Middle School Teacher Enactment of State Curricular Mandates

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Abstract

This article presents the findings from a yearlong narrative inquiry of teacher enactment of state mandated curricular reform in middle level social studies. Four brief narratives and cross-narrative themes are presented to provide examples of the complexities of teacher decision making and positionality when implementing new reforms. Analysis found teachers engaged in dynamic processes of interpreting, negotiating, and responding when enacting the SS reforms. Further, this enactment manifested in three themes. These found teachers engaging in ethical determinations, grappling with competing expectations, and feeling fatigued resistance. This article provides a nuanced, narrative perspective on teacher enactment of SS curricular reforms, finding teacher perceptions an important, but not all-encompassing element of teacher decision making.

Keywords: *teacher's lives; social studies education; curriculum reform; state policy*

It is well known that many policy initiatives can be a burden for teachers; teachers' voices and perspectives are often marginalized, and initiatives can be overly technocratic or reductive. Yet, as some educational reforms have moved to broaden representation and justice in the social studies, there may also be elements of reform that teachers find appealing. This article shares the results of a narrative inquiry of the enactment (Ball, et al., 2012) of state-mandated social studies curricular reform (SSSR) by four social studies teachers. Using a narrative inquiry approach, four *teachers' reform stories* (Craig, 2007; 2020) are shared, illuminating unique enactments of policy. To broaden the lessons provided by these teachers, I provide the results of a cross-narrative thematic analysis to provide new insights about teacher practice and reform and the multidimensional nature of teachers' work and experiences while enacting reform.

Literature Review and Interpretive Frame

This review has been kept brief to provide more space to the teachers' reform stories. However, two specific practices were named in the state mandates associated with this study: controversial issues-based instruction and informed action. As the teachers in this study were asked to discuss their pedagogical choices associated with these two concepts, I provide a brief review of this literature alongside a review of literature on teacher enactment of reform.

Teacher Enactment of Reform

Steven Ball and colleagues' (2012) theory of enactment illuminates the agentic, nonlinear nature of teachers' enactment of school reforms/policies. From this conceptual frame, enactment of reforms is constituted by "jumbled, messy, contested, creative, and [even] mundane interactions" that link policy to practice" (Ball, et al., 2012, p. 2). Educators will inevitably have political and emotional responses to reform and policy, which inform their selection, uptake, rejection, and even subversion. When teachers interpret, translate, and enact policies or reforms, they often do so reflective of their institutional context and schools' relationships with local communities (Sannino, 2010b).

Educators engage with both centralized and decentralized systems of change in their profession. However, when it comes to making choices about reform, teachers make specific choices based on what they know to be effective within their teaching strengths, student needs, and institutional settings. This may often follow an "adoption-adaptation-evolution" trajectory, depending on how reforms are initially introduced to teachers and within school structures (Hung, et al., 2016, p. 150). It is crucial that researchers, school leaders, and policy makers acknowledge that teacher agency is a critical component of education reform. Relatedly, teacher identity should be considered the "centerpiece" when understanding uptake and implementation of innovations or reform (Chee, et al., 2015). Teachers make agentic choices in implementation, and perhaps more importantly, these agentic choices are mediated by teachers' understandings of and commitments to their professional identities (Tao & Gao, 2017). This may be why, in some cases, teachers' responses to policies and reforms are characterized by resistance or even subversion. This is particularly true when policies or reform initiatives are at odds with teachers' values.

Critical policy researchers have recently engaged with concepts of enactment, performativity, and context to unpack the complexities of the tensions that can arise between mandates and practices (Singh, 2014). This framework is useful for analysis on a global scale (Singh, 2018). For example, Ball (2003) argues that the potential inauthenticity required for enactment pushes teachers to engage in "fabrications" of their work to align or comply. This evolves from teachers being posited as subjects whose work often is boiled down to narrow interpretations of teaching, with policing of conformity emerging as hallmarks of compliance (Vick & Martinez, 2011). In one comprehensive analysis of teachers' enactment of and potential resistance to accountability-oriented curricular reforms, Sloan (2006) found that teachers take an active role in reading and responding to mandates. This is an agentic process that finds identity as a central and meaningful component. Further, teachers' agentic enactments of such reforms are more complex than simple resistance. As Sloan states, "the overall quality and equity effects of accountability policies depend[s] on a variety of complex and interrelated factors. However,…site-specific factors are some of the most robust" (p. 146). This should inspire researchers to move beyond good/bad or implemented/resisted binaries and instead focus on unpacking the multi-layered and dynamic nature of teacher enactment of reform.

