

What Preservice Social Studies Teachers (Don't) Know About Politics and Current Events—And Why It Matters

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Abstract:

This article reports findings from a 3-year study on preservice middle and secondary social studies teachers' common content knowledge of politics and current events. Surveys showed that both groups were generally uninformed about these issues, and on almost all measures, the middle-grades preservice teachers performed worse than those in the secondary program. Interviews were conducted with preservice teachers in both groups, and although they articulated a vision of teaching social studies that included relating content to politics and current events, most of the preservice teachers admitted that their habits related to acquiring this type of content knowledge were not sufficient to enact that vision in their classrooms. The author argues that these preservice teachers' lack of political and social awareness is a product of their intellectual dispositions as opposed to a deficiency in their content preparation.

Keywords: political knowledge | current events | intellectual dispositions | pedagogical content knowledge

Article:

An extensive literature base within the field of political science has documented the steady decline in Americans' civic attitudes and practices over the past four decades. By almost all measures of civic aptitude, political scientists have found that Americans, as a whole, are less knowledgeable about politics and current events, increasingly disenchanted with government, and less likely to be civically active when compared to previous generations (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Macedo et al., 2005; Putnam, 2000). Research has shown that younger Americans, in particular, begin displaying signs of civic disengagement starting in early adolescence, and those dispositions often continue into early adulthood (e.g., Snell, 2010). Although more recent data project cautious optimism with respect to young Americans' civic participation, the fact remains that half of eligible voters between 18 and 29 years of age did not vote in the 2012 election, and young Americans' civic engagement continues to be correlated with factors such as educational attainment and socioeconomic status (Center for

Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Harvard University Institute on Politics, Mobilize.org, & National Conference on Citizenship, 2013).

Both political scientists and social studies educators have argued that young Americans' civic apathy can be tied, at least in part, to poor civic educational experiences during their middle and high school years (e.g., Galston, 2001; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Assessments of student performance suggest that, at the very least, public education has not been overly successful in developing students' civic knowledge. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics, for example, found that 64% of 12th-grade students were deemed to have demonstrated a “basic” understanding of civics concepts, and of those students, only 24% scored well enough to be considered “proficient” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Perhaps of greater concern is that research suggests substantive discussions of social and political issues in social studies classes are exceedingly rare, especially in low-socioeconomic, high minority classrooms (e.g., Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith, & Thiede, 2000; Nystrand, Gamoran, & Carbonaro, 2001). Studies of middle and high school students, both in the United States and around the world, have found that many students are actually exposed to current events on a regular basis (e.g., Hahn, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Yet teachers too often do not use this information as a catalyst for robust civic discussions in which students articulate and defend positions on political or social issues (e.g., Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2001, 2002).

Failure to engage students in these types of civic discussions undermines the goal of social studies education to prepare students for life in a democratic society. A wide range of political theorists have argued that democratic citizens can be considered civically competent only when they are both informed about social and political issues and able to rationally deliberate these issues within a public forum (e.g., Callan, 1997; Gutmann, 1987; Habermas, 1981/1984). Social studies teachers, then, should provide students with regular opportunities to follow and deliberate politics and current events as a way to prepare students for democratic citizenship (Engle, 1960; Hess, 2009; Parker, 2003). Moreover, classrooms are ideal for this type of civic development because students are more likely to encounter ideological perspectives at school that are more diverse than they typically find at home or in their places of worship (Parker, 2010).

Why, then, are discussions of political and social issues in social studies classrooms so rare? The blame has typically been placed on a perceived lack of instructional time or pressure to cover tested material (e.g., Journell, 2010b; Kahne et al., 2000; Larson, 1997). However, one factor that has yet to be explored is the civic knowledge and dispositions of those charged with facilitating students' civic development. It stands to reason that if social studies teachers do not have adequate political knowledge or regularly monitor current events, then they will have difficulty engaging their students in discussions of those topics. The findings from this 3-year study provide a better understanding of the civic knowledge and dispositions of preservice

middle and secondary social studies teachers and raise important questions about the preparedness of future educators to teach for engaged democratic citizenship.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Politics and Current Events as Common Content Knowledge

What teachers need to know in order to be successful at their craft is a question that continues to be debated within the profession. At one end of the spectrum are those who argue that if a curriculum is strong enough, it is essentially “teacher-proof.” In other words, a good scripted lesson can be taught successfully by anyone, regardless of what he/she knows. The limitations of this line of thinking become present when a lesson inevitably goes off script, such as in the case of students asking questions that require teachers to pull information from other sources, including their own knowledge base.

It is thereby impossible to script civic discussions. Spoken interaction between teachers and students does not in itself constitute a discussion. Studies of teachers have shown that often what they consider to be “discussions” in their classrooms are, in fact, recitations of answers to scripted questions (Wilén, 2004). True civic discussions, or what Parker (2006) and Parker and Hess (2001) termed seminars and deliberations, are based on factual knowledge in which students are engaged with an issue that has multiple competing viewpoints.¹ Depending on their purpose, these discussions are used to either increase understanding of an issue (seminar) or develop potential solutions to social or political problems (deliberation).

Given the unpredictability of these types of discussions, teachers need adequate content knowledge in order to raise issues for discussion, proctor student comments, and ask probing questions that force students to critically analyze their positions. In other words, leading discussions of social and political issues would appear to be an example of the need for pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which Shulman (1987) described as a unique body of knowledge that blends content and pedagogy. According to Shulman, simply possessing knowledge of content is not enough to ensure quality instruction. Rather, teachers also need to be skilled in how to deliver content in ways that others can understand it.

The reverse of that statement is also true, however. Teachers may be versed in the pedagogical aspects of teaching, but if they do not possess adequate content knowledge, they will struggle to move their instruction beyond rote memorization of facts. As Bain and Mirel (2006) noted, “Standards and textbooks are not curriculum. However, for teachers without rich content knowledge and practice in using disciplinary content knowledge to create instruction from standards and texts, the standards and textbooks, unfortunately, become the curriculum” (p. 215). Ball (2000) suggested that many teachers are fine with this arrangement due to the longstanding belief that all a teacher really needs to know is that which is required of his/her students. Ball dismissed this notion and argued that “our understanding of the content knowledge

needed in teaching must start with practice” (p. 244). In other words, teachers should evaluate their pedagogical goals and make decisions regarding necessary content knowledge accordingly.

However, determining what content is needed to meet pedagogical goals is not always straightforward. In their work on PCK in mathematics, Ball, Thames, and Phelps (2008) argued that content knowledge can be broken down into multiple domains. The most basic level is what they called *common content knowledge*, which they defined as being able to recognize correct and incorrect answers and use terms and definitions correctly. If teachers cannot master the common content knowledge for their discipline, they will have difficulty using that knowledge in more nuanced ways, which Ball et al. termed *specialized content knowledge*, that are needed to help students learn.

Unfortunately, most teacher education programs loosely monitor whether preservice teachers possess adequate common content knowledge upon graduating. Content acquisition is typically the purview of the various academic disciplines, and the primary assessment of preservice teachers' mastery of content is successful completion of content-area coursework. Scholars within a range of disciplines, however, have argued that coursework completion is not a reliable indicator of whether preservice teachers have obtained sufficient content knowledge (Bain & Mirel, 2006; Ball, 2000; Segall, 2004).

