

**A Survey of Appalachian Middle & High School Teacher Perceptions of Controversial
Current Events Instruction**

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Abstract

This study examined the perspectives of a sample of Appalachian middle and high school social studies teachers regarding the teaching of controversial current events. Specifically, the survey ascertained the teachers' familiarity with school district administrative policies regarding the teaching of controversial current events, their perceptions about the inclusion of controversial current events in the social studies, and their perceptions about their instructional responses and decision – making concerning the teaching of controversial current events. The researcher derived the data for this study from a spring 2009 survey administered electronically using a secure website. The study yielded only 76 participants out of a sample of 926 middle and high school social studies teachers, a concern which may have implications for Appalachian students' accessibility to participatory citizenship skill development. Of the teachers which did participate, the feedback was positive with regard to administrative policies and favorable toward the teaching of controversial current events as a part of the social studies curriculum.

Introduction

It is not new or unique to suggest that September 11, 2001 changed the way Americans think about their country and their future. The events of that day brought Americans closer together with the patriotic fervor not felt since the attacks at Pearl Harbor in 1941. Since 9/11, Americans have struggled to come to terms with our nation's vulnerability to terrorist attacks. In addition, Americans have reassessed the liberties and freedoms guaranteed them by the Constitution because of governmental policies aimed to protect us during times of national duress and emergency. The nation's public schools are not impervious to these social and political events; in fact, as the cases related to 9/11 and its aftermath below illustrate, the schools often become the instrument of prejudiced and, at times, extreme policies regarding the instruction of controversial current events (Westheimer, 2007).

- The fining of a 26 – year veteran teacher in New Mexico for refusing to have his students remove anti – war posters in his classroom (Archuleta, 2003);
- The suspending of an 11th grade honors student in Dearborn, MI for wearing an anti - Bush t – shirt to school (Simon, 2003);
- The banning of discussion about the war on the elementary and middle level and the limiting of discussion on the secondary level in the Knox County Schools, Tennessee (Barker, 2003);
- The forgoing and/ or postponing of field trips based upon the level of alert as issued by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (Zehr, 2003);
- The pulling of the textbook, History Alive! The Medieval World and Beyond from a Scottsdale, Arizona middle school amid parental complaints of its portrayal of Islam (Falkenhagen, 2005);

- The filing of a lawsuit by a Los Angeles high school social studies teacher claiming administrative retaliation in response to critical thinking activities about the war in Iraq (Garrison, 2006).

In spite of the negative picture that the above events reveal, social studies scholars contend that an important dimension of citizenship education in America is the study of controversial current events (Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Mattioli, 2003; Ochoa – Becker, 1999). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) endorses the teaching of controversial issues. The 2001 NCSS Position Statement, “Creating Effective Citizens,” proposes that “the core mission of social studies education is to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and values that will enable them to become effective citizens.” To do so, NCSS (2001) further recommends that teachers provide students opportunities:

- to be “ aware of issues and events that have an impact on people at local, state, national, and global levels”;
- to “seek[s] information from varied sources and perspectives to develop informed opinions and creative solutions”;
- and to “ask[s] meaningful questions and[is able to] analyze and evaluate information and ideas.”

Research indicates, however, that teachers give inconsistent or inadequate attention to controversial issues in their social studies classes (Byford, Lennon & Russell, 2009; Mitsakos & Ackerman, 2009). The reasons for this are manifold. First and quite simply, controversial issues by nature spark disagreement among members of a group and can arouse conflict between those members (Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Parker, 2005). Second, controversial issues span personal, social, political, and economic experiences of citizens and generate diverse and polemical sets of opinions based upon differing values, beliefs, and interests (Cook, 1984;

Dynneson & Gross, 1999). Third, the “mandated” curriculum and the effects of No Child Left Behind have caused teachers to decrease time for the social studies and to limit their discussion of meaningful and relevant controversies in the news (Mitsaksos & Ackerman, 2009). Fourth, and perhaps most germane to this study, is school administrators’ policies on the teaching of controversial issues. For various reasons and at various times in our nation’s recent history, administrators have questioned and restricted the teaching of certain controversial issues (Archuleta, 2003; Barker, 2003; Taylor, 2003; VanSledright & Grant, 1994; Westheimer, 2007; Wilson, 1980).

