

## Influences on Social Studies Teachers' Issue-Selection for Classroom Discussion: Social Positioning and Media

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### *Abstract*

*This qualitative research explores factors that influence social studies teachers' issue-selection for classroom discussion. Four high school teachers—three from an urban setting and one from a suburban high school—participated in the study. Data were gathered over three months via interviews, classroom observations, and field notes; all were analyzed using the constant comparative technique of the grounded theory approach. Two claims are made: Teachers' social positioning influences their curriculum choices, and media influences social studies teachers' issue-selection.*

### **Introduction**

In February 2003, Mr. Jensen from the *Seattle Times* visited my social studies classroom to see how I was dealing with the broader public debate going on in the country about the legitimacy and public support of the U.S. attack on Iraq. This reporter had interviewed another social studies teacher in a different school district before observing my classroom and talking with my students. Mr. Jensen reported, "In trying to present a balanced view, both teachers use articles from major newspapers and magazines. To help students see other perspectives, they have them read and view the news from the Middle East, France, Germany, and Russia" (Jensen, 2003, p. B4). But what does "balanced view" mean? *Balanced* from whose perspective? To highlight some of the difficulties social studies teachers face when choosing certain controversial issues, Brinkley (1999) writes,

Sadly, even if the teacher simply encourages an examination of pro and con sides of the issue, he or she might be challenged for that, as well, if he or she teaches in a district that has decided to emphasize uncritical praise for U.S. policy and actions. (p. 13)

Such examinations can take the form of classroom discussions where multiple views on a controversial issue may be expressed depending on the diversity of opinions existing in the classroom.

Values are embedded in controversial issues, and each person may have a unique way of interpreting them. Shaver and Strong (1976) reference the work of the American historian Charles Beard (1874-1948) when investigating the role of values in teachers' decision making. They argue, "Each of us has a frame of reference; our values are a very important part of that frame; and each person's actions are influenced by his or her frames" (p. 7). The notion of "frames" used by Shaver and Strong (1976) refers "to what Beard calls 'a frame of social

knowledge, ideas, and ideals” (pp. 6-7). It is possible for different frames to exist in classrooms, and they may clash, compete, or complement each other. Evans (2004) considers social studies to be a part of *an ideological battleground* where the American ideology is purified (p. 119). Social studies teachers are present on this ideological battleground, and this paper clarifies and deepens our understanding of their conceptions of the role they play in controversial issue-selection for discussion in schools. Given this background, I designed a research project that asks three questions:

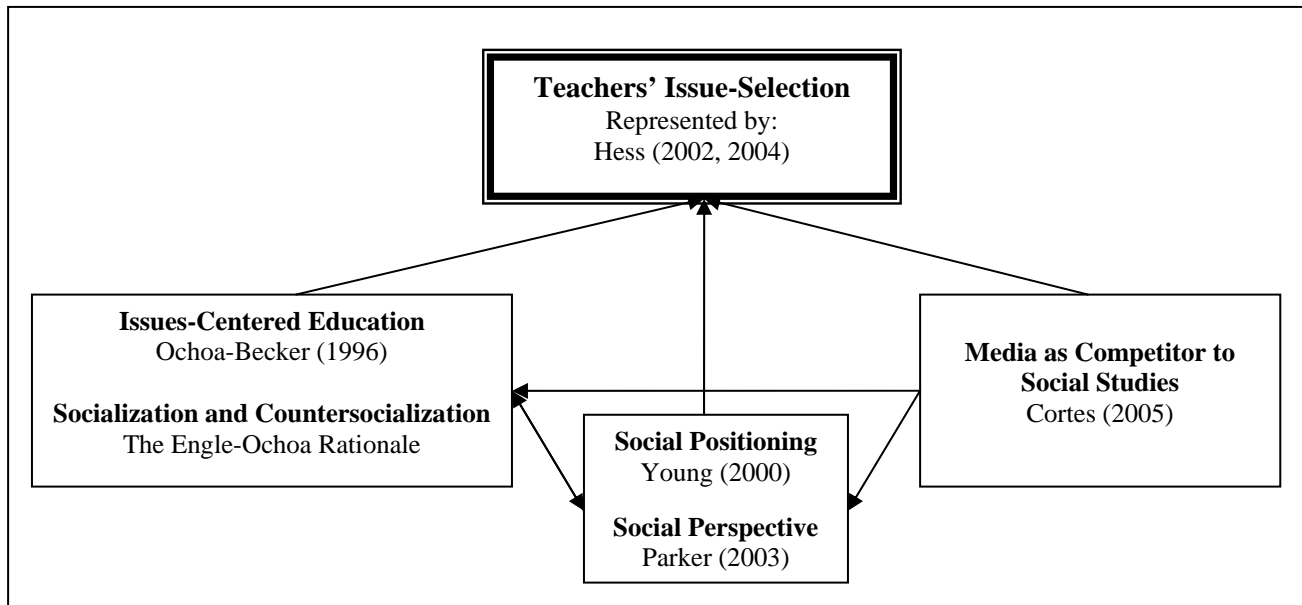
- What influences social studies teachers’ selection of controversial issues for classroom discussions?
- How do social studies teachers’ social positioning inform and influence their selection of issues for classroom discussions?
- How do outside factors, such as media, influence teachers’ decisions on what they discuss in class?

