Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers (ASSERT)

Guest Editor's Introduction to the Volume

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I serve as Program Coordinator of Secondary Education and Social Studies Education at the University of Florida in Gainesville. My primary goal is to problematize how civic education in the U.S. has been narrowly conceptualized. With this goal in mind, I aim to prepare both my preservice teacher education and PhD students to integrate this perspective into their own teaching and/or research. I am interested in critical democratic citizenship education and teaching conventional and "controversial" social issues. I am interested in faculty governance issues as a union member and past chair of my college's Faculty Policy Council, in which I focused on free speech rights for faculty in Florida public universities and on fostering allyship with BIPOC faculty, staff, and students. I am married to an attorney who specializes in due process and public interest law. We have three sons – an international human rights attorney, another a civil rights attorney, and one who is still in college as a sociology major. I spent most of my life in the U.S. but traveled extensively; I also lived in Bolivia and (what was then called) Czechoslovakia. I taught high and middle school social studies for five years in Atlanta.

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FRAMING THE TOPIC

I am grateful to Cory Wright-Maley for inviting me to serve as guest editor for this inaugural issue of *Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers*. As Cory states in his introduction, the goals of *ASSERT* are to provide both concise summaries of key findings from social studies research, and to share myriad practical ideas for engaging with social studies content. We also hope that, along the way, we can sometimes challenge conventional

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wisdom and embrace controversy.

Mandated curriculum standards and assessments notwithstanding, teachers make autonomous, important decisions every day about what to teach and how to teach it. In my experience, nowhere is this more evident than decision-making about teaching controversial issues. Some of these issues were controversial for people in the past and are now studied – we hope – as part of "settled" history (slavery, racial segregation laws); some are controversial in the present moment and thus are "unsettled" (national elections, gun rights). Perhaps the most difficult issues, in my view, are those that should no longer seem especially controversial but are manufactured as such (fill in your own examples here) by external actors such as politicians and media pundits. I think we know a few things to be true: 1) there is no agreed-upon definition of what is "controversial"; 2) context can make all the difference in the definition; 3) almost any issue can become "controversial" in a specific set of circumstances.

My students and I spend a lot of time talking about teaching controversial issues. This goes with the territory in social studies education. The reality, however, is that, when it comes to such issues, thoughtful decision-making about what to teach and how to teach it is fraught and complex. Each new group of students asks me the same questions every year: When is the best time to introduce controversial topics? How do I gain my students' trust to get them to participate in difficult discussions? What classroom norms should I establish? How do I maintain a sense of community? What strategies should I use? How do I keep things from going off the rails? What if I get in trouble with my administration and/or with parents? Perhaps the most complicated question that always comes up is: Should I disclose my own views, and if I do, what is the most responsible way of doing it?

Thinking about all of these questions led me to suggest to Cory that our first issue of *ASSERT* focus on social studies teachers' thoughtful decision-making about teaching controversial issues. We can be sure that we'll encounter *perennial* controversial issues, often embedded in the teaching of history, in the normal course of things. We ask ourselves: *What would social studies be without these? Aren't there times when we love to teach about such issues because we see how they engage our students?* Over time, we may develop instructional strategies that we can use as templates for such discussions.

But in our present moment, we have portentous issues staring us in the face and causing our students (and us) anxiety and distress. We try to accept the challenge and stare back. However, portentous issues are difficult to keep pace with. The landscape of what is considered "controversial" is constantly shifting, especially in the context of the "fake news" narrative that continues to erode civic culture and discourse. There is little doubt that there are more portentous issues to come later this year and beyond. Some are foreseeable; others are not. Most of them require us to be pedagogically nimble. In these times, I keep asking myself: *Where would my social studies students be without me? Aren't there times when I have to push beyond my comfort zone because I have a professional responsibility to my students to face portentous issues and not pretend that they don't exist? Do extraordinary times with high-stakes implications for the future necessitate that I take a stance sometimes? If so, when, and how?*

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CONTRIBUTIONS

In light of our present moment, I suggest that if we haven't given a lot of thought to our instructional decision-making around teaching controversial issues, now is a good time to do it. Accordingly, I invited six researchers who have done important work around this topic to contribute summaries of their research and reflect on what it means to them. Their work has helped me think through some difficult questions, apply their insights to my own teaching for the benefit of my students, and, perhaps most of all, envision what can *go well* – not just what can *go wrong* – as I grapple with my own decision-making. My hope is that readers will be able to do the same, through the articles by Wayne Journell, Steve Camicia, Paula McAvoy and Li-Ching Ho, Terry Beck, Rebecca Geller, and Tom Misco that identify some of the professional judgments teachers need to make when deciding how to approach a controversial issue and provide practical classroom examples (e.g., climate change, LGBTQ rights, immigration policy). They focus on such questions as:

- How do we make sense of what issues or topics should be treated as controversial in the classroom? How do we define where controversy exists? How are we to think about our role as curricular and instructional gatekeepers? How do we help ensure that we have a clear "game plan" going into teaching about controversial issues?
- How do we determine which topics or issues are "open" and "closed"?
- What can we learn from content analysis of specific curriculum materials for teaching controversy – especially in terms of the range of perspectives they provide? What are students learning about the relative value of different perspectives in these materials? How might dominant narratives be challenged and problematized?
- What controversial topics might help students gain the skills and attitudes necessary to tackle even tougher topics
- What is the nature of the arguments about these topics or issues in the larger society?
- How do we select quality sources for students to analyze, including those that challenge the "tribal nature" of certain positions?
- How might we facilitate more inclusive discussions of controversial issues? What factors complicate teachers' efforts to conduct inclusive discussions?
- What identity risks and attacks are likely to come up as students consider certain topics, and how do we help students deal with possible risks?
- What are our responsibilities in terms of professional ethics in these discussions?
- Why might a "neutrality stance" be problematic? Is such a stance even possible? How might taking a stance be beneficial to students?
- What are some issues related to teacher political disclosure that are specific to the Trump era, but that also help us sort through the larger issues of how disclosure can be done responsibly, professionally, and ethically?
- What can we learn from international and cross-cultural settings about teachers' decision-making with regard to their rationales, chosen topics, instructional practices, and perceived obstacles and pathways to teaching about issues that carry implications for morality and justice?

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- What are the implications of teaching about controversial issues for democratic citizenship education? What habits of mind and skills do we want to cultivate in our students so that they can be civically engaged in constructive ways?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Also, kudos to Cory for listening to our practitioners' desire to create a brief "Q&A" supplement to each article in which the authors expand on their ideas and speculate on future directions for controversial issues research and practice. Based on their research findings, we ask the authors for advice, clarification, and further insights on specific issues they highlight in their articles. We hope that this will become a regular feature of each issue of *ASSERT*, so that readers can get to know the contributors in different ways.

On behalf of Cory and the Editorial Board, I hope you enjoy this issue and look forward to your feedback!

Elizabeth Washington,
September 18, 2020