Political Discourse in High School Social Studies

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Abstract

Most social studies teachers use current events and many engage with controversial topics. Students show increased interest in these topics and benefit civically from deliberation of political issues. I use data from 6 interviews with social studies teachers and 8 interviews with students across two high schools to find varied depth and purpose in utilization of current events. I found that most students found discussion useful to their learning and participation increased in classes where students had more social connections with peers. Conversely, social exclusion caused less participation. In some accounts, political discourse was described as toxic and drama prone, leading some teachers to avoid controversial discussion and leading some students to apoliticism. Teachers expressed a strong commitment to neutrality, which students valued in a facilitator. In some cases, teachers chose neutrality over maintaining values. These findings suggest that teachers need more support to produce high quality civic education, which, according to the theory of deliberative democracy, requires inclusive and cooperative discussions of political issues.

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INTRODUCTION

Most social studies teachers integrate current events into their curriculum and consider this practice to be integral to their profession (Haas & Laughlin 2000). Teachers see discussion of controversial topics as a tool to develop democratic and civic education (Hahn 2002; Hess 2009; McLaughlin 2003). Empirical studies on social studies classes have shown a positive correlation between students' discussions of controversial issues and their civic attitudes (Hahn, 2002; Hess, 2009). Yet, observational studies show that in many classrooms little--if any--actual class time is devoted to discussion (Nystrand et al. 2013; Nystrand 2001; Kahne et al. 2000). Studies have found that many social studies teachers believe they have an obligation to be balanced and neutral mediators (Swalwell & Schweber 2016, Miller-Lane, Denton, & May 2006). Little research has been done on students' perceptions of political discussions, their preferences in facilitation style, and the reasons why they do or do not participate. How do teachers and students navigate controversial topics in a polarized political climate?

In this study, I draw on six interviews with social studies teachers and eight interviews with their students across two high schools in one school district. I found that teachers most often incorporated current events as examples for historical concepts. Current events were also utilized by teachers to increase engagement and establish history as relatable to students. For most students, discussion is useful to their learning. Most students stated they anticipated more frequently in classes where they had more social connections. Conversely, social exclusion caused less participation and harmed engagement. Students shared instances of racism and transphobia, which raise concern over equity in deliberative learning. Uncivil and unproductive discourse was described as rare, yet influenced curriculum and students' social lives.

My findings support literature about teachers' strong commitment to neutrality (Swalwell & Schweber 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Miller-Lane, Denton, & May 2006). I add on to this literature by finding that students also valued impartial facilitation and an example of reduction in participation when a teacher's bias was revealed. Additionally, I complicate the literature by theorizing that teachers navigate a tension between impartiality and values. I explore the implications of some teachers who prioritized impartiality, during class discussions of the January 6th insurrection and COVID-19 vaccine safety. These findings suggest that teachers need much more support to produce high quality civic education, which, according to the theory of deliberative democracy, requires inclusive and cooperative discussions of political issues.

Current Events in the Classroom

Current events can be incorporated into classroom discussion as a method of clarifying abstract concepts and establishing the relevance of history to student's lives. Teachers' motivations to include current events include providing contemporary examples of abstract historical, social, economic, and political concepts and illustrating the continuity of social issues over time and across cultures (Haas & Laughlin 2000). Current events can bridge what Sweeting (1991) calls the "generation gap," in which students can lose interest in curriculum due to the byzantine, adult-centric nature of history curriculum. Modern examples add "realness" to historical themes and teach students to use their knowledge of the past to analyze the present.

The use of current events in lesson plans can improve retention by holding student attention and forming additional cognitive pathways. Chun and Turk-Browne (2007) suggest that attention determines what will be encoded in the memory. This means that student engagement is necessary for social studies teaching to be impactful. The easiest way to create an engaging classroom is by pursuing students' curiosity. Swalwell & Schweber (2016) found that when

teachers integrated a local controversy into their curriculum they saw unprecedented levels of energy and interest from their students. Additionally, incorporating current events into curriculum can aid retention by enabling a deeper analysis of concepts (Metsämuuronen & Räsänen 2018). Incorporation of current events can make teaching more effective, especially when guided by student interest.

Although most teachers and researchers agree that political and social discussion is an important tool for social studies education (Haas & Laughlin 2000), observational studies show that little if any actual class time is devoted to discussion. Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, and Long (2003) conducted a study of 200 eighth- and ninth-grade classes and found that only 7% of instructional time was devoted to discussion. Classes that contained discussion were almost entirely made up of academically high-achieving students (Nystrand et al. 2003). Similarly, low amounts of discussion were found in large observational studies of social studies middle and high school classrooms (Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith, Thiede, 2000; Nystrand, Gamoran, Carbonaro, 2001). One of these studies found that 80% of classes contained no mention of a social problem and even when problems were mentioned there was rarely any discussion of possible solutions or parallels to current day (Kahne et al. 2000). Teacher's avoidance of discussion-based strategies may be caused by the difficulty of incorporating these strategies and scarce classroom time to dive deeply into relevant topics.

Discussions of controversial current events are widely seen as an important tool in democratic and civic education (Hahn, 2002; Hess, 2009; McLaughlin, 2003). Indeed, empirical studies on social studies classes have shown a positive correlation between students' discussions of controversial issues and their civic attitudes (Hahn, 2002; Hess, 2009). Teachers have complex understandings of their role as facilitators of these discussions. Teachers sought to create a

tolerant environment so that students could share divergent viewpoints (Swalwell & Schweber 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Miller-Lane, Denton, & May 2006).

Teachers' ability to be a balanced facilitator is limited by their own knowledge of current events and their biases. Teachers report seeking balance in these discussions by presenting all prevalent points of view on an issue (Swalwell & Schweber 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Miller-Lane, Denton, & May 2006). The ability to accurately represent divergent points of view requires an in-depth knowledge of politics and current events. Journell (2013) found that preservice middle and secondary teachers were generally uninformed about these issues, despite expressing a vision to incorporate political and current event content in their teaching. This could lead to weak, or even inaccurate depictions of, and evidence for, some perspectives. These "strawman" representations could lead to the unintended effect of biasing students towards the perspective that the teacher is more knowledgeable of.

A seeming minority of teachers disclose their opinion on controversial issues. Most opt instead to act as an impartial facilitator and advocate for values rather than specifics. The most well known argument for disclosure comes from Kelly (1986). He argued that teachers should take the stance of "committed impartiality," meaning the teachers should disclose their position, not for the purpose of swaying students, but as a demonstration of how to express and support an opinion (Kelly 1986). Secondary school social studies teachers in a rural county generally rejected Kelly's approach in favor of being an impartial facilitator (Miller-Lane, Denton, & May 2006). A common reason against disclosure is that it may prevent students with divergent beliefs from expressing them (Swalwell & Schweber 2016: Miller-Lane, Denton, & May 2006).

Community context also plays a major role in disclosure. Many teachers expressed fear that disclosure would result in community or parental backlash (Miller-Lane, Denton, & May

2006; Swalwell & Schweber 2016). These teachers expressed commitment to values instead of positions, while maintaining status as impartial (Miller-Lane, Denton, & May 2006; Swalwell & Schweber 2016).

The Integration of Constructivism and Objectivism in Social Studies Teaching

The formal curriculum of schools - including social studies instruction - presents tension between objectivism, in which knowledge is presented as the transmission of facts from teacher to student, and constructivism, in which knowledge is actively constructed by the student based on past understanding and connections (Metsämuuronen & Räsänen 2018). The concept of constructivism was first proposed by Jerome Bruner in his work *The Process of Education* (1960). Constructivism is formed around the basic tenet that “people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing the world, and reflecting on those experiences” (Harasim 2017, 62). Objectivism, in contrast, treats knowledge as something that can be objectively passed from teacher to student. Because of this, objectivist teaching often uses lecturing heavily. Objectivist assessments require students to recall facts learned in class. A major benefit of objectivist teaching is its efficiency.

Bruner complicated the transmission view of objectivist learning. He believed instruction occurs in three stages: 1) acquisition, where a learner is introduced to new knowledge which may refine, support or contradict current knowledge; 2) transformation, where the learner extrapolates their knowledge to new contexts; and 3) evaluation, where typically the teacher evaluates the usefulness or plausibility of the extrapolation (Bruner 1960). Contrastingly, under objectivism the teacher’s role is to bestow knowledge to their students. Objectivism does not take into account the subtext of knowledge and how students will use it to inform their understanding of

other concepts and events. Under constructivism, a teacher guides their student in the discovery of knowledge then encourages and evaluates students' application of that knowledge.

While many believe objectivism and constructivism to be diametrically opposed, Johannes Cronjé (2006) proposed the integration of these pedagogies. This integration has been observed in elementary school classrooms (Dangel & Hooper 2010) and in a broad survey of US colleges (Elander & Cronjé 2016). Cronjé and Elander (2016) describe teachers who employ this integration as instructing students or leaving them to discover for themselves--either simultaneously or in rapid succession--depending on the situation.

