# INCLUDING CURRENT EVENTS AND CURRENT ISSUES IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM: IS IT WORTH IT?

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#### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### INTRODUCTION

# Background

Social studies, out of all the academic subjects, probably includes the most disciplines, themes, and/or topics. For example, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS] (2010) defines social studies as follows:

...the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (p. 3)

Therefore, social studies teachers have the challenge of covering this vast amount of content by making sure that their students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills.

The National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies or (NCSS, 2010), includes ten themes: Culture; Time, Continuity, and Change; People, Places, and Environments; Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Power, Authority, and Governance; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; Science, Technology, and Society; Global Connections; and Civic Ideals and Practices. Indeed, most would agree that this is a lot to cover.

One reason for this overload of content within the context of social studies is the evolution of our society. As the world becomes more and more complex, the social studies list of themes and necessary skills involved will grow longer and longer. For example, the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (P21] (2011) is a national partnership organization that advocates for 21<sup>st</sup> century readiness for every student. Between 2002 and 2011, over 16 states aligned many of their academic standards with P21 (P21, 2011). The Ohio Department of Education's (ODE] *Academic Content Standards* (2011), for example, directly address the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills for civic literacy, financial and economic literacy, and global awareness. In order for students to develop these 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, the ODE has integrated certain topics into its academic content standards. Some of these topics include: global connections, civic participation and skills, civil and human rights, sustainability, technology, national security and international diplomacy, and the global economy (ODE, 2011). The course that ODE has selected to cover these topics is *Contemporary World Issues* (ODE, 2011).

A more common term for *Contemporary World Issues* that has been used by a majority of the notable individuals in social studies education, including administrators, educators, and researchers, is *Current Events* and/or *Current Issues*. Although current events and current issues are similar in nature, each possesses some distinctive features that define them as separate disciplines of study. Lipscomb and Doppen (2012) define current events as "events (that] are seen as 'one time only' events such as a natural disaster, primary elections, or major sporting events such as the Super Bowl" (p. 2). Current issues, on the other hand, are more ongoing in nature and, as Larson (1999) notes, "can be seen as more perennial issues because they 'transcend time and place'" (as cited in Lipscomb & Doppen, 2012, p. 2). Examples of current issues include the AIDS epidemic, abortion, and human rights. Lipscomb and Doppen (2012)

make an effective distinction between the two by stating that "while current events usually only answer 'what, when, and where' questions, current issues dig deeper by addressing the 'why or how' as well" (p. 2).

Within recent decades, the topic of current events and current issues in the realm of social studies education has drawn much attention. There have been many discussions, debates, and much research has been conducted on the integration of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum. One reason this topic has become current is, again, the fact that society has changed dramatically in recent history. In accordance with this change, educational entities on both national and state levels have placed more importance on the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum. As discussed above, this is reflected by many of the current national and state social studies content standards. Therefore, as has been argued above, the study of current events and current issues within the social studies educational realm is an important issue.

#### Statement of the Problem

Not only has this topic become a popular and important one within the social studies field, it has also become hotly debated. The debate is centered on the many factors involved in social studies teachers' abilities to successfully integrate the study of current events and current issues into their curriculum. This debate constitutes the basis for this Master's Research Project: We assume that social studies teachers should attempt to include current events and current issues in their curriculum because they are told to do so, but why? Why is this inclusion important? What are its benefits? If the study of current events and current issues is important enough to be included in the social studies curriculum, then what are the challenges teachers face? Once we know what these challenges are, do we believe it is feasible for social studies

teachers to incorporate current events and current issues in their curriculum? Finally, if it is feasible, how do social studies teachers effectuate this integration?

# Methodology

The literature selected, reviewed, and analyzed for this Master's Research Project was found through various Internet searches. Internet data bases and search engines that were used in finding the literature included the following: Academic Search Complete, InfoTree, ERIC, EBSCO, JSTOR, Google, and Ohio University's Alice Online Catalog. Key terms such as "current events"; "current issues"; "social studies"; "classroom"; "curriculum"; "controversial issues"; "teaching"; were all used in order to generate the references used for this Master's Research Project. Names of the most prominent figures in social studies current events and current issues research were also searched in order to locate the most relevant literature possible.

#### Limitations

The main limitation of this Master's Research Project is that the research conducted and results generated are solely based on the research findings of others. The fact that the research was based on analysis of literature and did not include data generated from 'live' participants limits this research project in scope. Another factor that should be considered is that the educational environment is ever-changing. Therefore, in order to accurately assess factors involved with the integration of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum, a sample that is representative of factors involved with the current state of education should be taken. This was another possible limitation of this project as the educational environment has likely changed since some of the research and literature analyzed for this Master's Research Project was conducted and first published.

# Overview

The intent of this Master's Research Project is to find answers to the above questions. This will be attempted through an analysis of existing literature and the research on the integration of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum. Based on an analysis of this data, recommendations will be made with regard to the effective integration of current events and current. In order to better understand the basis and rationale for the development of this Master's Research Project, Chapter Two will present a review of the research literature.

#### CHAPTER TWO

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

This Master's Research Project will consist of an in-depth review and analysis of existing literature and research relevant to the topic of integrating current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum. Due to the nature of the research involved with this project, this chapter will consist of general summaries of the references used for this project. An in-depth review and analysis of these same references will appear in the 'Findings' chapter of this report. The general summaries included in this chapter are provided in hopes of providing an understanding of the basis and rationale for the development of this research project.

