

The Influence of High-Stakes Testing on High School Teachers' Willingness to Incorporate Current Political Events into the Curriculum

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This paper describes the findings of a qualitative study of six government teachers from three diverse high schools in the Southwest Chicago suburbs during the 2008 Presidential Election. All of the teachers expressed a desire to cover the election in their classes; however, several experienced difficulty incorporating current events into their curriculum due to a perceived need to prepare their students for an end-of-course assessment that held graduation implications. Overall, the author found that the teachers fell into one of three groups with respect to their inclusion of current events within the curriculum: curriculum-first, disciplined-inclusion, and opportunity-first. The teachers who were categorized as curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion appeared wary of devoting significant instructional time to the election because they were concerned their students may not perform well on the end-of-course test, a fear that appeared linked to their school's prior academic performance on high-stakes assessments and their perception of their students' academic abilities.

In their description of quality civic education in the United States, Kahne and Middaugh (2008) argue that an ideal social studies program would include opportunities for students to monitor current events and political issues, explore social topics of interest, and engage in substantive discussions on these issues. While all social studies courses have the potential to meet these requirements, the contemporary nature of civics and government courses make them "the part of the formal high school curriculum that is most explicitly linked to the democratic purposes of education" (Kahne, Chi, & Middaugh, 2006, p. 391). Further, the political and sociological focus of most civics and government courses naturally predisposes them to issue-centered instruction (Avery, Sullivan, Smith, & Sandell, 1996), a quality that would suggest these courses are an integral part of the social studies curriculum.

Despite such perceived importance, however, civics and government topics are often afterthoughts when it comes to the social studies curriculum at most schools (Niemi & Smith, 2001). Although approximately 90% of high school students take at least one civics or government course during their academic careers, these courses often are not considered as having the same academic rigor as history and tend to be offered as semester-length electives rather than as part of students' graduation requirements (Kahne et al., 2006; Niemi & Smith, 2001). Even within the literature, the number of studies on civics and government courses pales in comparison to that of history, perhaps explaining why little is known about the ways teachers approach current political events within secondary education.

The majority of the literature on teaching current political events consists of theoretical suggestions on how to approach these topics in the classroom (e.g., Cousins, 1984; Eaton, 2004; Risinger, 2007) rather than empirical studies of existing practices. Of the research on teaching current political events, most rely on surveys of teachers after the fact (e.g., Haas & Laughlin, 2000; Haas & Laughlin, 2002). In this paper, the authors seek to further existing knowledge in this area by reporting the results of a qualitative study conducted with six teachers in three

Illinois high schools during the 2008 Presidential Election. While many factors ultimately contributed to the quality of political education that students received in each of these classes, the one that seemed to affect the amount of time the teachers allotted to covering the election in class was their perceptions of how well their students would perform on the end-of-course assessment that held graduation implications.

Theoretical Framework

Classroom Space and Opportunities for Deliberation

Textbooks, classrooms, and curricula are all resources that need to fit into finite amounts of space, and decisions over what knowledge or whose “truth” fills this space creates perpetual ideological conflict among those who inhabit and control these spaces (Apple, 1979, 1992, 1996). As a result, what is taught, and even *how* topics are taught, can only partly be determined by teachers and students, which is troubling for those who believe teachers are most effective as “agent[s] of education, not of ... subject matter” (Schwab, 1954/1978, p.128). Particularly as the federal and state governments seek to or attain greater amounts of control of classroom space, the autonomy of teachers and students to explore issues of perceived importance is often limited by the need to adhere to knowledge deemed essential by those in greater control of the curriculum. As Craig (2009) notes in her findings from a decade-long study of accountability reforms in Texas, increased accountability creates contested classroom space where “teachers [are] confined to the curriculum implementer role [and] weighed down by others’ prescriptions” (p. 1054).

This narrowing of classroom space carries implications for the training of students in the skills needed for successful participation in a pluralistic democratic society, namely the ability to deliberate on social and political issues with others and make informed decisions regarding public policy (Engle, 1960; Gutmann, 1987). Proponents of deliberation share the Habermasian (1981/1984, 1981/1987) belief in the power of language and argue that conflicts pertaining to public policy are best solved through opportunities for discourse, with a goal of reaching consensus based on individuals’ ability to succumb to the will of the most rational argument (Carleheden, 2006; Flyvbjerg, 1998; White, 1988). Further, Habermas and others who tout the virtues of deliberation argue that exposure to divergent beliefs encourages social integration (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Thomassen, 2006) and research on political communication among ideologically heterogeneous populations has shown that deliberation fosters tolerance among participants (Mutz, 2006).