Sannino (2010a) describes the positive aspects of resistance, showing that resistance can often be a signifier of agency; that teacher may be caught between teaching values and the ideological emphasis of a given reform or policy. These tensions may be particularly pronounced in the United States, where social problems are often "educationalized" rather than being dealt with substantively in other ways (Labaree, 2008). Indeed, teacher identity is inextricably intertwined

with school policy, politics, and policy enactment. As Zembylas and Chubbuck note, teacher identities are socially situated; "politicized, discontinuous, and shifting" (2018, n.p.). This calls for a more nuanced and individually situated approach to analyses of teacher enactment of reform.

Teacher identity is particularly important when understanding the specific role of resistance or subversion in enactment of reform. For some time, researchers have discussed teacher uptake versus resistance to school reform while not appreciating that teachers are often acting in "good sense" when resisting, taking into consideration time, power structures, and potential "fundamental" shifts in their work (Gitlin & Margolis, 1995). Further, most policy and education reformers fail to consider teachers' emotions and the potential impact of reforms on their sense of wellbeing in their work (Zembylas, 2010).

Controversial Issues

Historically, the field of social studies education has been contested ground. Despite generations of debate and policy about how to prepare future U.S. citizens, consensus remains elusive and rhetoric ever-changing, which has been argued to be a failure to reach potential (Evans, 2004). Indeed, some scholars have noted a tension between the social studies' responsibility for cultural transmission and critical thinking (Ross, 2006). More recently, the imperative to foreground diversity and equity in systems and practices has increased. As our national political, social, and cultural tides continue to shift, leaders in the field have identified that at last seven categorical social issues should be addressed (Levy, et al., 2023). Social studies (SS) educators have a particular role to play in this area—both in the content of their lessons as well as the foundational principles of their work. One element of justice-oriented SS teaching is the infusion of "controversial" issues, which were mandated in the policy enactments explored in this study. Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess have led research in this area. They argue that schools are the perfect setting for students to engage in meaningful, intentional, democratic discussions of controversial political and social issues (Hess, 2009), providing potential for nonpartisan political education, deliberations, and safe settings for attending to the polarization and inequities that characterize our societies (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). However, teachers need professional learning and structural support to enact these practices, especially when justice and diversity are the goal. Since the publication of these groundwork pieces, others have engaged in study of these pedagogical approaches, finding that teachers most often emphasize discussion and deliberation; others emphasize trust and relationships to balance the power dynamics and emotional responses that often accompany such discussions (Ho, et al., 2017). Further, teachers may also choose to utilize controversial images in justice-oriented lessons, although this is an emerging area of study (Hawley, et al., 2016). The integration of controversies is an imperative for the health and sustainability of democratic citizenship education and democracy in general (Misco & Shiveley, 2016).

Informed Action

Analyses of state standards have found that informed action and critical thinking are features of several state standards, even for the youngest students (Odebiyi, 2021). This can take many forms, but can include the integration of participatory technologies (Holmes & Manfra, 2022) and other modalities. In social studies and civic education, informed action is designed to help students take civic action or participate in civic experiences inside and outside of the classroom (Croddy & Levine, 2014; Levinson & Levine, 2013; Parker, 2003). Like controversial issues, the integration

of informed action is intended to provide students with opportunities to engage in real-world practice of democratic processes. This involves supporting students to act in their communities inspired by what they've learned in SS lessons. It can also include engagement with external stakeholders or peers. Such practices are proposed by the National Council for the Social Studies' College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework as the culminating practice at the end of a unit.

SS Teacher Practice in Context

Researchers have argued that SS teachers are powerful actors and advocates in the pursuit of a more just society (Agarwal, 2011; Bender-Slack & Rupach, 2008; King & Kasun, 2013; Sibbett & Au, 2017; Stevens & Martell, 2021), yet policymakers can be allies or foils to justice-oriented SS teaching and learning (Stout & Wilburn, 2021). In particular, the rising tide of divisive, misleading narratives about "controversial" or cultural/identity issues plus populist politics have motivated many scholars to call for greater attention to SS as an area of practical and scholarly inquiry (Breakstone, et al., 2018; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; McGrew, et al., 2018). This is in part, to counter the potentially damaging rhetoric prevalent in today's media (Anderson & Zyhowski, 2018; Huang & Cornell, 2019; Journell, 2017; & van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). To this end, support and professional learning for SS education is more consequential than ever. Further, teachers' voices should be an essential element to aid understanding of the enactment of such initiatives. With that in mind, the following theoretical frames have guided my analysis of SS teacher enactment of state mandates.

