

## Five Teachers' Range of Views on the Iraq war

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### Abstract

The significance of this qualitative study is in showing, for the first time, what American teachers are teaching about the Iraq war and their conceptions of controversy and balanced instruction in the context of their lessons. Through in-depth interviews, five high school social studies teachers' lessons related to the Iraq war were examined and analyzed through the lenses of Issues-Centered Education and teachers' curriculum gatekeeping. Findings show that teachers' conception of controversy and balanced instruction influences the way they teach about public controversies. Furthermore, the Iraq war controversy provides a unique opportunity to see how the Iraq war is taught during war time.

### Context for Teaching about the Iraq War

The Iraq war became controversial when the promise of a quick victory in Iraq, symbolized by the "Mission Accomplished" banner on display on the USS Abraham Lincoln did not match the grim realities in Iraq ("Mission accomplished," 2008). The violence has taken the lives of over 4,200 U.S. military personnel and an estimated 600,000 Iraqis. According to Oxfam and the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq, at least four million Iraqis have been displaced since the war began in March 2003 ("4 million Iraqis," 2007). The Iraq war is a hot topic in the news that has made its way into social studies classrooms. This is a clear example that children cannot be isolated from the major world events (McBee, 1996).

Although the war has been discussed in many classrooms many students are getting little, if any, information concerning the war. Adolescents tend to hold a variety of views on the war and many say that there has been almost no discussion of the Iraq war in their classes (Flinders, 2005). By ignoring the topic, teachers and schools are missing an opportunity to educate and involve students in an event that is of utmost importance to this country and to rest of the world. Lack of discussion about this public controversy may be a factor responsible for shaping the attitudes of some students who speak of the war with indifference. They speak of themselves as uninterested and removed from this event. Many feel that although the war is an import world event, even controversial, it had little consequence in their lives (Flinders, 2005).

Therefore, it is not surprising to see teachers who are responsible and feel the discussion is warranted, use the Iraq war as a teachable moment to examine a real-life controversial war that has moral, ethical, and national security ramifications for the United States and other countries. Students can get a chance to study this war by engaging in historical inquiry and explore the reasons for this war and discuss their findings.

Schools during wartime face unique challenges that test the boundaries of free speech and tolerance for different viewpoints (Fischer et al., 2007; Giordano, 2004; Foucault, 2001; Kaviani, 2006a). Teachers may play a key role in exposing their students to what potentially can be a wide range of ideas about the Middle East and U.S. policy options vis-à-vis Iraq.

As the war continues, teachers at every level struggle for ways to help their students deal with war related issues. News about the war is pervasive and graphic. Among the issues raised by the war are: safety, diversity, conflict resolution, history, geography, current events, and more. Many students want these topics discussed in the classroom while their teachers may feel the war is too controversial to include in the curriculum. "Teachers do not want to hurt anyone's feelings, no one wants to make waves, schools are not comfortable with this kind of thing, they do not want to seem like they are taking sides" (Flinders, 2005, p.2).

According to the BBC report ("Pupils given biased Iraq view," 2008) students have been given an unbalanced view of the Iraqi war. According to some teachers, materials produced by marketing agencies to be used in the schools, distort the real truth about Iraq. Although this may be the case, many teachers have stated that they find the materials valuable and fun.

In order to teach about the Iraq war in a balanced way, how far should teachers go to include opposing views in their lessons? Should teachers bring into their classrooms foreign viewpoints from Iraq, Jordan, and other countries or should they limit themselves to the American news sources? Which approach is more balanced? The five teachers who participated in this study explain their conception of *balanced* teaching and talk about their Iraq war lessons and their rationales for including various viewpoints.

The United States has a history of involvement and support for the autocratic rulers in the Middle East, such as the Saudi Arabia's Royal Family, the Royal family of Jordan and the former Shah of Iran. In addition, the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein when Iraq attacked Iran in September 1980 and used chemical weapons against the Iranian troops and Kurdish civilians of Halabja, as well as supporting Islamic groups in Afghanistan during the time of Soviet occupation of that country (Casey, 2003; Kinzer, 2003; Gresh, 2006; Stephens and Ottaway, 2002; Parsi, 2007; Kean et al., 2004).