Background of the Study

The researcher of this study was interested in ascertaining the perspectives of and methodologies used by Appalachian middle and high school social studies teachers in the teaching of controversial current events. The researcher decided to focus the study on social studies teachers in Appalachia because of the region’s reputation as being economically and geographically underdeveloped (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2009; Isserman, 1996). Economic and geographic factors of where people live affect their access to quality public education (Haaga, 2004). Appalachia’s public education is a striking example of the pervasive effects of adverse economic and geographic conditions. Rural schools, particularly in Appalachia, suffer from a series of problems, such as an urban bias in the allocation of federal education dollars, inadequate access to vocational and post – secondary education programs, low graduation rates from high school, and an inadequate tax base to fund public education due to few metropolitan areas and job opportunities (Easton, 1991; Haaga, 2004; Isserman, 1996).

The economic and geographic attributes of Appalachia caused the researcher to wonder about middle and high school social studies students’ access to democratic citizenship instruction in the form of studying controversial current events. The researcher regards the study and

discussion of controversial current events as a means to liberate and uplift students from the barriers of entrenched economic, political, and social patterns. Haaga's (2004) study reinforced this contention. Using data collected from the 2000 census, Haaga reported on the education profile of Appalachia. He found that although high school graduation rates improved in the northern – most regions of Appalachia between 1990 and 2000, the southern – most and central regions of Appalachia experienced few gains. Worst off in the study was Eastern Kentucky in which 37.5 % of the population lacked a high school diploma (Haaga, 2004). Had the students that had dropped out from high school remained in school, perhaps they would have felt “they are a part of history – that they have a responsibility to act in such a way as to have a future for humanity” (Easton & King, 1991, p. 34).

Recent news stories concerning administrative policies on the teaching of certain controversial issues in public schools also caused the researcher to wonder about Appalachian middle and high school students' access to this dimension of citizenship education. The news stories regarding administrative policies between 2003 and the present surprised the researcher. Much of this surprise was based on her background as a middle and high school social studies teacher in which the discussion and study of controversial issues was a regular part of her instructional practice. Results from Easton and King's (1991) study revealed similar assumptions regarding the purpose of the social studies. Reporting on the instructional practices of rural Appalachian science and social studies teachers, Easton and King found that the teachers overwhelmingly considered preparing students for citizenship as the central purpose of the social studies. Thus, this study's central concern was to discover whether Appalachian teachers perceive controversial current events to be an important aspect of citizenship education and whether they felt constrained by policies passed down by administrators.

Method

The researcher designed this study as a means to examine the perspectives of Appalachian middle and high school social studies teachers regarding the teaching of controversial current events. Specifically, the study ascertained the teachers' familiarity with school district administrative policies regarding the teaching of controversial current events, their perceptions about the inclusion of controversial current events in the social studies, and their perceptions about their instructional responses and decision – making concerning the teaching of controversial current events.

Sample

The researcher consulted the Appalachian Regional Commission's (ARC) "on-line resource center" at <http://www.arc.gov/index.do?nodeId=56> to identify the study's population parameter. According to the ARC, all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states comprise Appalachia. These states are: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Four hundred and twenty counties comprise these states. Next, the researcher and a graduate assistant accessed each of the 420 counties' school districts utilizing the internet and by confirming the school districts' addresses using each state's directory of schools. The grad assistant recorded each of the middle and high schools' names on an Excel spreadsheet. The total population consisted of 1,852 middle and high schools.

Next, the researcher and graduate assistant employed simplified random sampling to arrive at a 50% sampling of the 1,852 schools in the population. The grad assistant created another spreadsheet in Excel listing the 926 schools in the sample. This spreadsheet included the schools' names, address, and classification as either middle or high school. When finished, the

database contained 418 middle schools, 469 high schools, and 39 combined middle and high schools for a total of 926 from across the 13 state Appalachian region.