Returning to the focus of the present study, if social studies teachers wish to engage their students in discussions of social and political issues, then they need to possess common content knowledge of politics and current events. Only then can they use their pedagogical skills to effectively lead their students in civic discussions. One would certainly expect civics or government teachers to be socially and politically aware, since those courses are ideal for engagement with controversial public issues and democratic decision making (e.g., Avery, Sullivan, Smith, & Sandell, 1996; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hess, 2009). However, if teachers approach history instruction from the Deweyan (1916) notion that history is most relevant when taught from a sociological perspective, then knowledge of politics and current events would be of importance in those courses as well.

Despite this perceived importance, few studies exist that explore preservice or practicing teachers' knowledge of politics or current events, and most of the research on preservice social studies teachers' PCK involves the process of historical thinking (e.g., Monte-Sano, 2011). A recent study by Doppen et al. (2011), however, explored preservice elementary, middle, and secondary social studies teachers' knowledge of items included on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Naturalization Test. Preservice teachers were quizzed on 50 of the 100 questions used on the Naturalization Test, which assesses basic knowledge of American history and government. Although most preservice teachers scored well on the test overall, the questions that appeared to cause problems for students in all three groups were ones directly related to politics and important political figures. More than 50% of preservice teachers in all three groups could not identify their state senators or the total number of representatives in the U.S. House of

Representatives, and more than half of the middle and elementary preservice teachers could not identify the length of a senator's term or the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Knowledge of Politics and Current Events as Intellectual Dispositions

Once teachers become aware of deficiencies in their content knowledge, then they must make the choice whether to remediate any issues with content that may exist. At this point, what was once a problem with a teacher's lack of content knowledge becomes an issue related to his or her dispositions, which Katz and Raths (1985) defined as “an attributed characteristic of a teacher” (p. 301). Currently, most agencies designed to oversee teacher accreditation and professional teaching standards, such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, as well as many content-specific organizations, such as the National Council for the Social Studies, include assessments of teachers' dispositions as part of their methods for evaluating teacher effectiveness (Damon, 2007; Duplass & Cruz, 2010; Schussler, Stooksberry, & Bercaw, 2010).

Defining exactly what constitutes a teacher's disposition is complex and open to interpretation. Damon (2007) argued that dispositions are innately part of a teacher's personality and can be defined as traits that are “embedded in temperament and dispose a person toward certain choices and experiences that can shape his or her future” (p. 367). Yet Sockett (2009) argued that dispositions are a much narrower piece of a teacher's personality, one that is defined by actions and the awareness and intentionality of those actions. To complicate matters further, scholars also seem to disagree about whether dispositions are stable traits ingrained in the core values of teachers or traits that develop over time and are influenced by context and experience (Diez, 2007).

Regardless of how one defines teacher dispositions, the aspects most central to assessing teachers in terms of their dispositions are the intentionality and frequency of a specific trait. In this sense, dispositions are similar to Dewey's (1922/1988) definition of habits in that they are a “kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity ... which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action ... which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not dominating activity” (p. 31). Dispositions, like habits, are not the cause of a behavior or action, but rather they are the product of repeated intentional behaviors or actions (Duplass & Cruz, 2010), prompting Katz and Raths' (1985) description of dispositions as “habits of mind,” not mindless habits (p. 303).

Stooksberry, Schussler, and Bercaw (2009) categorized dispositions into three domains—intellectual, cultural, and moral. Of interest to the present study are a teacher's intellectual dispositions, which they defined as teachers' “decisions about content and pedagogy such as the learning expectations teachers establish for all students, what they teach and do not teach, and how they teach it” (p. 724). Stooksberry et al. argued that all teachers have “internal filters” that influence how they process knowledge of content and pedagogy as well as their awareness of

their inclinations to act upon their understandings of the nature of knowledge in their respective disciplines. They continued by stating that “key to the concept of intellectual dispositions is the awareness of how one's perceptions and assumptions about knowledge inform one's action in teaching and learning” (p. 724).

Ultimately, indicators of teachers' intellectual dispositions appear in their classroom instruction. Teachers' beliefs about content can be found in their delivery of material, the types of assignments they give, and the way they engage students with disciplinary knowledge (Schussler et al., 2010). The decision, for example, to regularly engage students in discussions of political and social issues indicates an intellectual disposition toward preparing students for informed democratic citizenship. As noted in the previous section, this type of instruction can only occur if teachers are informed about politics and current events, which represents another aspect of their intellectual dispositions. Since research has shown that social studies curricula rarely make explicit ties to politics and current events (Journell, 2010a), teachers must develop the habits, or dispositions, necessary to ensure they are prepared to lead discussions of these topics in their classrooms.

In this sense, teachers' intellectual dispositions can be considered essential to their pedagogical vision, which Fairbanks et al. (2010) described as an element of “thoughtfully adaptive teaching.” They argued that one reason why some preservice teachers are more thoughtful in their practice than others is because they have a clear vision of the type of educators they wish to be. They defined commitment to a vision as intending “to do more than dispense standard curricular content” as part of one's instructional practices (p. 164). In the present study, I am arguing that a vision in which preservice teachers seek to encourage their students to become politically engaged citizens would require them to develop the intellectual dispositions necessary to acquire knowledge of politics and current events in order to use that knowledge to further their students' civic development.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study, I sought to better understand preservice middle and secondary social studies teachers' knowledge of politics and current events as well as their dispositions toward acquiring knowledge of those topics. Three questions guided the data collection and analysis:

1. To what extent do preservice middle and secondary social studies teachers possess common content knowledge of politics and current events?
2. What importance do these preservice teachers place on having common content knowledge of politics and current events to effectively teach social studies in middle or secondary education?

3. To what extent do these preservice teachers possess the intellectual dispositions required to obtain the common content knowledge of politics and current events that is needed to supplement their vision of social studies instruction?

METHODOLOGY

Context

This study consists of interview and survey data collected over a 3-year period from middle and secondary preservice social studies teachers at a regional university located in the eastern United States. The university enrolls approximately 18,000 students, holds the Carnegie classification of “high research activity,” and is one of the more diverse universities in its state with 27% minority enrollment. The methods classes included in this study, however, are not representative of this level of diversity, as minority enrollment in these classes was approximately 10%. The community surrounding the campus leans to the left politically, although my personal experiences on this campus suggest that the student body contains a range of ideological perspectives.²

Based on research describing pathways into teaching (e.g., Conklin, 2009), this university is atypical in that undergraduates pursuing teacher licensure can choose among programs specific to elementary, middle, and secondary education, as opposed to the general elementary versus secondary distinction that occurs in many teacher education programs. The preservice teachers who participated in this study were enrolled in either middle-grades or secondary social studies methods courses during the Fall 2009, 2010, or 2011 semesters. The majority of the preservice teachers in these classes were undergraduates seeking initial teaching licensure. However, each semester there were a few Master's of Teaching (MAT) and alternative-licensure students, also seeking initial licensure, enrolled in the methods courses. Although the vast majority of undergraduates who participated in this study were traditional students in their early 20s, a few of the undergraduates and most of the MAT and alternative-licensure students were non-traditional students who were seeking to enter teaching as mid-career professionals.

Undergraduates in the secondary program major in a social studies content area and begin a 2-year sequence of pedagogical courses starting in their junior year that leads to licensure.³ The secondary undergraduates take methods during the fall semester of their senior year combined with an internship that becomes their student teaching placement the following semester. Upon graduation, they are licensed to teach any of the social studies disciplines offered by high schools in the state, regardless of their major.