For deliberation to occur, however, Habermas argues that participants need access to public spaces that allow for “spontaneous positions for-or-against regarding emerging themes, reasons, and information” (Carleheden & Gabriels, 1996, p. 8). Therefore, a classroom suited for deliberation would act as a public sphere where students are given time and space to present evidence-based arguments in an equitable manner without constraint from teachers or other authority figures (Englund, 2006; Flyvbjerg, 1998). However, creating an open space for discussion is only part of what is required for successful deliberation. In their research on classroom discussion at three ideologically diverse schools, Hess and Ganzler (2007) found that successful deliberations that foster tolerance among students occur only when teachers create opportunities for discussion *and* diverse viewpoints are present.

Research has shown that teachers can foster ideological diversity by incorporating discussions of controversial issues into their curriculum (Hess, 2002). Even though issues deemed controversial are subject to interpretation (Camicia, 2008; Hess, 2009), the very nature of politics, particularly in the United States where ideology tends to be stratified between the two major political parties, almost ensures that teachers who incorporate discussions of politics or political events in their classrooms will engage their students in topics that are deemed controversial. Even in classrooms that appear ideologically homogeneous, teachers can use a variety of

different strategies, such as liberal/conservative quizzes, classroom opinion polls, or interactive technologies, to discover the ideological differences that inevitably exist among their students (Journell, 2009b; Journell & Dressman, under review). Therefore, if provided the proper amount of classroom space, teachers could seemingly use discussions of current political events as a way of incorporating a deliberative element into their classrooms that serves a greater civic function of allowing students to practice reasoned and tolerant public discourse (Parker & Hess, 2001).

However, critics of Habermas dismiss the notion of unfettered public communication as idealistic (Best & Kellner, 1991; Flyvbjerg, 1998). Foucault (1984), in particular, argues that equal discourse among individuals can never truly exist because all communication is inherently penetrated by power. In other words, classrooms could never truly act as completely open spaces for discussion due to the natural power structures that separate students from teachers, administrators, and policymakers.

Near the end of his life, Foucault (1991) explored this idea of societal power through a framework he called "governmentality," in which he used the evolutionary history of government, from strong sovereign powers to a decentralized system comprised of institutions and agencies, to explain the emergence of modern neoliberalism, which is characterized by an emphasis on free market ideals and competitiveness within the global economy (Fimyar, 2008; Gordon, 1991; Harvey, 2005; Lemke, 2001). In the United States, neoliberalism can be traced to the early 1980s and the conservative movement spearheaded by the election of Ronald Reagan, which, from an educational standpoint, ultimately led to greater accountability measures placed on teachers and students (Hursh, 2007). According to Foucault (1991), government plays a significant role in the development of a neoliberal state by creating "apparatuses of security" (p. 102) that protect the nation's political and economic interests. Education serves this role through training future citizens to become productive members of society (Fimyar, 2008). In the past three decades, the federal and state governments have felt the need to strengthen the security of the American educational system through legislation that seeks accountability from students and teachers through mandated curriculum standards and high-stakes assessments, the sum of which could be argued has contested the amount of classroom space available to teachers (Craig, 2009; Hursh, 2007).

Curriculum Standards and Current Political Events

Research on social studies instruction in the United States prior to the widespread implementation of high-stakes accountability programs showed that students were often exposed to discussions of current events in school (Hahn, 1998; Niemi & Junn, 1998). However, more recent studies of teaching practices in social studies have shown that classroom discussions occur infrequently and are rarely sustained for significant periods of time (Nystrand, Gamoran, & Carbonaro, 2001; Bolinger & Warren, 2007), a trend that Parker (2006) suggests is due, at least partly, to the increased pressure on teachers to achieve high student pass rates on state assessments. These findings are particularly problematic in light of research that suggests students find their social studies courses more enjoyable and engaging when their teachers include classroom discussions of controversial political issues (Hess, 2009; Hess & Posselt, 2002).

The influence of state curriculum standards backed by high stakes testing on social studies instruction is certainly not a new topic for educators and researchers. An extensive body of research has explored the ways in which high-stakes testing in secondary social studies influences teaching practices and teacher perceptions (Gerwin & Visone, 2006; Grant, 2001, 2006; Segall, 2003; van Hover, 2006; Vogler, 2005) and reinforces traditional approaches to social studies instruction (Journell, 2008, 2009a, 2009c; Barbour, Evans, & Ritter, 2007). However,

few studies have attempted to analyze the connection between high-stakes testing and high school teachers' willingness to engage students in discussions of co-curricular material that falls outside the scope of state-mandated curricula.

The findings presented in this paper act as a starting point to explore the relationship between high-stakes testing and discussions of current political events. In this study, I observed six U.S. Government teachers at three high schools during the 2008 Presidential Election. All of the teachers were faced with preparing their students for a U.S. Constitution test that carried graduation implications. In addition, the three schools had exhibited varying levels of success on NCLB standards and other measures of student performance. The primary research question that drove this study was whether a high-stakes testing requirement would affect teachers' willingness to discuss current political events in their classrooms. In addition, I sought to examine whether teachers' willingness to teach current political events in a high-stakes environment was influenced by their school's prior performance on standardized tests or their perceptions of their students' academic abilities.