The researcher and grad assistant attempted to access every school's website in order to randomly select one social studies teacher for participation in the survey. The researcher and grad assistant only considered a name acceptable if shown on the website as either a middle school (grades 5 through 8) or high school (grades 9 through 12) social studies teacher. The task of going to the schools' websites proved fairly successful since most modern school districts have their schools spotlighted on the internet. Retrieving specific information about teachers' names and the courses they teach was less successful. Thirty - eight percent, or 352 of the middle and high schools, did not include faculty/ teacher information on the school websites.

The Survey

A literature review of best – practice recommendations for the teaching of controversial issues and current events by leading scholars in the field grounded the researcher's survey design (Haas & Laughlin, 2000; Merryfield, 1993; Ochoa – Becker, 1999; Passe, 1988; Wilson, 1980; Wilson, Sunal, Haas & Laughlin, 1999). The researcher also consulted several news stories regarding administrative policies on the teaching of controversial current events and teacher instructional choices (Archuleta, 2003; Barker, 2003; Falkenhagen, 2005; Garrison, 2006; Simon, 2003). Using sources from scholarship and the news, the researcher synthesized and addressed four main themes in the survey:

1. social studies teachers' familiarity with school/ district policy regarding controversial current events;
2. social studies teachers' instructional responses to controversial current events;
3. social studies teachers' perceptions regarding administrative policies on the teaching of controversial current events;

4. and, social studies teachers' demographics.

The researcher developed the survey using SNAP software for the purpose of on-line delivery and implementation. The researcher hoped this method for administering the survey would yield high participation from among the identified teachers. To invite teachers to participate in the study, the researcher mailed a cover letter to each of the 926 schools. Three hundred and fifty – two of those cover letters did not include a teacher name due to the inability of the researcher to access it on-line. Each cover letter contained a URL and secure access code in order to open the survey. The administration of this survey occurred during a two week time frame in March of 2009. Out of the 926 letters mailed to teachers, only 56 teachers participated in the survey for a 6% response rate. This low response rate could be explained by the fact that only 574 of the letters were addressed directly to a specific teacher. Another factor which contributed to this low response rate was the return of 53 letters.

The researcher then decided it was necessary to solicit participation again, but this time, by contacting the teachers through their email accounts. From the 574 names that originated from school websites, the researcher collected 313 faculty email addresses. Many of these websites had secure email accounts not accessible by outside individuals, which eliminated 261 teacher names to contact by email. The second deployment of the survey occurred in April 2009, was on-line, lasted for a time frame of two weeks, and yielded 20 additional responses.

The Respondents

Following the second deployment of the survey via email invitation, the researcher determined the demographic data of the respondents. One of the important demographics was that of the community and school, that is, whether the community in which the school resides is rural, suburban, or urban. Seventy point three percent of the respondents reported their school

and community as rural, 14.4% reported as suburban, and 9.2% reported as urban. Other demographic features of the respondents included:

- school classification (middle, high, or both);
- gender;
- education level;
- tenured / non-tenured;
- and years teaching experience.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents according to middle, high, and middle/ high school teachers, following the second deployment of the on-line survey.

Table 1. Number of Respondents Per School Classification

Classification	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers	Middle & High School Teachers	Total
Number of surveys returned: 1 st deployment	21	27	8	56
Number of surveys returned: 2 nd deployment	6	13	1	20
Total surveys returned	27	40	9	<i>N</i> =76

Also in terms of persons completing the survey, 47% were women and 53% were men. The respondents' educational background varied, indicating a strong emphasis on continuing education in the profession, as 37% of the teachers held bachelor's degrees, 53% held master's degrees, 9.2% held an educational specialist degree, and 1.3% held a terminal degree. Seventy – eight point nine percent of the respondents reported being tenured and 21.1% reported being non-tenured. Table 2 illustrates the number of years teaching experience of the respondents:

