who suggested, when we met in August 2024, that some guest speakers be removed from the schedule to allow more time for PSTs to observe them. This, to me, indicated that the SSD was taking ownership of preservice education and exhibited a form of teacher leadership ([Eargle, 2013](#); [Eargle et al., 2025](#); [Ikpeze, Broikou, Hildenbrand, & Gladstone-Brown, 2012](#)).

Reflecting on three years of work. Thinking about the last three years working to embed *Social Studies Methods* at FMS, I have thought more about how the process encourages me to be a more reflective educator. Because a PDS goal is to bridge theory and practice for both PSTs and teachers ([Burns et al., 2023](#)), integrating the course into the school prompts me to be more creative. To benefit the PSTs in *Social Studies Methods*, I am more intentional about how my own instruction is student-centered to mirror what they will observe in the SSD classrooms. Additionally, given that I feel an obligation to create a reciprocal partnership, the growth of the SSD is important to me, and therefore, I think carefully about how I can

simultaneously respond to their needs through *Social Studies Methods*. For example, as Jonathan and Chesnee described below, in the Fall 2025 semester, I included two local teachers, both colleagues of mine, to co-teach lessons for the class with me to model authentic and interdisciplinary instruction for both PSTs and the SSD. This focus on innovation and responsiveness is a key element of a PDS partnership (Stoicovy *et al.*, 2023). At the same time, interacting with Gabe and Jonathan helped me better understand the FMS context and the current needs of their students. Finally, working with Chesnee now as a teacher - and as a colleague - allows me to learn from her experience as a student to improve my own practice in the classroom.

Jonathan P. Wilburn: an administrator's perspective

I participated in the initial conversation and brainstorming session in 2023 that Jeff, Megan, and I had regarding how to embed *Social Studies Methods* at FMS. Because we shared a commitment to innovation (Stoicovy *et al.*, 2023), we conceptualized the course as one that would simultaneously teach PSTs best practices and provide PD for the SSD. While I thought we had a good plan, I was concerned that the SSD would not buy into the concept of learning theory and content alongside PSTs, as it placed the two on the same level. PSTs could learn practical knowledge while the SSD learned the latest research on social studies teaching practices.

From a shared vision to aligned goals. In 2024, I was promoted to the principal of FMS. That year, as Jeff detailed above, he and I discussed how to improve the experience. For example, Jeff noticed that the SSD would schedule a test or quiz when PSTs were scheduled to observe student-centered instruction. Jeff and I met with the SSD to communicate to our teachers how important it is to align our calendars with the *Social Studies Methods* syllabus to model lessons for our PSTs to observe. I encouraged teachers to engage students in a student-centered, collaborative atmosphere on Mondays when *Social Studies Methods* was taught at FMS. This meeting solidified the reason for the PDS partnership: To provide practical, real-world exposure to PSTs so that they could see real-world examples of teaching in a high needs school (Burns *et al.*, 2023). Our ultimate goal was that FMS not only prepares our middle school students for high school, but also prepares PSTs for the profession.

A PDS partnership is successful when a structure is developed based on a shared vision for growth (Coler *et al.*, 2023). The challenge to me was casting a vision of the role of our SSD in teaching both our middle school students and engaging with the PSTs in the embedded course. Our goal was to get teachers to immerse themselves in the embedded course to learn and humble themselves as practical teaching experts in the class. Sometimes teachers are pulled in many different directions and getting them to give up their time to do this work is periodically an obstacle. As the principal, it is my job to help them see the value in going to *Social Studies Methods* for professional development. I must balance not *requiring* teachers to go to professional development but, rather, *allowing* them to go to professional development.

