

**Current Events in the Classroom: A Collection of Case Studies on the Why and How of
Using the News to Teach Curriculum**

By

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Abstract

Every single day there are events occurring around the world that helps shape our society. News is a powerful resource of information for teachers to tap into, and how they incorporate the news is just as important as the news stories they choose to share. This paper explores the best pedagogical practices teachers use to incorporate current events into their classroom. For this research I conducted a literature review and interviewed four teachers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The literature explored theories related to news inclusion in the classroom as well as current attitudes and obstacles. From the interviews with the teachers, I gleaned their best practices. From their experience I concluded that teachers can use news resources in order to build student engagement, to help students deconstruct current events and articles with their class, as well as make connections to their own lives, and help students promote meaningful discussion.

Keywords: Current events, pedagogy, news, teaching strategies, best practices, literacy, social studies, curriculum, cross-curricular

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

By bringing the world into the classroom, through the use of current events, teachers have an opportunity to show students how what they learn actually matters in the world today. They can open their students' minds to different perspectives and experiences while still staying on track with the curriculum. It is possible, and helps make learning relevant.

Current events also have the power to engage students in subjects they may otherwise find difficult. News, by definition, is interesting and therefore it has the power to stimulate curiosity, and/or even a desire for social action.

The practice of using current events seems to fit naturally with the curriculum, but there is very limited research on the subject.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study research is to discover how or if teachers are using current events to teach curriculum in junior and intermediate classrooms, grades 4 and 8, in the greater Toronto area. Further, this study aims to examine the various strategies teachers are using to accomplish this task, and why they are inclined to incorporate current events into their classrooms.

There are many news stories that have a relevant link to the Ontario curriculum that are written daily and it seems a lost opportunity for teachers to ignore them. In order to begin to

figure out how teachers can better integrate current events into their classrooms, it is important to understand what teachers do. Then, researchers can study where the practice can be taken in the future.

Therefore, this study will consider teachers' rationale for the inclusion of current events into their classrooms. All teachers make their own decisions regarding what pedagogy to use in their classrooms. So, figuring out why some teachers use current events and how they do so will help us understand what motivates those teachers who incorporate news into their class work.

In essence, this study will seek to learn why some teachers support the idea of current events in the classroom and how they translate that to actual practice.

Research Questions

For this study, I wanted to find out about the experiences of teachers who regularly include current events in their classroom.

My main research question was: What are the experiences and preferred strategies of, grade 4 and 10, teachers who include current events in their classrooms?

My subquestions included: What challenges are faced by teachers who incorporate current events in their classrooms? What advantages are there to bringing current events into the classroom and using it to teach parts of the curriculum? What strategies teachers use to incorporate current events into their classrooms?

Background of the Researcher

Before I entered the world of teaching, I studied journalism at Ryerson University.

During that time, I discovered the power of the news to shape my experiences and challenge what I thought I knew. When I made the move over to education, those lessons stuck with me.

Having reported the news, I know how influential it can be. I saw first-hand how one key piece of information can transform the perspective of a student body, especially in the case of Toronto mayor Rob Ford. My class reported on his original public activities and I saw the shift in attitudes towards him go from mild tolerance to passionate dislike. Actions can have as much power as words.

The world is constantly changing. As I look back on my own primary and secondary education, I see how many opportunities my own teachers had to show us current events and they did not do so. I wonder why they did not take advantage of those rich resources.

Like my own teachers, my associate teachers in my first practice teaching block did not incorporate the news. Interestingly, they initially told me they used a lot of current events in their classrooms, but while I worked alongside them, I never saw evidence of this. They only discussed the typhoon in the Philippines after I brought it up in a lesson on news-writing.

Here at OISE, I have been taught that making the subject matter relevant to students' lives is essential for keeping a class engaged. In fact, in my teaching social studies class with Dr. Rose Fine-Meyer, I was required to do a current events assignment. She has all of her students, across all programs, do the assignment because she wants to ensure her students are prepared to include current events in their teaching practice. Current events are inherently relevant to students as they, as their name states, are current. They affect the world at a specific moment in time and allow students to become globally aware and engaged.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on current events in the classroom, although sparse, argues that it is something all teachers need to incorporate. In fact, in a survey of teachers, 95% of respondents said teaching current events is “important” or “essential (Haas and Laughlin, 2000 p. 12).” The news allows for content-to-world connections in a way that engages students. It is those connections that help students see real-world importance in what they are learning in school.