The middle-grades undergraduates major in middle-grades education and take courses to receive dual licensure in two content areas (language arts, mathematics, science, or social studies). Middle-grades preservice teachers take social studies methods during the fall of their junior year in conjunction with an internship in a middle school social studies classroom. Although they may

prefer one of their concentrations over the other, there is no distinction made within the program regarding their primary licensure area. All middle-grades preservice teachers must pass state requirements for content knowledge in both concentrations, including maintaining a minimum GPA and completing a “depth of inquiry” capstone project in each licensure area.⁴

Any MAT or alternative-licensure preservice teachers who participated in this study held an undergraduate degree in a social studies-related discipline and were taking methods as part of their licensure requirements. The MAT students would then student teach in a social studies classroom the following semester, similar to what was expected of the undergraduates. The alternative-licensure students either had already taken jobs teaching social studies at local high/middle schools or were expected to secure employment before receiving their license.

Participants and Data Collection

Data were collected through surveys given to preservice teachers in each of the methods courses and interviews conducted after their methods course had ended. The survey was designed to assess the preservice teachers' common content knowledge of politics and current events and was modeled after questions used by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) in their famous study of Americans' political knowledge. In this study, they conducted a meta-analysis of political survey questions from three data sources: The National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan before and after every presidential election since 1948, a database of survey questions developed by the Roper Center for Public Opinion from the 1940s to the early 1990s, and a series of studies conducted by Delli Carpini and Keeter between 1989 and 1992.⁵

As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) and others (e.g., Kuklinski & Quirk, 2001) acknowledged, determining exactly what factual knowledge is necessary for civic competence is fairly subjective. In their study, however, Delli Carpini and Keeter took steps to identify survey items that would be considered “essential” political knowledge and, thus, address the content validity of their meta-analysis. Specifically, they examined a diverse collection of materials related to politics and political thought, ranging from high school civics textbooks to works by democratic theorists. They also sought expert judgment through a survey of 111 American political scientists that asked their opinion of general topics and specific facts that the average citizen should know.

Based on these parameters, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) developed three categories of political knowledge that they argued politically competent citizens should possess: basic governmental institutions and processes; parties and important political figures; and current political and social issues, both foreign and domestic. They then used these categories as the basis for their meta-analysis. In the present study, I developed the survey given to the middle and secondary preservice teachers using these same categories.

For the section of the survey assessing knowledge of basic governmental institutions and processes, I took questions directly from Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) meta-analysis, making sure to take an equal number from each quartile of the percentage of correct responses. I

also modeled the section on parties and important political figures off of the questions used by Delli Carpini and Keeter in their study, again taking an equal number from each quartile of the percentage of correct responses. For the remaining two sections, however, the questions used by Delli Carpini and Keeter were outdated, which meant I had to create my own.

For both sections, I used a mixture of generic questions, such as “Which cable news network is commonly considered to have a conservative spin?” and more specific items that directly related to the major domestic and foreign news of the day. In order to create the specific questions, I looked at headlines of major national newspapers (e.g., *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*) and questions being asked by major political polling agencies (e.g., Gallup, Quinnipiac, Roper Center, Pew Center, Rasmussen, Zogby) in the two weeks prior to the implementation of the survey. A topic had to be mentioned in two or more news or polling outlets before I considered using it on the survey.

Due to this variability, a handful of the questions in the domestic and foreign current events sections changed each time the survey was administered and were only answered by the preservice teachers taking the survey in that given semester. Those questions are noted in their respective tables. The final section of the survey consisted of two multiple-choice questions asking the preservice teachers to identify their sources of political information and to assess the amount of time per week they spent informing themselves about politics and current events.

In total, 77 secondary and 44 middle-grades preservice teachers took the survey over the course of the study. Of the secondary preservice teachers, 44 were male and 33 were female. Sixty-two of the secondary preservice teachers were undergraduates, 5 were MAT students, and 10 were alternative-licensure students. Of the 62 secondary undergraduates, 55 were history majors, 4 were psychology majors, and 3 were political science majors.

Of the 44 middle-grades preservice teachers, 17 were male and 27 were female. Thirty-nine of the middle-grades preservice teachers were undergraduates, and 5 were alternative-licensure students. Of the 39 middle-grades undergraduates, 24 were seeking dual licensure in language arts, 8 in mathematics, and 7 in science.

Consistent with the questions used in the surveys analyzed by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), all of the questions were open ended. The surveys were administered without advanced notice, and the preservice teachers were allowed to take them anonymously. The preservice teachers were encouraged to attempt each question since the survey did not factor into their course grades and there were no penalties for incorrect answers or guessing. The surveys were untimed and monitored by a doctoral student to ensure that the preservice teachers did not seek help from each other or outside sources.

In the semester following methods, I emailed all preservice teachers who took the survey and invited them to participate in a semi-structured (Merriam, 1998) formal interview. In total, 14 secondary and 16 middle-grades preservice teachers agreed to be interviewed over the course of

the study. Participation in the interview was voluntary, but the 30 who agreed were representative of the larger pool of preservice teachers who had taken the survey. A table providing demographic and program information for each of the 30 preservice teachers who were interviewed is located in Appendix A.

In the interview, which was audiorecorded and lasted approximately 30 minutes, I asked the preservice teachers to describe their teaching philosophies related to social studies, their feelings about incorporating aspects of politics and current events into the social studies curriculum, and how they thought they had performed on the survey. I also gave them a blank copy of the survey they had taken and asked them to assess the difficulty of each section. I concluded the interview by asking them why they thought they had performed well or poorly on sections of the survey and whether their habits of obtaining political information had changed since taking it. An interview protocol is located in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

The surveys from each class were analyzed for correctness. Most of the questions could easily be assessed as either correct or incorrect in that they asked for a specific name or definition. However, a few of the questions in the governmental institutions and processes section required me to interpret whether students truly understood the concept being asked. Following the analysis procedures of Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), I counted items as correct when it was clear that the preservice teacher understood the general concept even if he/she did not provide a definition that was completely accurate. For example, when asked to give a definition of impeachment, most preservice teachers wrote some variation of “when the President is removed from office by Congress.” That definition is technically incorrect; impeachment only consists of the House of Representatives bringing formal charges against a president (or another elected official), but then he/she must be tried and found guilty on those charges by the Senate in order to be removed from office. However, it was clear to me that preservice teachers who wrote a definition similar to the one above had basic knowledge of the ultimate purpose of impeachment, and those answers were counted as correct.

One exception to that rule, however, occurred with questions that asked preservice teachers to provide two names or examples. Again, adhering to the procedures used by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), if preservice teachers only provided one correct answer, then no credit was given. For example, one question asked preservice teachers to provide the names of both of the U.S. Senators for their state. Answers were only counted as correct if they provided both names. If they only provided one, then the entire question was counted as incorrect, and no partial credit was given. Finally, none of the preservice teachers' answers were penalized for spelling or grammar.

I engaged in an issue-focused analysis (Weiss, 1994) of the interview data by reading each transcript and identifying items of interest, specifically items related to the preservice teachers'

intellectual dispositions or vision regarding teaching politics and current events. Based on these items of interest, themes were developed, and I went back through the data and attempted to identify patterns based on the themes that had been defined (Stake, 1995). Once relevant patterns were established, I then compared the interview data with the survey data to paint a more complex picture about social studies preservice teachers' knowledge of politics and current events and their propensity to acquire and use this knowledge as part of their instruction.

FINDINGS

Below, I list the results of the preservice teachers' surveys as well as describe relevant findings from the interview data. For the survey results, the wording of the question is exactly as it was written on the preservice teachers' surveys. For consistency, the questions in each section have been placed in the order of highest to lowest percentage correct based on the percentages from the secondary preservice teachers.

Survey Results

Governmental institutions and processes

Most of these questions are representative of the formal curriculum students would find in most middle and high school civics and government classes. Overall, this section of the survey proved to be the strongest in terms of common content knowledge for both groups. Yet, as Table 1 shows, half of the questions were answered correctly by less than 70% of the secondary and less than 50% of the middle-grades preservice teachers.