Comments made by President George W. Bush during his time in office indicate that the United States is planning to maintain a strong military presence in Iraq for the foreseeable future as construction continues on the largest U.S. embassy complex in the world. The size of this "superbase" is 104 acres, and it is currently estimated that it will cost 592 million dollars. The embassy under construction in Balad, Iraq, is only about five acres smaller than Vatican City and is like a city with its own power and water-treatment plants (Hirsh, 2006, p. 34). The point is that the United States continues to be involved in the Middle East in a visibly forceful and dramatic way by occupying Iraq and projecting its naval power in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that social studies teachers would continue to teach about the Iraq war and other hot spots in the Middle East.

## Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is set in the context of democratic citizenship education represented by Issues-Centered Education (ICE) (Ochoa-Becker, 1996). ICE offers a progressive approach to democratic citizenship that allows for real public issues to be examined from multiple perspectives based on informed thought and authentic historical documents (Hahn, 1996; Evans & Brodkey, 1996; Engle, 2003; Patrick et al., 2002; Shaver, 1992; Parker, 2003). Clearly, what to do about the U.S. policy in Iraq is an important public concern that is talked about in social studies classes.

Teachers, as curriculum gatekeepers (Thornton, 1991), decide *what* perspectives are included in their lessons and *how* they are presented to their students. Teachers enact democratic education curricula when they bring in public issues to their classes and expose their students to the best case fair hearing of competing viewpoints (Kelly, 1989). Thus, allowing their students to exercise decision-making.

Teachers have a need to know information because they do not want to look uninformed when their students pose questions to them (Kaviani, 2006b; Kottler, 1997). Teachers have their own prior knowledge and dispositions that influence their news consumption and what they may ultimately include in their lessons. As curriculum gatekeepers, teachers decide how much air time to give to various viewpoints and how to keep students interested in their lessons. The current Iraq war continues to be a taboo subject in some schools and Thornton reminds us that “the Iraq war hasn’t been mentioned in some schools because supervisors and principals have discouraged that” (telephone interview, May 12, 2006). In light of this situation, this study becomes significant because we see for the first time *what* five high school social studies teachers are actually teaching about the Iraq war and *why*.

In order to accurately record the viewpoints that these teachers included in their lessons, an organizing tool was developed to measure the *angle of perspectives* (AOP) index for the Iraq war controversy. The AOP index is a number (from zero to ten) associated with two opposing views on a scale that goes from -5 to 5. The distance between 5 and -5 represent the most extreme disagreement on a given issue. Teachers self-reported their AOP index and explained the reasons for choosing certain curriculum materials that represented their ideas of balanced teaching.

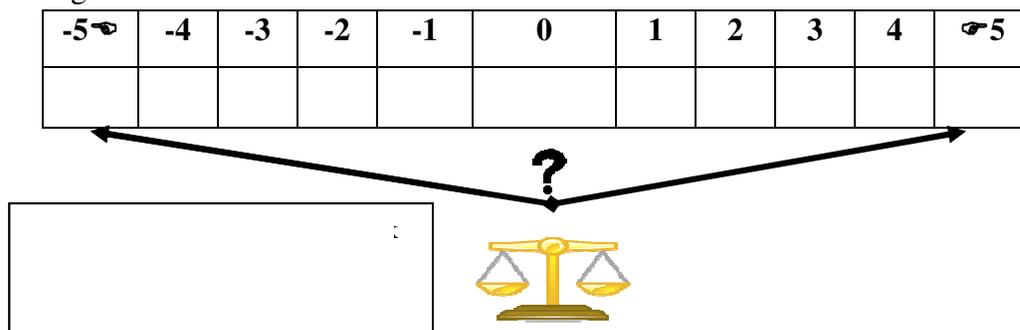


Figure 1: Self-Reported Angle of Perspective index on a given public controversy

## **Method**

The unit of analysis in this qualitative study was the social studies teacher (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1984). The characteristics of this study are congruent with Yin's definition of a case study that includes investigation of "a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (1984, p. 23). Data came primarily from the interviews and teachers' lesson plans, and limited classroom observation (due to scheduling conflict). Interview questions asked teachers about their sources of news, conceptions of controversy and balanced teaching, lesson plans about the Iraq war, and their reasons behind their instructional decisions.

Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999) was deployed for data analysis. The data were collected over a period of nine months, using semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted with five high school social studies teachers. These interviews were flexible and allowed for digging deeper into questions that needed to be pursued further. Field notes and interview data were transcribed. Memos were used to highlight the key ideas and record similar patterns in the other interviews. Additionally, the data were combed for new information not covered earlier. After coding the data and integrating categories, a point of data saturation was reached that allowed for the main findings to emerge. Next, the more significant findings about these teachers' Iraq war curriculum are discussed.

## **The Enacted Iraq War Curriculum**

The situation in Iraq was a hot topic that was discussed by all these teachers. All teachers looked for appropriate background information about the Iraq war to share with their students and expressed disbelief/amazement that they had to dispel ugly generalizations about the Middle Eastern people (not all Muslims are terrorists and they all don't live in deserts riding camels) and the 9-11 terrorists who attacked the United States had no credible link to Iraq.

Brandon was 42 years old and held a masters degree in education, plus another degree in International Studies (focusing on Europe, with a minor in German). He taught US history for nine years at an urban alternative high school. Brandon's undergraduate training was in American foreign policy, and he approached teaching about the Middle East from the perspective of preserving "the interests of the U.S." He focused on the neoconservative political movement in the United States and its influence in shaping the American foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East. Brandon used a variety of online news sources that included New York Times, The Guardian, CNN Student News, and videos that were produced by major book publishers and television programs. His idea of balanced teaching meant the presence of at least two opposing viewpoints and for an issue to be controversial, it needed to evoke strong "passions." He was sensitive about his role as a public school teacher and wanted to stay away from extreme views because he wanted to "inform and not indoctrinate" his students and not attract extra attention to his work. What teachers teach has consequences for their jobs and teachers can find themselves criticized for their approach to teaching about this controversial war. Teachers have found

themselves in the principal's office explaining what they were teaching in their classes when parents have viewed their lessons as propaganda and objectionable (Chandler, 2006).

Brandon was against the Iraq war and in his lessons he presented two sides: "one side to get rid of Saddam Hussein, begin democratic revolution in the Middle East, and the other side would be Hussein was not involved in 9/11." As more evidence surfaced about the Iraq war, he was more convinced that the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. forces was a mistake. He also believed that there were "no connections between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda,...the weapons of mass destruction." He considered teaching about the Iraq war to be "difficult" because of the fluid situation in Iraq and the ongoing nature of this open-ended occupation. The opposing viewpoints that Brandon presented (See Table 1) to his students were clustered around -1 and 1; with an AOP index of 2. This placement of opposing views was consistent with the way he viewed his role as a teacher.

Table 1: Opposing views included in "balanced" lessons about the war in Iraq.

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	Brandon
				Get rid of Saddam and begin a democratic revolution in the Middle East.		Saddam was not involved in 9/11 and the Iraq war was a mistake.					AOP index = 2

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	Fred
Senator Kennedy and others opposing troops escalation plan										Bush Administration arguing for more troops to be sent to Iraq as part of the "surge" plan	APO index = 10

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3-4	5	Rose
Pro-war: The Bush Administration								Anti-war: Get out Now! No More War!		APO index = 8-9

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4-5	Mindy
		The Bush Administration and His Supporters					Choices Curriculum About the Iraq war		Students are anti-Bush and anti-Iraq war	AOP index = 7-8