Narrative Inquiry and Enactment

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) assert, "methods for the study of personal experience [i.e., narrative inquiries] are simultaneously focused in four directions: inward and outward, backward and forward" (p. 417). Each of these are interrelated and vital components of a narrative analysis. However, this paper will narrow its focus to the internal-facing elements of teacher/reform stories; that is, the *inward* and the *backward*. Here, *inward* refers to "the interactional conditions of feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions, and so on" (p. 417) of teacher stories, while *backward* refers to the temporal, historical, or past. By examining elements of teacher/reform stories focusing inward and backward, I hope to highlight elements of each teachers' story to highlight the potential and limitations of social studies reform.

Analysis of teachers' stories and teachers' reform stories (Craig, 2007; 2020) can illuminate the multidimensional aspects of teachers' lives. These stories can reveal joys and successes but can also reveal the "chasms that can open between personal and professional knowledge landscapes, between imagined and lived stories, between who each is as a person and who each is as a teacher" (Schaefer, et al., 2019, p. 24).

To analyze the impact of policy (in this case state-mandated changes in SS curriculum) on the lives and work of teachers, I utilize Ball, et al.'s (2012) concept of policy *enactment*. This concept attends to the agentic process of layered policy interpretations. Enactment of policy inevitably becomes intertwined with teachers' understandings of self; teacher identity and agency are in constant, dynamic interaction with their situational realities (Buchanan, 2015; Hall & McGinty, 2015; Zembylas, 2005), which is perhaps best understood through the structure of story (Clandinin

& Connelly, 1998). "Stories such as these, lived and told, educate the self and others, including…those, such as researchers, who are new to their communities" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415).

In sum, the constant churn of education reform during the last several decades has left many teachers feeling burned out, demoralized, or fatigued (e.g., Ball, et al., 2012; Dilkes, et al., 2014, Dworkin, 2008; Orlando, 2014; Santoro, 2018), calling into question the appetite for and efficacy of what may otherwise be well-intentioned—even popular—justice-oriented SS education policies or reforms. Research in this area has often explored the impact of testing and standardization. However, less attention has been paid to reform of disciplines traditionally under less testing scrutiny, such as the social studies (SS). In this political and reform context, my research intends to investigate the experiences and perceptions of SS teachers.

This following will present findings from a year-long, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that examined four middle level social studies (MLSS) teachers' *enactment* (Ball, et al., 2012) of curricular reform during the discursive realities and storied landscapes described above.

Methodology

With this interpretive frame in mind, the research question guiding this study was: How do teachers' personal-professional stories interact with and shape their enactment of state-mandated curricular reform? To unpack the dynamic complexity of teacher experience in this context, and maintain relational researcher positionality, I utilized narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As both phenomenon and method, narrative involves "listening to individuals tell their stories and living alongside participants as they live their stories" (p. 543).

School and Policy Context

This study was undertaken during the implementation of new SSSR (state-mandated social studies curricular reform) requiring teachers to integrate "controversial issues" and "informed action" into their teaching. Specifically, the state legislature passed a law requiring every public school in the state to include one semester of civics instruction in the middle school years (SGA, 2015; 2020). This instruction could be embedded across social studies curriculum (i.e., districts could determine how to integrate the new mandates into their curricula in a manner most appropriate for the structure of the social sciences and teaching assignments at a given school). Further social studies educators were now required to revise their curriculum to include service learning, discussion of contemporary and societal (re: controversial) issues, simulation of democratic processes, and general instruction in government institutions. Educators across the social sciences were also required to integrate social science inquiry within their disciplinary categories. Teachers in the state were provided professional learning supports for the integration of these mandates by their local districts and/or a large professional development agency that was well known and worked primarily on civics education. At the time when these new mandates went into law, they were not controversial within the political climate of the state. Further, because they were allowed to be integrated in a somewhat bespoke manner, districts and teachers had a relative amount of agency (compared with other more accountability-driven mandates). No high stakes testing or revisions to state standards accompanied these SSSR, however a complete overhaul of the state's social studies standards was underway for implementation in several years. More details about

how this context relates to each *teacher's reform stories* (Craig, 2007; 2020) is provided in the findings below.

Participants

Four middle-level social studies (MLSS) teachers were recruited through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2014). I sought participants who self-identified as integrating the SSSR. These teachers also agreed to allow me access to their planning and curriculum documents, host me for frequent participant observations, and sit for several interviews over the course of the school year.

Data Collection and Analysis

I visited each participant two to four times a month September 2019 through March 2020. The field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) I collected transcriptions from interviews, notes from observations, and documents from the teachers' classrooms. Data collection was intended to continue through the end of the 2019-2020 school year but was cut short due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Craig (2007) suggests, the process or method of narrative inquiry in analysis of reform stories is a multi-step process. Citing Connelly and Clandinin (1990), this process begins with *broadening* the teacher/reform story to understand how the influences and complexities of teachers' professional knowledge landscapes become revealed (Craig, 2007, p. 179). Then, researchers engage in *burrowing* to reconstruct "events from the point of view of the central participants" (179), and finally, restorying to unpack and understand the choices of individuals in context, which "makes the turbulence, tensions, and epistemological dilemmas that invariably appear in teachers' lives visible" (p. 180).