Table 1. Governmental Institutions and Processes

Question	Secondary % correct	Middle grades % correct
What is the length of a president's term?	99	98
Define impeachment.	96	95
What Constitutional amendment protects free press and speech?	88	70
Name two First Amendment rights.	81	55
Define filibuster.	79	50
What does the Dow Jones index measure?	78	77
What is the substance of the Miranda v Arizona Supreme Court case?	77	61
Define economic inflation.	73	43
Give an example of a federal independent agency.	65	57
What is the percentage vote needed in Congress to override a presidential veto?	65	41

What is the job of federal appellate courts?	62	43
According to the Constitutional order of succession, which office directly follows the Vice President?	56	34
What is the length of a U.S. Senator's term?	53	39
What does the FCC do?	48	45
What two states traditionally hold the first presidential primaries/caucuses in an election year?	27	20
Name two Fifth Amendment rights.	6	2

The middle-grades preservice teachers scored worse than their secondary counterparts on every question, oftentimes by a wide margin, which is consistent with other studies of preservice social studies teachers' content knowledge (e.g., Doppen et al., 2011) and research detailing greater emphasis on pedagogy than content in middle-grades teacher education programs (e.g., Conklin, 2012).

Parties and important political personalities

Beginning in this section, the preservice teachers were less likely to have been exposed to this information in a formal educational setting, since these questions deal primarily with information that is frequently changing. It is possible that these preservice teachers were asked to identify individuals such as the Speaker of the House of Representatives or the U.S. Senators of their state at some point in their educational past. However, sustained knowledge of this information required that they had remained informed about politics and current events beyond the scope of a specific academic course.

As Table 2 shows, the percentage of correct answers for both groups dropped considerably from the first section. Even a few of the higher percentage questions beg a closer look, however. The fact that over 10% of the secondary preservice teachers could not identify the Vice President is hard to believe considering the historic nature of the 2008 election, as are the over 40% of middle-grades preservice teachers who could not identify the Secretary of State given Hillary Clinton's high media profile compared to others who have held that position. Overall, the middle-grades preservice teachers still scored below the secondary preservice teachers on most questions, although the margins were narrower.

Table 2. Parties and Important Political Personalities

Question	Secondary % correct	Middle grades % correct
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What is the objective of the NAACP?	95	89
Who is the Vice President of the United States?	84	91
Who is the Governor of [his/her state]?	78	82
Who is the U.S. Secretary of State?	73	59
Who is the Speaker of the House of Representatives?	47	32
Who is David Petraeus?	44	39
Name both U.S. Senators from [his/her state].	25	5
Name a third-party candidate in the 2008 Presidential election.	23	36
Who is the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court?	21	18
Harry Reid holds what office in the U.S. Government?	21	14
What position does Arnie Duncan hold in the U.S. Government? ^a	11	16
What position does Kathleen Sebelius hold in the U.S. Government? ^b	9	0
Who is the U.S. Secretary of Defense?	8	2
^a This question was only asked on the Fall 2010 and Fall 2011 surveys.		
^b This question was only asked on the Fall 2009 survey.		

Domestic current events

The questions in this section assessed the preservice teachers' knowledge of current domestic political and social issues. Given the scope of these questions, most of them were specific to the semester in which the survey was given. Therefore, the total number of preservice teachers answering semester-specific questions will be smaller. The collective responses, however, still offer a general assessment of these preservice teachers' propensity to follow politics and current events.

The results shown in Table 3 represent a selective awareness of current political and social issues among both groups of preservice teachers. Clearly certain topics, such as the H1N1 epidemic, Democrats holding the majority in Congress, and the controversy over plans to build a mosque next to the remains of the World Trade Center, were prominent enough to garner their attention. Other topics that created considerable national controversy, such as Supreme Court nominations or President Obama's remarks about race following the arrest of Professor Gates, did not seem to resonate. In total, over half of the items were answered correctly by less than 50% of one or both

groups of preservice teachers. The secondary preservice teachers outperformed the middle-grades preservice teachers on all but one question, but as in the previous section, the percentages were fairly close on most questions.

Table 3. Domestic Current Events

Question	Secondary % correct	Middle grades % correct
What is the H1N1 virus commonly known as? ^a	100	100
Which political party currently has a majority in both the House of Representatives and Senate? ^b	100	100
Earlier this year, a public controversy erupted after a Muslim organization announced plans to build a mosque near what American landmark? ^b	100	94
What does the term, “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” refer to?	88	75
What cable news network is commonly considered to have a conservative spin?	78	66
What is the name of the military base at the center of the debate on torturing terror suspects?	73	59
In January, Scott Brown won a special election in Massachusetts to fill the seat of which Democratic senator who had died in 2009? ^b	71	44
In 20XX, what has the term “tea party” referred to?	65	52
In early August, Democrats and Republicans reached a highly publicized deal to do what? ^c	61	40
Who did President Obama name to the Supreme Court earlier this year? ^a	55	15
Name a prominent Republican, other than Sarah Palin, who may run for president in 2012. ^d	48	41

Name two national conservative media/television/newspaper personalities.	48	36
Since 2009, what has the term “public option” referred to?	44	39
As of today, name an individual who is officially in the race for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination. ^c	42	47
In early October, Rohm Emmanuel resigned from what position within the Obama administration to run for mayor of Chicago? ^b	38	25
Name a state that held a gubernatorial election in 2009. ^a	32	23
Name two national liberal media/television/newspaper personalities.	32	25
In August, what did Standard & Poor do that affected the United States? c	32	27
Why was Al Franken's election to the U.S. Senate politically significant? a	27	15
Who is Henry Louis Gates? ^a	23	8
Who did President Obama name to the Supreme Court earlier this year? ^b	21	0
Name either of the two Supreme Court justices Obama has appointed since he took office. ^c	10	0
^a These questions were only asked on the Fall 2009 survey.		
^b These questions were only asked on the Fall 2010 survey.		
^c These questions were only asked on the Fall 2011 survey.		
^d This question was asked on the Fall 2009 and Fall 2010 surveys only.		

Foreign current events

The last section of the survey, as shown in Table 4, assessed the preservice teachers' knowledge of foreign current events, issues, and prominent world leaders. As in the previous section, a few questions were only asked in certain semesters based on the timing of the event.

Table 4. Foreign Current Events

Question	Secondary % correct	Middle grades % correct
The Taliban are a group of Islamic extremists from what nation?	79	61
What international crisis is occurring in the Darfur area of the Sudan?	77	68
In January 2011, which nation experienced a successful overthrow of their existing government that gained international attention? ^a	65	33
Who is the leader of North Korea?	62	39
India maintains uneasy relations with which neighboring Muslim nation?	60	52
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the leader of which nation?	52	36
The United Nations passed resolutions in 2009 denouncing which nation's nuclear program? ^b	52	41
Muammar Gaddafi is the leader of which nation? ^a	52	60
Besides the United States, name two other members of the United Nations Security Council.	47	45
Where is the headquarters of the United Nations located?	42	39
Which international organization is aiding the rebel insurgency in Libya? ^a	39	7
What city received the right to hold the 2016 Summer Olympics? ^c	32	62
What topic does the Kyoto Treaty deal with?	32	14
Who is the prime minister of	18	5

Britain?		
Who is the president of Mexico?	5	0
Who is the prime minister of Canada?	0	0
^a These questions were only asked on the Fall 2011 survey.		
^b This question was asked on the Fall 2009 and Fall 2010 surveys only.		
^c This question was only asked on the Fall 2009 survey.		