To answer these questions, I chose a purposive sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of four secondary social studies teachers who claimed to use discussions as a way of teaching about or teaching with controversial issues. My initial hunch about what influences teachers comes from my frame or social positioning which includes professional teaching experiences and personal experiences as a person who was born into a Zoroastrian family in Iran and came to the United States in 1979. For example, as far as I could tell, I was the only teacher in my school district developing lessons about the traditions of Zoroastrians who lived along the Silk Road. Thus, I see a connection between my social positioning and the curriculum materials I developed and enacted in my classroom. However, can this be generalized to other teachers, or was my situation a unique case?

For this study, I deployed three concepts: issues-centered education, media influences, and social positioning. Two conclusions emerged from this study: First, teachers’ social positioning influences their issue-selection, and second, media influence teachers’ issue-selection.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) of the study is made up of three dynamic components: Issues-Centered Education, Media Influences, and Teachers’ Social Positioning. I will explain each of them and elaborate on their relations to the teachers’ issue-selections. I begin by defining issues-centered education and discussing its purpose and rationales in the context of democratic citizenship education.



**Figure 1: A Framework for Understanding Social Studies Teachers' Issue-selection**

### *Definition of Issues-Centered Education (ICE)*

Issues-Centered Education (ICE) offers a unique approach to democratic citizenship because it departs from the traditional norm of teaching that relies upon expository teaching and textbooks that are mostly cleansed of controversies. In ICE, “Content comes not only from the curriculum and the textbooks but from the experience of students and teachers interacting through classroom discussion” (Massialas, 1996, p. 45). Ochoa-Becker (1996) defines ICE:

...a curriculum that uses public issues to emphasize controversial questions as the content for social studies. It is an approach toward teaching and learning that does not intend to provide right answers, but underscores the need for students to learn how to examine significant questions and become more thoughtful decision makers about public life.  
(p. 6)

This approach invites young people to care for the public welfare and deepens their understanding of issues that are grounded in various historical artifacts and interdisciplinary curriculum. The idea is that the problems societies face are too complex to be handled by any single discipline, and an interdisciplinary approach would better reflect the reality.

ICE promotes the development of “well-reasoned responses based on disciplined inquiry, on thoughtful, in-depth study” of public issues that “move beyond relativistic notions of truth” (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996, p. 2). There is a healthy skepticism built into ICE that encourages probing into and challenging norms and beliefs found in society. In addition, ICE promotes perspective taking from competing viewpoints, critical thinking skills, and rational decision making by focusing on controversial issues that impact public life. Why bother building a rationale for ICE? Because without a rationale, “school work is aimless” (Parker, 1996, p.184), or as Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik (1990) argue, “All cultures seek to ensure that the young will learn whatever values, rituals, skills, and modes of behavior are deemed to be in the best interests

of the group or the whole” (p. xii). Against this backdrop, let us review the rationales offered by three recognized ICE scholars on the underlying principles that guide ICE.

### ***Rationales for Issues-Centered Education (ICE)***

All rationales expressed by Issues-Centered Education scholars emphasize core democratic values, integrated approaches to study selected problems, sharpening intellectual development of children, and a non-authoritarian role for teachers (Engle 1960, 1996; Hunt & Metcalf, 1955, 1968, 1996; Oliver & Shaver, 1968; Parker, 2003; Singleton & Giese, 1996). I will mainly focus on the rationales articulated by Engle, Ochoa, Shaver, and Evans as representative scholars of ICE.

Shirley H. Engle (1960) considers decision making to be the heart of social studies rather than memorization of certain information found in history textbooks, because, he argues, democracy needs people who can make responsible policy decisions about public life. Engle (1964) is concerned both with the “descriptive and evaluative side” (p. 559) of issues confronting human society. He argues that persistent problems that society faces need to be identified and examined from multiple perspectives before policy decisions are made. Therefore, limited access to reliable information makes responsible decision making a very difficult task. As Soder (1999) warns, “The tyranny of omission denies a hearing, denies consideration of things, denies voices” (p. 570).