Results: Policy and Teacher/Reform Stories

Amid increasing student activism, political polarization, media misinformation, and recognition of underrepresented historical perspectives, the state in which this study took place began implementing a series of reforms to its SS curricular mandates (Anonymized SGA, 2016, 2020). These required MLSS teachers to engage students in units of instruction dealing with "controversial" social issues and "informed action". The following teacher/reform stories are presented in an abbreviated "story serial" format (Craig, 2020) to honor the unique "teacher and reform stories" (Craig, 2007) of each and stay within word count. All names, including those of schools, are pseudonyms.

Liz

Liz identified as a white woman and was approaching her fifteenth year of teaching when we met. She was born and raised in the community in which she taught and cared deeply about serving her students and their families in a locally relevant yet globally minded manner. She was a well-regarded and successful MLSS teacher, recognized by administrators and colleagues. One of the many reasons Liz had gained this reputation was through her appetite for professional development and leadership. In addition to her master's degree, Liz had traveled, volunteered, and earned certificates from national teaching organizations.

Liz's classroom was cozy, organized, colorful, and meticulously decorated with flexible seating, designated workstations, a variety of lamps, and numerous posters and photographs of cultures from around the world. It was a comfortable and unique setting in which to teach and learn. Students were seated in teams of four or five, often working collaboratively.

Many of the elements of the SSSR were already features of Liz's teaching. She helped lead her district's MLSS initiative to redesign the sequence of courses around conceptual themes like power, interdependence, and cultural diversity. Her curriculum featured multiculturalism, student inquiry, and informed action. Despite structural challenges to these efforts, Liz was resilient.

What supported Liz's enactment of the SSSR was overall alignment with her teaching. Further, these emphases supported Liz's identification as a public school teacher. She was particularly aware of the implications of her identity as a white teacher serving children of color: "We work with the public. We're exposed to many different things that impact our students—the good and the bad—so it's important that we support our students as whole individuals, expand their worldviews, validate their identities." Liz loved her students and felt supported by colleagues and administrators to engage in critical and ambitious social studies teaching. This manifested as a revised student activism unit, a key example of her enactment of SSSR.

After researching examples of adolescent activists from around the world and social causes, students constructed books. "They literally write chapter books about teen activism! They get into causes, effects, and conclude with a call to action, like what should people do now? How can we be inspired by these teen activists?"

As her teen activism unit revealed, Liz's teacher story and reform story were in sync. Revising her sixth grade SS curriculum, the enactment of SSSR was primarily about seizing the moment to forge ahead with topics relevant to her students. She was already engaging in most of what the state was mandating, so she used SSSR to dig a bit deeper:

> I've added, "What's *your* responsibility as a *citizen*? How can *you* be a teen activist *today*? It can be a lot of work and kind of intimidating to try these new types of projects, but you just try it and then suddenly, you're like, "Oh my gosh! How did you all write entire chapter books?" It's exciting to see what they come up with. And then, in April the sixth-grade class will pick one topic to focus on. They'll be in groups, creating an action plan for teen activism here in [our city]. And then we'll have them do it. Anything they want. We're going to give them some ideas to start, but mostly we're here to guide them.

Liz was already leading her students through the two main requirements of SSSR. They were engaging in conversations about social issues and were beginning work on projects that would be shared with a larger audience.

Unfortunately, the pandemic derailed informed action. However, Liz's teacher/reform story provides one example of how a teacher can leverage student interest towards policy enactment that is aligned with one's teaching values—especially when a teacher has support.

Yet despite her generally supportive environment and extensive qualifications, Liz felt teachers' work was under-respected:

> Sometimes, we are like public enemy number one. We're the fixers but "P.S., you've done everything wrong and why aren't you fixing it?" It's like, "No, we're doing a good job and we have wonderful kids in this community." We're doing great things with limited resources.

This extended to parent perceptions of the students' activism inquiry topics, which interrupted her curriculum, and therefore, enactment of SSSR. Here, tension wasn't with the reforms, but with the public's reticence towards certain topics.

> Sometimes we get pushback and parents call the district office. It's just crazy. I'll give you an example. Bullying can be focused on specific groups. Maybe students who are transgender or gay, you know? Our principal didn't like that. Which is problematic because we have not only children in our school who are gay, but also teaching staff. We've had transgender students. So, it's kind of like admin saying, "Well I'm worried about what other people are going to say." But I feel like, no, these topics are real. These are real students, real staff members we must support. This is their life and we're a public school. The public means everyone. School is supposed to be a safe place.