# Historical Background

Scott (2005) gives us some insight into the roots of current events and current issues education in the United States in his article entitled "The Chautauqua Vision of Liberal Education". Chautauqua, an adult education center founded in 1874 in western New York State, was formed on the ideals of liberal education (Scott, 2005, p. 41). These ideals were brought into the New World as a "product of the ancient, medieval and Renaissance traditions of higher learner" (Scott, 2005, p. 42). Liberal education evolved in the United States and was promoted by Chautauqua at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a means for self-improvement (Scott, 2005). One of the first examples we see of the integration of current events and current issues within the American educational realm took place at Chautauqua. This occurred when George E. Vincent took over as president of Chautauqua and placed a major emphasis on the inclusion of current events and social issues into Chautauqua's liberal education curriculum (Scott, 2005, p. 42).

Vincent's presidency (1907-1915) marked a major shift in Chautauqua's philosophy by bringing

a balance to "traditional liberal education with contemporary events and social problems" (Scott, 2005, p. 51). Vincent's reasoning for this "was that since the USA was an emerging world power, its citizenry ought to be well versed in national and international affairs" (Scott, 2005, p. 51). Writing in 1900, Vincent articulated his philosophy:

The successful program must be put together with the aid of some guiding principles....They should remember that popular (public) intelligence can be increased only by the study of historical periods, of literary achievements, and of economic and social forces which have been at work in the past, and are operative in the present....It is, nevertheless, true that current topics deserve attention. To bring to bear upon the affairs of today the reflective powers which have been strengthened by a study of the past is one of the most important tasks of the intellectual man (as cited in Scott, 2005, p. 51).

Scott (2005) also notes that "to this day, the programming of the (Chautauqua] organization emphasizes current issues" (p. 51).

#### Research Base

There have been many research studies conducted on the current events and current issues topic in recent history. Lipscomb and Doppen (2012) discuss three such studies in their chapter entitled, "Finding One's Place in the World: Current Events in the K-12 Social Studies Classroom." The first of these was conducted by Passe (1988) and consisted of a study of 350 elementary teachers (as cited in Lipscomb & Doppen, 2012, p. 4). Through this study, Passe (1988) found "that the more teachers knew about current events, the more likely they were to teach about them in their classes." Passe (1988) also suggested that teachers should use "a teacher-centered approach to introduce current events, adding background data at the children's level, and providing opportunities for classroom discussion where children are comfortable

asking questions about topics of interest" (as cited in Lipscomb & Doppen, 2012, p. 5). The second study, conducted by Haas and Laughlin (2000), involved the results of a survey given to nearly 200 elementary, middle, and high school teachers (as cited in Lipscomb & Doppen, 2012, p. 5). They found that 95% of the teachers in their study felt that teaching about current events was an important part of social studies education and that many of them discussed current events at least once a week in their classrooms (as cited in Lipscomb & Doppen, 2012, p. 5). The last study was one is which Lipscomb & Doppen (2012) analyzed data provided by "The National Study on the State of Social Studies Teachers" on nearly 12,000 responses to a variety of questions dealing with current events and current issues (p. 7). This study showed that the majority of elementary, middle, and high school teachers who responded included current events in their classrooms either daily, frequently (1-2 times per week), or occasionally (2-3 times per month) (Lipscomb & Doppen, 2012, p. 8). In trying to determine what types of social studies teachers include current events in their curriculum, Lipscomb and Doppen (2012) found a moderately strong correlation between those who emphasize civic responsibility and those who teach current events (p. 12). In summarizing the reasons why teachers teach current events Lipscomb and Doppen (2012) state that it "helps develop good, responsible citizens with an awareness of and appreciation for the world around them (who] can relate topics to real world experiences...and teach open-mindedness, tolerance (and] critical thinking" (p. 13).

The next two research studies to be reviewed deal more specifically with the teaching of controversial issues in the social studies classroom. Byford, Lennon, and W. Russell (2009) conducted a study which 67 high school social studies teachers from northern Indiana and central Oklahoma completed a questionnaire that consisted of a number of questions regarding the teaching of controversial issues. They chose teachers from different parts of the country in order

to get a more diverse sample from which to collect data. Based on their results they concluded that "it appears that teachers understood the importance of controversial issues in the social studies but were concerned about limitations or problems that exist in teaching them effectively and with minimal disturbances" (p. 169). In another research study on the teaching of controversial issues in the social studies classroom, Wilson, Haas, Laughlin, and Sunal (2002) surveyed 30 elementary and secondary level teachers in the Southeastern of the United States. Through interviews, they attempted to find out information on who teaches current controversial issues, who does not teach current controversial issues, and what influences the teachers to make their decisions on this topic (Wilson, et al., p. 34). The interview data revealed that many teachers were unwilling to address certain controversial issues in their classrooms and that the main reason for this apprehension was that they are not part of the mandated curriculum (Wilson et al., 2002, p. 42).

Deveci's (2007) research gives us a look at how social studies teachers in other parts of the world view the teaching of current events. Deveci (2007) interviewed 20 social studies teachers in downtown Eskisehir, Turkey of whom more than half considered current events as being highly related to social studies courses (p. 448). The results of this study showed that teachers use a variety of sources and methods (which will be discussed more thoroughly in the 'Findings' chapter of this report) in teaching about current events. In addition, Deveci (2007) found that there are some problems or challenges involved with the teaching of current events.

The final research study reviewed in this section was conducted by Susan Mosborg (2002) and was based on how students use their knowledge of history in reading the news. In this study, Mosborg (2002) chose ten diverse students from two different schools located in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. After reading articles on current events from random

newspapers, these students were interviewed by Mosborg (2002) and her staff in an attempt to find answers to the following questions: What historical events and ideas do adolescents from two different school contexts refer to when making sense of contemporary news stories on a given topic? How do they use these historical references? How do the two groups of students compare? (p. 325)

Mosborg's (2002) findings suggested that the students involved "framed current affairs not only relative to prior convictions, but also relative to historical eras associated with popular themes, and tacit understanding of how to express opinions in the public sphere" (pps. 349-350). She also concluded that "reading the news is one of many everyday activities that involve thinking about the past to get a fix on current affairs of substantive political import" (p. 355).