A small case study of implementing a lesson plan utilizing both objectivism and constructivism found the two pedagogies to be complementary (Muuren 2003). He found that the objectivist aspects of instruction "supports the effective transfer of knowledge," while constructivist aspects "definitely increases the rate at which knowledge is assimilated and internalized by the participant" (Muuren 2003, p. 20). Integration may offer the efficiency of objectivism with the critical thinking and retention developed in constructivism.

Constructivism seeks to weave nuance into all levels of education, avoiding the rigidity of objectivism's teaching of historic "facts." History by its very nature is difficult to teach as it seeks to conglomerate large swaths of human experience into coherent narratives. Thus, a long standing issue in the field of social studies is how to make history digestible for students without distorting or trivializing it (Sweeting, 1991). Objectivism is criticized for instilling a false sense of fullness and objective truth. Constructivism offers a solution to this in the form of what Bruner (1960) named "spiral curriculum." Difficult concepts are not avoided in early education because spiral education supposes that lessons compound on each other. "Even though they may not grasp the concepts in its entirety, a seed would be planted so that when the material is

revisited again and again the learner can build more knowledge, details, or advanced concepts on top of the initial foundation" (Stapleton & Stefaniak 2018, p. 5). This means that topics such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia can be taught "effectively in some intellectually honest form" to students of any age (Bruner 1960, p.33). It is the goal of social studies to fully develop concepts such as these to create citizens knowledgeable of past and existing social problems.

The use of integration pedagogy could strike a balance between the tendency of objectivism to oversimplify and constructivism to create incoherency. Social studies teachers are limited on time as a resource. So, not every nuance can be fully fleshed out in the intensive manner required constructivism. Therefore, framing a lesson with some objectivist, "predigested" information can create more time for key concepts to be explored meaningfully and applied using constructivism. Objectivism also creates a more universal base of understanding for students. In line with the concept of Bruner's spiral education, each student possesses a varied depth of understanding in every concept, from race to the Great Depression. Thus, objectivism can create a base of information, which may be oversimplified, but allows students to discuss concepts on a more equal playing field with their classmates. This objectivist base could take many forms including a lecture, readings, a fact-sheet, or a time-line. From this base, constructivist instruction can take place in the form of student research, discussion, or group problem solving, to name a few.

Deliberative Democracy

The integration of objectivism and constructivism is exemplified in the practice of classroom deliberation. Objectivism can be found in the teacher's framing of a topic and the materials they provide. There may also be objectivism if the teacher injects prevalent points of view into the deliberation that are not represented among the students. Constructivism can be

found all throughout the process of students speaking, learning, and adapting their understanding. In fact, all three of Bruner's stages of instruction are present in high quality deliberation. In the first stage, acquisition, students share information and experiences and their political knowledge grows. In the second stage, transformation, students' opinions change or develop nuance in response to their peers' comments. The final stage of constructivism, evaluation, occurs as students or the teacher respond, giving feedback to each other on what is persuasive and what is not in the process of consensus-making.

The theory of deliberative democracy frames my argument because it views public discussion of policy as the mechanism of democracy. This links discussions of current events directly to the civic aims of social studies education. Deliberative democracy departs from the traditional understanding that democracy functions through the aggregation of individuals' opinions. Deliberative democracy injects a step before opinion aggregation: authentic deliberation. Theorists believe that deliberation enhances the quality of opinions because citizens are exposed to arguments and evidence they had not considered when forming their opinions individually (Fishkin, 2009). This can be actualized in institutions as well as through informal interactions between people. Congress is considered "elite deliberation" because it is a forum for those with substantial political power to deliberate and pass policies (Fishkin 2019). In this project, I use the concept of deliberative democracy to refer to unelite deliberation, that is, political deliberation that happens between lay citizens.

A strong democracy is characterized by Barber (1984) as having copious opportunities for citizens to deliberate over and participate in policy-making. A "thin" democracy is the opposite: citizens have little role in governance and more power is transferred to the elite, elected representatives (Barber 1984). This tension between populist deliberation and elite deliberation

was present at the very founding of American democracy between the federalists and the anti-federalists. James Madison was famously a proponent of elite deliberation, as he believed representative institutions would "refine and enlarge the public views" into something "more consonant to the public good" (Federalist no. 10, 1787). For Madison, elite deliberation was a key defense against majority tyranny over minority rights. Proponents of deliberative democracy disagree with Madison and argue that authentic public deliberation is a better filter than elite deliberation, because elite deliberation is easily perverted by special interests.

Deliberative democracy functions through authentic deliberation, which increases knowledge and decreases self-interest. Fishkin describes the quality of deliberation as dependent on four criteria,

> a. Information: The extent to which participants are given access to reasonably accurate information that they believe to be relevant to the issue
>
> b. Substantive balance: The extent to which arguments offered by one side or from one perspective are answered by considerations offered by those who hold other perspectives
>
> c. Diversity: The extent to which the major positions in the public are represented by participants in the discussion
>
> d. Conscientiousness: The extent to which participants sincerely weigh the merits of the arguments
>
> e. Equal consideration: The extent to which arguments offered by all participants are considered on the merits regardless of which participants offer them (Fishkin 2009, 32)

Each of these criteria exist on a spectrum. The extent to which the criteria are met determines the quality of the deliberation. High quality deliberation expands the depth and importantly the breadth of knowledge on a subject for individuals and for the collective.

It is important to note that deliberation requires participants to express, listen, and weigh. I use the word discussion as an umbrella term for conversation in which participants exchange ideas. Deliberation is a form of discussion, but not all discussions are deliberative. Deliberation is more interactive than a simple exchange of ideas or opinions and more cooperative than a debate. In authentic deliberation, all participants are equal political actors who work toward a single goal: consensus. All arguments and experiences matter and are sincerely weighed by all, with the aim of reaching a mutually agreeable course of action (Parker 2013). Empirical evidence supports that deliberation increases participants' political knowledge (Boulianne et. al. 2020; Fishkin and Farrar 2005).

Authentic deliberation can teach students to value difference in a multicultural society. Parker (2013) argues that classroom deliberation is essential to create answers to the major question of citizenship today: "How can we live together justly, in ways that are mutually satisfying, and which leave our differences, both individual and group, intact and our multiple identities recognized?" (Parker 2013, 20). He described deliberation as students creating a democratic public culture, a "we," in which they listen and express opinions and stories with the aim of forging a mutually-agreeable course of action (Parker 2013). Differences are not seen as a deficit to unity within the public culture; instead, differences are valued as making deliberation more rich, solutions more formidable, and the community more just.

In classroom contexts, deliberation places students in the role of policy maker, increasing agency in citizenship. If widely and successfully implemented, deliberation could create a new

precedent for public political discourse as productive and fulfilling to its participants. This would be a much needed departure from current political discourse in America which is often uncivil and consensus is rare.

METHODS

Participants

I recruited a group of six high school social studies teachers and eight of their students. The teachers varied in the specific subject within social studies they teach. Subjects included government, US history, world history, and current events. Three of the teachers teach at Greenville High School and the other three teach at Washington High School, both pseudonyms. Five of the students attend Greenville High School and three attend Washington High School. Both schools are in the same district, in a small city, in a rural county in the Midwest. About 1,100 students attend Greenville High School. Of these students, a majority are white (70%), 10% are Hispanic, 10% are two or more races, 5% are Black, 4% are American Indian/Native Alaska, and 2% are Asian. About 1000 students attend Washington High School, 74% of which are white, 7% are two or more races, 6% are Black, 6% are Asian, 5% are Hispanic, and 2% are American Indian/Native American. 28% of students at Greenville and 23% of Washington students qualify for free or reduced lunch, compared to the statewide rate of 31%. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in order to protect their anonymity and encourage honest responses. All identifying information has been removed.

Data Collection & Analysis

I conducted semi-structured interviews over Zoom, a video conferencing application, and over the phone in November of 2021 through February of 2022. This was my primary source of

data, though some data comes from a pilot research project done in April and May of 2021. In the previous project, I interviewed three social studies teachers from Greenville on the same topic. In my interviews with teachers, I mainly asked about their method of incorporating current events into their classrooms, examples of political discussions in class, and their understanding of their role in these discussions. In my interviews with students, I mainly asked about the frequency of political discussions in their social studies classes, whether these were helpful in their learning, and how their participation was influenced, if at all, by their teachers and peers. Interviews with students and teachers lasted about 30 minutes on average. The interviews were recorded with permission and then transcribed using the AI software Otter.ai. Then, I hand-coded the data; first, I read the transcripts thoroughly; next, I identified significant, overarching themes relevant to my focus on political discussion; then, I color coded these themes, highlighted the transcripts accordingly, and added comments; finally, I organized coded sections based on theme, synthesized the information, and made assertions.

Researcher Positionality

Greenville was the high school I attended and graduated from in 2018. Of the teachers in this study, only one taught while I was a student and I was never in one of his classes. I believe that being an alumna from Greenville and being from the community granted me some trust from the teachers. They seemed open and frank about their teaching and the challenges they faced.