Towards the end of the school year, Liz began to resist; deciding to follow the students' inquiries and negotiate with parents later rather than open her curriculum up for questioning by the district before it had even begun: "I've learned to not necessarily run everything by admin. These are the topics the district has approved. This is what the students are interested in. Let's support them." Liz's story is one of synchronicity between teacher and reform stories, yet contextual factors complicated her enactments.

Jerry

Jerry identified as an early middle aged white man. He was a second-career teacher with a warm presence and sincere concern for his students' civic and social-emotional development. He was raised in the region where he taught and was committed to leveraging his teaching to contribute to an informed and empowered citizenry—particularly in the historically marginalized Black communities where he taught. Jerry's classroom was tidy, with the teacher's desk at the front of the room near a digital whiteboard and desks in clusters of four. The walls were decorated with posters of prominent Black Americans and social-emotional learning themes.

Jerry was passionate about his role as an educator in *public* schools: "An informed citizenry…is the only way to maintain a republic. The founding fathers wrote on this." He wanted his students not only to benefit from the mission of public schooling, but to care for themselves, their classmates, and their communities. As Jerry put it:

> My job is to care for them as whole people. It can take a while. There are students that are just now coming around, but you've got to have patience. They are under so much pressure that you and I wouldn't have had at that age.

When asked about his integration SSSR, Jerry said, "This is something I have done for a long time." He did his best to thread together several initiatives while maintaining what he knew how to do well—utilizing primary sources to make modern-day connections while emphasizing relationships. These connections ranged from current events such as the Black Lives Matter movement to wealth distribution. Rather than stating "controversial" social issues as focal points of a lesson or unit, Jerry prompted connections.

Jerry's students experienced high rates of adversity, which further reinforced his commitment to building supportive relationships above all else:

> We're also a school that's 98% poverty. When your water has been turned off, and you didn't get to wash your face, or when someone in the neighborhood is causing conflict with you or your family, or you've just come from a class where you felt disrespected by a student, a teacher, or whoever, you cannot learn in that fight or flight mode.

This related to Jerry's vision of teaching itself as activism:

> If I reach them socially and emotionally, they're going to trust me. Then when we move on to the bigger things, they'll be more likely to engage. They see me listening, being concerned. That is my form of activism. Caring about your students, your fellow human beings.

This manifested through classroom discussions connecting history content to structural issues such as racial and social justice. He felt that history class was "where it all should happen"—where students contextualize modern-day issues through historical foundations. He held an optimistic view of U.S. history, emphasizing moral and humanistic trends, calling it the "journey of humankind," in which Americans struggled to "search for justice." Systemic inequities and injustices "didn't just pop up overnight; some of these hatreds had been going on for thousands of years."

Jerry often utilized analogies to connect historic events to modern-day and/or humanistic themes. For example, he asked students to consider forced assimilation, removal, and genocide of Native American populations. Students read excerpts and secondary sources on Jefferson and Jackson, before engaging in discussion. Jerry asked his students to think about what other contemporary events seemed, to them, similar in tone, intention, or function. One student compared it to a college prep program that was recently implemented in her school. She focused her comparison on the program's emphasis on organization and college-ready character traits, making loose connections to colonization. In reflecting on this student's connections, Jerry was impressed, saying, "I see the similarities. It changes the way you're living your life. A new paradigm comes in and changes everything."

These teaching moves both aligned and diverged from SSSR. Jerry agreed with the intention and emphases of SSSSR. However, he was also beholden to numerous other initiatives, including social-emotional curriculum, a college preparatory program, new management practices, and curriculum redesign. These local reforms and Jerry's own teaching values took precedence over SSSR in his enactments.

Emma

Emma identified as a white woman in her early twenties. Emma had been teaching in her affluent suburban district for about three years when I visited. She endeavored to provide her MLSS students with a multicultural, critical, and justice-oriented perspective, and engaged in professional learning opportunities and her local teachers' union to build her own strengths.

Emma's classroom was bright, organized, and decorated with student art and encouraging quotes. She posted the learning targets, homework, and three things she was grateful for. Students were seated in groups and collaborated frequently. Each period, students filed into the room, grabbed the day's handouts and some tape. They settled in at their desks, opened their notebooks, and taped the handouts on a fresh page. These served as structures for the day: outlines for notes,

record of learning objectives and homework, and pace to write appreciations. This structured, procedural organization was characteristic of Emma's teaching. When it came to SSSR, she said, "I'm thinking of this as civics-oriented teaching. Particularly as modern-day social issues and key current issues." This was partially informed by student interest:

> My students are very split politically. I would guess ten percent are super liberal and ten percent are super conservative, and those are the ones who latch on to current events and speak up. I have one student who is really interested in economics. I can think of one student who is interested in gun legislation. But most of the other students don't particularly know what's going on or aren't super interested yet.