Context of the Study

This study took place in 2008, from the start of school in August through the presidential election in November, and is part of a larger study on teaching politics in secondary education (Journell, 2009d). High school social studies courses in Illinois are not subject to end-of-course state assessments; however, the state does require that all students pass a test on the U.S. Constitution prior to graduation. At all three schools in this study, the Constitution test was aligned with and given at the end of a required course on U.S. Government.

All three schools are located in the same Southwestern Chicago suburban county, although each serves a decidedly different community and student population. Each of the schools and the six classes are discussed in greater detail below, and demographic information for each of the teachers and their classes can be found in Table 1.

Roosevelt High School

Roosevelt High School is located within a major urban center and has an enrollment of over 2,500 students. Students of color comprise the majority of the student body, with over 70% of students identified as either Latino or African-American. The geographic area around Roosevelt contains a large percentage of low socioeconomic households; and, as a result, over 30% of Roosevelt students are deemed eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Table 1: Teacher and Student Demographics

Teacher Name	School	Race	Teaching Experience	Class Demographics
Ms. Wilkinson	Roosevelt	White	First Year	7 White
				6 African-American
				11 Latino
Mr. Harrison	Roosevelt	African-American	Less than 5 Years	3 White
				3 African-American
				18 Latino
Ms. Jackson	Roosevelt	White	Less than 10 Years	7 White
				7 African-American
				12 Latino
Mr. Ryan	Armstrong	White	Less than 10 Years	21 Students/All White
Mr. Pierce	St. Thomas	White	Over 40 Years	7 Students/All White
Mr. Leander	St. Thomas	White	Over 30 Years	17 Students/All White

Academics at Roosevelt are hampered by many of the same issues that are commonly found in urban high schools (Fine, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Roosevelt only graduates around 70% of its students, and the school has had difficulty meeting state and federal performance requirements. Based on students' scores on state assessments at the time of the study, Roosevelt had not achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as sanctioned by NCLB and had been identified by the state for a school improvement plan. The primary areas of concern were the overall graduation rate, Latino performance in math, African-American performance in both reading and math, and the performance of students with disabilities and students identified as economically disadvantaged in both reading and math. In addition, when comparing ACT results of Roosevelt students with other students in Illinois, Roosevelt falls below both state and district averages in all academic areas.

At Roosevelt, American government was a one semester course offered primarily to freshmen. Of the three classes I observed at the school, two were general level courses taught by Ms. Wikinson and Mr. Harrison. The third class was a lower-level course team-taught by Ms. Jackson and Ms. Lincoln and contained a large number of special education students. The student demographics in all three classes were consistent with that of the school as a whole.

Armstrong High School

Armstrong High School is located in a predominately rural area about 20 miles outside of the city where Roosevelt is located. At the time of the study, the total enrollment at Armstrong was approximately 600 students, 95% of whom were White. The school has a 93% graduation rate, but, like Roosevelt, Armstrong did not meet AYP goals in 2007 due to students identified as economically disadvantaged not achieving passing scores in either reading or math. However, due to the school's prior academic record, the state had not identified Armstrong for a mandated school improvement plan. Finally, when comparing ACT scores, students at Armstrong perform at or slightly better than state averages in all academic subjects.

Only one teacher, Mr. Ryan, taught courses in American government at Armstrong. His class was a semester course designed primarily for seniors that culminated about a week before the election due to the block scheduling used in the district. The students in Mr. Ryan's class were all White and most appeared to hail from middle-class backgrounds.

St. Thomas High School

St. Thomas High School is a private school located in the same urban area as Roosevelt. The school is affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, and students must apply for admission and pay an annual tuition of nearly \$8,000. St. Thomas services over 900 students, and, like Armstrong, the student body is 95% White. The school boasts a 100% graduation rate, and many of its alumni attend prestigious universities. Although the private status of St. Thomas prevents a comparison of NCLB scores, the average ACT scores of St. Thomas students are considerably higher than state and national averages. Students at St. Thomas did, however, have to satisfy the same Constitution testing requirement that was required at the two public schools in this study.

I observed two government classes at St. Thomas, both of which were composed exclusively of seniors. The first was an Advanced Placement (AP) course taught by Mr. Leander, and the second was a lower-level course taught by Mr. Pierce. The student demographics in each class were consistent with that of the school as a whole.