Being an alumna aided me in finding student participants. I first attempted to recruit students through emails sent by the schools' office to parents. This resulted in one interview. The remaining seven were arranged through personal connections I had with their older siblings or through connections with friends of relatives. I disclosed to the students that I grew up in their community and attended Greenville. I believe my life experience in the same community was a

reason why most students opened up to me about aspects of their personal and academic life. I sometimes responded to students about similarities or differences to my experience at Greenville. I think this helped students connect with me and trust that I could properly represent their experiences.

While all student interviews were conducted over the phone, it's possible students correctly assumed I am white based on my way of speaking or, through degrees of personal connection, they knew a family member is white. I believe my race was a factor in the openness I found in some white students to talk about racism present in their school. White students may have felt uncomfortable or have been more cautious when discussing racism with a person of color. Out of the four students of color I interviewed, two discussed inclusion and one of those two spoke explicitly about racism. No participant spoke about personal experiences with racism. It is likely that my race was a barrier to students sharing their full experiences, perhaps out of concern their experience could not be fully understood by a white person. It's also possible they assumed that racism was not relevant to my research.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Incorporation of Current Events

Teachers utilized current events in a variety of ways. The most common form was using current events to deepen understanding of historical concepts and events. Students valued social studies in its application to the present. One teacher used media coverage to guide his prioritization of government concepts. Current events were also incorporated in formal segments of class, showing that teachers valued themt in and of themselves. Teachers and students expressed heightened engagement during discussion of current events.

Teachers incorporated current events to deepen students' understanding of historical events and concepts. The most devoted to this practice was Ms. Mackay, who allocated a section of each Friday in her world history and US history classes to current events presentations from small groups of students. One requirement of these presentations is that students connect the event to a historical event or concept they learned in class. She explained how this practice increases understanding and retention: "So then even if it's, you know, something that we talked about a month ago, and they're making a connection to it. Well, that means that they remembered what we were talking about a month ago, and then it also refreshed the [other] kids' memories, and then they're allowed to make another connection with it." Through this aspect of the assignment, students–both presenters and listeners–gain a deeper understanding of the historical curriculum and an additional cognitive pathway to remember it. Ms. Mackay further explained how current events aid in a level of engagement necessary for long term retention:

> You have to make the connection from the past to the present. And if you're not, you're not fully engaging kids, because they're not going to really connect with it. Instead, you're just kind of throwing information at them. Where I think the next step after that, giving them that information, is for them to be able to make that connection. So it can truly sink in for them, and become beneficial for them, you know, as they go on with their lives.

Similarly, Mr. Campbell and Mr. Gleelen utilized the present to increase understanding and sought to make history relatable. For example, Mr. Campbell held a discussion about free speech using the case of a teenage girl who was suspended from her volleyball and cheer team for making an Instagram post containing obscenities. In an assignment for his US history class, Mr. Gleelen asked students to reflect on similarities between the social and political climate of the 1920s and the 2020s. Mr. Gleelen articulated the importance of creating relatability:

> When you're trying to talk to someone, especially a freshman, about something that happened 1000 years ago, you kind of get that glossed over look in their eyes, and they're not really connected. So, if you can connect it to modern times as much as possible, or something in their lives, then it makes a lot more sense to them. I try to relate to them as much as I can.

Establishing relatability was effective because most students valued social studies for its use in the present world. Many students articulated that they had a responsibility to learn from the past in order to not repeat its mistakes. Alex, a sophomore at Washington, found enjoyment in extrapolating from history to see how traces manifested in the present. Chloe, a junior at Greenville, described social studies as her weakest subject, because she struggles with memorization. She was best able to connect with events and concepts that felt relatable. She brought up an assignment similar to the one previously mentioned by Mr. Gleelen, but taught by a different teacher. "The 1920s were kind of like, precursing, like modern times," she told me, "because that was when, like, women were getting their voting rights. And they were flappers, which I feel like, it's very much like women today." This assignment was especially interesting and memorable to her because she could see herself in the women they studied.

Increased engagement reported by students and teachers show that current events can bridge the "generation gap" within history (Sweeting, 1991). During current event discussions, Ms. Mackay's students were more engaged than any other time in the week. Mr. Gleelen described students as "perking up" when given a current event to illustrate a concept. It gave his students a "story to go back to" to aid in their retention. Ms. Hahn utilized current events in activities as a "hook" to get students interested in new units. Examples of this included reading about the one-child policy in China in her world history class and a discussion of modern racial injustice in her US history class.

Mr. Cunningham noted that students were better able to grasp the concepts that were in the news cycle and public discourse. He explained how students' understanding of impeachment was enhanced by the impeachment of Donald Trump.

> So, talking impeachment, you know, like, up until a couple of years ago, I'd have to bring up the Bill Clinton impeachment. And the kids just aren't super familiar with something like that, because it relies on a lot of outside knowledge that they don't have. And for the most part, our US history curriculum is so stretched that they're not getting to the 1990s. [They've] barely ever heard of Bill Clinton, other than like, "Oh, yeah, he had an affair," you know. Being able to bring up more modern day things, I think, at the very least enhances their understanding of them to go, here's a real world example, you can see this, and I do think it increases engagement. It's not like a day and night difference, you're still going to get kids that just don't really care about it, they're going to go 'well, it doesn't matter if it's in the news or not.' But you're gonna get a lot more kids that start asking questions and, you know, connecting the dots and doing those types of things.

Current events served as examples or reflected commonalities with the past, deepening historical understanding by transporting students into the familiar context of the present. As mentioned repeatedly throughout interviews, social studies teachers are extremely limited in terms of time. Painting the complex context surrounding Bill Clinton's impeachment would require additional time that is often not available due to the breadth of the standard curriculum. Thus, current events are short cuts for creating "realness" for students, which is essential for holding their attention and establishing deep understanding.

Beside enriching curriculum, current events influenced which concepts Mr. Campbell prioritized. He noted this was possible, in part, because of the leeway in state standards and the lack of standardized tests for social studies classes. Mr. Campbell explained how media coverage and public discourse made clear what concepts deserved the most attention:

> Like you can't have been alive in America over the summer without hearing about George Floyd, you know. So, we're talking, okay, this is what qualified immunity is. When people talk about getting rid of it, this is what they're referring to. Here's your right to protest. Here's what we're seeing. And we use Kenosha, you know, we use Jacob Blake, or in years past, we've used the impeachment of Donald Trump. . . I'm trying to bring up cases that are currently occurring, because these are the ones that I want kids to think about and hear about.

Mr. Campbell used his autonomy to give special deference to topics which had demonstrable societal significance. He pointed out that students are constantly passively and sometimes actively exposed to political discourse. So, he set out to teach the concepts and arguments necessary to fully understand the public debate at hand. This likely helped students notice mischaracterizations or bias in the media they consumed.

While all participating teachers incorporated current events in some way, some expressed skepticism about the usefulness and feasibility of this practice. Mr. Keller and Mr. Campbell viewed some of their students as egocentric and therefore disinterested in current events. Theoretically, Mr. Keller believed that current events could be useful to social studies teaching. However, he was not sure that students themselves believed this. “To a certain degree, I think a lot of the kids [think] ‘that's happening somewhere else. That's not in my world. So if it's not happening in my world, it is less important,’” he said. Mr. Campbell viewed a portion of his class similarly, stating, “You're still going to get kids that just don't really care about it. They're going to go 'well, it doesn't matter if it's in the news or not.'”

Mr. Keller and Mr. Otto adopted a more objectivist teaching style, due to their perceptions of students’ limited knowledge and lack of motivation, respectively. Mr. Keller described the freshman in his world history class as “oblivious to the other side of the world” and

unfamiliar with high level concepts. Thus, discussions in class were “almost like fill in the blank to a certain degree.” Mr. Otto cited lack of student motivation as a hindrance to discussions and the incorporation of current events. He explained that many students don’t do their assigned reading before class, forcing him to lecture. He believed this lack of motivation was caused by technology drawing student interest away from schoolwork.

> Admittedly, I'm pretty much a traditional teacher, or what I call it traditional. I end up doing a lot of lecturing, worksheets, quizzes, standard multiple choice tests, things like that. I've had discussions with my principals about it. And mainly, the kids don't read. And if they read, so we could do more of a discussion based [class], that'd be great. But since they don't read, I kind of by default have to lecture. . . I try to [incorporate current events]. Not formally, but in lectures and discussions, I'll try to bring in modern stuff that happened. Like in one of my classes today I brought up something I read about over the weekend, over the long weekend. And the problem is, again, these kids don't read so many of them had no clue what I was talking about. Maybe one thing I'll incorporate is, for each chapter, they're gonna have to look up an article. just kind of force them to look at what's going on in government, to get more into it. . . I would prefer doing discussions, but I can't do discussions unless you've done research. I mean, I try to throw out questions. I try to bring out opinions and try to get them to defend or speak against it. Sometimes it works. But a lot of times it doesn't.