Engle and Ochoa (1988) discuss the unavoidable tensions in a democracy between individual liberty/diversity and social conformity. Coercion and democratic ideals do not mix. Therefore, reason becomes what citizens may use to negotiate public policies. We find evidence of this line of thinking in Alexander Hamilton’s *Federalist Papers No. 1* in which he argues that “good government” comes about as a result of “reflection and choice” and not “accident and force” (p. 3).

Since education is not a neutral process, a society passes on to its younger members the values and traditions that have sustained it for generations. Engle and Ochoa (1988) refer to this process that is not reflective and relies upon “emotion and authority” as socialization (p. 30). Young people’s behaviors are modified through rewards and transmission of certain ideas and values that allow them to participate in the life of their community. Engle and Ochoa (1988) argue that democratic socialization should take place during the early years of schooling when young minds are impressionable by choosing appropriate content and materials.

To counterbalance socialization, Engle and Ochoa (1988) set forth the idea of countersocialization. They define it as “a learning process designed to foster the independent thought and social criticism that is crucial to political freedom” (p. 31). Stated simply, it means that not only should each citizen be able to evaluate his or her own beliefs and values, but each should also be able to make sense of complex public issues and participate in democratic life. Countersocialization does not necessarily lead to a rejection of previous practices and established values, but rather, it offers a balance to the socialization experience that is void of reflective thought. Engle and Ochoa (1988) consider a healthy skepticism to be an integral part of ICE because young people should be able to identify facts, opinions, and biases in what they read, see, and hear. They should always consider knowledge or truth to be open to probing and investigation.

In short, Engle and Ochoa (1960, 1996) advocate socializing young people into a democratic political education process, rooted in the Deweyan notion of reflective inquiry, by

building in them the critical capacity to become reflective decision makers and active participants in the political life of their communities. The idea is that people who come to appreciate democracy through reason, can protect, nurture, and develop it. Also, through inquiry, better ways can be found to improve society, and the need to indoctrinate disappears (Stanley, 2005).

Shaver and Strong (1976) define rationale as the end product of an examination and clarification of one's unexamined assumptions. According to their thinking, as we grow and change, so should our rationales. Therefore, they argue, teachers need to continuously update their rationales in order to prevent "the unthinking imposition" of their beliefs and values on their students (p. 8). They define values to be "standards and principles for judging worth" (Shaver & Strong, 1976, p. 15), and social studies should address value issues.

The Shaver Rationale is rooted in a democratic citizenship idea which argues that students learn best when they can perceive a problem to be *real* and can relate to it in a personal way (Shaver, 1992). He sees the line between public and private to blur at times and considers public issues to be the outcome of many individual decisions like the existing city noise ordinances and other laws. Public and private issues have ethical dimensions, and Shaver points out that both are needed in citizenship education. Balancing public and private interests is a challenge in democracy. Depending on how issues are framed and defined, competing claims may emerge, and citizens in a democracy should be able to make their own independent decisions.

Third, the Evans Rationale for ICE stems from his belief that students are not learning much that is of value to them, and "social studies as currently practiced are largely dysfunctional" (Evans, 1989, p. 50). He believes that knowledge should be used to improve people's lives by solving societal problems rather than just relying on textbooks to organize the curriculum. He considers student boredom to be a big problem, and his solution is "A problem-centered design" that connects the past to "current-issue areas" by making a commitment to social justice an integral part of social studies (p. 51). He favors an interdisciplinary approach in which students develop critical thinking skills by studying perennial social issues, like justice and free speech that are important in a democracy. Next, we examine how content selection and discussion fit into this scheme.

### ***Content Selection and Discussion***

Harold Rugg (1926) successfully operationalizes a model of ICE curriculum that is set "in vivid human settings" (p. 156). He calls it "the method of the dramatic episode" (p. 157). Rugg's (1930) curriculum allows students to apply what they learn about other countries and cultures to their own lives and to improve their society. Others, like Massialas (1996), propose five criteria for educators to consider when selecting issues, which include the following: "relevance, reflection, action, practicality, and depth of understanding" (p. 45). Similar to Rugg, Massialas also argues that the curriculum needs to relate to the lives of students, and it should promote open discussion and rational thought that leads to some social action.

Evans and Brodkey (1996) echo a similar idea by advocating a social studies curriculum that is "built around certain social realities and the ethical questions and possibilities they raise" (p. 257). They propose a "problem-topic approach" similar to Oliver and Shaver's jurisprudential approach. The difference is that, under Evans and Brodkey's plan, students can study and discuss a wide range of topics like nationalism, patriotism, American foreign policy, and others.

It is clear that teachers play a key role in the classroom and in particular, in content selection (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Johnson & Johnson, 1988; McNeil, 2000; Passe & Evans, 1996). Therefore, it is vital to better understand what makes teachers choose an issue over another. Is it student knowledge, plus the local school and community context (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996), or is it the amount of time allotted for each topic (Chadwick & Meux, 1971) or something else?