# **Existing Literature**

The remainder of the research literature to be reviewed in this chapter consists of publications that are more miscellaneous or general in nature. This general review includes basic information on such aspects as the importance of, challenges with, and methods of incorporating current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum. A more in-depth analysis of this literature will appear in the 'Findings' chapter.

In "The Civic Mission of Schools," the editors of *Social Education* (NCSS, 2005) share what they believe are some of the most important objectives for schools to be committed to in providing a quality education. Within these objectives they mention the importance of the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum. They also briefly discuss some ways in which social studies teachers can effectuate this inclusion in their classrooms.

NCSS has also published a bulletin devoted to the teaching of global issues entitled *Social Studies and the World: Teaching Global* Perspectives. Authored by Merryfield and Wilson (2005), this bulletin includes two chapters on the teaching of current events and currents issues. Included in these chapters are discussions about the challenges involved with teaching these topics, the benefits and skills that students can receive from studying these topics, and many invaluable resources for teachers to use in their attempts to effectively teach these topics (Merryfield & Wilson, 2005, pp. 105-133).

Graseck (2008) shares her beliefs on the importance of the study of current events and current issues in an article entitled "Explore the Past to Understand the Present and Shape the Future". Specifically, she lists the benefits that the study of history can provide for students in relationship to their abilities to better understand current events and current issues and shape the future of our society. Libresco (2003) also believes in the integration of current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum and communicates why she believes this integration is important in "Current Events Matters...for Elementary Social Studies Methods Students". In this article she shares her surprise in discovering that none of the participants at the 2002 College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA] conference's elementary social studies methods symposium felt their social studies methods courses focused much on current events instruction (Libresco, 2003, p. 274). Libresco (2003) also shares why she thinks the study of current events and current issues is important in elementary school classrooms and suggests methods for how to effectively teach current events and current issues to elementary school students. Crowe and Wilen (2003), who taught secondary social studies methods courses at Kent State University, also discuss how they found a lack of preparation amongst their teacher candidates in the ability to effectively teach current events and current issues. In "Teaching

Prospective Social Studies Teachers to use Issue-Based Discussions in Their Secondary Social Studies Classrooms", they share how they addressed this problem by adding more requirements that deal with strategies of properly teaching current events and current issues into their social studies methods courses (Crowe & Wilen, 2003).

In "Dealing With Crisis: Teachable Moments in the Social Studies Classroom", Lipscomb (2002) discussed how emergent crises offer valuable opportunities for social studies teachers to include the study of current events and current issues in their classrooms. He gives examples of these types of 'teachable moments' and how to effectively tie them into the social studies curriculum. Along these same lines, Lintner (2006) gives readers an example of how to effectively incorporate current events and current issues in the elementary classroom through the teaching of natural disasters. He communicates the benefits that students will receive from this method as well as how to properly effectuate its implementation (Lintner, 2006). Scarlett (2009) also shares an interesting and innovative way to teach current events and current issues. He advocates for the teaching of transitional justice in students' abilities to better understand current issues dealing with human rights. He offers specific examples of what this method entails as well as its benefits to students and challenges involved with being able to implement it.

In the first of two articles that highlight high school classes that were created with the sole intent of teaching current issues, Kuthe (2011) discusses factors involved in the creation and implementation of his course on the war on terror. In the article "Teaching the War on Terror: Tackling Controversial Issues in a New York City Public High School", Kuthe (2011), who teaches this course at Williamsburg Preparatory High School in Brooklyn, describes the challenges of creating such a course and questions why such courses are seemingly rare in social studies education (p. 160). In the second article entitled "Moving Students From Personal to

Global Awareness", Libresco and Wolfe (2003) share information about a course on human relations that is taught and was created at Oceanside High School on Long Island in New York. In this article, they discuss the reasons why this course was created, problems and/or challenges involved with its creation and implementation, and details of how it was implemented within this particular school (Libresco & Wolfe, 2003). They do make a point of stating that they "are fortunate to work in school district that had the foresight to develop a course geared to helping students think about bias, intolerance, and hatred" (p. 44).

In "Social Studies: Integrating School and Society", Ediger (1996) shared how his experiences with the use of thematic units in the social studies curriculum produced an avenue for the study of current events and current issues that are relevant to students. He communicates the importance of this type of instruction and also gives specific details of a thematic unit in which he implemented in the past. Another example of a strategy that can be used to incorporate the study of current events and current issues in the social studies classroom is offered by Pescatore (2007) in her article entitled "Current Events as Empowering Literacy: For English and Social Studies Teachers". Here Pescatore (2007) discusses how she has used the study of current events in both English and social studies curricula to help students develop critical literacy skills. Included in her discussion are benefits of this strategy, challenges in implementing it, and what was involved in its implementation.

Hicks and Ewing (2003) presented an in-depth look at how teachers can use online newspapers as an instructional tool for teaching current events and current issues. They discuss the benefits of this particular teaching strategy and share some resources in aiding with its implementation in an article entitled "Bringing the World Into the Classroom With Online Global Newspapers" (Hicks & Ewing, 2003). In sticking with the theme of the use of online

resources in the teaching of current events and current issues, Brodie and Byerly (2002) provide an extensive list of current events websites in their article entitled "In the News: Current Events Websites". Manzo (2006) also informs readers of a resource provided by C-SPAN that is devoted to the teaching of current events in her article entitled "C-SPAN Offers Current Events Aligned to States' Standards".