Collectively, the preservice teachers performed worst on this section of the survey. Neither group scored higher than 79% correct on any of the questions, and most of the questions were answered correctly by less than 50% of preservice teachers in one or both groups. These results are not particularly surprising given the general lack of emphasis given to global citizenship education within public schools in the United States (e.g., Merryfield, 2008; Myers, 2006). Yet, many of the questions addressed events that either were featured prominently in the mainstream American media or in which the United States was an active participant, such as the Libyan revolution of 2011.

Preservice teachers' habits of acquiring political information

The last two questions of the survey asked the preservice teachers to assess the amount of time they spent following politics and current events and the venues they used to acquire this information. In response to the first question, over half (52%) of the secondary preservice teachers reported spending less than 2 hours per week following politics and current events. The next highest percentage reported spending between 2 and 5 hours per week (35%), followed by 5 to 10 hours per week (10%), and more than 10 hours per week (3%). The percentages for the middle-grades preservice teachers were similar, with 53% reporting spending less than 2 hours per week, 35% spending between 2 to 5 hours per week, and 12% spending between 5 to 10 hours per week. None of the middle-grades preservice teachers reported following politics and current events more than 10 hours per week. ⁶

For the second question, the preservice teachers were given the option of choosing from a list that included the Internet, television, family and friends, newspapers, and class as sources of political information. The preservice teachers could choose as many as applied to them, and they were given space to write additional sources that were not listed. For the secondary preservice teachers, the Internet was the most popular source of political information (with 64 students indicating that they used the Internet for this purpose), followed by television (53), family and friends (34), newspapers (22), and class (15). Two secondary preservice teachers also wrote that they acquired political information from National Public Radio. The middle-grades preservice teachers' responses were similar, with television (36) narrowly edging out the Internet (30) as the most widely accessed source of political information, followed by family and friends (22), newspapers (17), and class (15). Five middle-grades preservice teachers also noted that they

listened to the radio for political information, and one preservice teacher wrote that she found her internship to be a source of political information.

Interview Data

Troubling a vision

Without exception, all of the preservice teachers interviewed stated that knowledge of politics and current events was important to their vision of social studies education. Most of the preservice teachers' responses focused on the need for middle and high school students to be politically aware. As Sarah, a secondary preservice teacher, noted,

Current events are important because it's happening during [students'] time and they are able to relate to them. And a lot of times, they don't see that. So, I think that providing that explanation and opening their eyes to something that happens outside of the classroom is extremely important.

Even when asked whether politics and current events have a place within the history curriculum, all of the preservice teachers articulated a Deweyan (1916) vision of teaching history from a sociological standpoint. A representative description of this vision can be found in the comment made by Melissa, a secondary preservice teacher, who stated,

You can spout history at kids all day long, but if you can't apply it to what is happening in the world right now, they are not going to get a sense that history is not done. It is not something you learn about and then never have to worry about again. There is always going to be more history.

Overall, there seemed to be a general consensus among the preservice teachers who were interviewed that in order for their middle and high school students to become competent citizens, they needed to expose them to politics and current events as a supplement to the formal curriculum.

Perhaps more importantly, the preservice teachers also realized that they needed knowledge of these topics in order to successfully implement this vision in their classrooms. Several preservice teachers made comments stating that in order to be an effective teacher and model appropriate civic behavior, they needed as much, if not more, knowledge of politics and current events than their students possessed. Others alluded to the potential embarrassment that would occur if their students repeatedly asked questions of them that they would not know. Ellen, a middle-grades preservice teacher, commented,

I would think, as a teacher, I should know all this just because it's important for me to be educated enough for my students where, if they ask me a question, I don't have a dumbfounded look on my face [and say] "Let me go Google that and I'll be right back."

Beth, a secondary preservice teacher, made a similar point when she stated,

If my kids ask me who David Petraeus is, I would want to be able to answer that without saying, “I’m going to have to Google that. . . .” If part of my teaching philosophy is to create students who are capable of participating in the globalized economy, then they need to know about other countries, and how am I going to teach them that if I don’t know myself?

However, when I asked many of these same preservice teachers how they felt they had done on the survey of political knowledge, they admitted that they had performed poorly. Only nine of the preservice teachers interviewed believed they had done “well” on the survey, although when asked to hypothesize about the percentage of questions they had answered correctly, their answers ranged from “more than half” to “almost all of them.” Many of these preservice teachers also believed that they had performed well on the survey largely based on conversations with classmates who had admitted only knowing a handful of questions.

Of those nine preservice teachers who indicated they had performed well, six were non-traditional undergraduates, one was a MAT student, and two were traditional undergraduates. These preservice teachers attributed their above-average political knowledge either to their intrinsic interest in politics or prior life experiences. John, the MAT student, stated that his knowledge of content was “more than just a major; it was entertainment.” He continued by saying,

Like right now I am reading about the Empires of the Steppes, you know, the Central Asian nomads and stuff. And Washington a couple years after Yorktown and that kind of stuff. And I watch the end of the Sunday morning news shows and things like that, and I listen to NPR. I like to keep in the loop about stuff.

Intrinsic political interest also seemed to be a factor for the two traditional undergraduates who appeared confident in their political knowledge. Both of these preservice teachers were in the secondary program—one was a political science major and the other was a self-described “news freak.” As Tiffany, the political science major, stated, “I try to listen to NPR every time I am in a car instead of, like, a music station. But I don’t know. I just pay attention and try not to be in a bubble.”

The most articulated difference between those preservice teachers who felt they had done well on the survey and those who had not, however, appeared to be age and life experiences. Outside of those two aforementioned traditional undergraduates, these high-performing preservice teachers were in their early-to-mid-30s or older and had engaged in a variety of life experiences, such as serving in the military or raising a family, which has been found to be significant in the professional development of teachers (e.g., McCall, 1995; Merryfield, 2000). Interestingly, when asked to hypothesize about how well they would have done on a similar type of survey when they were in their early 20s, most of these preservice teachers stated that they would not have performed as well.

The remaining 21 preservice teachers who were interviewed were aware they had performed poorly on the survey, and all of them acknowledged that it assessed information that they should have known as preservice social studies teachers. When asked to recount how they felt after taking the survey, all of them admitted feeling “dumb” or ashamed at their performance. Margaret, a middle-grades preservice teacher, provided one of the more detailed responses when she said,

I felt awful. I really felt like, well, I shouldn't even be teaching, wanting to teach history. And that was my New Year's resolution, because this [survey] really bothered me really bad... . Like I could remember hearing stuff about [the information on the survey], but I couldn't remember a lick about anything. And then, looking around the classroom, whether they knew what they were writing or not, people were writing stuff down. I was just sitting there, like a fly on the wall, not doing anything. So, it made me feel very not able to teach students right now on anything about this.

Ruth, another middle-grades preservice teacher, described her immediate reaction to the survey as “I was like, ‘Oh my goodness. I want to teach this.’” She continued by saying, “I felt really embarrassed and really pissed off at myself because this is stuff I need to know and I should know.” Sarah, who was student teaching at the time of the interview, admitted, “I am glad I wasn't teaching Civics this year. I would have been in trouble.”