Table 2. Years Teaching Experience of Respondents

# Years Teaching	# Respondents	% Respondents
1-5 years	20	26.3%
6-10 years	14	18.4%
11-15 years	12	15.7%
16-20 years	7	9.2%
21-25 years	9	11.8%
26-30 years	6	7.8%
31 or more years	8	11%
Total	76	100.2%

The respondents also reported on their membership in specialized professional associations (SPAs) in order to provide the researcher a more detailed picture of their professional profile. Of the 76 respondents, 26, or 34.2% reported being members of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS); and 17, or 22.3% reported being members of their state affiliate of the national organization for social studies. Three respondents reported being members of the National Middle School Association (NMSA), which is 11% of the teachers having reported themselves as middle school teachers. Six respondents reported being members of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), and 10, or 13.1%, of the respondents reported not belonging to any specialized professional association. When asked whether they belonged to the National Education Association (NEA), 49, or 64.4%, of the respondents reported affirmatively.

Findings

This study, to ascertain the perspectives of and methodologies used by Appalachian middle and high school social studies teachers in the teaching of controversial current events, yielded 76 total responses out of a sample of 926 teachers. Although this is a low response rate, it is important to consider that the second deployment, this time by inviting teachers to participate in the survey through their school email accounts, consisted of 313 teachers whose

emails were accessible to outside individuals. The second deployment of the survey resulted in 20 additional responses. When viewed in this way, the response rate of viable participants, that is, those teachers whose names were on the original mailing and email distributions, was 24.2%. The researcher questioned the teachers about their familiarity with school/ district policy regarding controversial current events, their instructional responses to controversial current events, and their perceptions regarding administrative policies on the teaching of controversial current events.

Social Studies Teachers' Familiarity of School / District Controversial Issues Policies

For this theme of the survey, the researcher queried the respondents about three elements:

1. administrative policy status for their school/ district;
2. degree of familiarity with administrative policy status;
3. type of administrative policy actions imposed since September 11, 2001.

If the respondents answered 'yes' or 'very familiar' or 'familiar' to any of the three elements, the survey directed them to answer additional questions for clarification of their responses.

The first question corresponded to the first element and read, "*Does your school and/ or district have a policy related to the teaching of controversial current events?*" Seven respondents (9.2%) reported 'yes', 29 (38.2%) reported 'unsure', and 40 (53%) reported 'no.' Of the 7 respondents reporting yes to this question, 2 of them reported that the policy is building – only, 2 were not sure, and 3 reported it as being a district – wide policy. In terms of the degree of familiarity of the policy, the second element of the first theme, the question read, "*How familiar are you with your school and/ or district's policies relating to the teaching of controversial current events?*" Twenty – seven (35.5%) responded 'very familiar' and

'familiar', as well as twenty – seven (35.5%) responded 'unfamiliar' and 'very unfamiliar.' Interestingly, of the 27 which responded very familiar and familiar, 21 reported that their district policies do not contain references to placing restrictions on the teaching of controversial current events.

Since the researcher's survey consisted of controversial current events questions dating back to September 11, 2001, a time in which she began to notice administrative policies enacted on the teaching of them, the researcher wanted to find out if school administrations had placed instructional restrictions on that specific event. Thus, the researcher queried the teachers about this element by asking them, *"To the best of your knowledge, has your school and / or district placed a restriction of any kind on the teaching of controversial current events since September 11, 2001?"* Consistent with the first question regarding their knowledge of a school/ district policy and to the question regarding policy references made restricting the teaching of controversial current events, 56 (73.6%) of the respondents reported 'no' to this question. Only 5 respondents reported 'yes' to the question regarding restrictions since 9/11, and 4 of those 5 reported restrictions imposed on the teaching of 9/11 and its aftermath, and 1 of the 5 reported restrictions imposed on the teaching of terrorism. Each of these teachers reported themselves in the demographics section of the survey as middle school social studies teachers. Three respondents reported that the strongest reason for the restriction was to protect students from violent images on television, while one respondent reported that the restriction was to limit discussion of opposing viewpoints regarding 9/11 in the classroom. Yet another respondent reported that the strongest reason for the restrictions following 9/11 was to maintain focus on the curriculum and testing mandates.