However, the literature also highlights the issues and obstacles in teachers’ way. Teachers need to find time to devote to the news and other appropriate resources, as well as negotiate the space of their classroom in ways that makes it safe for students and themselves.

Using Current Events in the Classroom

There is a clear consensus in existing literature on the importance of incorporating news in the classrooms, however, not all teachers use it.

Wayne Journell’s research (2010), found that all of his participating teachers expressed the necessity of using current events in their politics classroom, yet only two capitalized on the unique opportunity they had with the 2008 presidential race (Journell, 2010). Those two were more experienced than others and were working in higher income neighborhoods and better performing schools, according to standardized testing. Journell concluded his research by defining three categories of current event inclusions: curriculum first, disciplined inclusion, and opportunity first (Journell, 2010, p. 116).

The curriculum first system prioritizes the content set out by the curriculum and standardized testing. Teachers who practice this, rarely, if ever, use or mention current events. They deliver, almost exclusively, the content mandated by the curriculum (Journell, 2010, p. 116).

Disciplined inclusion is when teachers systematically and intentionally integrate current events into their teaching, but stays close to the mandated content (Journell, 2010, p. 119).

The opportunity first inclusion strategy prioritizes current events. In the case of Journell's research, this meant the teachers talk more about the election and less about the material for Illinois' government test (Journell, 2010, p. 120).

This theory of inclusion, and Journell's views of it, are seemingly representative of how teachers approach current events. It stands to reason that more comfortable teachers take more liberties when straying from the curriculum and allowing students to take the reins.

It is also important to note all of Journell's teacher and student participants were satisfied by the amount of election discussion there was in their class, no matter what type of inclusion the teacher used (Journell, 2010, p. 121). This demonstrates the willingness of teachers to stand by their practice as well as the students' contentment with what they know. Students who did not have an opportunity first classroom cannot know what that environment is like just as opportunity first students cannot imagine a curriculum first based instructor.

Another study (Haas and Laughlin, 2000), found the same enthusiasm for incorporating the news amongst teachers as Journell did. The study surveyed teachers from the National Council for the Social Studies. Again, like Journell's work, Haas and Laughlin found teachers did not use current events much as they would like, citing a lack of time, as a major inhibiting factor (Haas and Laughlin, 2000 p. 24).

As a body of literature it is clear teachers are on board with the idea of using the news to teach students a variety of subjects. In the next section, I touch upon the use of current events in

science as well as literacy classes. In addition, I will be explaining some of the reasoning behind these views and why teachers are so pro news in their classes.

Arguments for Using Current Events in the Classroom

Using the news to teach content is a simple way teachers can make the curriculum accessible to their students.

Laura McCullough (2006), who is an associate physics professor at the University of Wisconsin, had her students do a science-based news assignment . She called the assignment “the best assignment I have so far come up with for my college physics course (McCullough, 2006, p. 33).” This is because it engaged her students in a world outside the classroom and she even had students commenting on the “coolness” of the articles they found, which I think is an achievement in itself (p. 32) As a university student, I know that getting me or my peers to call an assignment “cool” is an uphill battle for any instructor. McCullough even received papers early from this assignment which is another testament to its ability to draw on students’ curiosities (p. 33). McCullough also found her students put more personality into their work than usual (p. 32). They connected the articles they chose to their own families and lives, which I believe is a main reason to use current events in the first place. Of course, this study is conducted with university aged students, so its applicability here is limited. With that being said, it does clearly show a connection between current events and student engagement. If the news sources were of grade level, on topic, and of interest and I don’t see why these findings could not be replicated on younger students. This being said, it is up to the teacher to know his or her students in order to make it work.

McCullough's experiences make sense because a study conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools and National Center on Effective Secondary Schools in the United States, notes that connection to the "real world" is a key factor in student engagement, "One of most critical criteria for authentic work is that it has its value and meaning beyond the instructional context. To the extent that the messages students speak and write, the products they make, the performances they complete (music,dance,sports) make an impact on others and on students themselves, beyond certifying students' level of competence or compliance, these activities gain in authenticity (Newmann, 1992, pg. 26)." This means that as students learn and produce work with larger connections to the world, student's engagement will increase.