Finally, in *Social Studies in Elementary Education*, Walter Parker (2001) provides an indepth chapter on the teaching of current events and current issues in the elementary social studies classroom. Entitled "Current Events and Public Issues", this chapter includes information on the importance of the study of current events and current issues, building a current events curriculum, strategies for teaching current events, strategies for teaching enduring public issues, and specific resources and activities to use in teaching about current events and current issues.

#### CHAPTER THREE

#### **METHOD**

Through the analysis of selected literature relevant to the topic of current events and current issues in the social studies classroom, data was collected to gather information in relation to the following research questions:

- 1. Should social studies teachers attempt to include current events and current issues in their curriculum?
- 2. If yes, Why? Why is it important? What are its benefits?
- 3. What are the challenges involved with integrating current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum?
- 4. Is it possible for social studies teachers to include current events and current issues in their curriculum?
- 5. If it is possible, how do social studies teachers effectuate the integration of current events and current issues into their curriculum?

In order to add to the validity of this Master's Research Project, the literature was randomly selected and included multiple publications authored by some of the most notable figures in the field of social studies current events and current issues research. It was also gathered with the objective in mind of representing as many diverse perspectives as possible on this topic. This research literature has been briefly discussed and/or summarized in Chapter Two. A complete listing of this literature is referenced in the References section at the end of this Master's Research Project. The analysis of this literature included a review of all data in order to identify recurring themes.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

#### **FINDINGS**

#### Question 1

Should social studies teachers attempt to include current events and current issues in their curriculum?

The entire body of research literature reviewed in Chapter Two advocated for the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum. This overwhelming advocacy was supported by specific examples of the importance for the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies classroom as well as by specific examples of its benefits. These examples are shared and reflected under the following heading.

#### Ouestion 2

If yes, Why? Why is it important? What are its benefits?

Most of the support for the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies classroom revolved around the positive effects this inclusion has on students. For example, Passe (1988) concluded that the study of current events can help students become more effective citizens and ultimately "improve the study of our society" (as cited in Lipscomb & Doppen, 2012, p. 5). Scarlett (2009) pled that the study of current events and current issues such as transitional justice "presents opportunities for students to become morally inclusive in their thinking, engage in global democratic citizenship, and study critically important current events unfolding in their world" (p. 169). Merryfield and Wilson (2005b) argued that the inclusion of global events can help students "recognize their connections to people around the world who may share similar situations or have different reactions" (p. 123). This speaks to the fact that our

society has become an interdependent global entity or 'flat' as Thomas Friedman (2007) puts it in the title of his seminal work on the globalization of modern society. Libresco (2003) sums it up nicely by stating that "as we move toward an interconnected global community, our lives are so intertwined with others' around the world that we have no alternative but to develop the analytical tools so that we can make judgments based on reliable data" (p. 276). Hicks and Ewing (2003) also added a relevant touch to this point in stating that "at a time of increasing global interdependence, the ability not only to locate information about other countries, peoples, and cultures but also to make sense of this significant knowledge needs to be central to the social studies curriculum and the practices of teachers" (p. 134).

Mosborg (2002) asserted that involving current events and current issues in the social studies classroom can lead to more effective student connections between past and present. She stated that "using history in the course of reading the news evokes background narratives that join past and present in evaluative judgments about historical change and continuity" (Mosborg, 2002, p. 350). She also posited that, "rather than assimilating the news stories to their idea of the present, adolescents assimilate news stories to their idea of the difference between past and present" (Mosborg, 2002, p. 351). Finally, she found that "adolescents' use of history when reading the news is shaped by self-expression, a key ideal of American citizenship and that common frameworks of periodization and core values are exploited" (Mosborg, 2002, p. 352).

The powerful connections that the inclusion of current events and current issues can create for students are not limited to the scope of past and present only. Connections can also be made to what is important and relevant in students' lives. Lintner (2006) communicates this idea very well by stating that "the immediacy and relevance of current events in social studies classrooms is profound because they bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world

and can provide students with information that they can use in their daily lives" (p. 101). In support of connecting school to society in order to give students deeper levels of learning, Ediger (1996) stated the following:

For learners to be able to use what has been acquired, they need to have numerous opportunities to apply what has been achieved and application should be made in the real world of society so that two separate realms, school versus society, do not exist. (p. 121) Kuthe (2011) explains how his class on the war on terror has "provided his students with a rare opportunity to engage intellectually with their peers on issues of real importance to them and their society both now and in their futures" (p. 162). The flexibility that the current events and current issues strategy affords can also lead to such connections. As Merryfield and Wilson (2005a) state, "an advantage of teaching about global issues, whether in a separate course or as part of another course, is that students can be asked to choose items they are interested in and to choose actions they would like to take" (p. 118).

Through the analysis of the literature there were also tones of how the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies classroom can lead to social change for the better. This notion was popularized, perhaps, by the infamous educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1970/1993) in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. His overall idea was that for social change to occur, citizens must not only think critically about what they read and view, but they must also react to transform the world. Take, for example, Libresco's (2003) outlook. She believes that "students must study current events where groups of citizens join forces to make change...to gain civil rights, to stop a war, to campaign against drunk driving, to put in a crosswalk" (Libresco, 2003, p. 274). Libresco (2003) believes studying these examples of social change will motivate students to practice the same types of civic activism that will lead to the

betterment of our society. Pescatore (2007) elaborates on the benefits of the inclusion of a critical literacy program in both English and social studies curriculums. She states that "this strategy has the added benefit of fostering engagement in the public interest rather than just self-interest, enabling young people to become significant forces for change" (Pescatore, 2007, p. 339). Scarlett (2009), in his article about teaching about transitional justice, claims that "the study of transitional justice addresses important themes of social studies education and can motivate students to engage in active global citizenship" (p. 170).