The second teacher was Fred. He was 42 years old and was about to complete his masters degree in education. He had eight years of teaching experience at a rural public high school. He considered his upbringing to be “very Republican and red blooded Midwestern.” Fred considered himself a pacifist. He was planning to start his Middle East unit in late May 2007. He believed that the Iraq war was “at the forefront of everybody’s consciousness nowadays.” He considered the Iraq war an important current event where “American involvement” justified teaching about it. Last year, when he taught a lesson about this war, his students learned about the pro and con arguments of “Does the US have the right to overthrow Iraq’s government?” For this year, he was considering asking his students: “Should we escalate the war?” He was planning to use two editorials and news articles for the pro and con sides of this controversy. His sources of news were mostly domestic (CNN, CBS online, Seattle Times, New York Times, National Public Radio, and other programs like 60 Minutes). He wanted his students to grapple with the Iraq war controversy as they drew their own conclusions about it. The opposing viewpoints that Fred presented to his students were clustered around -5 and 5; with an AOP index of 10. This number indicates that Fred considered these two positions to be extreme (see Table 1). This approach was consistent with his views about controversy (strongly opposite viewpoints) and balanced teaching (presenting at least two opposing views) and letting students decide for themselves.

The third teacher was Sherry. She was 42 years old and had taught for 18 years. She had spent two years in Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer. She spoke French and was working on her MA degree in teaching. She taught in an urban public high school. For Sherry, the notion of controversy in the context of Middle East meant the presence of violence. Related to this idea, balanced instruction meant providing information about normal life (traditions, holidays, feasts, etc.) about the Middle Eastern people that were void of violence and showed people doing everyday things. This idea was shaped by her experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer.

Sherry was against the Iraq war and explained that most faculty and students in her school felt the same way. This was an ongoing war that was constantly in the news and she had strong opinions about it. She said, “...as terrible as Saddam was, and definitely, he was not wonderful, but people’s lives [Iraqis] were better then than they are now.” She used parts of the *Choices* curriculum that were about America’s options in Iraq as well as materials from the *Rethinking Schools* publications. She used those materials for simulations and discussions with her students and “liked” the materials from the *Rethinking Schools* because they were “developed and tried by teachers.” In addition, she used Yes Magazine, Economist, New York Times, Guardian, Afrique (in French), PBS and CBC television programs and other videos with subtitles. Her focus was on how the U.S. viewed the Middle East and did not include any opposing views in her lessons because she considered the Iraq war to be an “illegal invasion based on false evidence.” Therefore, she did not think that providing opposing views was necessary. She did not want to use the AOP, but offered general explanations about her lessons.

The fourth teacher was Rose. She was 37 years old and held a BA degree in international studies with a focus on foreign policy, peace, and diplomacy. She had seven years of teaching experience at an urban high school. Even though she came from a conservative “Republican” family, she claimed that she did not identify with her parents’ politics. Her idea of controversy was the presence of strong and varied opinions about a given issue that related to one’s values and morals. Balanced teaching meant providing space for voices that challenged the status quo and acknowledging multiple perspectives on a given issue.

Rose felt compelled to teach about the Iraq war because she felt that this war was “unfortunately the biggest domestic and foreign policy for our country right now. And there’s so much misinformation about it and these kids foresee-ably could be fighting in the conflict, you know if it’s not resolved.” She considered this war to be a “misguided war” and was opposed to it. She said, “I’m not even unsympathetic to people who call it criminal to have initiated it, but you know, then we read about things that Saddam Hussein had done to his people, and then it’s we are where we are, so how do we fix it, you know?”

Rose relied on the *Choices* curriculum and mostly other domestic sources (PBS, local news, Seattle Times, Economist, history textbooks, television documentaries and films) to explain the situation in Iraq in the context of World War I, World War II, oil, and the Cold War. Her students also read articles that discussed the United States’ support for Iraq and Saddam Hussein during the Iran/Iraq war. In her judgment, the coverage of the Iraq war has been “very sanitized and very much tilted toward the U.S. perspective.” She considered the Iraq war a situation that was not possible to be wrapped up “in a neat bow.” She was concerned about the loss of Iraqi and American lives and the ongoing destruction of Iraq. Her goal was for her students to understand the complexity of the Iraq war and realize that there were multiple perspectives on how to solve it and not all peaceful options had been tested to end the war.