For the purposes of this research, I will define authentic by using the Oxford Dictionary's definition as it pertains to existentialist philosophy "relating to or denoting an emotionally appropriate, significant, purposive, and responsible mode of human life (Oxford Dictionaries Online)."

Moore (2013) shares my views that personal connection to content is an advantage of using current events: "News and current events connect directly to children and young people's lived experiences, and actively shape their values about the world." He says the connections formed help students to see themselves and others in a larger context in relation to the media. This means students can see themselves and their representations in the mainstream media and are therefore more likely to question what they see. This is an objective of media literacy, which is a strand in the Ontario literacy curriculum.

Media literacy is defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and effectively communicate in a variety of forms including print and non-print texts (Considine et.al. 2009, p. 472).” This definition says media literacy is a critical thinking skill set all on its own.

But, as teachers know, students are not blank slates when they walk through the classroom doors. They already have a set of media literacy skills as they are constantly bombarded with media messages as they troll the internet, watch television and listen to music (Considine et.al. 2009, p. 471). Considine et. al. (2009) says bringing media into the classroom in any form helps to bridge the gap between the skills students already use to mediate their media consumption with the skills and content used in the classroom (Considine et.al. 2009, p. 471).

News is a form of media and by using it in the classroom, teachers can instill the essential skills of analyzing and evaluating in their students.

In addition, Considine et. al. expresses the necessity for keeping students interested and the ability for current events to provide that hook. Weak readers tend to gravitate towards material beyond their level when it is of interest to them (Considine, et. al 2009, p. 475). Since those students can be pushed beyond their so-called “level,” teachers have an opportunity to scaffold those students’ reading abilities and bring them up to where they need to be. Literacy is a main Ontario focus as evidenced by the amount of literacy periods in elementary schools in the York Region District School Board schools I have been doing my practicums in. They have full 100 minute blocks of uninterrupted literacy every day. If news in the classroom can bring the interest level up, teachers will be able to more effectively teach students to read effectively for meaning.

Since reading is a skill used in all subject areas, (textbooks are not extinct yet) literacy skills are necessary for all subject areas, including science. McCullough used news in her classroom to great success, and in lower level classrooms the marriage between literacy and science is still evident. McClune et. al. (2012) studied the way English and science teachers can approach the same science news articles. Not surprisingly, the English teachers focused on the characteristics of the article as well as the writing style whereas the science teachers focused on the content (McClune, 2012, p. 73). However intuitive that is, it provides an insight into the usability of news. Different teachers can use the same text to teach two very different subjects.

With that being said, not only content areas can be covered by the news. Current events have the ability to act as teaching moments. They cover issues in society which may not always work their way into the standard curriculum, yet teachers want to expose their students to. Galczynski et. al. (2012) says: “When students develop the habit of questioning and thinking critically about their immediate environment, their beliefs and their identity, the foundation is laid for them to become conscious and participating citizens (Galczynski et. al., 2012, p. 151).” Not only are teachers trying to teach students a body of knowledge, but they are also teaching how to be well-functioning members of society. Current events, Galczynski et. al. says, is one way to help open students’ minds to ideas of multiculturalism and discrimination. If the teachers deliberately keep the discussion going in a constructive direction, teachers can promote a greater understanding of differences amongst people (Galczynski et. al., 2012, p. 151).

Demacio, a contributor to David Booth’s book *Caught in the Middle*, agrees. He sees a well-rounded literacy program to have an overarching purpose and cross-curricular ties. He designed a program with his grade partners that used the students’ perception and place in the

world as a guiding theme. By developing that theme into guiding questions, he taught students the necessary skills to navigate the curriculum, “Students became knowledgeable in research skills, comprehension and analysis, point of view, identifying bias, and many other important curriculum areas. They were becoming critical thinkers (Demacio, 2011, pg. 110).” By having his literacy class study larger issues through media texts, his class was thoroughly engaged in a cross-curricular program. He was touching on science and social studies as well as literacy.