Social Studies Teachers' Instructional Responses to Controversial Current Events

The next theme the researcher queried teachers about pertained to their instructional decision – making and teaching practices. Specifically, these questions concerned:

1. the frequency of their controversial current events instruction;
2. their attention to and time spent listening to and reading about the news;
3. the topics of controversial current events discussed/ taught in the classroom;
4. and, the instructional strategies used when teaching the controversial current events.

Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the distribution of the respondents' reported average time spent teaching controversial current events in their classes and their reported average time watching, listening, or reading about the news.

Table 3. Respondents' Average Time Teaching Controversial Current Events Per Week

Frequency	M.S. Teachers	H.S. Teachers	M.S. / H.S. Teachers	Percentage of Teachers
0 times per week	4	1	1	7.9%
1-2 times per week	14	20	5	51.3%
3-4 times per week	6	8	2	21.1%
5 or more times per week	3	11	1	19.7%
	<i>n</i> = 27	<i>n</i> = 40	<i>n</i> = 9	100%

Table 4. Respondents' Average Time Watching, Listening, Reading about the News Per Day

Frequency	M.S. Teachers	H.S. Teachers	M.S. / H.S. Teachers	Percentage of Teachers
0-10 minutes	12	3	1	21%
11-20 minutes	6	0	0	8%
21-30 minutes	2	9	3	18%
31-60 minutes	2	12	2	21%
61 or more minutes	5	16	3	32%
	<i>n</i> = 27	<i>n</i> = 40	<i>n</i> = 9	100%

When asked about the topics of current events discussed or taught in class, 71 of the 76 respondents reported that the current events were definitively controversial in nature. The survey directed those respondents reporting in the affirmative to answer questions about the nature of those topics and the instructional strategies used when teaching about those topics. The first question which addressed this element of the query was, “*How would you describe the nature of the controversial current events you have taught? (check all that apply).*” Table 5 illustrates the distribution of their responses:

Table 5. Controversial Current Events Topics Taught by the Respondents

Topic	M.S. Teachers	H.S. Teachers	M.S. / H.S. Teachers	Total
U.S. foreign policy	11/27	40/40	9/9	60
U.S. domestic policy	13/27	40/40	5/9	58
Religious issues	5/27	35/40	5/9	45
Sexuality issues	3/27	26/40	1/9	30
State gov't policies	9/27	25/40	2/9	36
Local gov't policies	9/27	11/40	2/9	22
Teen issues: drugs, sex, suicide, peer pressure	14/27	25/40	1/9	40

The second question asked of the respondents was, “*I find myself struggling to find time to teach controversial current events.*” Of those respondents reporting in the affirmative that some of their current events are controversial in nature, 44% reported ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ regarding the time commitment they perceive they should allow in class for this endeavor, while 33% reported ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ to this question. However, when asked, “*Teaching controversial current events has not affected my teaching style,*” 64% of the respondents reported ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ whereas only 20% reported ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree.’ As far as the students’ interest level is concerned regarding the teaching of controversial current events, 67, or 88%, of the respondents reported ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ with the question, “*My students appear interested to learn about controversial current events.*”

The final aspect regarding the social studies teachers' instructional responses to the teaching of controversial current events applied to their instructional strategies they perceive that they use, in addition to resources they perceive to consult for assistance in their planning. The survey asked the respondents to check all that apply to the question, "*What instructional methods have you used to teach about controversial current events?*" The most frequently reported instructional strategies used were: class discussion (99%), teacher – led lecture (71%), and watch/ listen to the news (60%). Instructional strategies receiving fewer than 50% of the respondents' selections were: debates (43%), research (42%), written summaries of the news (32%), guest speakers (28%), games/ role play/ simulations (20%), journal writing (20%), and other (17%).