Mr. Otto framed the lack of student engagement as a societal problem, rather than a problem with the textbook curriculum or his teaching style. If lack of student motivation is the problem, incorporating current events could help establish significance to students’ lives. As previously discussed, participating students were primarily interested in history in its application to the present. It seems that Mr. Otto had trouble implementing this practice due to lack of scaffolding. He brought up a current event from something *he* had read, expecting some students to also be aware of the subject. His impromptu style of incorporation seemed to not fit his students and their level of self motivated engagement with news. He may have seen more

participation had he assigned the article. Lack of scaffolding may also explain why students sometimes did not respond to his attempts to "bring out opinions." Perhaps students felt ambivalent toward the question or do not have the evidence to feel confident in their opinion. Class time to research could resolve these barriers to participation.

Mr. Otto and Mr. Keller may be underestimating the ability of their students to participate in complex discussion. This is something Ms. Hahn found herself doing in her first year of teaching government:

> We had discussions, but I wish we would have had more because I was a little bit fearful of the civil discourse, or that, in some cases, they couldn't handle it. . . We did one activity at the end of the year and it was talking about constitutional amendments, and they were given a situation and they had to identify which amendment was being violated and why. And the students were like, 'we wish we would have done more discussions.' And so it's something that I've tried to take that feedback and use it for future classes

All students felt positively about the incorporation of current events and two mentioned wishing they were more present in the class. Alex imagined a whole unit dedicated to current events while Chloe wished that the present was applied like a lens throughout history. Incorporation of current events fulfilled multiple purposes for teachers. Notably, this is a strong tool for increasing student engagement, because it aligns with student's motivations to apply history to the present.

Civic Education

Besides acting as a tool to teach standard curriculum, teachers saw current events as intrinsically valuable to social studies education. Teachers articulated a responsibility to civic education, which they characterized as encouraging consistent political engagement and the

creation of informed and unbiased opinions. Teachers articulated a responsibility to form active, informed citizens through social studies education. Ms. Hahn believed both schools had a consistent view of civic education, which teaches skills and responsibilities involved in being politically engaged and critical consumers of news:

> So I think in the department at Washington, and I think this can be implied at Greenville as well, is that we feel that our responsibility as social studies teachers is not only to teach the content, but teach civic responsibility. So making sure that [students] understand that we have the duty as a citizen, to participate in government and also be informed on different types of news and issues that are affecting the United States and also that will extend to other areas of the world as well. So we tried to incorporate that by talking about current events, also kind of building those habits of analyzing different sources, close reading, also identifying bias within sources. So those are kind of like skills that I tried to weave in, by assigning different types of readings and having those discussions, and also maybe kind of looking at more complex issues to help model how to have those conversations."

Both discussion of current events and standard curriculum served Ms. Hahn's conception of civic education. In standard curriculum, students practice the skills of analyzing multiple sources and identifying bias in historic documents. Students also learn a model for approaching discussions of complex issues. They can then go on to apply these skills to modern events and issues.

For many teachers, civic education was motivated by a fear that students would otherwise become apathetic to the political world and passive citizens. Ms. Mackay warned her class not to be a "headline reader," rather they should deeply engage with news and analyze multiple sources of information. Mr. Gleelen articulated a similar view of civic education while describing the type of questions he asks students in assignments:

> That's always one of [my] questions: How does this affect me in my world? And what's happening in a critical viewpoint, rather than just like, looking on a news site, reading a headline, like "Oh, that's true." Actually reading it, studying it, and then asking questions about it, I think is really important. . . Basically teaching them how to be better people and better global citizens.

Discussion of current events was a method of civic education used by Mr. Campbell and Ms. Mackay. Mr. Campbell's classes always started with a "News and Announcements" section, in which students kept each other up to date on popular and evolving news stories. These included the disappearance of Gabby Petito, the injuries and deaths during a Travis Scott performance at Astroworld Festival, and the Kyle Rittenhouse trial. The weekly current event presentations in Ms. Mackay's class included 25 to 40 minute discussions, where topics included mask mandates and the COVID-19 vaccine. These routines show that teachers wished to keep students consistently informed on topics interesting to them.

Teachers viewed current events as a tool to encourage engagement with the political world, which they saw as an important civic goal. Consistency was an important factor in how Ms. Mackay incorporated current events into her classroom. "Events are literally constantly happening. So if they're only focusing on [current events] once a month or once a quarter, are they really becoming informed? That's my biggest fight there," she said. She identifies nurturing consistent political engagement in her students as her "biggest fight" within teaching civic education. Claire, a junior at Greenville, confirmed the struggle of staying informed, "[I] still don't know everything that's happened [in the world]. There's so much happening and I think it's very hard to absorb all of it."

Many teachers hoped to create independent thinkers, who question the beliefs they have absorbed from family, peers, or media. Ms. Mackay believed that civic education should give

students "the ability to go into the world and take a look at both sides and, you know, look up the information and make their own decisions, rather than allowing media or social media, or their peers, or their parents to kind of guide them. But rather focus on their own understanding and making a decision." Mr. Gleelen saw political development in his students through their emerging ability to justify their beliefs:

> [Freshmen] have mostly their parents' viewpoints I found, right. So when you ask them, like, 'Oh, why do you think this?' They don't have an answer. But they're starting to look into it a little bit. And then with my juniors, a lot of them are a lot more into it. Or some of them are more into it and then they're more knowledgeable. So they'll actually say, like, why they believe in something and they can back it up.

Students' development and nuancing of beliefs was illustrated in a class discussion Mr. Gleelen recalled about socialism:

> We were talking about World War One and I mentioned something about socialism and how that was on the rise. And then someone made a comment about how socialism is evil, or something like that, like 'it's awful.' And I said, 'well', and then before I was able to step in, some other students chimed in with 'Yeah, I agree,' or 'I don't agree.' And so, when I stepped in, I was like, 'well, technically, every country is socialist.' And then they kind of stopped and looked at me. And so I explained, capitalism, communism, socialism, and explained the different ranges of socialism, from all the way from democratic socialism to Marxist socialism. And they kind of stopped and were like, 'oh, okay.' So that was very close, to kind of spiraling out of control, right. But I think I've kind of learned how to handle at least this group, how to handle them and redirect them back.

This story illustrates how students sometimes enter the classroom with underdeveloped and dogmatic beliefs, like "socialism is evil." Some of the students held beliefs about socialism strongly enough that an argument almost broke out. By teaching about different degrees of socialism, Mr. Gleelen deepened the students' understanding and seemingly brought nuance to

their opinions. Teachers had strong commitments to civic education, and complex conceptualizations of what this entailed. Teachers taught this through repeated exposure to current events and assignments that required fact-checking, argument analysis, and bias identification. Teachers also sought to develop the intellectual capabilities of engaged, critical, and independent-thinking citizens.

Teachers' Role as Facilitator

All teachers and some students believed that facilitation should be impartial. This entailed providing balanced materials, concealing personal biases, and fairly portraying common perspectives. In one student's account, a teacher revealing his personal bias reduced student participation. I find that over commitment to neutrality can lead to the dilution of values and the spread of misleading information.

All participating teachers mentioned that they did not disclose personal opinions and prevented personal biases from affecting their teaching. Many believed that expressing their personal opinion would stifle the expression of students with diverging opinions. This would cause discussion of current events to become one-sided and therefore "propaganda" or "indoctrination," words used by Mr. Keller and Mr. Otto. "As a teacher, it's our job to educate, not give our opinions. . . My job is to sit back and let them discuss," said Ms. Mackay. Teachers viewed their personal opinions as irrelevant and expressed them as contrary to the goal of education.

Students valued neutral facilitation from their teachers. Emily, a junior at Greenville, desired teachers to be open minded and teach "all sides" of subjects. She appreciated Mr. Gleelen's honesty and the fact that he didn't "praise the United States over like other countries,"

something she believed her previous social studies teachers did. Rachel, a junior at Greenville, felt more comfortable participating in classes where the teacher reassured those that expressed differing opinions. Kennedy believed that Mr. Otto revealed his partisan bias to the class when they were watching presidential debates and he spoke of some candidates more positively than others. She describes a chilling effect to engagement and participation:

> No one really wanted to listen to him anymore just because they all knew he was saying *his* thoughts, and they were biased thoughts, obviously, you know? So, I feel like when you don't teach both of the sides you just kind of, I guess, this disengaged students. And it just causes students to not really understand both sides of the story, which is what prompts fights and, you know, arguments. . . Students on that [Mr. Otto's] side were like, okay, cool. That's great. But then those who weren't just kind of sat there just looked around.

To Kennedy, teacher impartiality is essential for productive discussions. She describes a disengagement on both sides of the political spectrum. Students with the same supposed political leanings as Mr. Otto felt validated in their beliefs, so much so that there was no reason to engage with the other side. Those on the opposite side felt alienated and uncomfortable expressing beliefs that opposed Mr. Otto's supposed bias. Kennedy thought the lack of participation caused misunderstandings between the opposing sides, then causing unproductive "fights."