Methods

The author used a multiple case study design (Stake, 1995) in which he acted as a participant-observer (Merriam, 1998) in each of the six classes. Government courses were chosen for study due to the theoretical alignment between a presidential election and the curricular goals of a course pertaining to the American governmental system. I collected data using common

ethnographic methods of observation, interviewing, and artifact collection (Hammersly & Atkinson, 1995). On average, I observed each of the six classes three to four times per week during the three-month study. In addition, I formally interviewed each of the teachers twice, once at the beginning of the study and again after the presidential elections. The initial interview was designed to gain an understanding of each teacher's attitude toward teaching politics and her or his overall plan of instruction as it related to the presidential election. In the concluding interview, I asked the teachers to reflect on their coverage of the election throughout the semester. In addition, I also interviewed students from each class to gauge their reaction to their classroom instruction. All interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed for accuracy.

Findings

Based on information ascertained through the teacher interviews, it seems clear that all six teachers believed that exposing their students to the election was fundamental to the goals of the course and to their personal philosophies of civic education. Yet, I observed varying degrees of success in incorporating the election within the formal curriculum due, in large part, to the pressure placed on teachers to have their students perform well on the state-mandated Constitution test.

Teacher Beliefs on Citizenship, Politics, and the Election

Each of the teachers acknowledged their role in the civic development of their students and viewed politics as a natural element of active citizenship. Specifically, each teacher cited being politically informed as essential to functioning in a democratic society and considered motivating their students to become politically engaged as a salient instructional goal. As Ms. Jackson at Roosevelt stated, "I think politics is a huge part of civic education and is a part of being a contributing citizen. In order to be a productive member of society, you need to be informed about the process and what is going on." Other teachers cited political awareness as a first step toward a progressive form of citizenship where one sought to better society through political activism and volunteering. Even at a pragmatic level, many of the teachers saw knowledge of politics as a type of cultural capital that their students would need in order to participate socially with other adults later in life.

Regardless of their conceptualization of politics, all of the teachers recognized the historic implications of the election and understood that their students would not be able to escape the ubiquitous nature of the campaign throughout the semester. Therefore, all of the teachers stated that they intended to incorporate the election into their instruction, either through specific projects, classroom discussions, or informal inclusion into the curriculum. However, few of the teachers had extensive experience teaching presidential elections. Both Ms. Wilkinson and Mr. Harrison had started their careers within the past four years, and Ms. Jackson and Mr. Ryan had only been teaching long enough to cover the 2004 contest, although neither could recall specific examples of instructional strategies that they had used at that time. Only the two teachers at St. Thomas, Mr. Pierce and Mr. Leander, had considerable experience with presidential elections. Both men stated that they had tried various strategies in years past, from formal projects to group work, but that simply following the news and engaging in informal conversations with students seemed to work best for them.

Incorporating the Election Into Classroom Instruction

Despite their initial enthusiasm about the election and the possibilities it presented for classroom instruction, the teachers varied considerably on their use of current events within the curriculum. In fact, three distinct methods of inclusion emerged from my observations, which I term *curriculum-first*, *disciplined-inclusion*, and *opportunity-first*. I will discuss each below and provide examples from the teachers who fell into each category.

Curriculum-first. I use the term curriculum-first to represent the lowest level of current event inclusion. The teachers who fell into this category, Ms. Wilkinson, Ms. Jackson, and Ms. Lincoln,

all at Roosevelt, chose to proceed with the formal curriculum with few exceptions, regardless of what occurred in the election campaign. In all three cases, the anxiety surrounding the end-of-course Constitution test fueled the teachers' reliance on mandated content despite their aforementioned acknowledgement of the relevance of the election to their students' lives. As Ms. Wilkinson stated,

It's hard because our curriculum is very structured. It is like seven days on this, seven days on that ... I do want to incorporate current events because I do think it is very important that they know what is going on but as to where do I fit it in and how much do I talk about it, because if I put up a clip of Hillary Clinton supporting Barack Obama, I mean how much in depth do we go into it? I can't take too long and I don't want to just give them a short little discussion and just cut it off. That's not fair to how significant something is. I don't know. It is hard and I am still struggling with that, how much time I devote to that.

She continued by referring to the Constitution test and said, "I don't want to teach to the test, but I want to give them exactly—I just want to nail in them the information they need to know." The 50 item Constitution test used by the Roosevelt school district focused exclusively on the history and structure of the document and contained no questions about political parties or ideologies.

However, this reliance on the formal curriculum did not mean that the election was never mentioned in either class. As Ms. Jackson noted, "[The election] is part of our curriculum. There is an objective on political parties and the political process." During this unit, which lasted approximately two weeks, both classes focused on the election, with students in Ms. Jackson and Ms. Lincoln's class even researching and writing a paper about one of the candidates. Yet, discussion of the election before and after the politics unit was sparse, as evidenced in Ms. Lincoln's initial interview when I asked her whether she believed her students were interested in the election. She responded by saying, "I don't know. I can't tell right now. We won't really know until we start the political party objective."