Engaging in reciprocal learning. Frequently, I find myself joining *Social Studies Methods* as a guest and as a learner. Jeff noted above the importance of understanding the FMS context in the course. Along with teachers, I have observed PSTs presenting their Community Mapping Projects. These projects clearly showed aspects of the community in a detailed way that I had never seen before. FMS has always shown teachers the neighborhoods in our community with bus tours, but this was a more in-depth look into our community. PSTs detailed different aspects of the community that were unique to FMS's attendance zone. As Chesnee explained below, this project helps our PSTs understand the students of FMS. Demographic and socioeconomic information allows our PSTs and teachers to best understand how to reach our kids (Wyman & Kashatok, 2008). Many times, teachers see a school-university partnership as a one-way street; however, this project has opened my eyes to the idea that the partnership is mutually beneficial on both sides of the equation.

In August, 2025, Jeff explained that he would invite a teacher, who is a doctoral student at USC investigating how to teach geo-literacy, from a local high school to co-teach a lesson with

him on Holocaust geographies to the PSTs and SSD (see [Eargle & Sanders, 2026](#)). This level of professional development helps our SSD by giving them the tools they need to be able to teach geography using current methodology ([Burns et al., 2023](#); [Polly et al., 2023a](#)). Sometimes there can be a disconnect between a teacher's geography lessons and the way it is modeled in a methods class. However, through this geography lesson, I was able to understand that the Polish citizens knew that there was genocide occurring. This was good professional development because it helped me realize, as an instructional leader, that geography could be used to encourage students to wrestle with moral and ethical questions ([Bednarz, 2019](#)). I was struck that a geography lesson had opened up this question: *What should one do when a group of people violate the rights of another group of people?* Having the embedded course at FMS allowed me and the SSD to engage in an example of authentic learning and think about our own curriculum.

In addition to the geography lesson, Jeff and I expanded our professional development concept to include another middle school in our district. Jeff planned to co-teach an interdisciplinary lesson with an English language arts (ELA) teacher from the school as a model of how social studies and ELA teachers can collaborate. I reached out to the principal at the middle school and scheduled a meeting to discuss this opportunity. Jeff and I met with the principal of the school and proposed a plan: The ELA teacher would co-teach the class with Jeff and, in return, the school would send grade-level teams consisting of one ELA teacher and one social studies teacher to join as professional development. As Chesnee explained below, this professional development provided current teachers with an example of how interdisciplinary instruction benefits students ([Mansilla, 2005](#)).

Growth through partnership. As I reflect on the work we planned and completed through FMS's partnership with USC, we have done great work in both preparing PSTs to be excellent social studies educators as well as providing support for the SSD. As Chesnee noted below, the PSTs were given confidence as to the practicalities of teaching as they observed various aspects of our social studies classes. I agree with Gabe's observation below that our teachers were willing to learn with and from PSTs and this provided a platform for better social studies instruction for our students. There are logistical challenges in executing our professional development plan, yet Jeff, the SSD, my administrative team and I have an open form of communication and work toward a common goal. Drawing from work by [Burns et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Stoicovy et al. \(2023\)](#), we have high expectations for our collaboration and I think we do a good job of preparing our PSTs to be social studies teachers and we provide good professional development that pushed the SSD to improve their practice.

Gabriel (Gabe) M. McGee: a teacher's perspective

I began working at FMS in the fall of 2019, having recently graduated from the University of South Carolina Secondary Social Studies Program. My principal at the time, Megan, along with her administration team, which included Jonathan, had established a relationship with the university that positioned FMS in the PDS Network. FMS regularly hosts PSTs for their internships and offers space for embedded classes to be taught on campus. There was a clear expectation from the administration that FMS would remain committed to the PDS partnership.