While there is no clear consensus on how best to prepare students for democratic citizenship, Hess (2004) discusses four approaches to Controversial Public Issues (CPI) in the curriculum. The importance of these approaches lies in the fact that the teachers, as curriculum gatekeepers (Thornton, 1999), make decisions about issue-selection based on their own reasoning and judgment.

The first approach that Hess (2004) identifies is labeled *denial*. According to Hess, in this case, a teacher does not take side on an issue and presents the information as *truth*, denying that the issue is controversial. The second approach is labeled *privilege*. In this case, the teacher presents the issue as if there is a right answer. Students are taught the right answer as defined by the teacher. Hess calls the third approach *avoidance*. In this case, the teacher chooses not to include the issue in the curriculum. Hess calls the last approach *balance*. She acknowledges that teaching about a subject as a genuine CPI with various perspectives presented is difficult to pull off successfully and leaves teachers vulnerable to accusations of being biased.

It is difficult to imagine ICE without discussion (Harris, 1996; Lockwood, 1996; Passe & Evans, 1996; Singleton & Giese, 1996). Johnson and Johnson (1988) argue that some of the reasons for teachers avoiding controversial issues has to do with their lack of instructional models or their view that controversy may alienate students from each other. A common discourse found in many classrooms revolves around a pattern of teacher asking a question, followed by students responding, and then the teacher evaluating the response before initiating another round of Initiate-Response-Evaluate (Cazden 2001; Parker 2005). Perhaps Nystrand's (1997) study captures the essence of the dominant theme in classrooms which states, "Teachers talk and students listen. And the lower the track we found, the more likely this to be true" (p. 3).

Kelly (1989) believes that teachers should conduct classroom discussions on curriculum-related controversial issues based on "a *best-case, fair hearing of competing points of view*" so that students develop the civic competence necessary to engage in public dialogue (p. 368). Kelly (1989) discusses the pros and cons of revealing a teacher's position to students during discussions of controversial issues. Reasons to conceal or reveal cover a wide spectrum of ideas that range from keeping silent because it allows students to develop their own ideas and is safer for the teacher to revealing as a way of providing a model for validating students' struggles.

Many scholars have argued about the importance of teachers' roles in classroom discussion (Coombs & Meux, 1971; Cox, 1951; Gagnon, 1988; Hess, 2004; Massialas & Cox, 1971; Parker, 2001, 2003). Clearly, social problems amplify the need for discussion of public issues. But what is discussion, and what are its characteristics? Dillon (1994) defines discussion as "...a form of group interaction, people talking back and forth with one another. What they talk about is an issue, some topic that is in question for them" (p. 7). According to Dillon, the uniqueness of discussion is due to it being "disciplined and concerted talk" that it is about one issue (p. 13). Dillon discourages teachers from asking questions during discussion because it will turn "the class into some other group talk much like recitation" (p. 78). Instead of asking questions, Dillon recommends that teachers use "statements, signals, silence, and student questions" to stimulate student thinking and move the discussion along (p. 78).

So far, I have tried to present a clear concept of issues-centered education and a few key approaches to and rationales for it within the framework of democratic education. I have tried to show that socialization and countersocialization are two sides of the same coin of issues-centered education. Through content selection and discussion, teachers can decide *what* is taught and *how* it is taught. Next, *media influences*, the second component of the conceptual framework, is discussed.

### ***Media Influences***

A powerful socialization that happens in our society is through television (McLuhan, 1994). In this section, my objectives are to present various views on the role and influence of television on teachers' curriculum decisions. Television has been credited with having great powers to influence, define, and/or shape the viewers' worldview (Kniker, 1977). Television is influencing what gets discussed or talked about in social studies classrooms (Apple, 2001; Evans, 2005; Selwyn, 2005).

Many scholars argue that democratic citizens need be skillful in determining the significance and worth of news that they hear or see (Berson & Berson, 2005; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Shiveley, 2004). Mays and Pagano (1978) argue that television plays "a major and permanent role in classroom instruction and in learning outside of school" (p. 70).

Cortes (2005) makes a convincing argument that the media has become the main competitor to social studies and identifies six characteristics of the media. In addition to media presenting information, Cortes argues, "They organize ideas. They disseminate values. They create and reinforce expectations. And they model behavior" (p. 25). In order to support his claim that frequency and not accuracy of news matters in shaping people's views about the world, Cortes describes a television game show called *The \$25,000 Pyramid* in which two strangers are matched to be partners for the competition. One of the pair has to describe the word *gang*, and she describes it as "They have lots of these in East L.A."; her partner immediately comes up with the right answer. Cortes raises the question, "So where did they get their coinciding default knowledge?" (p. 28). His explanation: information media. Through repeated coverage of gang activities in the newspapers and television, Cortes argues, "an informal social studies curriculum featuring gangs as the quintessential popular vision of urban Latino communities, such as East Los Angeles" is formed in the minds of the people (p. 28). Cortes believes that even if social studies were to be eliminated from school curriculum, American children would continue to receive social studies lessons through the information media. He believes that teachers can use the media to help students understand their world. Similarly, Wineburg (2001) acknowledges the ever-presence of new technology and media in our everyday lives and argues that teachers need to use them to advance their students' historical understanding of events. Next, we examine how teachers' social positioning influences their curriculum decisions.