The importance and benefits of the inclusion of current events and current issues also lend themselves to the future needs of students as they enter the workforce or environments of higher learning. For example, in "The Civic Mission of Schools", the editors of Social Education (2005) state that "our students' future depends on their ability to understand current issues, raise the right questions about problems, and find solutions" (p. 414). They elaborate on this point by stating that "the discussion of such issues, including those that are controversial, in the classroom engages young people in subjects that will frame the world they live in" (NCSS, 2005, p. 414). Graseck (2008) also supports this practicality theme. She believes that "if our students are to become competent analysts of world affairs and problem solvers tomorrow, we must engage them in informed deliberation on the uncertainties of history and the challenges of the present" (Graseck, 2008, p. 371). Hicks and Ewing (2003) explain the long term benefits that students will reap from the reading of online global newspapers because they "offer teachers and students a kind of information otherwise difficult if not impossible to access, expand the horizons of knowledge, introduce radically different perspectives, and encourage critical thinking and life-long learning" (p. 138).

Parker (2001) effectively sums up the importance and benefits of the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies classroom. He believes that the analysis of current events and current issues requires the use of a variety of skills and abilities which include the following: to read and view news materials; to discriminate between important and less significant news items; to take a position on issues based on knowledge and critical evaluation of the facts; and to predict likely consequences in terms of present developments (p. 180). Parker (2001) also believes that a benefit of teaching current events and current issues is that it helps students relate school learning to life outside school (p. 181). Speaking of connections that were previously discussed, Parker (2001) believes that it is the social studies teacher's job to promote the habit of interest in current events and current issues.

# Question 3

What are the challenges involved with integrating current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum?

One of the issues addressed in previous chapters and sections relating to what is at the heart of the problem involving the integration of current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum is that some social studies teachers have not been and are not currently including much of this content, if at all. Knowing that this is the case, there must be some challenges or obstacles involved for teachers in their ability to include current events and current issues in their curriculum. These challenges were made evident through the analysis of the literature in regards to the question above.

One of the main challenges that was mentioned in much of the literature addressed the current climate of high stakes testing. As a result of their research on the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum, Haas and Laughlin (2000) concluded a

decade ago that the emphasis on standardized testing most likely already had a negative impact on teaching about current events (as cited in Lipscomb & Doppen, 2012, p. 6). Scarlett (2009) concurred by stating that "given the current climate of accountability at all levels, teachers are under increased pressure to address standards and prepare students for standardized tests that can have very real consequences for districts, schools, and students" (p. 171). Pescatore (2007) offered us some historical insight as to why this negative impact occurred by stating that "in today's accountability climate, as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, critical thinking activities can take a back seat to test preparation" (p. 330). She added that "if the textbooks often fail to deliver, current events activities can fill the void, but where can the social studies teacher find the time to add this to an already filled curriculum" (Pescatore, 2007, p. 336)? Here Pescatore (2007) alluded to the fact that, due to the state standards which teachers must cover in order to effectively prepare students for standardized tests, no time is left to include current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum.

The advent of the high stakes testing environment that exists within schools is not the only reason for this time dilemma, however. Some of the literature has also pointed out that the very nature of the social studies curriculum in general contributes to time constraint issues for social studies teachers. Libresco and Wolfe (2003) elaborated on this point nicely by stating that "time is the enemy of every teacher, especially the global history teacher, who must connect 15,000 years of history across five continents" (p. 44). Therefore, social studies teachers, faced with these challenges of time, have to decide themselves, what to include and not to include in their curriculum.

Merryfield and Wilson (2005b) hint at some of the additional challenges that social studies teachers face in trying to include current events and current issues in their classrooms. They stated the following:

Social studies teachers who want their students to understand current events face many constraints they know all too well: curriculum mandates that leave no room for new content, the need to find reliable resources on unfamiliar issues or parts of the world, and the sensitive nature of many events and issues in the news. (Merryfield & Wilson, 2005b, p. 123)

The sensitive nature of which is spoken about here was addressed in additional research as well. None more evident, however, than Wilson's et al. (2002) who stated that "today, there is tremendous pressure on teachers to avoid current controversial issues because certain members of the public view many issues from a perspective that pits good against evil thereby limiting opportunities for discussion, reflection, and negotiation" (Wilson et al., 2002, p. 32). They add the following:

Many teachers do not wish to indoctrinate their students and are unsure whether they will somehow do so if they encourage discussion and investigation of a controversial issue because studying these issues may seem to these teachers to be creating a context fostering animosities between individuals with different views. (Wilson et al., 2002, p. 32)

Specifically in their study, Wilson et al. (2002) reported that all of the teachers surveyed as part of their study expressed concerns about how parents would view any discussion of the current (at the time) controversial issue of the impeachment of former U.S. President Bill Clinton. The teachers mentioned that they believed "most of their students' parents held strong opinions in

relation to the presidential impeachment and would not tolerate teaching that might result in their children's questioning of the parents' views' (Wilson et al., 2002, p. 38).

This sensitivity issue is not only relegated to concerns about parents' views and creating rifts between students, however. It is appears to be a job security issue for many teachers as well. As Byford et al. (2009) suggest, "many social studies teachers neglect teaching controversial issues through discussion and interaction because of school and district policy" (p. 166). In their study they reported that 93% of the respondents felt the need to protect themselves from administration (Byford et al., 2009, p. 166). The overall sources of concern for teachers involved in this particular study were summarized as "student-related disruptions and conflict, as well as controversies that could implicate or be detrimental to a teacher and his or her career" (Byford et al., 2009, p. 169). Deveci (2007) refers briefly to these same types of concerns by stating that "teachers take into consideration some criteria while selecting current events such as choosing the events which are not ideological and away from violence" (p. 448).