Because she had grown up in the community in which she now taught and had come to appreciate her own social/cultural positionality, Emma was passionate about developing her students into citizens who could understand their racial and economic privileges and see the U.S. through a more critical lens. While not every single student in her class enjoyed such privileges, the vast majority did, and so Emma made it a point to draw historical and contemporary connections when contextualizing inequities and injustices in U.S. society. "We ask, 'Has life truly improved for these five groups that we're studying?' Such as immigrants, women, Black Americans. I'm hoping this year we can make more explicit connections to today, as opposed to just analyzing the past." Economic issues—or viewing social issues and inequities through an economic lens—were particularly engaging for Emma's students, and she leaned into that interest. She pushed them to reconsider the infallibility of meritocracy by characterizing historical systems established in the late nineteenth century as "greedy," asking students to consider how these structural inequities had been maintained over time.

Emma also relied on metaphor. For example, she posited wealth distribution as "pieces of pie." However, she informed students that only about ten percent of Americans held almost 90 percent of the country's pie pieces (wealth). When discussing this idea with her students, she said, "We have this idea that the harder you work, the more pieces of pie you should get…[But] some people make money by manipulating politicians and taking advantage of marginalized workforces."

Yet, Emma felt pressure from her administrator to keep things relatively "neutral" in the classroom.

> Unfortunately, I only really feel comfortable engaging with controversial topics in certain ways…Some of our teachers are Trump supporters, and some [students] think he's funny because Trump's the loudest person in the room, but I have other students who push back and want to be able to argue ideas. I try to keep it civil and safe, but I don't engage head-on with all of it because I don't necessarily want to alienate them.

Interestingly, Emma's administrator and her students' parents seemed to feel that it was possible to keep her curriculum apolitical or "neutral" by keeping the focus on historical events. As she put it, "My administration encouraged me to not be super current events-y." Because of this, Emma chose to continually ground conversations about social issues within historical examples.

> One instance was when I wanted to include a Trump tweet in a nativism lesson and my principal said, "No, don't rock the boat on this one." And then the next year, I wanted to show a video about Emmett Till, but my principal was like, "No, you can't show the really

> graphic parts." And I'm like, "I fundamentally disagree with this, but okay." He likes to tread carefully.

Emma still felt that she was falling short on her enactment of the state mandates and her own goals to develop her students' critical, justice-oriented lenses. For example, she characterized her attempts at integrating informed action as "bad" despite the relevance and rigor of the assignment.

> [For one unit] they were asked to write a letter to our state senators… I told them that I'd send them, but they made comments like, "You're not really going to send 170 letters." It felt very inauthentic to them, and their final work was not their best.

It seemed that there were just too many competing demands at play. Emma felt pressure from her administrator to be neutral and please her students' parents/guardians, she was working hard on her own professional learning to stay up to date on the newest practices and reforms, all while doing her best to integrate her students' interests and push them to reconsider the world through more diverse perspectives. It was clear that this was difficult:

> Something that just frustrates me endlessly about education reform is that there's so many smart people having so many smart ideas. But I can't navigate them on my own, like which is the best idea? Or which is an idea that's going to fit well with my class and my teaching style?

Faye

Faye identified as an Asian American woman in her early twenties. She was in her fourth year of teaching at a large middle school in a mid-sized city. This city had a great deal of racial, linguistic, cultural, and economic diversity.

> As a social studies teacher, we can help our students to have conversations with the past. History acts as our consultant and it's kind of maybe a base line or standard for students to evaluate social issues as they become decision makers. Like, "Ah, my decisions will shape the future." The more conversations they have with people who are different, the better. I want them to be able to be strong critical thinkers.

Although she was just beginning her fourth year of teaching, Faye possessed the poise and perspective of a much more experienced educator. "It's so much harder to be a teacher these days," she reflected during our first conversation. What was "harder" was the numerous initiatives, policies, reforms, and demands (formal and informal) on Faye and her colleagues.

Faye was a highly motivated early career teacher with a strong desire to learn as much as she could to further her enactment of culturally sustaining and justice-oriented teaching. She was particularly passionate about supporting her students who were learning English for the first time.