### ***Teachers' Social Positioning***

Selwyn and Maher (2003) cite a Mexican proverb that claims in this world there is no truth or lie. One sees different colors by looking through a crystal from various angles. They argue, "It is also generally understood that in order to persuade, compromise, debate, and negotiate, we need to be able to see issues not only from our own point of view, but from that of

others” (p. 41). Understanding how teachers’ curriculum decisions are informed and influenced by their social positioning becomes important in the light of changing school demographics in the United States. Also, as ideological beings, we cannot shed our backgrounds that allow us to have our own unique interpretation of the world (Sears & Parsons, 1991).

Many scholars have argued that a teacher’s social positioning influences her or his decisions (Apple, 2000; Jadallah, 1994; Kottler, 1997; Muessig, 1965; Selwyn, 2005; Singer & Pezone, 2005; Thornton, 1991). Young (2000) argues, “We find ourselves positioned in relations of class, gender, race, nationality, religion, and so on, which are sources of both possibilities of action and constraint” (p. 100). She further argues, “Individuals are agents: We constitute our own identities, and each person’s identity is unique” (p. 101). The idea of agency in this context explains how individuals are able to make choices in their lives and explains the differences in individual outcomes and outlooks. Expanding upon Young’s social positioning concept, Parker (2003) defines social perspective as “a shared way of looking at situations that is grounded in one’s social position(s) without automatically predicting what one sees” (p. 96). Parker (2003) argues, “*where* one is situated matters in terms of *how* one sees the world and *what* one attends to in it” (p. 96).

Ben-Peretz (1990) presents “Subjective curriculum interpretation” and argues that according to this idea,

Teachers assign meaning to the curriculum materials they use daily in their classrooms, and they try to comprehend and make sense of the innovative materials which they encounter in their teaching. Much of this sense making is subjective, guided by personal, idiosyncratic frames of reference. (pp. 70-71)

She also uses Kelly’s theory of personal construct (Kelly, 1955) as a framework “for exploring teachers’ own criteria for interpreting curriculum materials” (p. 71). So, what does it mean for a social studies teacher who is consciously making decisions regarding issue-selection for classroom discussion? Ben-Peretz argues, “From the point of view of Kelly’s conceptual framework, teachers may be conceived as using personal constructs for examining, interpreting, and using available curriculum materials. These personal interpretations may then form the basis of teachers’ lesson planning” (p. 71).

Each of the three components of the conceptual framework permits a disciplined examination of the issues under investigation from a particular perspective. *Issues-centered education* with its distinct components offers a unique approach to democratic citizenship education. It gives us an appreciation for the complexities involved in teachers’ issue-selection. The lens of *media influences* allows us to find specific links between what gets discussed in classes and what is reported in the media. Finally, by applying the *social positioning* lens, we can offer another explanation for why different teachers choose to discuss different issues with their students. These three lenses allow us to gain a better understanding of issue-selection by teachers and have an informed appreciation for their work based on data. These three lenses can extend Hess’s (2004) explanation on teachers’ issue-selection.

## Method

This qualitative research study investigates the influences on four social studies teachers’ issue-selection using ethnographic field methods (Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The roots of qualitative research are in sociology and anthropology, and researchers use it to study various social interactions, scenes, roles, and events. Glaser and

Strauss (1999) discuss how sociologists use a theory to predict and explain behavior as well as guide research. In order to generate a theory, they suggest using the data gathered during research, thus the name, *grounded theory*. Grounded theory allows me to elaborate and expand upon my initial *hunch* mentioned earlier in the paper and allows for other theories to emerge.

Data from the four audio-recorded teacher interviews conducted during January, February, and March 2005 make up the backbone of this research. I used a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam, 1998) that allowed me to ask teachers the same core questions while remaining flexible enough to dig deeper into their individual responses. In addition, I used “triangulation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to match teachers’ actions in their classrooms with what they said during the interview.

The interview protocol has four parts. In part one, the questions are of a personal nature and relate to the social positioning frame of the conceptual framework. Questions begin with a general inquiry into the teacher’s professional experiences, educational background, reasons for wanting to teach, and what they find most rewarding about being a teacher.