Rationalizing their lack of content knowledge

When pressed to reflect upon why they did not possess what they considered basic content knowledge, the preservice teachers provided a variety of reasons ranging from simply not caring to being too busy with their personal lives to focus on politics or current events. For example, Paul, a middle-grades preservice teacher, told me about a high school teacher that had made him read the *U.S. News and World Report* as part of his class, but he quickly added, “On my own, you're not going to catch me reading a magazine like that.” Ruth was even more direct when she described herself as “basically being lazy” when it came to following politics and current events. Other preservice teachers blamed their political apathy on their upbringing, as was the case of Margaret who insisted, “It's not that I don't care, but I'm not even up to date on this and I think that is because of how I was raised. It wasn't thought to be a known thing to do.” Her comments were echoed by Rachel, a fellow middle-grades preservice teacher, who said, “It's just not something that I have ever been interested in, and nobody has ever instilled an interest in it in me.”

Other preservice teachers questioned the relevance of certain parts of the survey to their lives. As Nikki, a middle-grades preservice teacher, told me,

Logically, I know that what happens in those countries [on the survey] affects what happens in my country and it affects my daily life because that's what I tell my kids about globalization that

I just taught. But I don't see... . Like the prime minister of Canada. I don't talk Canada. I don't think about Canada. I don't see them on my news. They're not trying to bomb me.

Ruth spoke more generally, stating that “In the past, this wasn't relevant because it wasn't made relevant to my life. It wasn't important.” However, she quickly added, “And that is bad, and I don't want to do that to my students. I want to change that.”

Ruth continued by blaming her attitude toward politics on a deficiency in her formal education. As she stated, “I don't know any of [the questions on the survey], and I mean, I am not ashamed to say it because, quite honestly, I was never taught it.” This statement by Ruth is illustrative of a theme that ran throughout the interviews in that these preservice teachers seemed to believe that their content classes at the university should have better prepared them to complete the survey. Most of the preservice teachers failed to realize that, with the exception of the section on governmental institutions and processes, the answers to the questions on the survey would not have been found within the curriculum of a typical history or political science class, but rather, required them to develop habits related to following politics and current events on their own.

As Sally, a middle-grades preservice teacher, noted, “I think part of [the reason she did poorly] is because this is more of the political and economic aspect and, in schools, we learn a lot more of the history aspect, and a lot of these things aren't focused on; they are, like, glazed over.”

Interestingly, Beth described a political science course that she had taken at the university in which the professor had randomly quizzed the class about current events over the course of that semester. However, Beth stated that “As soon as that class was over, I stopped reading as much about it as I should have.” The only preservice teacher who articulated a sense of responsibility for knowing much of this information on his/her own was Melissa, who admitted, “I think mostly it just comes down on me not paying enough attention just as a human [as opposed to a history major].”

Another theme that surfaced throughout the interviews was that many of the preservice teachers believed they were symptomatic of the national arrogance and self-absorption that they perceived as problems related to American society as a whole. These feelings were especially prevalent when they discussed their lack of knowledge of foreign current events and prominent world leaders. As Beth explained,

I do care about what happens in other places in the world, but Americans are so—my friends don't post links [on Facebook] to articles about countries because we are just so inward-looking. We only think about what is happening here. I mean, I don't know who the prime minister of Canada or Mexico or Britain is, but I bet they all know who our president is. That makes me feel bad.

Yet, despite stating that she cared about what happened in other parts of the world, Beth said less than a minute later that even if her friends posted links about other nations on Facebook, “I probably won't click it because it doesn't matter to me.” Rachel added, “I think Americans are—

America, as a country, is very self-centered and egotistical, and anything that we do in other countries is ultimately for self-interest.” Another middle-grades preservice teacher, Walter, tied his belief about Americans' lack of knowledge about global politics with his understanding of the nation-centered formal curriculum found in middle and secondary social studies education in the United States: “I think we are a really selfish nation and we consider, you know, our own history, whether it is current events or the past, so much more important that I don't think kids are learning that much about what goes on overseas.”

The final theme that emerged in regard to why the preservice teachers believed they did poorly on the survey is that they were too busy juggling schoolwork and their personal lives to pay attention to politics. As Walter, who was a father, noted, “In my [previous] life, I paid attention to global politics with a passion. Now, I pay attention to diapers and studying for exams and, you know, writing lesson plans with raps in them.” Similarly, Beth, who was a history major, admitted, “I had a pretty heavy course load [the last couple of years], so I was more concerned with what happened a hundred years ago and not what is happening right now.” Finally, a comment made by Ruth was illustrative of the attitudes held by most of the undergraduates. She admitted, “I don't watch the news every day or every week. I am not very knowledgeable about that, and I should be. But, I mean, I am stuck in, you know, going to class and going on Facebook and talking to my friends and going to sleep.”

For many of the preservice teachers, doing poorly on the survey seemed to be a signal that they needed to become more politically aware, and many of them indicated that their habits related to acquiring political information had changed since taking the survey. Sarah's comment is illustrative of those made by several of her peers when she noted, “I started paying more attention to what I read and what I heard, and if I didn't know something, then I would go find out what that was in order to make the connection, rather than just say, ‘Oh well, whatever.’” Margaret went so far as to say that all preservice social studies teachers should take a similar survey:

To be honest, I really think so because just about how much [doing poorly on the survey] bothered me. I can't tell you. I really was so mad at that. The end of the day, it was the cherry on top. And I think a lot of people, I mean, this just strips you to the bone. It really tells you what you know and what you don't know. A lot of people, you hear them just, you know, walking around. They know everything about politics and what is going on in the world. But I guarantee, if you give them this, they are just going to bomb it like there is no tomorrow. And I think this would be great just to give to everyone. I think people would really open their eyes and say, “Wow, I didn't know as much as I thought I did.”

Yet, the survey did not have the same effect on all of the preservice teachers. Nikki admitted that her performance on the survey gave her pause but that the embarrassment of not doing well was not great enough for her to change her habits of acquiring political information:

I'm kind of embarrassed because I know that I should know it. And then I feel guilty because you think, like, all those people in all the other countries that don't get to vote. And we make those people take this. We make people trying to get their citizenship, ask them these questions. And nobody knows them. So I feel bad that I don't know them. But not bad enough to look it up.

Ruth made a similar admission, but she also believed that the survey acted as an initial call for her to become more prepared as a future social studies teacher. Yet, she seemed to believe that additional wakeup calls, such as being asked a question about current events from a student or on a job interview, would be needed for her to change her habits. As she admitted,

I am a junior in college. That is really sad. So, maybe, you know, I keep getting slapped in the face with not knowing this stuff and repeatedly telling myself, "Ruth, you need to know this," or "You should be knowledgeable about this," then maybe I will take the initiative to do it.

LIMITATIONS OF FINDINGS

Although these findings provide a glimpse into the political knowledge and intellectual dispositions of preservice middle and secondary social studies teachers, there are limitations to this research that must be acknowledged. First, these findings are only representative of the political knowledge and dispositions of preservice teachers on one university campus. Although I would consider the campus in question to be typical in terms of student and faculty political awareness, it is certainly possible that a more politically active campus might yield preservice teachers with greater political knowledge.

Second, as Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) noted, all political survey research is subject to certain validity issues. Perhaps most important to the present study is the fact that the percentage of respondents who answered correctly is not necessarily the same as the percentage who knew the answer. The element of guessing may exaggerate percentages on some items, although this is offset by the possibility that some students may have missed questions that they actually knew due to being asked to take a survey without advanced notice in a classroom setting.

Having the preservice teachers volunteer to be interviewed may have also influenced the type of responses I received with respect to their dispositions. Due to Institutional Review Board (IRB) restrictions, however, the surveys were required to be taken anonymously, eliminating the possibility of targeted selection of participants. Yet, had the element of volunteering affected the type of preservice teacher who responded, one would assume that the volunteers would have been skewed toward those who felt they had done well on the survey. That two-thirds of those interviewed reported doing poorly on the survey, however, lessens that concern.