Communicating shared goals. Jeff and I first met in 2017 when he joined the faculty at USC while I was a student in the Secondary Social Studies Program. Due to these past experiences, when Jeff approached me in the spring of 2023 about his idea for embedding *Social Studies Methods* more intentionally at FMS, my initial reaction was excitement. My responsibility in embedding the course was to help communicate between Jeff and the SSD. My role was to gauge buy-in from the SSD, align everyone's understanding of the plan and share SSD feedback with Jeff, Megan and Jonathan. This plan involved partnering the SSD and PSTs in *Social Studies Methods* in the Fall of 2023 and examining the implications of this collaboration for future improvement. Included in this plan was the opportunity to provide meaningful,

integrated learning for both the SSD and PSTs (Figure 2). In my experience, professional development sessions are often disconnected from what I actually need. Jeff's idea felt different because it aimed to support both PSTs and the SSD as a shared community of learners (Stoicovy et al., 2023). The plan's goal was to address real-world challenges that benefited all parties.

While I was excited about the plan's potential, I knew that did not guarantee that all SSD teachers would feel the same. Teachers can sometimes feel uncomfortable or intimidated working in unfamiliar structures, so genuine support from the whole SSD was essential (Polly et al., 2023a). It was clear that this could not be "Gabe's Project with Jeff." For the plan to succeed, authentic buy-in was needed. Working with Jeff and Jonathan, I reached out to colleagues to discuss how this opportunity could best support our department and ultimately improve student learning. In our initial SSD conversation in August of 2023, I shared Jeff's idea informally. I asked: *How would it help us if we had professional development tailored to a collective need?* The SSD unanimously identified support with aligning student-centered instruction to the South Carolina Social Studies Standards as our greatest need (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). After discussing this with Jeff, I confirmed that the SSD had agreed to participate. This buy-in came because teachers saw real potential for tailored professional development and valued the opportunity to interact with PSTs in a meaningful PDS environment. The consensus in the SSD was that we were finally being asked what we need as social studies teachers.

Collaborative learning in practice. Moving forward, Jeff coordinated guest speakers to join *Social Studies Methods* and provide a session for PSTs, a joint session for PSTs and SSD members, and a session for SSD alone. As the plan progressed in 2024 and 2025, I learned a great deal from the experience. One of the clearest lessons was how much I valued direct interaction with PSTs in *Social Studies Methods*. The classes where I worked side by side with PSTs sparked the most meaningful conversations. Like Chesnee's statements below about her experience as a PST, in informal conversations I had with the SSD, we all seemed to appreciate the opportunity to have content-specific, in-house professional development designed around our input (Figure 2). As shown in Table 1, opportunities expanded into joint field studies where SSD members and PSTs collaborated at local museums to evaluate narratives and suggest improvements. These experiences blurred the university-school divide and strengthened the connection between theory and practice (Burns et al., 2023).

From my perspective, one of the most rewarding outcomes was seeing the impact of this plan on PSTs and SSD members. As Jonathan mentioned above, we wanted to position PSTs to gain authentic experience from practicing teachers and asked meaningful questions grounded in lived experience. Chesnee, who was in the embedded class, later became my colleague and shared that her group learned more through these interactions than through traditional structures. Through working with the SSD, Chesnee shared with me how she felt that the plan benefited her as an educator and ultimately her students. The professional development around state standards gave me renewed confidence and clarity regarding my instruction. I felt better prepared to identify essential standards and align instruction effectively.

Instructional implications for teachers. As I reflect overall on this partnership, I see it as one of the more meaningful professional experiences I have had at FMS. As Jeff referenced above, what made this plan feel successful was a shared commitment to collaboration and growth. To serve as a model for PSTs and be a "subject" in the Classroom Observation Inquiry project, I needed a willingness to be vulnerable about my own practice. Because of this experience, I am better able to become both a learner and an educator who seeks growth over "rank." As a teacher and doctoral student studying blended learning and engagement, this experience reinforced that authentic collaboration is a powerful tool for professional renewal (Polly et al., 2023a). Moving forward, sustaining these partnerships will require ongoing reflection, planning and awareness of challenges such as time, staffing and maintaining consistent participation. Ultimately, this partnership works because the SSD is willing to open its doors, be vulnerable, share expertise and learn from one another. I remain grateful to have

contributed to a model that highlights the power of collaboration within an established PDS network.