In parts two and three of the interview protocol, connections between teachers’ role and issue-selection for discussion and curriculum planning are explored. For example, I ask questions such as “How do you see your role in topic selection of controversial issues?” or “What criteria do you use when you go about choosing topics and/or issues for class discussion?” In part four, I am interested in learning how social studies teachers view the current trends in education and how such trends are perceived to influence their issue selection and other curriculum decisions.

The *Atlas ti* software was used to manage the data. The findings presented in this paper come primarily from the personal interviews, teachers’ handouts, and classroom observations. Next, I discuss data analysis followed by a description of the research settings and contextualization of the information presented.

### ***Settings and Participants***

Four high school social studies teachers participated in this study. Rick, Tom, and Elana teach in an urban high school that has 1,080 students, and Matthew teaches in a suburban high school with 2,172 students. The demographic distribution of both schools is similar in terms of percentages of their student population.

***Snapshot #1:*** Rick is 59 years old and teaches 9<sup>th</sup> grade World History and 12<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History. He has vivid memories of the Cuban missile crisis and the fall of the Berlin Wall. 21 years ago, Rick worked as a nurse before becoming a science and social studies teacher. He has a BA in sociology and an MA in anthropology.

***Snapshot #2:*** Tom is 55 years old and teaches 9<sup>th</sup> grade World History I & II and 12<sup>th</sup> grade AP U.S. History. He comes from a large family of teachers. He is the social studies department chair and has taught social studies for 23 years. Before becoming a social studies teacher, his plan was to become a history professor. He completed the course work in history but never completed his dissertation. He believes in research-based teaching and supports close collaboration with a research university that trains teachers.

***Snapshot #3:*** Elana is 31 years old and teaches 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade World History and U.S. government courses. She has five years of teaching experience, all in the same building. She is

the youngest member in her school's social studies department. She has a BA in international studies with a focus on foreign policy and diplomacy. Before becoming a teacher, she wanted to become a Foreign Service officer or an ambassador. She studied international relations.

**Snapshot #4:** Matthew is 39 years old and has 14 years of teaching experience in social studies. He has an MA in geography. He teaches 9<sup>th</sup> grade World History, 10<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. history, and a senior class of AP U.S. History. He comes from a family of geographers and is an avid hiker. He claims geography to be his passion.

### *Data Analysis*

As a first step in the data analysis process, I transcribed the four interviews and read through the entire corpus of data looking for themes. I then coded Rick's interview responses and highlighted certain parts that were relevant and interesting. Four themes emerged related to teachers' issue selection for discussion: 1) Student interests' are taken into account. 2) Issues selected are leading news items. 3) Issues selected are believed to stretch students' thinking and challenge their preconceived notions about the world. 4) The teacher decides the issue selections. I named these categories: *relevance*, *leading news*, *mind stretching*, and *teacher's frame*.

Two of Rick's responses are grouped under *relevance*: Students bring up issues they hear on the radio or see on television that they want to discuss, and the teacher knows certain issues that have worked well in the past and repeats them. Four other responses are grouped under *leading news*: issues about the Iraq War, 2004 Presidential election, terrorism, and immigration policy debate in California. Three responses are grouped under *mind stretching*: focusing on the causes and results of wars, understanding current events, and seeing different sides of an issue. Five other responses are categorized under *teacher's frame*: compassion guides my decisions, bitter over current foreign policy in Iraq, educational background, a sense of independence as a teacher, and experiencing real emotional moments at events like the coming down of the Berlin Wall or the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Next, I compared Tom's interview responses with the four categories developed from Rick's responses. Tom reiterated several ideas that were similar to Rick's comments. He also mentioned other aspects that were not mentioned before; as a result, I was able to sharpen the existing four categories. Tom explained how he used "the teachable moments" to engage his students with a foreign policy matter that was the dominant news of the day. He held a mock summit where students examined the controversy: "What should our policy be in Iraq?" Students wrote letters to the President or a senator, recommending particular policies. Tom viewed this issue as an opportunity for his students to develop "critical thinking, reading, and writing skills" around a "central question." He required his students to gather information from multiple sources and told them: "American media is vastly different than if you go to BBC or something like that." He saw his role as a generalist whose mission was "to create informed citizens who can make decisions in a democracy." This scenario illustrated how a leading news report made it into a social studies classroom and how a teacher justified discussing it. Here, the teacher framed the issue and set up the activity in such a way that his students were engaged in individual and group problem solving. This pattern repeated with Elana and Matthew using different issues.

However, Elana added a new dimension to the *leading news* category that was related to *teacher's frame*. She saw her role as a "shield" to "protect students from too much violence on TV news." Consequently, she drew upon her expertise of nuclear arms race issues that she had

studied in college and asked her students to examine and discuss the nuclear proliferation in the world today. She chose the North Korean nuclear weapons controversy that was the dominant news of the day as the subject of their investigation. After examining all four interview transcripts, additional categories emerged which did not relate to issue selection, and I have left them out of this study. Also, my classroom observations reinforced what teachers discussed during the interviews but resulted in no additional relevant categories.