In both classes, major events in the campaign were either ignored or glossed over. For example, I observed both classes the day after Biden was chosen as the Democratic vice presidential nominee, yet the selection was not mentioned in either class. Ms. Jackson and Ms. Lincoln even chose to ignore Obama's historic achievement that same week. Other watershed moments, such as the debates, General Colin Powell's endorsement, and Obama's prime-time television spot, were summarily ignored. Finally, in perhaps the most representative act of this curriculum-first ideology, Ms. Wilkinson chose to administer a unit test the day after Obama won the general election.

In fact, both classes had prolonged periods of time where discussion of the election was virtually nonexistent. From September 15th to October 2nd, a period of time that included a presidential and vice presidential debate among other newsworthy items, I made approximately 10 observations of Ms. Wilkinson's classroom and nothing political occurred. The same could be said for Ms. Jackson and Ms. Lincoln's class from October 2nd to October 30th, a period that spanned two presidential debates and countless negative attacks from both political parties.

Outside of the political party unit, even when the election was discussed in these two classes, there was rarely a sustained focus. Most of the time, the election was mentioned in passing, such as Ms. Wilkinson mentioning the White House during a lesson on the executive branch and saying, "This will be the new home for Obama or McCain after the election!" When students happened to mention an advertisement or news clip pertaining to the election, the teachers would briefly respond to the students' comments or questions, but then the class would quickly move on to other topics. On average, each of these teachers spent less than five minutes on the election on any given day outside of the political party unit, although

the amount of political discussion increased considerably during the two weeks devoted to political parties.

On several occasions, however, Ms. Wilkinson did alert her students to pivotal events in the campaign, such as the debates, by offering them extra credit if they watched and wrote a short summary. When I asked her how many students participated, Ms. Wilkinson said that several of her students throughout the day completed the extra credit but very few from the class that I had observed. None of the students that I interviewed said they did the extra credit, even the ones who admitted to watching parts of the debates. However, elements of the debates were never discussed in class. After the third debate, one of Ms. Wilkinson's students asked her which candidate had won the contest, and Ms. Wilkinson dismissed him by saying, "It depends, both sides claimed victory" before moving back to a discussion about the three branches of government.

Ms. Wilkinson also tried to briefly introduce the election to her class during the Republican and Democratic Conventions by showing clips of the candidates' acceptance speeches. However, the videos did not appear to be a pre-planned activity. The first video Ms. Wilkinson showed was Obama's acceptance speech, which occurred the day after my first formal interview with her, in which I responded to her frustration about not being able to assign homework on the election because some of her students did not have televisions or Internet access by asking her whether she had ever thought about showing election coverage in class. She responded by saying,

Yeah, I mean I have the projector, so I could do that. I just have to go onto the *Washington Post* or something like that and just get news clips and stuff like that to show in class. But I think right now, well I guess I could incorporate the Democratic Convention and I could do a couple other things like that, but sooner or later I have to get to the Articles of Confederation and stuff like that so I am going to have to struggle a little more in finding stuff that relates to that.

The fact that she showed the Obama speech the next day, yet did not show Biden's speech that had occurred earlier in the week suggests that our conversation may have sparked the idea for her, particularly considering she showed both the McCain and Palin acceptance speeches the following week. In any case, these were the last politically themed videos shown in class until the days preceding the general election.

When asked to reflect on how they believed their coverage of the election went during the semester, all three teachers appeared pleased with their instruction but admitted that they did not go into the depth that they had desired. As Ms. Jackson stated,

I think maybe, because we didn't talk about the election every day, maybe even if we tied it into the opener or five minutes here tie in something with the election so it could be an ongoing project from day one until the end of November.

Ms. Wilkinson seemed particularly conflicted because she did not believe her coverage had been adequate, but she also felt she had outperformed her peers at Roosevelt. She said,

I was surprised because I felt like I wish I could have done more with it, but when I talked to other teachers and how they were teaching it, they weren't mentioning it at all. I mean they would say that it is going on but they wouldn't really do anything about it. As I thought about it, at the end I wish I could have taken like every Thursday or something and done the bell ringer for just the election coverage coming up rather than saving it until the end.

She concluded by saying that she hoped to learn from her experiences and planned to be better prepared for the next presidential election.

Disciplined-inclusion. Both Mr. Pierce at St. Thomas and Mr. Harrison at Roosevelt used what I term a disciplined-inclusion approach to teaching current events. Their instruction was characterized by consistent involvement of the election, although detailed analyses of current events were often superseded by a perceived need to adhere to the formal curriculum. In these two classes, there existed a persistent tension between the teachers' desire to develop their students' interest in the presidential election and their belief that their primary responsibility was to prepare their students for the Constitution test. Mr. Harrison expressed this frustration when he said,

It's not a matter of doing it because I think that anybody that sticks completely to the curriculum and what is supposed to be done is doing an injustice to the students ... What I may end up doing, to be honest with you, certain things that I know may be one or two questions on the test, we may just stay 40 minutes on, for the most part give them the answers so we can spend more time on the election even though there are not very many questions on the test that they have to pass. Can you see what I am saying? Basically I am going to rob Peter to pay Paul unless somebody can give me a better way.