Chesnee M. Kelly: a student's perspective

Although I currently teach 6th-grade English language arts at FMS, I was a student in *Social Studies Methods* embedded at FMS in the Fall 2023. Seniors in the College of Education at USC take a series of courses during their senior year to prepare for graduation and becoming a teacher. During my senior year in Fall 2023, I took a course on modern European history, an integrated curriculum, introduction to classroom assessment, *Social Studies Methods* and English language arts methods. As a PST, I took several courses on-site at middle schools. However, *Social Studies Methods* at FMS was the first course that made me feel like I was actively involved with the school. The difference was that my class at FMS was an “embedded” course while my other classes were “on-site”. The definition of *on-site* is “at a particular place” (Merriam-Webster, 2014b, p. 867), while the definition of *embed* is “to enclose closely” and “to make something an integral part” (Merriam-Webster, 2014a, p. 406). Thinking of this difference, my experience in *Social Studies Methods* made me feel included, prepared and affirmed in my choice to pursue a career in education.

Experiencing an embedded course. One unique way that FMS made *Social Studies Methods* feel like a true part of the school was to give us our own classroom - the “Carolina Room.” Because the room is next to the library, it was easy to find as a college student who was unfamiliar with the school. The thoughtfulness of designing a space, with USC posters and flags, helped form a welcoming environment. Knowing what to expect every time I came to my class at FMS made me feel exponentially more comfortable and prepared for class. Not only was the “Carolina Room” welcoming, but there was also an evident relationship between Jeff and the administration. Throughout *Social Studies Methods*, Megan and Jonathan would frequently come into the classroom and engage in our lessons. Having the principal and assistant principal of FMS come into our classroom meant a lot to me as a PST because it showed what supportive administration looks like.

One of my favorite activities in *Social Studies Methods* at FMS was the Community Mapping Project. For the project, we were challenged to look at the demographics of the students at FMS, places in the community and analyze how the demographics affect the environment within a school. The project encouraged me to think beyond the mechanics of lesson planning and instead consider whom I am teaching - their lived experiences, cultural backgrounds and the community environments that influence their engagement, motivation and sense of belonging (Wyman & Kashatok, 2008). Towards the end of the semester, we presented our Community Mapping Projects to Jeff, classmates and FMS administrators. As Jonathan mentioned above, the presentations were mutually beneficial. While presenting, Jonathan and Megan were attentive and would even give insights on how the information was more than just numbers, and how certain aspects like education levels of parents, can affect students’ performance in school. Because of the embedded nature of the course, I gained an understanding of how important it is to understand the culture that students come from.

In addition to having an individualized space for *Social Studies Methods*, our class had constant interaction with the SSD and administration at FMS. As a PST, I was able to interact with the current teachers and be involved in discussions. At first, it was daunting to have conversations with experienced teachers; however, the more I interacted with the SSD, the more confidence I gained in contributing to conversations. Similarly to Gabe’s observation above, the biggest “ah-ha” moment of feeling like I mattered and belonged was when we took a field trip to the local city museum and were given a tour alongside the SSD (Table 1). Afterward, we collaborated with the SSD to discuss how the museum could make modifications that would encourage school groups to be engaged when visiting. Then, we brought our ideas to a whole group discussion with the museum curator on improvements that could be made to the museum in regard to presentation and flow to better support middle

school students' learning. This was a valuable experience for a PST as we were authentically engaged in [Gilbert's \(2016\)](#) call to teach museum literacy and critical inquiry through social studies. Additionally, hearing the thought processes of current teachers gave me insight into practices that are beneficial to student learning, bridging the theory learned in class to classroom practice ([Burns et al., 2023](#)). Knowing that my voice was heard and valued was very affirming as an aspiring teacher.