Another challenge for social studies teachers in being able to include current events and current issues in their curriculum that became evident through the analysis of the literature was that many teachers lack the proper training in how to effectively teach current events and current issues. In their study on teaching prospective social studies teachers to use issue-based discussions in their classrooms, Crowe and Wilen (2003) stated the problem of prospective teachers as "having been primarily exposed to the recitation form of discussion in schools that required them to recall and review basic knowledge and concepts and having had little experience with reflective discussions, which encourage them to formulate, examine, and evaluate ideas, opinions, and issues" (p. 303). Specifically, they reported that out of the 29 social studies education students who completed a survey they administered, "only four students

described having experienced more than a few reflective discussions and, of the rest, most reported they felt they had no experience with reflective discussion as a teaching method in their high school or college classes" (Crowe & Wilen, 2003, p. 304).

In Scarlett's (2009) study on teaching transitional justice, one of the obstacles for teachers in being able to effectuate this task was "that most social studies educators probably lack the background knowledge to incorporate it into their curriculum without additional research" (p. 171). This goes back to the time constraint issues that teachers face as well as the lack of motivation for teachers to get out of their so-called 'comfort zones' to go above and beyond to research information and ways to effectively teach about current events and current issues. Kuthe (2011) concurs with this point by suggesting that courses that include the teaching of contemporary issues "means parting from the comfortable canon that social studies teachers inherit from their universities and then have reinforced by state curriculums" (p. 162).

### Question #4

Is it possible for social studies teachers to include current events and current issues in their curriculum?

The research literature implicitly supported the notion, in varying degrees, that it is possible to include current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum.

#### Question #5

If it is possible, how do social studies teachers effectuate the integration of current events and current issues into their curriculum?

Despite the numerous challenges involved, most of the research literature suggested specific ways in which social studies teachers can incorporate current events and current issues into their curriculum. The first body of research literature offering examples of how teachers can

incorporate current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum is more general in nature. For example, in their chapter entitled "Teaching Current Events From a Global Perspective", Merryfield and Wilson (2005b) list five points of consideration for teachers in bringing current events through news and media into social studies classrooms (p. 128). These considerations are listed as the following:

- Educate ourselves daily from multiple sources. All social studies educators need to stay up on the news from a variety of sources. It is critical to hear how world events are perceived by different groups of people within our own country and other countries.
- Learn sources of reliable resources. It is important to know about university-based
  centers and other organizations that produce instructional materials, make resources
  available on their websites, and provide speakers and professional development
  opportunities.
- 3. *Begin with curricular connections*. No matter what we teach, there are news stories every year that will breathe relevancy into the topic. Good teachers seem to make these connections easily and are constantly on the lookout for an editorial cartoon, a documentary, a news story that will enhance what they are teaching and demonstrate its worth in the world today.
- 4. Develop criteria for including current events. There will be times when it is difficult to connect important events to topics under study. Yet profound events that shake the world cannot be ignored. It is important that teachers work together to plan ways to respond to such events so that those decisions are not made in the midst of a crisis.

5. *Aim for balance*. It is critical that teachers provide balance in the study of news events and issues. Balance is provided by student access to different kinds of information and points of view so that they can see all sides of an issue.

In their research study involving how social studies teachers taught about the impeachment of President Clinton, Wilson et al. (2002) also gave some considerations to social studies teachers trying to integrate current events and current issues into their curriculum by stating the following:

Social studies educators should increase their dialogues across levels, between communities, and within the profession of social studies teaching in order to determine how they can most effectively address the important task of nurturing and preparing our future generations for citizenship responsibilities. (p. 44)

Moving from considerations to specific methods, Lipscomb (2002) shares some strategies he used in teaching about the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. These strategies included dealing with evidence, journaling, comparing historical events, interviewing and contrasting, and analyzing photographs (pp. 237-238). Through his observations and evaluations of these methods he noted that "dealing with the evidence and journaling were the most effective and meaningful activities in the days immediately following the crisis, but others also proved to be powerful in subsequent weeks" (p. 238). Libresco (2003) shares what she views as successful strategies for involving current events and current issues in the elementary classroom:

Bulletin boards need to be filled with conflicting sources of information from a variety of publications. Although elementary students cannot digest whole articles from some publications due to the reading level, they can certainly read excerpts. Possible sources include student-briefing pages or newspapers that have different points of view expressed

by students, themselves. Teachers should organize current events groups in their classrooms when students discuss and assess the reliability of information with their peers and ultimately decide what action to take on the issues they explore. (pp. 274-275)

Parker (2001) gives four general strategies for teaching current events and current issues: daily discussion of news; decision making on controversial issues; teaching about kinds of controversy; and writing about issues (pp. 183-194). Deveci (2007), based on his research involving teacher's views on current events in social studies, reported that "all teachers in the study indicate using newspapers and approximately all indicate using television as resources in their classrooms. Furthermore, teachers made use of other sources such as magazines, the internet, books, radio, and so on" (Deveci, 2007, p. 448). Devici (2007) is also one of the only researchers analyzed that gave information relating to when current events and current issues are covered during the course of particular class periods by stating that "the time for using current events differs from the first 1 to 10 minutes of the class" (p. 448).