What I have tried to present so far is a sense for how the categories are developed, based on the four interviews, using the constant-comparative technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) to compare incidents, integrate categories, and delimit the theory before writing the theory. Theories emerged after comparing and contrasting the teachers' responses and seeing the common threads that connected them all. I justify the absorption of the categories of *relevance* and *mind stretching* under *leading news* by arguing that pedagogical considerations are applied to the headline news of the day. What gets air time in class is the headline news and that makes it dominant. Therefore, I argue that data supports the theory of "influential media" as one of the two main theories that influence issue selection for discussion; the other being "teacher's social positioning." Clearly, additional nuance would emerge by exploring the connections between media and teachers' social positioning in future studies. Thus, the claims I make in this study should be understood as tentative as I invite other researchers to conduct further studies to validate, modify, or dismiss them.

## Findings

### Claim #1: Teacher's social positioning influences issue-selection

The teachers in this study feel that they can and should discuss a wide range of issues with their students. Teachers' decisions on selecting issues for discussion vary due to their educational background, personal experiences, and conception of their roles.

With 23 years of teaching and department chair experiences, Tom makes his mark on curriculum decisions at his school. His decisions not only impact what his students learn but also determine what other 10<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teachers teach. Tom claims that teachers at his school can *blame* him for adopting the *Choices Curriculum* from Brown. He uses his department chair position to promote the *Choices Curriculum* that the other social studies teachers in his building use. He argues, "They're relevant; they're well written; they're well structured." Therefore, to teach about the Middle East controversies, they use the lessons prepared by the Brown University titled, *Shifting Sands: Balancing U.S. interests in the Middle East*.

During the interview, Tom shares a story about his former colleague, a Vietnamese American teacher, whose influence on the 10<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum is quite impressive. Tom attributes to his former colleague's expertise and desire to teach about Vietnam, the reason why in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, their curriculum used to be dominated by issues related to Vietnamese politics and culture.

Rick is a former nurse, fifty-nine-years old with teaching endorsements which allow him to teach social studies and biology. As a social studies teacher, he believes he can discuss just about anything and cover "whatever needs to be done." Rick likes to add drama to his lessons and chooses controversial issues that he believes students want to discuss. So what is Rick's favorite issue for discussion? The "Colonial Period of America...just because my passion is there." He feels "guilty" for not spending "enough time" on it. He avoids issues like the Kennedy assassination and U.S. foreign policy because these are too emotional for him.

Matthew comes from a family of geographers and considers geography to be his passion; he asserts, “I would rather be teaching geography and solely geography.” He considers geography education to be essential for all students. Matthew explains, “I think that understanding geography should be at the center of social studies education.” He justifies his choices of curriculum and the lessons he creates by arguing, “...that’s because I’m *so* wanting people to understand geography!” His students discuss the issue of whether or not the United States should drill for oil in the Arctic National Wild Life in Alaska, as part of a “big project.”

Elana wanted to be a Foreign Service officer or a diplomat before becoming a social studies teacher. She views her role as a teacher as an opportunity to expose her students to international issues. When her students complain that they are tired of discussing the Iraq War, they end up discussing North Korea’s nuclear program and problems of nuclear proliferation in the world today. I asked her, “Why nuclear proliferation?” She explained, “I had some knowledge of and resources on, so we could pull something together.”

In the four cases above, it is obvious how teachers’ beliefs about their roles influence decisions related to issue selection or curriculum choices which, in turn, contain selections reflecting their interests and personal knowledge. These four teachers’ beliefs about their roles are common denominators that have given them the authority to select issues in which they are interested, based on a variety of factors that include their educational background, training, experiences, and interests.

### **Claim #2: Media influence teachers’ issue selection**

Media influence teachers’ issue selection in two specific ways: Headline news influence what teachers talk about with their students and a given headline news may develop into a major project that can take several days to complete.

Teachers depend on the media for information and analysis of the news, and they consult mainly the mainstream sources of news. Teachers are aware that their students are news consumers, too; however, students may not have the depth of knowledge or be aware of the background information of many headline news stories to which they are exposed. Nevertheless, they walk into their classrooms expecting teachers to answer their questions. Rick, who reads the news online every day, illustrates this point by stressing,

I am absolutely amazed at how sometimes, some of these students are so aware of what’s going on in the news. Some of them read it on the internet; some of them watch the news; some of them read the newspapers...; sometimes we do a ten minute, oh, what happened in the news kind of thing.