When asked, "*What resources have you used to help you learn more about a controversial current event,*" the respondents check marked all that applied to their teaching. The four most frequently reported resources were: on-line encyclopedias (90%), newspapers (86%), television news shows (75%), and news magazines (63%). Resources consulted by fewer than fifty percent of the teachers were: books written by experts/ scholars (35%), radio broadcasts (33%), teacher journals (24%), and professional development (25%).

In addition to the resources that the respondents felt they referred to, only 32% of them reported affirmatively to the question, "*I have referred to my state's content standards for guidance in the teaching of controversial current events,*" 31% of the respondents reported 'neutral,' and 37% reported 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree.' When asked if they refer to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) standards or materials for guidance in the teaching of controversial current events, only 18% reported 'strongly agree' or 'agree,' and 43% reported 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree.'

Social Studies Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Administrative Policies on the Teaching of Controversial Current Events

The final theme the researcher addressed in the survey concerned the teachers' perceptions of known administrative policies, as well as the teachers' perceptions regarding the role and importance of controversial current events in their students' citizenship development. When asked "*If your school and/ or district has restricted the teaching of controversial current events in your recent memory, which best describes your response,*" 14% reported that they 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the decision, while 29% reported that they 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed.' Fifty-seven percent of the respondents reported neutral to this question. Below represents the exact wording of the answer choices and the number of respondents:

- *I strongly agreed with the restriction and I have complied in all earnest (3)*
- *I agreed with the restriction with reservation and have made a good faith effort to comply (8)*
- *I neither agreed nor disagreed with the restriction and have neither complied nor not complied (43)*
- *I disagreed with the restriction although I have made a good faith effort to comply (19)*
- *I strongly disagreed with the restriction and have not complied. (3)*

When asked, "*If your school and/ or district has restricted the teaching of controversial current events in your recent memory, in what way do you handle students' questions about the events,*" the respondents reported:

- *I try to answer as objectively as possible (38, or 50%)*
- *I give a brief, general answer (20, or 26%)*

- *I recommend that they ask their parents or outside sources (18, or 24%)*
- *I ignore the students' question by changing the subject (0)*
- *I ignore the student's question by not acknowledging him/ her (0).*

Regarding the respondents' perceptions of the importance controversial current events have on students' citizenship development, 94% reported 'strongly agree' or 'agree.' The respondents considered that their school and/ or districts place a less - than - favorable importance on the teaching of controversial current events. When asked if they believed their schools/ districts consider the teaching of controversial current events as important to students' citizenship development, only 39% reported affirmatively while 22% reported negatively.

Discussion

The researcher of this survey study examined the perspectives of Appalachian middle and high school social studies teachers regarding the teaching of controversial current events using the simplified random sampling approach. Specifically, the study ascertained the teachers' familiarity with school district administrative policies regarding the teaching of controversial current events, their perceptions about the inclusion of controversial current events in the social studies, and their perceptions about their instructional responses and decision – making concerning the teaching of controversial current events. The importance of the study was to determine whether Appalachian teachers perceive controversial current events to be an important aspect of citizenship education and whether they felt constrained by policies passed down by administrators. Because Appalachia continues to be among the poorest regions in the United States (Easton, 1991; Isserman, 1996) and that students' access to quality education may be jeopardized due to adverse economic conditions (Haaga, 2004), the researcher hoped to

understand the perspectives of middle and high school social studies teachers as they contribute to students' understanding of controversies affecting their communities, state, nation, and world.

Several important findings emerged from this survey study, first being the low response yield of 6%. First, when comparing this study to similar ones of the last ten years, particularly Wilson, Sunal, Haas & Laughlin (1999) and Haas and Laughlin (2000), the return rate was dismal. The low participation represented in this study may be suggestive of a perceived tenuous environment for teachers as schools across the nation have been clamping down on the kinds of topics teachers may address in their classes. It is also safe to suggest that the current security situation in the United States and increased attention to high – stakes testing and accountability may also have contributed to the low response rate (Flinders, 2006; Mitsakos & Ackerman, 2009; Westheimer, 2007). In other words, the political environment of the schools and the greater society may actually have contributed to some teachers' decisions not to participate in the survey.