In the pursuit of impartiality, teachers often played "devil's advocate" to balance the political leanings of discussions. Though all teachers described Greenville and Washington High School as ideologically diverse, cases arose where prominent perspectives on current events were not represented among students. In these cases teachers described playing "devil's advocate," representing perspectives while not claiming them as their personal opinion.

> It's important that kids hear multiple perspectives that they're not hearing. I mean, then [teaching] becomes propaganda at that point: 'this is the only side that you're going to hear the other side is wrong', sort of

> thing. I got a class two years ago that was, like, blue as blue can be sort of thing, right? Well, then it felt like every day that I was only on one side, but I kind of had to be only on one side, because you all agree with one another, that this is the way the world should work. And I need to give you at least something to think about from the other perspective. Now I've had the opposite of that, groups that lean very much to the other side, and it's like, Okay, you guys need to at least hear what the other side is saying about this here and [I'm] kind of going through some of their main talking points. I try to represent that stuff as best I can. I don't know that I'm ever perfect, both on the right or the left in representing their ideas or their reasons why they follow a certain thing. But I try to be as fair as possible to both groups. -*Mr. Keller*

Playing "devil's advocate" prevents a lack of ideological diversity from biasing students' perspectives. It also causes students to evaluate counter arguments to beliefs which they otherwise wouldn't receive criticism of. Mr. Keller acknowledges the difficulty in authentically representing left and right views and their supporting evidence. Weak representations of prominent perspectives could lead to bias. Thus, discussions of controversial issues are quite burdensome on teachers, because they require extensive research to avoid this pitfall.

In my view, Mr. Keller demonstrated the difficulty of neutrality by dismissing a valid view presented by students. He spoke about correcting false equivalencies students would make. One example occurred when students compared the migrant detention camps at the US-Mexico border under the Trump administration to concentration camps. "[A detention camp] is not a concentration camp in any regards of the imagination" he said to me. Of course, Mr. Keller is right that detention camps during the border crisis should not be conflated with death camps in the Holocaust. However, they can be accurately described as concentration camps, according to some scholars (Wise 2019). This is a minor instance and it's unclear whether his dismissal of the comparison affected students' expression. However, it does reveal the difficulty in representing

other perspectives, especially when unexpected discussions arise and teachers must navigate them unprepared.

Another important aspect of neutrality teachers identified was providing politically balanced materials. Mr. Campbell explained that most of his effort towards neutrality takes the form of selecting readings. He makes sure that materials provide evidence that students could use to support "both-sides" of an argument. Ms. Hahn explains how balanced materials serve to make her students more objective, "[I] make sure that both sides are being shown and that they're evaluating all the information before they make a decision. That way, it's more informed and factual, rather than kind of focusing on an emotional response to it. And making sure that we're grounding in the facts before we kind of jump to conclusions." One way Mr. Otto balances materials is by using a website called AllSides.com:

> In my AP class, we're going to be talking about the Second Amendment. So I'm going to bring up the [Ahmaud] Arbury case, we're gonna hopefully get into a discussion there. But I'm going to send them to that website and they're going to have to find an article about a second amendment issue. Because what's neat about that site, it gives a series of articles from the left, a series of articles from the right, and a series of articles in the middle. And they have to read each one, just to see their impression of each one.

Many teachers expressed the importance of maintaining certain values during discussions. "Sometimes I do have to step in. And but a lot of times it's not political at that point. Then it gets to like harmful views and I step in and stop [them]. It's like racism, bigotry, stereotypes, like stereotypical thoughts. That's when I step in. Um, but I feel like that's not an opinion. I feel like that's just being a good human," Mr. Gleelen said. Prejudiced comments may make students with marginalized identities less likely to participate. Therefore, Mr. Gleelen's

practice of speaking against these comments could make these students more comfortable participating, increasing the diversity of perspectives present.

Rachel approved of Mr. Gleelen's method of maintaining values as a form of moral education. Rachel and Emily both described hearing peers express views they saw as immoral or insensitive. For example, Rachel recalled some insensitive comments pertaining to the US atomic bombings of Japan. Unlike Emily, Rachel was not discouraged from participating by such comments. She acknowledged that others were not as far along in their moral development as she was. "I think I've kind of grown up in a household where it's pretty clear what's right and wrong, you know? And, like, empathy wise and things like that. How you can feel for others, especially in big, like, world situations," she said. High school is an essential time in social emotional development where student ethics' are challenged and applied to complex situations (Allensworth et. al. 2018). Mr. Gleelen played a vital role in this form of social emotional learning. Rachel explained his practice: "He doesn't make it, like, silencing their voice. You know what I mean? I feel like whenever a teacher tells you you're wrong, it kind of does hurt you a little bit. But also, he does it in a way that it doesn't encourage their behavior, but it allows for them to, like, grow, if that makes sense." She portrays Gleelen's ability to speak against regressive comments without embarrassing or shaming the student. This way the student is more likely to reflect on their comment and is less likely to be discouraged from participating in the future.

While Mr. Gleelen did not see this practice as violating impartiality, Mr. Campbell believed this did add some subjectivity:

> It does make it tough to be that mediator, because you're going 'okay, I want to stay in the middle.' But sometimes, like there are certain things where you go, ‘well, what's right or wrong?' and we have an obligation to do or say something about that. So when you're looking at something like hate speech, and we have a kid who's arguing that hate speech should be allowed, that's where you have to step in and be like, well, this is right, this is wrong. And here's why. Like, you can't just say like,' hey, you're wrong,' but you're gonna go,'here's why this is the case.' If I have a kid who's going to be arguing to me that we should segregate, well, I can't be the mediator. I can't be a neutral mediator in that discussion. There's no neutral mediator between Person A has value and Person B has no value. That's where you have to kind of determine that level of right and wrong. And that does come back to personal biases, which is always going to be a gray area that can never be taken out.

Mr. Campbell and Mr. Gleelen saw that they have an obligation to uphold values by speaking against regressive views, rather than remaining neutral on them. Mr. Campbell emphasized the importance of explaining why an opinion was morally wrong. He acknowledged that the line between right and wrong depends on personal beliefs and is thus a source of subjectivity, but one that is necessary to accept.

The tension between neutrality and maintaining values was illustrated in a class discussion Mr. Campbell recalled about the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Mr. Campbell described some points of disagreement that arose amongst students surrounding the event:

> [Students] had different thoughts on whether or not something like this was justified. We're talking, like, you know, whether or not Capitol Police should have shot Ashli Babbitt. Whether or not there was justifiable outrage. Whether or not the President was responsible for this type of thing. . . Almost everybody could agree that like, you know, acts of violence are bad, but it comes down to motivations, arrests. How should we treat people afterwards?

Through these questions, Mr. Campbell's students were processing a terrifying threat to democracy. Essential tenets of democracy, elections and the peaceful transition of power, which their class was devoted to learning, were being attacked. Yet, Mr. Campbell described students' disagreements over this event with neutrality:

> So, you just hear [students] out. And if they disagree, like, hey, at the end of the day, like, you kind of have to just understand one person sees it differently than you. And kids are usually pretty cool about that, like, they're not going to fight for a very long time. . . What are the consequences [of the insurrection]? Like, people are gonna have some different thoughts on that and that's fine. That's part of being a person and being a human.

This example reveals how the prioritization of neutrality can lead to a dilution of values. Mr. Campbell decided that this was not an instance where maintaining values required him to condemn the insurrectionists. He accepted, and encouraged his students to accept, the opinions of some students that the insurrection was justifiable. As an authority figure in the classroom, a teachers' silence legitimizes views. Students' undemocratic or misinformed views may have been corrected if Mr. Campbell had taken a value and evidence-based stance against the insurrection.

Prioritization of neutrality could lead to the legitimization and spread of misinformation. Students frequently chose topics related to COVID-19 vaccines for their presentations on current events in Ms. Mackay's class. She explained how she facilitated these controversial discussions:

> Sometimes the tensions get a little high, especially when it came to vaccination. Just because some were very anti-vaccination, some were very for it. Sometimes it would get a little heated. The way that I would kind of guide it is [by saying] 'all that matters is that everybody is making an informed decision.' So if you decide something, you're making sure that you are deciding it based off of the information that you've been

> presented, and you know that it's accurate information. . . So they, it got some of my students to really think and it didn't mean that it changed their minds, but it educated them more on what decision they decided to make.

Ms. Mackay believes that stances for and against vaccination are both acceptable in her classroom, and should be accepted by students, so long as the stances are formed by accurate information. Yet, there is scientific consensus that the Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccines are safe (Wu et al., 2021). This fact led me to ask, "does [mediation] get difficult if, maybe, you were to hear a student make a claim that you didn't think was substantiated either by reality or by, like, science?" Ms. Mackay responded:

> "Um, to be honest, I haven't really ran into a situation yet where I've had to step in and say something. Usually, because they're all focused. My students tend to ask those questions, like, verifying the information.'Well, where did you hear that?' They ask those questions in these discussions. And even my freshmen will kind of do that."