> One thing on my mind a lot is the ELL/ESL students. I think that comes just from hearing stories in my family. For instance, my dad, who came to the States when he was young, and it was just such a struggle to get through school. He was handed *Dante's Inferno* as a teenager when he could hardly speak English. Or, in student teaching I had a student who

> was learning English. It was tough for him in government class, learning all those terms. I didn't want that excitement to be lost just from language.

Although she was taking a lot of initiative to grow her teaching knowledge and, there seemed to be a disconnect between what how she wanted to respond to students' cultural, developmental, and political positionalities and the numerous other initiatives at play. While Faye agreed with her district and state's numerous initiatives, she was overwhelmed by the long list of "must dos."

When it came to the SSSR, Faye wanted to let her students take the lead. She felt they knew what was most important to them as learners and citizens.

> I think within the social studies curriculum students seem to want to engage in discussion about what seems right or wrong. Often, they feel like, "How did they decide that? That's not right." Their feelings can be my guide. I love pitching big idea questions about decisions that have been made throughout history.

One controversial social issue relevant to Faye and her students was immigration and restrictions on who would be allowed to remain in the U.S. during the Trump administration.

> That was a little rawer. Students were sad, because we were hearing about families in our community who were fearful of being deported. Some students were jokingly more flippant about it. I don't know if they meant it, but it was just part of the political jargon. They would hear things on the TV or whatever and suddenly they're saying to classmates, "Oh yeah, you're going to get sent back to your country." But we had some students who were genuinely afraid. We have students who feel they are mistreated on the scale of the school—socially, politically. These students need to be advocated for. It's not okay that they are afraid. My relationships, my classroom, my curriculum needs to be a place where we can engage with these things.

However, tension existed between the rapidly evolving political landscape and other obligations. The SSSR, district initiatives, student interests and needs, curricular requirements competed. She summed it up this way:

> With the state and admin, integrating students' backgrounds, testing, good feedback, social emotional needs. It's so much. While they're [state mandates] awesome, it also makes it so difficult to be a teacher. Just the amount of responsibility. I just need time.

Results: Looking Across Stories to Learn About Enactment

I've followed Craig's (2007) lead in looking *across* stories to find common themes that elucidate the similarities and distinctions that are revealed by these stories of policy enactment. As the literature on the integration of controversial topics has found, teachers must attend to the complexity of their teaching contexts—including students social, emotional, and cultural needs—when engaging in these practices (Ho, et al., 2017). The teachers in this study represented a broad range of enactment, exposing the potentialities and limitations of state-mandated reform as a lever for transformative SS. All four MLSS teachers in this study felt their personal teaching commitments and values aligned with the interpreted intent of the SS curricular mandates. Further, all felt motivated by the moral, ethical, and civic import of their work with students, and saw these themes

represented in the heart of the state mandates. They felt it particularly important to support students' engagement with "controversial" social issues and learn how to engage in action in their communities during the current political climate.

However, the teacher/reform stories shared here also reveal each teacher's policy enactment (Ball, et al., 2012) work was characterized by a unique blend of personal, socio-political factors and the teachers' perceptions of their professional contexts. It was their interpretation of the latter that most frequently influenced their enactment of the reforms. In short, a clean line could not always be drawn from policy mandate to practice, regardless of each teacher's positive feelings about the focus of the reforms. This was an interactive and dynamic processes.

Who they saw themselves as teachers implicated the ways in which they organized their curriculum, how they leveraged current events (often called "teachable moments") in instruction towards efficacious enactment of the state mandates, and their perceptions of the new reform efforts contextualized within other reforms or policies to which they were held accountable. While teacher identity and professional goals did influence classroom practice, this influence was also in interaction with their understanding of their students and perceived expectations of state and institutional mandates.

As a result of this process, three themes emerged that characterize the nature of teacher enactment of state-mandated SS curricular reform. These are (1) teacher engagement with ethical determinations, (2) grappling with competing expectations, and (3) feeling fatigued resistance. I discuss these below.

Ethical Determinations

This dimension of policy enactment was one of the most impactful. The teachers in this study cared deeply about their students but needed lots of structural and administrative support to carry out reforms of their teaching. As other scholars have found (Wessel-Powell, et al., 2019), teachers in this study prioritized their time and teaching to enact what they saw as most important for their students and their teaching values. Teachers who felt administrative, parental/familial, and cultural support experienced less tension. Take the following quote from Liz as one example of this:

> Our principal will step in and say, "This doesn't work for us here." We also have curriculum heads at the district who let us take charge. They listen to us and say, "What do you want to do about these mandates?" Now I'm trying things I've wanted to do since I started teaching.