The second body of literature involved methods for incorporating current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum and is more specific in nature by offering more detailed examples of these inclusion strategies as well as some practical tools available for teachers to utilize in doing so. A brief section that appeared in the April 1991 issue of *Curriculum Review* (1991) explains how a high school social studies teacher in Ohio designed a board game to help students learn about current events (p. 25). It explained how this game, called News or Lose, "consists of 500 current events questions that students answer while advancing to the pinnacle of a pyramid printed on the game board" (p. 25). It even offered contact information on how to order this innovative game (p. 25). Another example of a specific tool that teachers can use to integrate current events and current issues into the classroom is

offered by Manzo (2006). She informs readers how teachers can find video clips on current events and public policy debates through C-SPAN Classroom, a website designed to align with states' standards (p. 16).

Continuing the online media theme, Brodie and Byerly (2002) list more than 30 websites they reviewed as being excellent resources for social studies teachers attempting to integrate current events and current issues into their curriculum. These websites are categorized by television outlets, news magazines and online newspapers (Brodie & Byerly, 2002). Brodie and Byerly (2002) also stated that some of these online resources feature adaptable lesson plans (p. 35). Similarly, Merryfield and Wilson (2005b) list nearly 100 different websites, from general resources to online media and centers by region, for social studies teachers to use when trying to teach current events from a global perspective. Along these same lines of using technology to access media to aid in the teaching of current events and current issues, Hicks and Ewing (2003) explain that "global newspapers on the Internet provide an accessible, convenient, and innovative approach for using instructional technology to acquire information, develop skills, and enhance understanding" (p. 134). They created a website entitled "Newspapers Around the World" that gives a list of online newspapers categorized by different continents or regions of the world (Hicks & Ewing, 2003, p. 137). Hicks and Ewing (2003) argued that, in teaching current events and current issues, "the use of online newspapers facilitates the introduction of multiple, global perspectives into the classroom and the curriculum" (p. 135).

The research literature also included many specific examples of how social studies teachers can teach and have taught about various major global events and issues that have emerged in recent history. In Chapter 6 of *Social Studies and the World: Teaching Global Perspectives*, Merryfield and Wilson (2005a) offer many sample lesson plans on teaching about

globalization and its problems and progress. Kuthe (2011) discusses the creation and implementation of his course on the war on terror that explores controversial topics surrounding terrorism and modern reactions to terrorism (p. 160). Libresco and Wolfe (2003) share how their school district on Long Island in New York instituted a human relations course for ninth graders as a requirement for graduation (p. 44). They explain how this course "evolved into an offering that dovetails with the global history curriculum, connecting personal and local issues of intolerance with past and present global human rights violations" (Libresco & Wolfe, 2003, p. 44). Topics covered in this course included the Taliban's treatment of women in Afghanistan, the official one-child-per-family policy in China, and child labor in Southeast Asia (p. 45).

The evidence for incorporating the human rights issue as a means of teaching current events and current issues in social studies classrooms continued with Scarlett's (2009) advocacy for the teaching of transitional justice as a way for students to "study critically important current events unfolding in their world" (p. 169). He argues that "studying the ways in which societies emerging from violent conflict move toward peace should be a central part of any effort to teach about human rights" (Scarlett, 2009, p. 170). The Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the Holocaust are examples that Scarlett (2009) presents in which social studies teachers can integrate this type of teaching method. He points to the use of documentary film, firsthand written accounts, art inspired or created by victims, and speakers as the most effective methods of humanizing the subject of human rights in general, and transitional justice in particular (Scarlett, 2009, p. 174). Lintner (2006) specifically discusses how the use of current events such as natural disasters, particularly the 2004 Indonesian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, can assist students in developing valuable skills in many of the social studies disciplines such as geography, economics, government, and history.

The integration of this type of relevancy into the social studies curriculum can also be effectuated on a more local level. Take, in point, Ediger's (1996) article on thematic social studies in which he explained, how he along with a group of colleagues, taught a thematic social studies unit on grain farming (Ediger, 1996, p. 121). Realizing that many in the community in which this particular school was located had a strong farming background, this method had some very profound effects on the students. For example, many local farming problems were solved as a part of this unit and it really opened the eyes of the students and gave them an appreciation of what farmers in their area had to deal with (Ediger, 1996, p. 126). "The Civic Mission of Schools" authored by the editors of *Social Education* (NCSS, 2005), echoes these sentiments. Along with the discussion of current events, one of the six commitments of schools that they listed was to expand community service programs (NCSS, 2005, p. 414). They expound on this commitment by stating that "when accompanied by the right kind of learning programs, these service activities enhance our students' understanding of social issues and problems" (p. 414).

Another interesting and seemingly effective method of incorporating current events into the social studies curriculum was communicated by Pescatore (2007). She discussed how she redesigned her curriculum to focus on critical thinking through the use of current events articles (p. 331). Specifically, she explains how she used an article and report on global warming that she found in *The New York Times* as a basis for student development of critical thinking skills (Pescatore, 2007, p. 330). She incorporated such specific critical literacy skills as identifying bias, researching background information, and developing hypotheses.

In dealing with the challenge of prospective teachers lacking proper training or exposure to effective methods of teaching about current events and current issues, Crowe and Wilen (2003) shared how they decided to make conducting a reflective discussion a requirement of

their social studies methods course at Kent State University. Specifically, the requirement consisted of students being responsible for planning a 20-minute issue-based Socratic seminar that they likely would use as part of a unit they would teach during their upcoming student teaching experience (Crowe & Wilen, 2003, p. 304). Crowe and Wilen (2003) reported the following as a result of this added requirement:

From our reflections, on the experience, student comments in class, and student responses on the survey, it appears that the Socratic seminar requirement resulted in student appreciation for issue-based discussion, skill development, and learning how to apply it in their student teaching classrooms. Based on the feedback we have received from the students, we are more confident that these future social studies professionals will use issue-based discussions to prepare their students to be thoughtful and active citizens. (p. 305)

This chapter addressed the findings of the research conducted in this Master's Research Project in specific relation to the five research questions listed in Chapter Three. Based on a review of the existing literature, findings were reported in this chapter on aspects of the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum. Chapter Five will include a discussion of the overall significance of these findings and what they mean for educators.