Some error in fact-checking or evidence weighing must have occurred for Ms. Mackay and some of her students to conclude that there is an informed anti-vaccine position. Extreme levels of misinformation and disinformation surrounding COVID vaccines have led to false safety concerns becoming increasingly believed to be fact (Brodie et al. 2021). It is possible that students brought in inaccurate information, despite Ms. Mackay's requirement that students verify information across multiple reliable sources. This would be especially possible when students reference sources besides those used by the presenting students, because neither the students nor Ms. Mackay have had the chance to verify the information and the legitimacy of the source.

Acceptance of the anti-vaccine position also may have come from improper weighing of accurate information. For example, students may have brought up the cases of blood clotting with Johnson & Johnson vaccine or the cases of myocarditis in vaccinated people. While these cases are important to discuss, they do not prove that these vaccines are unsafe because the rates are very small, especially in comparison to the much higher rates of these complications to those who contract COVID-19 (Heymans 2022; Hippisley-Cox et al. 2021; Geddes et al. 2021). It's possible that students didn't know to weigh the small health risks of vaccination to the much larger health risks of COVID-19 contraction.

This account reveals the extreme importance that evidence is rigorously investigated and weighed in discussions. So far, Ms. Mackay has relied on students to do this, to ask "where do you hear that?" Evidently, this is not rigorous enough of a process to prevent misinformation or misleading information from entering the classroom, which is especially concerning in matters of personal and public health. The fact that Ms. Mackay had not felt the need to step in implies that some teachers may lack sufficient knowledge or time to properly verify and weigh evidence. The fact that students bring in information shows enthusiasm and investment in current events, but it also increases the chances of illegitimate information entering discussions. Ideal facilitation requires extensive research and multitasking. Teachers must guide discussion, conceal biases, fairly represent perspectives, and maintain values. Navigating the tension between neutrality and values is an understandably difficult, but necessary task.

Social Factors in Student Participation and Engagement

Students' preference for class discussions varied. Most students enjoyed discussions and, given certain conditions, found them conducive to learning. Some saw discussions as a way to

learn from their peers and inform their opinions. All students identified factors that made discussion more fruitful and made them more likely to participate. Students participated more in classrooms when they had greater familiarity with peers. Social exclusion contributed to less participation. Incidents of prejudice and their implications to deliberative learning are discussed.

Participating students stated that preplanned, whole class discussions were rare. Small group discussions and impromptu discussions–often spawning from students' questions during lectures–were more common. Alex was the only student to describe his class, AP World History, as discussion oriented. He was also the only student who was in an AP social studies class. The greater emphasis on discussion was a major reason why he took AP classes. He believed that the small class size was conducive to discussion and engagement. Alex's account aligns with Nystrand's finding that discussions disproportionately occur in classrooms with high achieving students (Nystrand et al. 2003).

Most students said that discussion contributed to their learning, given certain circumstances. One student, Claire, was neutral about discussion. She explained, "I don't think the discussions really changed how much I learned. So I would rather, just kind of like, learn all the information. Like, I don't really need to talk about what we learned, you know. But sometimes it's nice. I wouldn't really care either way." Claire seems to prefer a more direct, objectivist style of teaching. Discussions contributed to students' learning by facilitating the weighing of different perspectives. Emily liked discussion because she got to hear other students' interpretations of material, rather than just "learning on your own." Rachel saw discussions as a way to strengthen and better inform her opinions.

> Sometimes it’s like, if I have a discussion with people that have different opinions, it's a little hard to see from that perspective. But it is also very necessary, because you have to remain unbiased, especially in, like, writings and things like that. So I think it's, it helps small discussions help with like, forming your opinion, but also helping your opinion to be not as biased, as it probably would have, if you don't see from different perspectives.

Rachel admitted the difficulty of understanding divergent opinions but acknowledged the importance of this. She emphasizes the need to write in an impartial way, a key goal in teachers’ conceptions of civic education. Discussions helped her form opinions in a less biased and more informed way.

Emily, Chloe, and Flynn stipulated that they enjoyed discussions when their peers actively contributed. Chloe noticed that teachers sometimes struggled to get students to participate, sometimes the topics were “a bit over our heads.” This led to students “just saying stuff to try and get the teacher to give us a good grade, rather than actually discussing the topic.” She often contributed because felt “really bad for the teacher, when they're just sitting there trying to get us to talk.” She believed she’d enjoy discussions more if more students participated. Difficult topics, without proper scaffolding, can be a barrier for robust discussion and broad participation.

Scaffolding, teacher support to build a base of knowledge, before discussion can increase student participation and passion. Emily, Grace, and Rachel were more likely to participate in discussion on subjects they knew and felt passionate about. Rachel said, “I usually am passionate, if I know about the subject, or if there’s teaching about it, even if I didn't know beforehand.” When I asked Jamila, a freshman at Greenville, if she cared about politics she said, “No not really. One thing that I've learned in my family is that we do not talk about politics

around my grandpa." The first thing that came to mind for her was that politics is something to be avoided. For many students like Jamila, politics are not discussed at the dinner table. This means that school may be the only place they can research and discuss current events. Scaffolding can create a more equal playing field for participation and helps students discover issues they are passionate about.

Emily and Flynn expressed frustration with peers who lacked their seriousness and passion. Both students described themselves as very passionate about political issues. Flynn, a senior at Washington, explained that he liked to share his thoughts in discussions but this was difficult when interacting with "immature" peers. "It's like if we're gonna have a conversation, I want to have a meaningful conversation with you. But if you're not going to take me seriously or all you're doing is trying to instigate me, what's the point?" he said. Emily's participation was reduced by students who made "out of pocket" statements that she viewed as immoral. For example, she recalled a student who positively framed the violence of World War One as a testing ground for weapons and future advancement in military defense. Both students felt discouraged when students minimized their passionate beliefs, through humor and antagonism. As Emily said, "I don't want to feel attacked for something that I so strongly believe."

Social connections with peers increased participation and engagement. Alex, Kennedy, Claire, and Flynn mentioned that they felt more comfortable participating in classes where they had close friends. Social interaction was especially important to Kennedy, a senior at Washington. Her favorite aspects of school were social activities, like "whiteboard days" in math, where they solved problems in pairs, and "joke day" in choir, where once a week class began with a few students telling jokes to the class. I asked if she wished more classes had social activities and she replied, "Yeah, honestly, I do think it would help students make different

friends other than their friend groups. If they sort of paused every once in a while and did some sort of breakout game or just like a fun activity. Because classes such as English and Math, where things get pretty intense with just schoolwork, and reading and stuff like that, kids just kind of seem to focus on that, which is why like, some kids don't have friends and in certain classes." Kennedy's comments show how individualized work and intensity of curriculum can prevent social connection and how simple classroom practices can increase peer familiarity. Most students pointed out that such social connection increases their participation.

Conversely, social exclusion can cause less participation and lower engagement. Flynn is transgender and in non-elective courses he frequently overheard comments of peers belittling his identity. "I hear them talking in the back, just talking about, like, "oh, she thinks that she's a guy," or whatever. And it's just like, I can't focus on this essay when I hear them just making all these little remarks," he said. Flynn was rather aloof in his description of the transphobia he faced, shying away from the word bullying and calling it "just annoying." Yet, his peers' exclusion, and the ensuing inability to focus, had real effects on his grades. He typically received B's but his grades would sometimes drop to Ds, though he was always able to get them back up by the end of the semester. His participation was also negatively affected. "It's just those required classes. It's when all the different kinds of cliques mix and it's a little harder to talk. I'm not, like, significantly [more] quiet, but if you were to look at me in choir versus English you can definitely tell that there's a difference," he said. In elective courses, such as Choir, Flynn felt more accepted by his peers and was more likely to participate. "[Choir] is the one class where I can go and I don't have to worry about anybody saying anything. And I tend to be kind of a leader in that class. So it's just really fun to be in such a new environment that lets me be who I want to and no one's going to tell me anything." Flynn had to work much harder to get good

grades in classes where he faced social exclusion. In choir, he didn't have to worry about what others thought and said about him. This created room for greater engagement and enjoyment and allowed him to become a leader.

Students' stories of racist and transphobic incidents imply that social exclusion is a major problem at both schools. Claire, a white, cis student, shared a several incidents of predjudice that she heard about at Greenville. This included someone who wrote the n-word in the dirt on a Black student's car and near constant cyber bullying of one of Claire's friends, who is transgender. Incidents also involved teachers. One of Claire's friends was in a friend group of entirely Black students. This group was frequently kicked out of the library for being too loud when they were speaking at the acceptable level. In her Freshman year, Claire's language teacher was "outwardly transphobic." He was reprimanded for repeatedly misgendering a student and complained to Claire's class about the situation. Flynn and Claire framed the administration at their respective schools as unhelpful in punishing instigators and in preventing future instances of prejudice. Flynn told me that his teachers sometimes noticed students' belittling comments. When these teachers asked him about it he'd act nonchalantly about the situation and ask them not to do anything, "because all [the teachers are] going to do is take them in the office, tell them not to do it, and they're just gonna keep doing it." These stories reveal a climate of intimidation towards students with marginalized identities. It is likely this climate is harmful to students' mental health. Further, Flynn's account shows that such incidents can also negatively influence engagement and academic outcomes.