The opposing views that Rose represented ranged from “get out now, no more war” to those who supported the war, mainly “The Bush Administration, they’re just doing it to avenge his father’s humiliation or something.” She also cautioned that pulling the U.S. troops out of Iraq too quickly may have unintended consequences, leading to bigger problems. The opposing views that Rose represented to her students were clustered around -5 for the pro-war people and about 3-4 for the anti-war people. A way to interpret the placement of Rose’s opposing views is to note that these two positions were not equidistant from zero. Given Rose’s anti-war sentiments, she did not view the anti-war people’s position as extreme, but she viewed the Bush Administration’s position on the Iraq war as extreme (see Table 1).

The fifth teacher was Mindy. She was 36 years old and held a masters degree in education and a BA in history. She had taught for 13 years in an urban public high school. For Mindy, providing a balanced instruction was important and it meant “a smattering of perspectives on an issue” that involved students in an organic process of knowledge construction that needed quality/reliable information from multiple perspectives to make the lesson “balanced.”

The Iraq war, as an ongoing story in the news, was a hot topic for Mindy’s class too. She considered that the United States had a “very, very, very direct role in starting the war...and that our leaders have absolute, direct impact on this issue.” She was worried about the consequences of an early U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq, leaving that country in a ruined state. Her students opposed the U.S. involvement in Iraq. In order to challenge her students’ thinking, she included an article from a conservative publication, *National Review*, for students to read and discuss in class. Some of her main sources of news were Frontline documentaries, history textbooks, Seattle Times, New York Times, Newsweek, Time, New Yorker, and Economist. She believed that she could find a wide range of perspectives on the Iraq war through national and local sources of news. Thus, she felt no need to seek foreign sources of news.

Her lessons included reading articles about the conflict, visiting some web sites as a class, going over the key concepts, and reviewing a brief timeline of the war. Mindy’s students conducted individual research assignments that culminated into presentations about their stance on what the United States should do in Iraq.

The opposing views that Mindy represented to her students were clustered around -3 for President George W. Bush and his supporters, around 2 for the *Choices* curriculum, and around 4-5 for her students' views on the Iraq war. Her lesson provided several viewpoints. She was worried that a sudden troop withdrawal from Iraq would make matters worse and that explains why she put her students' position at 4-5 and giving the benefit of the doubt to the Bush Administration for wanting to stabilize Iraq before bringing the American troops home (see Table 1).

Teaching about the Iraq war brought out these teachers' personal political views at a time when Americans have begun to publicly disagree with the Bush Administration's foreign policy in Iraq. The continuing reports of the U.S. military casualties and the ongoing bombings and violence in Iraq dominated the news and students and teachers talked about them in their classrooms. It was surprising to find that none of these social studies teachers supported the Bush Administration's policy of invading Iraq. However, they were concerned about the unwanted consequences of a sudden U.S. troop pullout from Iraq. These teachers mostly used domestic sources of information for their Iraq war lessons. The Angle of Perspective forced these teachers to think about the opposing views that they were incorporating into their lessons and revealed a representation of what a balanced approach meant to each of them in the context of the Iraq war.