Growing as a professional because of the embedded course. Being a student in *Social Studies Methods* at FMS had a significant impact on shaping me into the teacher I am today. Because the course was embedded, not simply taught on-site, meaningful experiences were possible. The structure of the embedded course allowed me to move beyond surface-level observations to an active participant in the daily life of the school community ([Burns et al., 2023](#)). I was able to form authentic connections with administrators, collaborate closely with social studies teachers and take part in real discussions and decisions that influenced student learning ([Figure 2](#)). These interactions enabled me to see how context, culture and community shape instructional choices and school culture, and they helped build confidence in my own professional voice.

The embedded nature of *Social Studies Methods* made it possible for me, as a student, to receive immediate, relevant feedback from teachers and administrators, which strengthened my understanding of demographic influences and informed my approach to student teaching and eventually my own classroom. Seeing how the SSD was constantly furthering their education and involvement in social studies was encouraging for a teacher about to enter into my career. Because the SSD was committed to continuing education to teach with best practices by joining our class, it was an amazing model for a PST. It showed me that, even if you have been teaching for multiple years, there is still more to learn. Ultimately, *Social Studies Methods* provided a strong example of what it means to learn alongside a school community, and it laid the foundation for my ongoing commitment to reflective practice, cultural responsiveness and meaningful collaboration within FMS.

Working with the course as a teacher. As Jeff mentioned above, the SSD met in August of 2024 to discuss what *Social Studies Methods* should look like for the upcoming school year. At that point, I was a teacher at FMS and joined the discussion. I said that the Community Mapping Project should absolutely still be assigned in the course. However, I thought that it would be more beneficial at the start of the semester as opposed to a semester-long project; Jeff took my advice and made the change. The takeaway I have from the project was how important it is to know the demographics of the school that you are teaching in, and I valued the feedback that I received from the administration. The insight was very helpful and informed the decisions I made in my student teaching, so I would have valued having that knowledge earlier in the semester. Now that I am a current teacher at FMS, I have referred to my Community Mapping Project as a reminder of the demographics of the students that I teach and how that might affect instruction and the approach that I have towards my students ([Wyman & Kashatok, 2008](#)). Overall, the embedded course at FMS allowed me, as a PST, to look deeper than just the numbers and hear from administration first-hand how demographics have an impact on the culture of a school.

In the Fall 2025 semester, I had the opportunity to join *Social Studies Methods* as an ELA teacher for an interdisciplinary professional development session with FMS teachers, administration, PSTs and teachers from another school. Participating in the class was valuable because it allowed me to bring my ELA content knowledge to the conversation while learning from the perspectives of social studies teachers. While in professional development, we were able to have a learning strategy modeled for us. I valued being able to experience a lesson that students could go through in social studies, because I was thinking about ways that I could be more intentional about teaching the skills that students use in social studies classes. This professional development reinforced that ELA and social studies can be integrated into the classroom, and when teachers from different content areas collaborate with openness and

shared purpose, we are able to design learning experiences that are more engaging and intentional (Mansilla, 2005).

Summarizing observations

Embedded methods courses have the potential to positively support PST learning (Hamilton and Margot, 2024; Skinner, 2024) and they exemplify the boundary-spanning work of a professional development school (National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021). However, little research exists on both teaching embedded social studies methods courses (Skinner, 2024) and on social studies collaborations in a school-university partnership (Chase and Merryfield, 1998; DiGiacomo *et al.*, 2022; Eargle, 2013; Gieselmann, 2008; Hohenbrink *et al.*, 1997; Skinner, 2024; Vontz *et al.*, 2007). The goal of this article was to document the logistics and impact of embedding a social studies methods course in a middle school as a means of both preparing PSTs and providing professional growth for teachers.