The climate of intimidation towards students with marginalized identities can prevent them from fully participating in deliberation. Three criteria of high quality deliberation are harmed when prejudice is present in the classroom: equal consideration, conscientiousness, and

diversity. Prejudice subconsciously or consciously prevents students from fairly weighing the arguments and perspectives of marginalized peers, violating equal consideration and conscientiousness. Claire's stories of teachers exhibiting prejudice are alarming for a number of reasons. In regards to deliberation, prejudiced facilitation is especially harmful because the teacher holds authority in the classroom. The teacher makes decisions over the subject matter of the deliberation, who is called on, how long they may speak, and which comments are acceptable and which require speaking against. In all of these responsibilities, conscious or unconscious prejudice could arise, further normalizing marginalization and further discouraging these students' participation. Even if a facilitator is unprejudiced, students with marginalized identities may participate less due to the climate of intimidation present at the school. The ensuing lack of diversity in perspectives harms the quality of deliberation. More importantly, it harms the education of students with marginalized identities. Under prejudiced and non-diverse circumstances, deliberation only serves to validate the beliefs and opinions of those belonging to dominant culture.

Uncivil Discourse

I have previously discussed possible challenges to productive discourse. Another challenge arose from discussions that became uncivil. While somewhat rare, unproductive political discourse actively shaped curriculum and students' social lives. Teachers adopted class norms and used redirection to avoid incivility.

Teachers described most discussions as civil, though some recalled examples of emotionally-charged and unproductive discussions. The most extreme example came from a government class Mr. Keller taught:

> Usually, we would talk a lot about politics and how it connects to what we're talking about. And we tried it a couple of times, and they were seniors, they were deeply rooted in what they believed and they had the opinion that the other side was idiotic and wrong, or even worse than that, you know, racist or whatever it is. And it just was not a productive conversation. So we kind of slowly took that out, so to speak. So it kind of depends on the group of kids that you have. Can they handle it? Can they not? . . . you could talk until you're blue in the face about having respect for one another, and being able to think and see the other side, see the other perspective. . . They were not willing to step back and look at the other side of things and consider different viewpoints. So you know, unfortunately, for that group, it was a lot of, 'we're gonna ignore this topic for right now.' We're just, we're just not ready for it. And I don't know. Now, I'm sure they–[I'm] trying to predict– now they're probably 19 year olds that just write whatever they want on Twitter, and just hit send and don't even think twice about what they're writing. Hopefully, they matured, but I just that's not the feeling that I got when they walked in and when they walked out, unfortunately."

The uncivil nature of these discussions caused Mr. Keller to sanitize his curriculum of controversial topics. He described a group of what I assume was left-wing students who could not converse with their right-wing peers in good faith. This is evident of a lack of deliberative skills. Mr. Keller described unsuccessful attempts to enforce respectful discourse.

Campbell observed that some students did not participate in discussion because of their heated nature. "Even though [a few students] might want to talk about it, not everybody else wants to listen to this. You know, there's 20 people in the room and if two of them are debating, 18 of them are going, 'can we just not yell at each other?'" he said. Unequal student participation in discussions contributed to Mr. Campbell's decision to make assignments mostly based on individual opinion-making and in pairs. "It always ends up being a couple of kids that dominate discussion a little more than others," he said. By assigning students to individually write answers to discussion questions or discuss in pairs, Mr. Campbell could hear and respond to "a greater variety of voices." Mr. Campbell's emphasis on individual opinion-making is, in part, a response

to a students' underdeveloped deliberation skills. Coming from this starting place, to pursue a discussion-based format would require extensive investment from the teacher and buy in from the students. This may put in jeopardy Mr. Campbell's goal of covering all state standards and prepping his Advanced Placement (AP) Government students for their AP exam.

Mr. Campbell described the toxicity of political discourse in society and media being reflected at Greenville, sometimes manifesting in unproductive, heated debates. When I introduced the possibility of teaching students better deliberation skills he seemed to support the concept, but was skeptical of its practicality:

> I can't control the fact that you [students] are seeing social media posts that you think are offensive, and I can't control the fact that you and someone else might just straight up never agree on this particular thing that happens to be in your face in meaningful ways. You know, I can't control the fact that the internet generates hatred on purpose, as a revenue stream.

Campbell hypothesized that this uncivilness was the cause of broad apoliticism in the student body:

> So yeah, lots of kids are very apolitical. But it's not because, in my opinion at least, because they're not interested in politics. It's because they don't like to fight. And they usually see politics as like an argument generating machine, which can be true, for obvious reasons. And so like, I think a lot of kids are just like, 'Hey, I don't really want to deal with this. I don't want to put up with that. Like, I don't want to yell at my friends.'

Campbell believes there is genuine interest in politics in the student body that is being stifled by a toxic climate of political discourse, within the school and beyond. Though, other teachers framed student political engagement more positively. Ms. Hahn viewed the current political climate as "open[ing] the door for more conversation." "I think students are more likely

to ask questions, and maybe want to talk about those things and learn more about it, because it's so prevalent in their daily lives," she said. Mr. Gleelen compared his students to his peers in high school, "No one in [my] school is interested in politics. Like no one in our class was talking about it. And then now that's a regular discussion. So it's interesting, just like in the 10 years or so to see the change."

Political beliefs actively shaped student's social lives. Claire and Emily believed that Greenville's social groups tended to have homogenous political beliefs. For example, Claire noticed that left-leaning kids in social studies tended to group together and Emily framed "the hicks" as conservative. Freshman year, Kennedy was in a friend group whose members were "heavily democratic," with exception of one girl who was conservative. Disagreement over police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement was the tipping point of a series of arguments that caused the ending of the friend group:

> It just felt like everyone couldn't understand what the other person's side was. And so they just kept butting heads and just basically saying the same points over and over again, and we got nowhere. So and that is what prompted most of the fights to is just no one could see the other side. And so it was like, 'Well, why would she even think that?' I'm like, well, *because that's what she believes in*. No one could possibly understand, which is why it just, we just never got anywhere near logical.

Similar to many teachers, Kennedy thinks that political beliefs should be respected. "Because that's what she believes in" is a good enough answer for Kennedy. In contrast, her democratic friends seemed to struggle with the dissonance of their friend having such different views and, perhaps, values. It's easier to agree to disagree on a difference in prioritization of values or a difference in policy. The friend group was unable to get to this point, perhaps because they lacked the deliberative skills or the language to get to the root of their disagreements. The result is incomprehension of the opposing side.

Teachers dealt with incivility by establishing class norms and using redirection. Mr. Gleelen and Mr. Otto managed discussion through a set of discussion guidelines students were expected to follow. For both teachers, the key aim of these guidelines was respecting peers. Most teachers mentioned monitoring the emotions of students and ending the discussion when they ran too high. Mr. Otto's tactic was representative of most teachers. "When you see a kid getting upset, you can usually sidetrack it and that's what I like to do. When they start debating I'd like to let them go, but I'm always there that if one [student] is starting to get a little heat or something, I can kind of redirect, give them a chance to calm down," he said. My findings of uncivil discourse seem to be a consequence of polarization, paired with insufficient deliberation skills. In some cases, students came into discussion with extremely different views of the world and failed to reconcile them, creating frustration and disrespect. In most cases, discussion remained civil perhaps through redirection and class norms. While redirection manages a teacher's control over class, it may prevent opportunities for consensus, the primary goal in democratic deliberation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Many high school social studies teachers incorporate current events and controversial topics into their teaching, as a tool to develop democratic and civic education (Hahn 2002; Hess 2009; McLaughlin 2003). With this practice, many teachers articulate an obligation to be balanced and neutral mediators (Swalwell & Schweber 2016, Miller-Lane, Denton, & May 2006). This study compares teacher and student accounts about discussion facilitation and participation. My findings present a tension between neutrality and values, raising new policy implications for facilitation. I recommend that school districts invest in professional development

on facilitation training, with a focus on teaching consensus building, impartiality, class norms creation, and rigorous fact-checking. In addition, I recommend that students should be exposed to deliberative curriculum earlier in education. Finally, I discuss the importance of implementing prejudice reduction policies in schools where deliberative curriculum is pursued.

Research shows that social studies curriculum rarely makes explicit ties to politics and current events (Journell, 2010). Textbooks rarely include current events because this ages the text. So, teachers must often conduct their own research, adapt resources to the class's development level, write discussion questions, and create assignments from scratch. Participating teachers frequently mentioned time as a barrier to changing curriculum. This explains my finding that many discussions were impromptu and most teachers did not formally incorporate current events. Yet, several students desired more incorporation of current events and many mentioned wishing to learn social studies in more creative ways.