Mr. Pierce echoed this sentiment but strongly believed in exposing his students at St. Thomas to current events on a daily basis. Without exception, Mr. Pierce always had a handout of photocopied newspaper articles that had been clipped from the *Chicago Sun-Times* or the *Chicago Tribune* that morning. Students were expected to browse the articles at their leisure once class started, and then Mr. Pierce would attempt to initiate a short five minute discussion about the issues of the day. The newspaper articles did a respectable job of covering the major events of the campaign, such as the debates and convention speeches, and the relevant items in the news cycle, such as Obama's infamous "lipstick on a pig" gaffe or the cost of Palin's wardrobe. However, the discussions rarely progressed farther than Mr. Pierce quickly scanning the headlines.

Mr. Pierce made a conscious effort to include articles from both sides of the political spectrum, and many of them provided insightful commentary either supporting or expressing concern about the candidates. However, the content of the articles was seldom discussed, other than Mr. Pierce telling his students that he had read a particular article and found it interesting, which insinuated that his students should read it on their own time. At the beginning of the semester, Mr. Pierce attempted to inquire into his students' opinions on a fairly regular basis, but after they did poorly on the first chapter assessment, he stated to me that he was going to have to spend more time reviewing the chapters in class because his students were not studying the textbook at home. From that point, student input on discussions waned, and Mr. Pierce spent more time on the formal curriculum, although he regularly used elements from the campaign to support assertions made in the textbook.

At Roosevelt, Mr. Harrison started the school year giving minimal coverage to the election and focusing only on the formal curriculum. The Democratic and Republican Conventions and the first presidential debate were either ignored by Mr. Harrison, mentioned in passing, or offered as extra credit opportunities with no subsequent substantive discussion. However, as the semester progressed, Mr. Harrison began initiating discussions and creating assignments about the election on a regular basis. He explained this change in philosophy in our final interview when I asked him what he would do differently if he taught a presidential election in the future. He said,

I think I would make a bigger deal about it. [This year] I kind of went gradually and kind of ramped it up, and I did that because of my past. I allowed that to kind of drive it and then in the middle I started to say, hey, if I can get excited about it, maybe they will get excited about it. If I don't get excited about it, they sure aren't going to get excited about it.

After he decided to increase his own enthusiasm for the election, Mr. Harrison began including the election within classroom instruction on a regular basis, although the majority of references were short and designed to help students connect the formal curriculum to a real-life context rather than initiate a prolonged conversation. However, the subsequent presidential debates resulted in lengthy discussions where students expressed their opinions about the race and their preferred candidates. During the political party unit, Mr. Harrison even spent an entire class period on an informal seminar of political and social issues chosen by his students.

As with the teachers previously discussed, both Mr. Pierce and Mr. Harrison appeared satisfied with their coverage of the election. The former stated,

Well, in [first period] I think it has gone excellent because of just drawing them out and getting them to converse. It was an easy semester for government because of the election, so I think it went well. I don't know if it can go better, but it seemed like it went well to me.

Like Ms. Wilkinson, Mr. Harrison chose to judge his performance based on that of his peers at Roosevelt, stating,

I think that after talking, and I am comparing myself with my peers that are in my department, I think I did more for the most part than anybody in regard to bell work, time spent discussing different issues, and designing lessons that were strictly and directly relevant to what is going on but still covered the objective that the state required.

For both men, the tension between coverage of current events and the formal curriculum never totally resolved itself, and it often fluctuated based on the academic performances of their students. However, both undertook an uneasy balancing act that resulted in students who were aware of the election, if not fully informed.

Opportunity-first. The final two teachers, Mr. Ryan at Armstrong and Mr. Leander at St. Thomas, viewed the election as an opportunity to engage students and, therefore, prioritized their curriculum around the presidential campaign. Of course, both teachers concurrently fulfilled their professional obligation to prepare students for the Constitution test; however, nearly every class incorporated a substantive conversation or activity pertaining to the election. Moreover, their current event discussions rarely had a fixed time schedule; both teachers often appeared content to let conversations continue until issues had been resolved or all students had a chance to voice their opinions.

This instructional strategy was a deliberate effort in both cases. As Mr. Leander noted, "In all of my social studies classes, whether it is economics or government, we deal with the news and follow the economic and political news all year long," even though he admitted that the responsibility for preparing his students for the AP exam could be time consuming. For Mr. Ryan, the election offered the opportunity to merge theory and practice. As he said, "If [his students] are going to see the relevance of politics, I don't think knowing how many senators and representatives is going to do it for them, even though that is stuff they need to know too."