Second of importance and possibly related to the above finding, is the low number of teachers reporting that their schools and/or districts have administrative policies regarding controversial current events instruction. Only 7 teachers out of the 76 reported that this was the case, whereas 29 were unsure and 40 reported no. Haas and Laughlin (2000) also found that the majority of teachers' schools had no administrative policies on the teaching of current events. Of the 7 teachers reporting that their school/ district does have policies, it is interesting to note that 5 of them were middle school teachers, and reported that their school and/ or district placed restrictions on the teaching of September 11, 2001. Because so few of the teachers who participated in this survey reported their schools and districts as having controversial issues policies, it is safe to suggest that teachers whose schools do not were more likely to participate in this study. Again, this result reinforces the idea that the current political climate of the schools

and greater society may be affecting our social studies teachers' ability to teach controversial issues which are so important in our students' citizenship development (Flinders, 2006; Mitsakos & Ackerman, 2009; Westheimer, 2007).

The third and perhaps most important finding emerging from this study pertains to the teachers' perceived emphasis they place on the teaching of controversial current events and the manner by which they go about preparing to teach them. Seventy – one out of the 76 teachers reported that the teaching of controversial current events is important to their students' citizenship development. This finding parallels nicely with Easton and King's (1991) study in which Appalachian social studies teachers reported that the purpose of the social studies is to prepare young people for "local, national, and global citizenship" (p. 34). Additionally, 67 of the teachers reported that their students are interested and motivated to learn about controversial current events, a finding that is consistent with Flinders' (2006) and Merryfield's (1993) studies. Thus, when considering whether Appalachian social studies teachers view controversial issues as an important feature of citizenship education, on the surface these findings render a hopeful future for the social studies.

However, the manner by which the teachers say they go about preparing to teach controversial current events is less than positive and suggest some critical concerns for the future of citizenship education. First, this study confirmed previous research (Haas & Laughlin, 2000; Merryfield, 1993; Wilson, et al, 1999) that teachers tend to not consult state curriculum standards as they plan to teach controversial current events. Given this situation, it is plausible to suggest that teachers continue to lack autonomy in their instructional decision – making due to the rigid nature of state mandates (Merryfield, 1993). It is also plausible to suggest that the state curriculum standards do not adequately address the critical thinking skills or multiple perspectives associated with controversial current events instruction. If Appalachian social

studies teachers, as well as teachers from other regions of the country, are to value this dimension of citizenship education, then the researcher suggests that state affiliates of NCSS and other stakeholders in the promotion and advocacy of the social studies examine states' content standards and recommend and institute more flexible revisions.

Another critical concern regarding the future of citizenship education as determined by this study is the teachers' membership in the NCSS and its state affiliates. Only 26 of the 76 teachers reported being members of the NCSS and only 17 reported to be members of their state affiliate. These reports of low membership in the specialized professional associations for social studies are consistent with Easton and King's (1991) study in which "two-thirds of both social studies and science teachers" did not consider membership or participation as useful in their teaching. Also alarming was the teachers' report that only 14 of them regularly use the NCSS journals in their preparation to teach controversial current events. The researcher regards this as a concern because as teachers consult resources external to the NCSS, they are more likely to rely on sources that may be biased or provide uneven representation of points of view. It is interesting to note that 71 of the 76 teachers reported controversial issues as important, but what concerns the researcher, is the sources they say they regularly use when preparing to teach them. These sources, newspapers (reported by 90%), television news shows (reported by 75%), and news magazines (reported by 63%), are all confounded by political points of view and slants. Thus, it is plausible to suggest that although these teachers say they value controversial current events instruction, their presentation of them may actually contribute to the growing divisiveness of our schools (Westheimer, 2007). The instructional strategies to teach controversial current events reported by the teachers may also be a factor in divisive school environments. The teachers reported class discussion and teacher led lecture as the two main strategies; again,