To reduce the onus on teachers, more resources should exist that provide readings, discussion questions and class activities related to current events, which are adapted to multiple developmental stages. Resources to support current event incorporation could take many forms. One route is to create online forums for teachers to share curriculum. It was very common for the social studies department at Greenville to share lesson plans and activities with each other. This allowed high quality, engaging content to reach more classrooms, while decreasing teacher workload. Scaling this concept up to a national, or even global, level would allow quality current event content to reach more classrooms. Such a forum would also be faster than traditional sources of curriculum, like textbook publishers, keeping in line with the fast pace of the news cycle.

Schools and school districts should invest in professional development workshops that train deliberation facilitation. In this study, teachers and students articulated a complex view of ideal facilitation. Teachers and many students expected impartial facilitation. Other important aspects I found were maintaining norms of respect, monitoring the emotional state of students during controversial discussion, and maintaining values. Ideal deliberation requires teachers to do these highly complex tasks simultaneously and often impromptu. Taking this complexity into account, the shortfalls in facilitation I found are understandable and to be expected in any school. Facilitation training could prevent instances similar to that which I found, difficult discussion questions without proper scaffolding, Mr. Otto possibly revealing bias, the dilution of democratic values in Mr. Campbell's discussion on the January 6th insurrection, and the validation of the anti-vaccine position in Ms. Mackay's class. Facilitation training should teach consensus building, impartiality, class norms creation, and rigorous fact-checking.

Curriculum and professional development programs have succeeded in spreading high quality deliberation to many classrooms. Between 2004 and 2010 the Deliberating in Democracy Project provided curriculum and professional development programs to 400 teachers in ten countries, involving over 20,000 secondary students, aged twelve to nineteen (Avery et al. 2013). Survey data found that participating teachers were overwhelmingly positive about their experience with professional development programs and observations found that most teachers followed the given model for deliberation facilitation, with only modest adaptations (Avery et al. 2013) The data on students was also promising, "Each of the six years, the majority of students consistently agreed that they developed a better understanding of the issues, increased their ability to state their opinions, and were more confident talking about controversial issues with their peers. In student focus groups, students frequently spoke of how they had learned to listen

to and respect one another." (Avery et al. 2013, 111). Similar facilitation programs deserve investment so that teachers can enter the role of facilitator better prepared.

Classroom discussions should be more focused on consensus building. I found that teachers often adopted the stance that all opinions are acceptable and ought to be respected. This sometimes led to discussions where students shared opinions but did not, or could not, reconcile their views. Deliberation requires more argument interaction and more empathy. Students must figure out how to create a solution that is mutually acceptable and just for all (Parker 2013).. Students express their perspective on what is best for "us," not what is best for just "me." In this model, not all opinions are acceptable. For example, self-interested arguments are not acceptable unless they appeal more broadly to the class. Similarly, not all arguments are equal. Policies that are more universally desirable or just are preferred over those that are less. Deliberation has been found to increase empathy in participants (Gronlund et al. 2017). The shift from discussion to deliberation could help students reconcile beliefs because they would be pursuing the same goal.

Deliberation should be taught as early as kindergarten. While teachers described most discussions as civil, undeveloped deliberation skills led to unproductive and emotionally charged discussions. In the most extreme case, controversial topics had to be entirely removed from the curriculum. Many students and teachers described students struggling to understand opposing arguments and respond to them in good faith. In Kennedy's account, students' inability to resolve political disagreements cause the ending of friendships. Essential requirements of deliberation–conscientiousness and equal consideration–could require years to cultivate. Unproductive discourse is a consequence of relegating political deliberation to high school.

Paley's (1992) case study of her kindergarten class shows that robust deliberation is possible and useful for young children. By starting young, students will steadily build

deliberation skills, which will expand to more complex and divisive issues. Case studies of deliberative curriculum in elementary schools have shown increased engagement (Beck, 2012), increased agency and ability to critique authority (Payne et al. 2017), and opportunities for democratic participation (Tammi & Rajala 2018). Similarly, a case study in a middle school found that deliberative curriculum increases civic behavior and increases the depth and scope of civic interactions between peers (Hu, 2012). These studies imply that elementary and middle school students have the intellectual capacity to engage in deliberation. Early deliberative education would set students up for productive discussion in high school social studies class and their personal interactions generally.

Resources adapted to multiple developmental stages should be provided to aid teachers in discussion of current events. This is especially important for events such as the murder of George Floyd and the January 6th insurrection, which could be difficult to process and possibly traumatizing to students. Avoidance of violent and controversial current events may seem to protect young children. However, research on children's response to violent news supports open communication between adults and children. Active mediation style of parents was found to reduce the relation between violent news exposure and fear, anger, and sadness in elementary aged children (Buijzen 2007). Restrictive mediation had no or even an opposite effect. (Buijzen 2007). Similar results were found in a study on the effect of COVID-19 news; active mediation was associated with higher emotion regulation and lower negativity (Morelli et al. 2022). While these studies investigated parental mediation the results are likely relevant to teachers as well. Teachers could play a vital role in students' development of emotional resilience in a tumultuous world.

Deliberative instruction should be pursued with diversity and equity considerations at the forefront. Claire informed me of a number of incidents of racism and transphobia that reveal a climate of intimidation toward students with marginalized identities. This raises a number of concerns for the mental health and academic challenges these students face due to prejudice. It also has implications for deliberative learning, because key criteria, conscientiousness, equal consideration, and diversity, are unattainable in this climate. Deliberation could cause further marginalization by peers and instructors through unequal treatment of these students during deliberation. Thus, if deliberative curriculum is pursued, policies to reduce prejudice must also be pursued. If successfully implemented, deliberation could reduce prejudice by creating a forum where marginalized voices are valued and incorporated into the considerations of all students, of all identities.

CONCLUSION

Social studies teachers who incorporate current events often feel an obligation to impartiality. This entails providing balanced materials, concealing personal biases, and fairly portraying common perspectives that aren't already represented. The complexity of impartiality is future complicated when teachers take on competing obligations, such as the maintenance of values. To investigate impartiality in discussions of current events, I interviewed six social studies teachers and eight students across two high schools in the same school district. In line with literature on facilitation, I found that teachers had a strong commitment to neutrality (Swalwell & Schweber 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Miller-Lane, Denton, & May 2006). I add on to this literature by theorizing that teachers navigate a tension between impartiality and values. I explore the implications of some teachers who prioritized impartiality, during class discussions of the January 6th insurrection and COVID-19 vaccine safety.

Additionally, I found that students also valued impartial facilitation and discovered a reduction in student participation when a teacher revealed bias. Student participation increased in classes with greater social connections between peers. Conversely, social exclusion caused less participation. In some accounts, political discourse was described as toxic and drama prone, leading some teachers to avoid controversial discussion. These findings show that current event discussion can be beneficial to historical and civic education. They also show the need for additional support in facilitation and strategies to seek robust, equitable student participation.

I recommended that schools and school districts invest in professional development that teaches facilitation. This study and others have shown the utility of current events in civic education (Hahn, 2002; Hess, 2009) and incorporation is very prevalent (Haas & Laughlin 2000). Many teachers would benefit from facilitation training because it is an incredibly difficult skill. Additionally, professional development would bring social studies teachers together in deliberation of the craft. From this could arise strong commitments to values, such as democratic citizenship, social justice, or anti-racism. Deliberation among teachers may cause teachers to become more aware of equity problems in their facilitation and ways to solve them.

I also recommended that deliberative curriculum should be introduced early on in education. Young children are capable of engaging in deliberation on topics relevant to their lives when provided guidance (Paley 1992). Additionally, actively mediated discussions of current events can reduce fear and increase emotional resilience in young children (Buijzen 2007, Morelli et al. 2022). Finally, I argue that deliberative curriculum reform must be accompanied with policies to reduce prejudice. My findings imply that marginalized students could face further harm if prejudice prevents peers or teachers from giving them equal regard. The likely effect would be decreased participation, engagement, and educational outcomes for marginalized

students. Deliberation itself would also be harmed, because would lack important perspectives and would only reinforce the perspectives of non-marginalized students.

This study is limited by its small sample size and the remote method of interviewing. Interviewing more teachers and students could have brought to light new considerations. For example my student participants seemed to mostly be left-leaning, so it may be that conservative students have completely different views on political discourse in these schools. Due to distance and COVID-19 concerns, I was not able to conduct my research in the site schools. Being in the schools could have given me more time to get to know my participants and their daily lives along with better understanding the school's culture. Future research should assess the quality and political balance of the resources that teachers use to in current events incorporation. Research could also investigate the effect on civic engagement by social studies facilitation that prioritizes neutrality versus facilitation that prioritizes values.

I have found that students desire interactive, challenging, and social curriculum. Deliberation should be incorporated in all subject areas. In part, due to the rise of standardized testing, most classrooms are far more devoted to content memorization than to deliberation. Even in social studies, where political and social problems are at the forefront, discussions are rare (Kahne et al. 2000). Deliberation can be used to revitalize these classrooms into places where knowledge is complex and inquisitive . English classes can deliberate and critique an author's intent. In art students can explore the way the medium extends social commentary. There are many opportunities for deliberation no matter the subject area.

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