Mr. Ryan continued by saying, "We won't necessarily [discuss the election] every day, but it's just such an exciting political time I would say it's going to happen pretty much all this term." He turned out quite prophetic; in the nearly three months of observations I conducted at Armstrong, Mr. Ryan only held seven classes in which the election was not substantively discussed. Even by the end of August, Mr. Ryan had recognized the need to inform his students about the political ideologies of the major parties in order for them to be able to effectively discuss the election throughout the semester. On September 2nd, he announced to his class that he would alter the curriculum to discuss political parties at the beginning of the semester so they could have, in his words, "some knowledge on what is liberal and what is

conservative and who they would vote for so we can watch it play out and they can have some clue besides the young African-American guy versus the old White guy.”

In addition to the daily election coverage, Mr. Ryan also allotted time on Fridays exclusively for current event discussions initiated by students. Every week, he assigned four or five students to find a current event of interest pertaining to national, state, or local issues to share with the class. Therefore, the Friday discussions could range anywhere from McCain's tax policies to road construction in the middle of town. When the student-initiated discussions ended, Mr. Ryan always had several additional relevant events that students may have overlooked. Often, these dealt with the election, but he would also include state or local issues of interest to his students.

The only teacher who incorporated the election into his class more than Mr. Ryan was Mr. Leander, who, without exception, led substantive political discussions in every class at St. Thomas that I observed throughout the semester. Further, he often had no qualms with letting a discussion run its course and giving all interested students a chance to contribute. One particularly salient example of this relaxed attitude occurred the day after Obama chose Biden as his running mate. The class spent the entire period discussing the electoral and political ramifications of the choice and how it would potentially impact McCain's selection the following week. Before anyone realized, only five minutes were remaining in the period, so Mr. Leander put away the notes he intended to give and said, “We will have to push this until tomorrow, but that's OK; it is my responsibility to educate you guys about what is going on in the world.”

In their exit interviews, both Mr. Ryan and Mr. Leander exhibited positive reactions about their coverage of the election and measured their success by the increased interest in politics they observed among their students throughout the semester. Mr. Ryan believed that his students at Armstrong “got more interested as the term went on” and continued by saying, “Hopefully, some kids that didn't care at all before at least have some inkling about why it is important now.” Mr. Leander expressed similar sentiments, stating that he thought the key to gaining students' interest was “just the fact that we talk about it every day, because once you get it initiated you get their passions coming out, and they start talking about it.”

Student Reactions to Election Coverage

Interestingly, nearly all of the students interviewed considered the election coverage in their class adequate. None of the students claimed they thought their class failed to cover the election well enough, although a couple students from each class at Roosevelt said that they would not have minded more discussion about the election. However, most student responses ranged from “I thought it was perfect” to “I think [my teacher] did a good job.” In particular, students seemed to value the informal class discussions that allowed them to express their views and listen to others. As one of Mr. Harrison's students at Roosevelt stated, “It's like we all have our own voices and we just talk about it right then and there, and there was no strict time limit and we could have the whole period just to talk about it.” Similarly, all of the students interviewed from Mr. Ryan's class at Armstrong made a point to applaud the current event days on Fridays because it allowed them to focus on issues they deemed important.

Ironically, two students from Ms. Jackson and Ms. Lincoln's class at Roosevelt claimed that their teachers spent “a lot” of time on the election. One student even went so far as to say Ms. Jackson and Ms. Lincoln spent “too much” time on the election and should have spent that time on required content, which, of course, directly contradicts my observation that they spent the least amount of time on the election of any teachers in the study. While this general satisfaction with their respective classes most likely represents the students' true feelings, the fact that all of their attitudes were generally positive, even in the classes where politics was

rarely discussed, may suggest that these students, like many of their teachers, formed their judgments based on informal comparisons among other classes and teachers.

Discussion

Haas and Laughlin (2002) describe presidential elections as “the quintessential example of teaching social studies” (p. 20), yet several of the teachers in this study were unable to use the election to its full potential in their classes. Even though all of the teachers appeared to recognize the importance of covering the election, the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion teachers felt they were unable to give the event the attention it deserved due to the preparation required for the end-of-course graduation requirement. The vast majority of students in these classes started the semester curious, if not excited, about the election, even if they exhibited minimal interest in their government class overall. While students’ level of enthusiasm toward the election rarely reached that of their responses to the Chicago Cubs’ play-off hopes or the annual homecoming dance, the historic nature of the election and the resulting media attention had classrooms and hallways of each school abuzz with talk of politics. Yet, in the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion classes, this enthusiasm was tempered in students’ government classes because too often the election was given minimal attention when compared to the content the teachers felt they had to cover. In this sense, many of these teachers missed a golden opportunity to use an event of considerable interest to their students as a way of encouraging them to develop a sustained appreciation of government and politics.