### ***Broader Implications***

This study was framed in the context of democratic education where Issues-Centered Education (ICE) provided the rationales for including controversial issues in the social studies curriculum. Many have argued that democracy requires certain conditions like trust, respect for civil discourse, free and open inquiry, and other essential attributes (Dewey, 1944; Engle 2003; Parker, 2001; Soder, Goodlad, and McMannon, 2001; Perrin, 2006). In addition, McCarthy (2007) argues that self government is quintessentially about process and this process is so usefully high-minded that proponents are absolved of the burden to address deeper questions of substance. So, one may ask, what does teaching about the Iraq war have to do with democracy? As stated earlier, free and open inquiry are two of the essential attributes of democratic values that schools should promote. Whether imposing democracy on Iraq was the main goal of the military occupation of Iraq is not clear. Regardless of the motives, the supporters of this policy argue that countries have a right to democracy and they should be helped when possible. Helping them would prevent or reduce terrorism in the world. Moreover, they argue that it is morally imperative for the United States to help the innocent population against a tyrant who has committed genocide against its own people. On the other hand, the opponents of the imposition of democracy on Iraq argue that democracy cannot be exported by force. Encouraging democracy is not the same as imposing it. It takes time to develop the necessary democratic institutions and develop the culture necessary to sustain and protect democracy. Furthermore, unilateral action by the sole super power in the world is dangerous in an interdependent world and ignores the dangers posed by the precedents that it sets. There are also cultural differences that need to be taken into account and the need for security should not be used as an excuse to control resource-rich areas of the world (Editors of IDEA, 2007).

This study extends the work of Thornton's gate-keeping (1991) by focusing on the Iraq war and providing specific examples about what five teachers think and teach at a time when the

United States continues to be engaged in a controversial war. Teachers in this study considered teaching about the Iraq war to be stressful which showed that gatekeeping had an emotional cost to them.

These teachers exercised their curriculum gate-keeping prerogative by deciding what and how to teach about this war. Their students used internet to search for background information and it became clear that electronic media outlets were providing the main content knowledge for both the teachers and their students.

Diversity of news from domestic and foreign sources can have the potential of providing teachers and their students with a wider spectrum of ideas that Kelly (1986) calls “the best case, fair hearing of competing points of views” (p. 368). However, determining the real truth as reflected in the easy to access online sources demands a higher level of scrutiny that I am not sure we all can and do exercise, even under the best of conditions.

This study found that teachers were still trying to teach their students that Iraq had nothing to do with the 9-11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Therefore, it is important to realize the lasting influence of media on creating a national history (Epstein and Shiller, 2005). A prominent example of a half-truth with far greater consequences for peace in the Middle East was when the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations Security Council, showing an artist’s rendition of Iraqi mobile biological weapons labs on flatbed trucks that allegedly were used by Saddam Hussein’s regime to produce weapons of mass destruction. In that speech, Secretary Powell said, “One of the most worrisome things that emerges from the thick intelligence file we have on Iraq’s biological weapons is the existence of mobile production facilities used to make biological agents” (Powell, 2003). He also claimed that Iraq had continued its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Powell said, “Saddam Hussein is determined to get his hands on a nuclear bomb.” Those allegations proved to be baseless (Ritter, 2005; Kean et al., 2004). Based on the evidence Secretary Powell presented, the Iraq war was justified to the Americans and other people of the world. By 2003, the long standing military response doctrine of the United States was shifting from an actual attack on the U.S. soil to a mere threat from an outside power that legitimized the pre-emptive military strike against the perceived threat.

When the political climate is saturated with mistrust and animosity, fear of the “other” can over-ride our sense of judgment and make us agree to policies that may not be based on facts. Such a claim can be warranted by studies that have tried to show the connections between personality and political orientation. The most comprehensive study that was conducted in 2003 involved some 22,000 individuals. John Jost of New York University and his colleagues found: “For liberals, conservatives, and independents alike, thinking about death actually makes people more conservative—at least temporarily” (Dixit, 2007, p. 85). They argue that our political stance is not immune from manipulation by others and various factors like childhood temperament, education, and fear of death can influence our political views. A similar view was expressed by Congressman Jim McDermott of Washington State. In a meeting with him at his office on March 16, 2007, Congressman McDermott expressed his concern that democracy at home is under threat and people cannot make sound decisions when they are confused and frightened. If educators agree with the Engle and Ochoa’s (1988) argument that decision making is the heart of social studies education, then how reliable are such decisions that come out of confused and frightened state of being?

Teachers and students talk about decisions that important political leaders make that influence public policies. Did President George W. Bush model good decision making for the American democracy by ordering the invasion of Iraq? Did President Bush model dialogue as a

peaceful way of resolving conflicts? Did he engage in perspective taking to show that he cares and understands the influence of US foreign policy on people who are at the receiving end of his decisions?