Finally, these findings are constrained by a relatively small sample of preservice teachers. A larger sample size would have allowed for more detailed statistical comparisons, such as linking participants' age with their performance on the surveys. The purpose of this study, however, was not to develop a mechanism to predict the political knowledge of preservice social studies

teachers. The intention was to raise questions about the common content knowledge and intellectual dispositions of future social studies teachers, and when framed in this way, these findings offer several implications that can be transferred to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

From a content standpoint, the survey results were discouraging. As the preservice teachers who were interviewed acknowledged, the questions assessed information that the average American, much less future social studies teachers, should know. Yet, several of the preservice teachers admitted to not knowing the answers to even the most basic questions. The percentages of correct answers would most likely have been even lower had the preservice teachers been asked to show depth of knowledge in their answers, such as providing a policy platform of their governor as opposed to simply identifying him/her by name. At a basic level, these results provide more ammunition for those who devalue K–12 social studies education, as well as those who view traditional teacher education programs as failing to adequately prepare future teachers. That prospective social studies teachers could be entering classrooms unable to name the Vice President of the United States is, at the very least, a public relations nightmare waiting to happen.

A more substantive concern is how this lack of knowledge could impact the instructional practices of future social studies teachers. Within social studies education, a tenet of teaching for democratic citizenship is the ability of teachers to take aspects of the formal curriculum and apply them to discussions of social and political issues. Without common content knowledge of politics and current events, teachers cannot enact the more advanced aspects of PCK described by Ball et al. (2008), which are necessary to make these connections and help students understand practical applications of content. Seminars and deliberations, in particular, require that teachers maintain a general awareness of politics and current events, but the survey results suggest that many of these preservice teachers did not possess adequate knowledge of these topics.

Although both groups of preservice teachers struggled with aspects of the survey, the fact that the middle-grades preservice teachers consistently scored lower than their secondary counterparts raises additional concerns about the preparation of middle-grades teachers. Previous work by Conklin (2008,2010) on the preparation of middle-grades social studies teachers has suggested that they are done a disservice when they are forced to choose programs in either elementary or secondary teacher education. This study offers a perspective from a program designed specifically for middle school teacher preparation, albeit one that requires students pursue dual licensure.

In her recent work, Conklin (2011,2012) argued that preservice teachers who study within a program designed specifically for middle-grades teaching often are provided with rich instruction on the nuances of teaching young adolescents but are not necessarily given a rich

understanding of the principles that guide the teaching of their content area. She posited that this lack of emphasis on content is perhaps due to a belief common to many middle-grades educators that rigorous academic understanding of content should not be expected of young adolescents and is more appropriate at the high school level. In other words, preservice social studies teachers who study within a program designed exclusively for middle-grades instruction may learn how to teach, but they may not learn what is needed to teach social studies. This concern seems to be compounded in programs that require dual licensure. The middle-grades preservice teachers in this study did not have enough time in their schedules to take upper-level content courses in either of their two academic disciplines.

The findings from this study, therefore, raise questions about the preparedness of preservice social studies teachers receiving dual licensure. There are many advantages to dual licensure—marketability being most prominent—but these findings suggest that it may come at a cost. The middle-grades preservice teachers in this study were not considered generalists in the same sense as elementary educators, but they were also not given the same opportunities to develop their social studies content knowledge as their secondary peers.

Of course, discovering that preservice teachers do not possess adequate knowledge of content is hardly a new revelation. Within the social studies literature alone, recent studies show preservice teachers demonstrating poor knowledge of content (e.g., Doppen et al., 2011; Sanchez, 2010). It has been my experience that teacher educators often dismiss deficiencies in content knowledge with the understanding that teachers will ultimately learn content, at least that which is required of their students, in order to prepare students for success on end-of-course assessments.

I have often told preservice teachers that they will develop a deeper understanding of content in 1 year of teaching than they ever have as a student, because successful teaching requires being able to understand content to the point that one can explain it to others. That advice is only true, however, for the *formal* curriculum, or in this case, what was covered in the governmental institutions and processes section of the survey. If, for example, the over 90% of preservice teachers in this study who could not name two rights guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment found themselves in a position where that information was a required element of the curriculum, they could easily access it and make it part of their knowledge base for future semesters.

The knowledge assessed in the remaining sections of the survey, however, will rarely be found in the formal curriculum and is constantly changing (Journell, 2010a). To an extent, the same principle as above applies to these questions as well. If teachers need to find the answer to a question related to politics or current events, they can look it up. No one can be expected to be abreast of everything. In that sense, one could take any of the individual questions on the survey and argue that it assesses trivial knowledge. Taken collectively, however, the survey results suggest a lack of political and social awareness that is limiting to these preservice teachers' ability to teach for engaged citizenship.

One could also argue that learning how to access unknown political information is more important than actually possessing common content knowledge of politics and current events. At a basic level, I agree with that sentiment. The danger in having to look up information, however, comes when it happens too frequently. As the comments made by preservice teachers who appeared ashamed of having to Google the answers to questions they had missed on the survey attest, teachers are expected to possess a certain amount of common content knowledge. Repeated mistakes and admissions of ignorance will ultimately lead to students questioning a teacher's credibility (Hare, 2007).

The only way teachers will be able to credibly possess this type of knowledge is through acquiring the habits necessary for political and social awareness. Therefore, I would argue that the knowledge deficiency present on this survey is more a product of dispositional issues than poor academic performance. Consider, again, the splits in performance between the secondary and middle-grades preservice teachers. The broadest split occurred in the first section on governmental institutions and processes, which is not surprising given the greater number of content courses taken by the secondary preservice teachers. Yet, the splits between the two groups narrow considerably in the subsequent sections because that information is reliant on consistent political and social awareness.⁷

All of the preservice teachers I interviewed articulated a vision of social studies education that included developing politically aware citizens. Yet, many of them acknowledged they had not done the necessary work to enact that vision. Worse, as illustrated by the student who lamented the fact that she did not know basic facts about other nations, but did not feel “bad enough to look it up,” some students could not articulate why they needed to know this information in order to enact their vision of social studies education. In other words, I would argue that these preservice teachers lacked the intellectual dispositions required to develop the PCK that would allow them to be the social studies teachers they believed they should eventually become.

Determining exactly what dispositions are needed to enact a vision of politically aware instruction is subjective. It was clear from my interviews with the preservice teachers, however, that most were painfully aware that they had not developed those habits. The question for social studies teacher educators then becomes, “How can we encourage our preservice teachers to develop the dispositions necessary to acquire this type of knowledge?” The answer may depend on whether one perceives intellectual dispositions as traits engrained in teachers or habits that can be modified over time.

If the former is true, then this issue can only be addressed through assessments of students' intellectual dispositions as part of admissions criteria to teacher education programs. For example, the preservice teachers who seemed to possess the intellectual dispositions for acquiring political knowledge were older or had non-traditional life experiences, such as serving in the military, which raises interesting questions about the types of individuals who should be admitted into social studies teacher education programs. That there were also older students who

did not perform well on the survey, however, prohibits making definitive conclusions about this aspect of the study. Future research on how life experiences impact preservice social studies teachers' intellectual dispositions is needed.

If, however, one believes intellectual dispositions are malleable in response to focused attempts at fostering habits designed to enact successful pedagogical visions of teaching, then changes in preservice social studies teacher preparation are needed. These findings support arguments made by others (e.g., Yogeve & Michaeli, 2011) that teacher education programs should better incorporate aspects of social activism and awareness as part of preservice teachers' professional development. Moreover, this increased awareness needs to occur in both pedagogy and content courses. At the crux of these findings is an alarming lack of intellectual curiosity among preservice teachers, which could be used as a starting point for collaboration between social studies teacher educators and their colleagues in the respective content areas.