It is important to note that the issue in the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion classes was not poor teaching, but rather curricular decisions made by the teachers. All of the teachers in this study routinely exhibited traits of engaging and critical social studies instruction when teaching their required content; however, the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion teachers rarely used those strategies to teach about the election. Certainly, it is possible that these teachers, particularly those with less experience, did not feel comfortable broaching the controversial nature of the election, which may have resulted in less direct instruction about the election in those classes. However, as noted in their interview responses, all of the teachers claimed to be interested in teaching about the election, and none ever expressed any hesitation about whether the election would be too controversial for their classrooms. In fact, some of the more provocative conversations over controversial campaign issues occurred in the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion classes (Journell, 2009d).

Based on my observations, I would argue that the lack of emphasis on the election in these classes was due, in part, to the limited “open space” available to them because of the constant pressure to achieve high scores on the state assessment. Consider, for example, Ms. Wilkinson. She came to Roosevelt fresh from a highly respected teacher education program armed with a variety of innovative instructional strategies and a penchant for technology that she frequently used to engage her classes in content. It seems plausible that, with a little more freedom from her school and district administrations, she would have used those talents to create multiple opportunities for her students to explore and discuss the election.

However, these findings do not allow for a blanket statement condemning high-stakes assessments as the reason why teachers do not choose to engage their students in regular conversations about current political events. Certainly, Mr. Ryan at Armstrong and Mr. Leander at St. Thomas did not hesitate to talk about the election in their classes, nor did they appear to share their colleagues’ concern about the Constitution test. Yet, the fact that Mr. Ryan taught at a school that, historically, had little trouble meeting state requirements and Mr. Leander taught an AP class at a prestigious private school should not be ignored. By simply eliminating the preconceptions and anxiety that plagued the other teachers in this study, Mr. Ryan and Mr. Leander were perhaps able to generate greater curricular space based on their confidence

in their students' ability to achieve passing scores on the Constitution test, space which they then used to spend more time on the election in class.

The question then becomes why emphasis on the Constitution test seemed to dominate coverage of the election in the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion classes, even when each of these teachers claimed that teaching about the election was a salient instructional goal that they wished to achieve during the course of the semester. On the surface, it seems that these teachers were affected by preconceived notions of their students' abilities that were based on their school's history of meeting state requirements or, in the case of Mr. Pierce at St. Thomas, his students' academic performance. Yet, these fears appear symptomatic of a larger problem in secondary education, one that can be explained using Foucault's (1991) governmentality framework.

In a neoliberal approach to education, schooling is viewed as a way of preparing students for success in the private sector (Peters, 2001). Curriculum standards backed by high-stakes testing contribute to this goal in two ways: by helping ensure that teachers are providing students with the skills necessary for success in the political economy and by providing a public certification of a school's efficiency and ability to properly educate students. It is this latter outcome that may have influenced the political education that occurred in the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion classes. While the individual teachers may have been concerned about their own test scores, they were merely one link in a chain that started with the federal and state government, worked its way through the school and district administrators, and finally ended with the community surrounding these three schools. For schools to act as apparatuses of security, they need to ensure public confidence in their abilities to train students for productive citizenship (Gilles, 2008). Failing test scores shake this confidence, which is why the school and district administrators seemed to keep constant pressure on each of the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion teachers to adhere to the formal curriculum.

Of course, simply blaming the system can often be viewed as a convenient excuse for poor teaching. Certainly, a school's environment has the potential to affect classroom instruction, and standardization has forced many schools and districts, particularly those that consistently underperform on state tests, to enact more stringent control over the freedom teachers have in their classrooms. However, the literature is filled with accounts of teachers who are able to provide ambitious and challenging instruction in spite of pressures to achieve high scores on standardized tests, even at low-performing schools (e.g. Gradwell, 2006; Grant, 2001; Johnston-Parsons & Wilson, 2007). It is essential that teachers who are mired in high-pressure environments develop ways to meet the demands of their principals and district administrators without diminishing the quality of their instruction.

Overcoming this response of teaching to the test is, in many ways, the most important step in facilitating a deliberative approach to teaching politics in secondary education because, quite simply, if teachers do not feel comfortable incorporating politics or current events into their curriculum on a consistent basis, then opportunities for substantive political discussions diminish considerably. Ensuring that schools retain public confidence is important, particularly within the current neoliberal climate in the United States; however, this responsibility should not come at the expense of educating students on topics of social and political interest that do not have a place within the formal curriculum. If schools are to have a civic function that prepares students to take part in the political economy, then the focus of civics and government courses should go beyond structural knowledge of democratic processes. The value of these courses is held in their potential for developing students' interest in public policy through engagement with the social and political issues of the day, regardless of whether these topics can be found on a state assessment.

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