In telling the story of three years of partnership, we captured the evolution of this work. We began our work in the spring of 2023 with three brainstorming questions (Figure 1), which resulted in a PLC-style structure (Figure 2). For social studies teachers, PLCs can have a positive impact on student achievement when the learning is ongoing and interactive (Çopur & Demirel, 2022). From a practical standpoint, a common vision among the university faculty, school administrators and classroom teachers is needed to set expectations regarding how teachers support PST learning and engage as learners in the partnership (Burns *et al.*, 2023; Coler *et al.*, 2023; Polly *et al.*, 2023a). Finally, university faculty and school administrators must engage in open and consistent conversations around goals for PST and teacher learning and be open to creative approaches to further the embedding process. This includes understanding that embedding a course requires annual revisions to the curriculum to develop learning experiences for PSTs and teachers, to cultivate support among teachers and to reflect together on successes and areas for improvement.

When we began writing this article, we focused on the themes of *authenticity* and *affirmation*. The embedded methods course – a course integral to FMS - offered an authentic experience for social studies PSTs (Burns *et al.*, 2023) and teachers (Polly *et al.*, 2023a). This required the FMS administration and SSD to support the integration of the course into the school and provide a unique learning experience for the PSTs. Additionally, the social studies teachers needed to be open and receptive to boundary spanning work to set the right foundation for the partnership to work (Cosenza *et al.*, 2023). This means modeling instruction to help PSTs observe theory to practice and learn alongside the PSTs during the embedded course. Likewise, our work presents the efforts that we undertook to structure the embedded course in such a way that it became an affirming professional development experience for social studies teachers. By establishing a shared vision of logistics, structure, reflection and innovation (Coler *et al.*, 2023; Stoicovy *et al.*, 2023), both PSTs and the SSD are positioned to engage in collaboration, skills-based professional learning, moral questions and interdisciplinary teams. This work can be affirming for PSTs as they benefit from conversations with the SSD by building their confidence as they emerge into the profession. For the SSD, the professional development with the PSTs put them at the forefront of methods and research in social studies education and validated the daily work they conduct with students.

During the writing of the article, *relevance* emerged as a theme. We viewed the embedding of *Social Studies Methods* as an opportunity to provide innovative learning for PSTs and teachers (Burns *et al.*, 2023; Coler *et al.*, 2023; Polly *et al.*, 2023a). In a broad sense, we have reflected on the need for university faculty to be responsive to the uniqueness of the school. In return, administration and teachers should be responsive to PST learning by opening their classrooms, embracing innovation and encouraging integration into the fabric of the school. Because teachers may be given a new course assignment or the same teachers are invited back to join the class as professional development, the university faculty needs to be responsive to the teachers' needs in addition to PST learning needs. Therefore, every semester must be

marked by an evolving curriculum to provide different experiences to benefit both PSTs and teachers (Table 1). This approach to an embedded course supports PSTs in that learning is contextualized to the school and they observe the SSD as teachers who are also learners.

Inspired by the collaborative, research-based, experimental and relevant characteristics of a PLC (Wald & Castleberry, 2000), we approached embedding *Social Studies Methods* with intentionality (Figure 2). For the SSD, the experience offers a rare opportunity to engage in relevant learning, often not given to social studies departments. The vignettes captured the consensus of the SSD that they were *finally* being given professional development specifically designed to include them. This is not a surprise. Social studies is a core content area hampered by marginalization because of schools emphasizing tested subject areas over social studies (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2012; *Social Studies Collaborative*, 2018), a trend that is also observed in South Carolina for middle-level social studies (Knight, 2025). By embedding *Social Studies Methods* to include a professional development component for the SSD, we took an opportunity to highlight social studies education in the reciprocal-focused spirit of a PDS partnership.

Note

1. The Community Mapping Project requires PSTs to investigate the FMS community by researching community and school demographics, analyzing student success data, understanding the history of the community, actively interacting with the community by visiting local businesses and identifying institutions and organizations that can support student learning. The Classroom Observation Inquiry requires PSTs to identify a topic in social studies instruction to research and study in practice at FMS. PSTs produce a report on what was observed in the social studies classrooms; the professor then shares the data with the SSD to generate conversation around improving practice.

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