Depending on the program, however, those within schools of education may have little influence over the instruction that occurs within content-specific departments. Social studies teacher educators, therefore, should take their own steps to improve their preservice teachers' political knowledge. One aspect of this study that may have implications for social studies teacher education is the survey itself. For several of the preservice teachers I interviewed, being confronted with their lack of political knowledge was an eye-opening experience that forced them to change their current habits. The survey seemed to make them aware of the disconnect between their vision of social studies education and the intellectual dispositions that were limiting their ability to enact that vision.

Once preservice teachers are made aware of a dispositional limitation, the next step is to help them address the problem. The teacher education literature, however, offers few strategies for how to accomplish this goal. Studies have chronicled how some teacher educators have had moderate success in making preservice teachers more attuned to politics and current events through written reflections (e.g., Camicia & Dobson, 2010; Koshmanova, Hapon, & Carter, 2007) or exposure to politically themed media, such as documentaries (Jensen, Janak, & Slater, 2012; Journell & Buchanan, in press). Parker and Hess (2001) also suggested that teacher educators should model political awareness in methods classes. Regularly engaging preservice teachers in deliberations and seminars on political and social issues not only provides them with a model of civic discourse they can use in their own classrooms, it also forces them to become aware of limitations in their common content knowledge.

It seems, based on this limited research as well as the findings from the present study, that the key to making preservice teachers more politically aware is consistent engagement with political and social issues. Further research is needed to better identify best practices for how this can be done in teacher education programs and, specifically, social studies methods classrooms. Teacher educators, however, must take the responsibility to conceptualize the habits of effective teaching for their preservice teachers, which, as Diez (2007) argued, involves making connections

“between their intentions and actions” (p. 394). The findings from this study suggest that having preservice teachers articulate a clear vision of teaching and then making an effort to connect that vision to their dispositions is beneficial for their professional development.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study raise important issues related to the preparation of preservice social studies teachers. Perhaps the most fundamental lesson that one can take from these findings is that preservice teachers must realize that their PCK cannot be reliant only on content they learn in their university coursework, especially with respect to awareness of political and social issues. It is also clear from this study that many social studies preservice teachers enter their teacher education programs with a strong vision of their future teaching practices. As this study illustrates, however, simply having a vision is not enough. Preservice teachers must recognize what is needed to enact that vision and develop the dispositions necessary to achieve their pedagogical goals.

APPENDIX A

Demographic and Program Data of Students Interviewed

Student name	Gender	Middle/secondary	Program	Major/other concentration
Sam	Male	Secondary	TU	History
Melissa	Female	Secondary	TU	History
Charlotte	Female	Secondary	TU	History
Ralph	Male	Secondary	TU	History
Steven	Male	Secondary	TU	History
Sarah	Female	Secondary	TU	History
Jack	Male	Secondary	TU	History
Tiffany	Female	Secondary	TU	Political Science
Rick	Male	Secondary	NTU	History
Beth	Female	Secondary	NTU	History
Mike	Male	Secondary	NTU	History
John	Male	Secondary	MAT	N/A
Hadley	Female	Secondary	MAT	N/A
Bill	Male	Secondary	MAT	N/A
Paul	Male	Middle grades	TU	Language Arts
Maxine	Female	Middle grades	TU	Language Arts
Ruth	Female	Middle grades	TU	Language Arts
Kendall	Female	Middle grades	TU	Language Arts
Margaret	Female	Middle grades	TU	Language Arts
Rachel	Female	Middle grades	TU	Language Arts
Ellen	Female	Middle grades	TU	Language Arts
Jesse	Male	Middle grades	TU	Science
Sally	Female	Middle grades	TU	Math

Deborah	Female	Middle grades	TU	Math
Nikki	Female	Middle grades	TU	Math
Walter	Male	Middle grades	NTU	Language Arts
Amanda	Female	Middle grades	NTU	Language Arts
Vanessa	Female	Middle grades	NTU	Language Arts
Graham	Male	Middle grades	NTU	Language Arts
Crystal	Female	Middle grades	ALT	N/A
<i>Note.</i> TU = traditional undergraduate, NTU = non-traditional undergraduate, MAT = master's of teaching, and ALT = alternative licensure.				

APPENDIX B

Sample Interview Protocol

1. What is your major/other concentration?
2. [If middle grades student] Which of your concentrations would you prefer to teach? Why?
3. What is your teaching philosophy as it relates to social studies education?
4. What role do you think politics and current events should play in [middle or high school] social studies classrooms?
5. How do you envision teaching politics/current events in your future social studies classroom?
6. Do you remember taking the survey? How well do you think you did on it? Why do you think that?
7. How do you think you did in relation to the other members of your class? Why do you think that?
8. How did you feel after taking the survey?
9. Which section of the survey do you think you did the best on? Why?

10. Which section of the survey do you think you did the worst on? Why?
11. What did this survey tell you about yourself as a future social studies teacher?
12. Where do you get your political/current event information? How often do you access this type of information?
13. After taking this survey, did your practices of acquiring political/current event information change? If so, how did it change?
14. Do you think that middle/high school students should know the information included in this survey? Why?
15. How well do you think your students [in internships] would do on a survey like this? Why?
16. Do you think your experience at [name of university] has prepared you to know the information contained in this survey? Why or why not?
17. What recommendations would you make for the teacher education program at [name of university] to better prepare you to know this information?

Notes

¹For more on what constitutes an issue, as opposed to a topic, see Hess (2009).

²The county surrounding the campus voted for President Obama in 2008 and 2012 with 59% and 57.8% of the vote, respectively.

³The content areas in which preservice teachers could major to receive licensure in secondary social studies were anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, or sociology.

⁴One might argue that if preservice teachers' preferred concentration was not social studies, then one might not expect them to enter their methods classes with adequate content knowledge. This argument is often made in reference to elementary preservice teachers, who are often considered generalists and have been shown to not possess deep content knowledge in any one discipline (e.g., Doppen et al., 2011; Sanchez, 2010). I concede that if the middle-grades preservice

teachers prefer their non-social studies concentration, they may be less informed about social studies, but I do not consider the middle-grades preservice teachers in this program to be generalists. They may prefer to teach one discipline over another, but that decision is often left to the job market. Many of these preservice teachers will be asked to teach courses in both of their licensure areas throughout their careers. The expectation in this program, therefore, is that preservice teachers need to be fully prepared to teach in either of their licensure areas upon graduation.

⁵The studies conducted by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) consisted of 2 national surveys (a survey of political scientists and a telephone survey of 610 randomly selected adults) and 15 state-level surveys and focus groups conducted by the Survey Research Laboratory at Virginia Commonwealth University. Detailed information about sample size and other aspects of each survey can be found in the appendix of their book.

⁶One middle-grades preservice teacher did not answer either of these final two questions.

⁷Since dispositions are shaped by one's environment and prior experiences, deficiencies in preservice teachers' intellectual dispositions may be more complex than assuming that they simply do not care about politics or current events. A variety of factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic location, have been found to influence both adolescents' and young Americans' civic experiences (e.g., Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Lenzi et al., 2012; Sander & Putnam, 2010; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 1999). It is possible that preservice teachers' demographics and personal histories may predispose them to certain intellectual dispositions. Future research is needed to better understand how these various factors impact social studies preservice teachers' intellectual dispositions related to acquiring knowledge about politics and current events.

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