Fighting radical Islam and forging democracy have been presented as basically the same thing by many in power. As is the case in Iraq, can a resolutely Islamic culture that relies upon an Islamic jurisprudence reasonably be expected to be democratic? Critics of this idea point to the inherent limits of such system by arguing "When one is on the side of angels there is no need for a discussion of details" (McCarthy, 2007, p.4). Developing democratic traditions require proper education that can begin in schools along with building other necessary infrastructures that promote trust in the government, security, employment, cooperation, and recognition of minority rights in the society.

Why are such questions relevant? Because, as illustrated in this study, students and teachers talked about the U.S. foreign policy options in the Middle East as a controversial public issue. Also, teachers always encourage students to resolve their problems by talking with each other and somehow this important lesson was absent when Iraq was invaded.

### **Implications for Teacher Education**

This study finds four implications for teacher education. First, the teachers in this study wished for curriculum materials that were written at a reading level that their students could use. The articles they used were often times too difficult for their students to read and teachers ended up explaining the main points to them. Therefore, new curriculum materials about the Middle East are needed that go beyond the "shifting sands" metaphor and provide pertinent information about the lives of real people.

Second, teachers should pay attention to viewpoints that are present and absent from the materials they use as curriculum. As illustrated in this study, teachers used the *Choices* curriculum, *Shifting Sands: Balancing U.S. interests in the Middle East*. This curriculum presents the Middle East conflicts in the context of the post 9-11 United States and primarily focuses on the politics of oil and the Iraq war. There are nine political cartoons, two maps, a black and white drawing of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Middle East in the Western imagination, and a table that shows the U.S. petroleum consumption from 1973 to 2003. Between the pages of one to 47, there is not a single image of an everyday person from the Middle East. What kind of an impression is a teacher or a student left with after studying such a text? The intent here is not to present a full content analysis of this text; however, the intent is to point out the importance of recognizing the presence and absence of various points of view in any text used to teach about the Middle East.

Third, on the political front, a thorough examination of all political systems operating in the Middle East and identifying their supporters are needed that go beyond the general country reports. Our times demand political transparency that has not existed in the political affairs of the Middle Eastern countries. It is necessary to go beyond the "shifting sands" metaphor and put some names and faces to those who support and sustain the undemocratic regimes in the Middle East and address the causes of extremism worldwide. Social studies education has a tradition of teaching about closed-areas or taboo subjects and engaging in moral reasoning, and deliberation. Relying on that tradition, we can begin asking critical questions that would get us closer to a

better understanding of the Middle East that would demystify its politics and peoples. In the current climate of war, it is understandable why some teachers may feel an extra level of “stress” when teaching about the Middle East. Granted, asking questions that may challenge the political norms and policies can be stressful (Foucault, 2001; Giordano, 2004). But if social studies educators do not ask the tough questions and do not model democratic questioning, then who will?

Fourth, what are teachers to do when teaching topics that are as controversial and complex as are the issues surrounding the Iraq war? It is suggested that teachers listen to their students and watch their behavior. Some may be quiet, but frightened, and unsure of what is happening and how it will impact them. Teachers should reassure their students that information and knowledge are power that should be used in making thoughtful decisions. They should encourage students do their own research and find out for themselves the implications of going to war. Examples of questions that could be asked: How has the rest of the world responded to the U. S. position on Iraq? What is national security? What are some of the threats to security? Should the President be allowed to make decisions without the agreement of the American people? (“Tips for Teachers,” n.d., para. 45). By asking these questions and looking for legitimate answers students can better inform themselves of the complexity of war and the serious decision making that must be taken before going to war is offered as an alternative.

These issues that have been raised in this paper are intended to further the discussion about how best to teach about major public controversies. The way teachers teach about the Iraq war reflects their own moral and political values. Ultimately, the essence of the American liberal democracy is reflected in what and how teachers teach about important public issues.

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