The process of making ethical determinations also meant that teachers would emphasize or prioritize things that they felt were most important or best aligned with their ethical commitments as teachers. This was most often related to teachers' perceptions of students' strengths, needs, and interests, but also the teachers' strengths or successes from their years of experience (such as the reliance on "teachable moments" or current events vs. pre-planned inquiries). Teachers also made determinations based on the prominence of external expectations or accountability, such as parental/family concerns, administrative directives or boundaries, local reform/curricular initiatives, and the teachers' interpretations of the intent of the state mandates.

Competing Expectations

The two teachers in this study who were earliest in their careers (Faye and Emma), placed pressure on themselves to implement the new mandates with fidelity. They were particularly excited about the potential to leverage the mandates for more justice-oriented themes in their teaching yet found this difficult amid so many other competing expectations. This tension illuminates the complicated reform stories of policy enactment that can arise among numerous, layered expectations.

This early evidence of competing—even overwhelming—expectations helps contextualize (in part) why all of the teachers in this story chose to enact reforms in a manner that was best matched to what their students' interests or perceived needs were *and* what these teachers knew they would be successful integrating. For example, for Emma, teaching with controversial social issues was not a binary or an all-or-nothing proposition. It was more about where she chose to draw the line and why. This line was negotiated by her individual teacher identity and motivations in concert with other contextual factors. In the example of Emma's teaching, lines were often drawn at the intersection of her curricular goals with parental concerns (as voiced by her administrator). It was permissible to discuss redlining, for example, but not to engage head-on with the concept of systemic racial privileges that were still realized by her and her students. Parent expectations about what was developmentally, culturally, and politically appropriate competed with Emma's interpretation of the state mandates and her own teaching goals.

In other cases, the persistence of competing expectations led more experienced teachers to simply rely on what they knew best how to do. Liz and Jerry were likewise experiencing competing expectations but felt more confident in their voice to fold in or highlight pre-existing elements of their teaching that were aligned with the state mandates.

Fatigued Resistance

Reform and policy fatigue are present factors for teachers, even in the best of circumstances. Looking across stories, fatigued resistance was especially present for teachers whose personal and contextual realities were misaligned with the ways in which the mandates were presented. Resistance was most teachers who felt a lack of agency and were fatigued by the constant churn of reform. This feeling persisted despite recent years' relative inattention to the SS as a target of reform in the state (compared with math and literacy).

Fatigued resistance emerged even when the teachers expressed support for the reforms. For example, Faye, who was just beginning her fourth year of teaching, was already concerned about burnout. Even though she found the ideas of the state mandates and other district-level reforms to be "awesome" it was simply too much to focus on at once. She felt frustrated at the lack of voice teachers were afforded in the process of developing and implementing state policy and wished there was more emphasis in her district on allowing teachers to do what they knew how to do best. Likewise, Emma was growing weary of the lack of time and support she was provided to design, assess, and redesign her curriculum. And Liz and Jerry, although positive about the reforms in general, were focusing on developing or continuing with things that they had done in past years of teaching. Liz was particularly frustrated in the lack of political and community support for teachers, saying she sometimes felt like "public enemy number one." She also said the following, which alludes to a sense of fatigue:

> I just feel like I commit so much time to my profession. Obviously, I know I'm getting a paycheck, but there's just so much more that we are expected to do now that it's almost a full-time job outside of the school day.

This provides evidence that even when teachers agree with reform or policy initiatives, there is still too heavy an overall burden. This is created by the constant cycle and numerous demands, a felt lack of respect for teachers' professional knowledge, and a lack of time to learn, experiment, and evaluate new ideas.

Discussion & Conclusion

While others have investigated teachers' resistance to reforms divergent from teaching values (e.g., Dyches, et al., 2020; Hall & McGinty, 2015), this paper provides a storied perspective on the impact of policy/reform mandates with which teachers agree. It is my hope that this brings attention to the diverse and wide-ranging factors that inform how social studies educators engage with and enact state mandated curriculum reforms. More specifically, the narratives shared in this study draw attention to the ways which each teacher's unique professional contexts can act as resources to support enactment of critical, justice-oriented social studies. Every participant in this study held passionate beliefs in the importance of SS curriculum as a tool for social and civic ends. However, as this study implies, only when teacher agency and supportive teaching contexts are present will teachers have the emotional and logistical bandwidth to sustain integrations.

While the text of state mandates did not explicitly mention social justice or equity as the end goal, the teacher/reform stories featured in this paper illuminate the potential fertility of these policies for such ends. Yet, reform fatigue, underwhelming support, and a history of revolving door mandates seemed to undercut this potential, creating tension and stress in the realities of the outstanding teachers who were working so hard as it was. This study illuminates the potentialities and limitations of (potentially) justice-oriented, state-mandated reform. Yet, without attention to teacher agency, reform fatigue and a history of revolving door mandates may undercut this potential.

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