Through these ten minutes of impromptu interactions, those students who may have missed the news get a chance to hear about it in class. These *ten-minute* interactions are media driven and are initiated by either teachers or students.

Social studies teachers follow the news so that they can answer their students’ questions. They use a variety of sources like *The History Channel*, internet news sources, and others. This phenomenon is best captured by Matthew who often records from *The History Channel* to show to his students and listens to NPR and CNN online to get his “fix of current issues.” He considers staying abreast of national and international events to be a necessity, dictated by his job as a social studies teacher. He is able to answer his students’ questions and connect with what they

hear or see in the media. In short, they have something common to talk about. Kottler (1997) writes, “You are the ‘answer person,’ the one who, in the eyes of your students, seems to never be at a loss for words, nor explanations, for why things are the way they are” (p. 55). Kottler argues that when teachers “know things,” students “respect” them (p. 55).

Sometimes talking about the news becomes more than a ten-minute affair. Major news headlines may influence what teachers teach and discuss in the classroom. For example, Matthew follows the environmental news about whether or not drilling for oil and natural gas should take place in the Arctic National Wild Life Refuge in Alaska and explains,

...At this time on March 17, 2005, one issue that environmentally, which I think would be controversial issue, would be the Arctic National Wild Life Refuge that they just passed the Senate, oil drilling. And it’s on our radar screen...

He designed a “big project” for his students based on this news that took them a week to complete.

Another example of the power of media is what Elana discusses in her social studies class after her students return from their winter break. The tsunami of December 2004 became a topic of discussion in Elana’s class; she asserts, “...we actually put the curriculum we planned on hold” to discuss how much foreign aid the United States should provide to the countries impacted by the tsunami.

Clearly, media has an influence on what Elana talks about with her students, as she explains,

You hear on the radio or you see it on TV or you read about it and you’re kinda attuned to that and bring that in. Sometimes it’s just interesting things are going on and kids will bring them up and you can talk about them.

Elana has a stack of newspapers near the classroom door and a fully stocked magazine rack at the back of the class. Pinned around the classroom walls are newspaper clippings about the tsunami in Asia, the Iraq War, and other major events. She expresses a willingness to stay with the big news like the tsunami in Asia, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and she follows these stories closely.

Media also influences what Elana does not teach. She changes her lesson about the Iraq war when her students complain that they are “tired of talking about the [Iraq] War and saturated in the media...” Consequently, she chooses the problems of nuclear proliferation in the world today as a new discussion topic.

What these cases illustrate is a picture of the media influencing teachers’ curriculum decisions, whether ten minutes of a class period or much longer. These teachers pay attention to headline news and incorporate them into their classroom lessons. Social studies teachers pay close attention to the dominant news of the day because their students may ask questions about those stories and teachers do not want to appear uninformed.

### **Challenges Ahead**

My study identifies two additional sources of influence on teachers’ issue-selection that can be added to Hess’s (2004) study: a teacher’s social positioning and media influences. Here, I

broadly review these findings and argue that we need to further explore the nature and depth of influences that teachers experience, especially, in a post 9/11 wartime school environment. I conclude with some comments about the limitations of this study.

This research has shown that teachers' issue-selection are influenced by their social positioning. It is also important to note that demographic layout of the United States is changing. Teachers should not only be aware of their own social positioning vis-à-vis curriculum choices, but they also need to be aware of their students' social positioning. The complex dynamics of issue selection and interactions between teachers and students in today's wartime schools are worthy of our attention.

We live in a wired society where students and teachers are consumers of news. Today, news is available 24/7 and can be accessed from a variety of sources like television and internet. In such a media-rich environment, nurturing democratic citizenry and having meaningful discussions in social studies classrooms are challenges that we need to address. Clearly, media influence *what* and *how* issues of public concerns get talked about and/or discussed in social studies classrooms. As Elana put it, "You think about the modeling that's going on, you've got all of these shows on TV or the radio, you just have people yelling at each other..." Clearly, democratic education needs all the help it can get, and "yelling at each other" is a bad discussion model.

Limitations of this exploratory study include the following: short period for conducting the needed research, lack of access to certain sites, interruptions at schools due to state-mandated testing, ongoing field trips, grade reporting time, and limited samples. Therefore, any claims of generalizations require additional studies. Teachers in this study claimed to use discussion as a way of teaching about controversial issues in their classrooms. If I apply Dillon's (1994) definition of discussion to what I observed in these four classrooms, it would be accurate to say that I did not see a *true* discussion take place. Issues-Centered Education is a sure way to "wise participation or reflective involvement in civic affairs," and ICE offers a promise of achieving "Democratic Enlightenment" (Parker, 2001, p. 99). I am hopeful that in the near future, ICE will be rediscovered by teachers interested in engaging their students in meaningful discussions that go beyond rehashing the headline news.

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