possibly problematic due to who is doing the talking and the manner by which alternative view points are mediated.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study to ascertain Appalachian middle and high school teachers' perceptions regarding the teaching of controversial current events and the perceptions they have regarding administrators' policies, illuminated several key findings. These findings concerned: a) teachers' willingness to participate in a survey about controversial issues instruction , b) the value they say they place on the teaching of controversial issues, c) the public schools as being "political mirrors" of the greater society, d) the future of citizenship education in the United States, and e) the value teachers place on membership in specialized professional associations such as the NCSS and its state affiliates. Based on these findings, the researcher recommends the following research studies to be conducted:

1. *The teachers' willingness to participate in the survey.* The low participation rate is a concern for the researcher, and should be of concern to all those who profess to uphold controversial issues instruction as a key dimension of citizenship education. For this reason, the researcher recommends smaller samples, perhaps on a state – by – state basis, but using the same contextual information as provided by the Appalachian Regional Commission. A meta – analysis could be performed following these surveys in order to ascertain more generalizable descriptions of the sentiment held by Appalachian social studies teachers. A second recommendation is that qualitative research in the form of observation, interviewing, and focus groups be conducted in order to ascertain more revealing stories about teachers' decisions in the face of compromised instructional autonomy and administrative policies.

2. *Appalachian teachers' value on the teaching of controversial issues.* The researcher recommends that continued research be conducted to determine whether societal, economic, and political factors influence Appalachian social studies teachers' decisions to teach or not to teach controversial issues. Continued research in the area of comparing Appalachian social studies teachers' attitudes and skills toward the teaching of controversial current events to other regions of the United States is critical if we are to understand Appalachian students' exposure or underexposure to this citizenship dimension. Appalachia continues to struggle economically and geographically, which, in turn adversely affects the quality of education of its students. Research to compare Appalachia to other regions would help underscore the importance of finding ways to initiate parity in the political socialization process.
3. *The public schools as political mirrors.* The researcher recommends that future research explore the school administrative structures and faculty policies, especially as they relate to the teaching of controversial current events. So few teachers participated in this study that it caused the researcher to wonder if these teachers did not fear reprisal from their schools. Further survey and qualitative research could help answer this question. Research could also help answer if Appalachian social studies teachers are subject to greater administrative pressure due to this population's general cultural homogeneity. It would interesting to compare these results to research conducted in more heterogeneous school populations, such as urban areas, to determine if a relationship exists between community/ school type and the degree to which their administrative policies on the teaching of controversial issues are affected by prevailing political sentiment.
4. *The future of citizenship education in the United States.* The researcher recommends that future research examine the types of citizenship education practiced in Appalachia and in other regions of the U.S. for means of comparison. Again, qualitative research would be

best suited for this pursuit. The researcher recommends examining school administrative structures, teachers' instructional decisions, and faculty policy manuals in order to ascertain whether a school practices an "authoritarian" form of citizenship preparation or "democratic" form of citizenship preparation (Westheimer, 2007). Are students in Appalachia exposed to democratic forms of citizenship classes that will enable them to be free and independent thinkers and to identify social injustices in our society and be moved to do something about them? Qualitative research in this area will help illumine the degree to which Appalachian students are equipped with the participatory citizenship skills to improve their communities, state, and world.

5. *Teachers' membership in professional organizations.* Finally, the researcher recommends that research examine the trends of membership in NCSS and state affiliates of not only in Appalachia, but throughout the United States, utilizing data sets provided by the NCSS and by the several states. NCSS members, such as teacher educators and teachers, should proactively recruit new members into the organization in their classes and schools. Research should examine the priority school districts place on membership in the NCSS and professional development provided by the organization. If the NCSS continues to endorse quality citizenship education for all learners throughout the United States, then finding ways to ensure that each school has a teacher member to train and influence other educators, should be a priority.

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