#### CHAPTER 5

#### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter will present the conclusions that can be derived from the findings as well as suggestions for future research and implications for practice.

#### Conclusions

There is overwhelming support for the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum. Not only is this support evident in the existing research literature but also in national and state social studies standards.

#### **Benefits**

The literature suggests the importance and benefits of including current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum can be categorized into four sections: the globalization of modern society; the addition of relevancy and life into content; the creation of opportunities for social change; and the development of necessary skills as it relates to future needs of students.

Through such phenomena as the development of technological advances, international alliances, and outsourcing, our world has become truly globalized. The fact that the planet has become an interdependent global entity has made the inclusion of current events and current issues more necessary than ever. In order for future generations of students to function "well" in society, they need to be exposed to and well-versed in the study of current events and current issues. They need to be aware of the fact that things happening "on the other side of the globe" can have a profound impact on their own lives at home. In addition, they need to know that decisions they make in their own daily lives can affect people millions of miles away. Through

the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies classroom students will be able to gain this awareness and learn how to access the tools they will need to attain a more "global" knowledge.

The study of current events and current issues can also significantly add relevancy to social studies content. For example, in a history course, the use of current events and current issues can help to foster strong connections between the past and the present. These connections will add a greater sense of time, continuity, and change. The study of current events and current issues that occurs on a more local level can further add relevance. Therefore, the inclusion of current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum helps to enhance motivation for learning in students that will help them develop into life-long learners.

The study of current events and current issues can also serve to engage students in civic activism for social change. Studying current events and current issues can help students become passionate about certain issues and move them into action for social change (Freire, 1970/1993).

Finally, students can gain valuable skills. Whether entering the world of work or post-secondary education, students will need life-long learning skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and civic responsibility. The study of current events and current issues can help students develop these skills in order to become competent and successful members of society.

# Challenges

Challenges involved in including current events and current issues in the social studies classroom can be organized into one of three different categories: time constraints; sensitivity issues; and lack of training and exposure.

Time constraints are predominantly due to the high stakes testing climate that is currently evident in schools around the country. The educational legislation that was enacted at the turn of the century has held teachers more accountable for student achievement or the lack thereof.

Most states' content standards do not include requirements to the study of current events and current issues. As a result, teachers, rather than face unwanted consequences, such as losing their jobs, teach towards "what is on the test." Another factor that leads to the time constraint challenge is the fact that the social studies content area is broad in scope. These circumstances lead to the fact that social studies teachers do not have much time, if any, to incorporate topics outside of the required curriculum such as the study of current events and current issues.

Even if they do find time, social studies teachers also face the challenge of how to effectively include current events and current issues in their classrooms. The discussion of current events and current issues oftentimes involves the interrogation of sensitive personal matters such as politics and religion which can easily lead to dissent amongst teachers and students as well as concern among parents and administration.

A majority of prospective social studies teachers lack proper training in and exposure to effective methods of teaching about current events and current issues. This deficiency requires novice teachers who want to include current events and current issues in their classrooms to spend a disproportionate amount of planning time to teach about these topics. As they seek to incorporate current events and current issues into the social studies curriculum, teachers also face issues such as their school setting, funding levels, administrative support, student abilities, and technological resources.

# Strategies

There are many effective teaching strategies and methods to teach about current events and current issues. First, teachers must be students themselves of current events and current issues. They should research for creative and effective ways of teaching this material to their students. In doing so, social studies teachers should strive to make connections between current events and/or current issues and the required core curriculum. Current events and current issues can be included in the core social studies disciplines, such as history, geography, government and economics, or offered as a separate course focused on controversial issues such as the war on terror, globalization, human rights, and natural disasters. Current events can also be accessed on a daily basis through resources such as newspapers, online newspapers, and current events websites.

# Suggestions for Future Research

More research is needed to identify the benefits and challenges involved in integrating current events and current issues in the social studies curriculum. For example, what challenges are most prevalent at higher-end socioeconomic schools? What challenges are more common in at-risk or lower-achieving schools? Are concerns about parental or administrative views more prevalent in higher-end socioeconomic schools or lower-end socioeconomics schools? Is the high stakes testing climate as much of an issue in regards to the teaching of current events and current issues in Advanced Placement as it is in "regular" classrooms? In summary, how do factors such as where teachers teach, who their students are, and what they teach determine the effectiveness of teaching about current events and current issues?

## Implications for Practice

Social studies teachers should attempt to include current events and current issues in their curriculum because it is important and beneficial for students. Although there are many challenges involved, it is worthwhile for teachers to include current events and current issues if they avail themselves of the many available resources and methods. Teachers must always seek to put students' needs first in order to prepare them to become productive and successful citizens.

However, teachers must also weigh the pros and cons of including current events and current issues in their classrooms. For example, a teacher who has encountered problems with parents and administrators might decide that it is necessary, in terms of job security, to eliminate the study of current events and current issues from his or her curriculum. A teacher who teaches low achieving students might decide that it is more important to solely cover basic social studies content to prepare them "well" for the state mandated test. A teacher who is in charge of a number of different extracurricular activities might not have sufficient time to research for effective methods and resources in order to teach current events and current issues.

Currently, too many social studies teachers are overburdened by obstacles that prevent them from effectively integrating current events and current issues into their curriculum.

Consequently, schools should consider creating and implementing separate courses dedicated specifically to the teaching of current events and current issues. If the study of current events and current issues is indeed as important and beneficial to students as this Master's Research Project suggests, shouldn't our educational system make the necessary adjustments in order to address this issue?

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