Current events integration also has the capacity for hope-building. Generally the news is a doom-and-gloom topic, but if approached in a proactive way, students can be led to believe in the possibility of a better future, “Hope requires a careful understanding of issues, the development of reasoned vision and a realistic sense of efficacy. It is then that the sobering images on TV screens and the problems they imply can be seen with possibility (Werner, 2008, pg. 175) Students are the key to our future and by teaching them the way the world is today, teachers can build students up to the challenge of taking on social issues and truly making a difference “Our goal is to encourage the development of those abilities and dispositions that allow young people to engage in appropriate personal, social and political action. Hope is indistinguishable from the belief that individuals and groups influence and shape their futures through action, (Werner, 2008, pg. 174-175).

With the considerable advantages to using current events in the classroom, it is important to ask why every teacher is not using a news article in every single lesson. But, unfortunately there are a significant amount of obstacles that stand in a teacher’s way.

Obstacles to Using Current Events

The biggest obstacle for teachers is time. Curriculum documents are extremely dense and lengthy. Teachers tend to motor through large amounts of material within the confines of the school year. Teacher perceptions are that they don't have enough time to cover all of the course expectations. However, at OISE, I have been told, on numerous occasions, that there is no curriculum police and that teachers have the distinct opportunity, to make choices around how to cover expectation and the strategies to ensure student learning is supported.

The surveys collected in Haas and Loughlin (2000), cited a lack of time for their non-inclusion of current events (Haas and Laughlin, 2000 p. 24). The teachers said they were not using news for inquiry based assignments since it would take too long, rather they brought in articles for small discussion-based assessments and would rarely let them run more than one day of class (Haas and Laughlin, 2000 p. 29). If I were to categorize those teachers according to Journell's theory of inclusion, those teachers would be part of the disciplined inclusion category. This means teachers are favouring the curriculum over the opportunities current events offer.

But, inquiry based learning does take time. In Moore's research (2013), he presents the story of Rachel, a teacher who used inquiry based learning. She had her students study homelessness and the work took more than two weeks. Although she had success in building and satisfying students' curiosities, this was a summer media literacy program and classroom teachers typically do not have the luxury of devoting that much time to one project.

Another problem teachers face in deciding whether or not to add current events to their program, is related to resources. The news is available through unlimited resources. There are television spots, radio broadcasts, newspapers, websites, and much more. But, Hobbs (2011) says

news can be “a significant source of stress because it reminds them of the peril the world is in.”

Teachers, if they are to bring the news into their classroom, need to mediate the relationship their students have with the stories they present.

Also, the quality of the sources needs to be carefully considered. McCullough noted that, although her students loved the assignment and waited for the weekly issue of the science publication she chose for them to be released, some of them found the source not meant for science students, and therefore altered slightly. This demonstrates the inability for teachers to address all needs. When a source is perfect for some students, it may be too hard or too easy for another.

Resources also pose a problem for the teachers, themselves. Moore’s subject, Rachel, did not know very much about homelessness when she addressed the issue with her students. She ended up learning right along with them, which can be a scary prospect for many teachers (Moore, 2013).

McClune said there is a disconnect between some teachers’ ability to understand the science content in some news stories. A lack of familiarity with the content and how to effectively evaluate it in the articles tends to drive the English teachers to stick to the English content of the article, rather than to delve into science articles (McClune, 2012, pg. 76). This then affects teaching strategies as English teachers are more comfortable using strategies for teaching media literacy, rather than science (McClune, 2012, pg. 76). McClune calls for inter-departmental learning in order to help teachers become more comfortable with both aspects of teaching about a particular article or issue (McClune, 2012, pg. 76).

Teachers like to maintain control of their classrooms but “teachers often face *ambiguity and uncertainty* in their own lessons to adapt to the highly unpredictable and sometimes galvanizing nature of classroom discussions and activities that center on news and current events (Moore, 2013).” News is constantly changing and teachers need to keep up, or remove the discussion from the current to the more trend-like news. Moore’s subject, John, used an off-line approach to combat this as much as he could. He wanted his assignment and lesson to go as planned and by sticking to the print media and real-world observations, he was able to keep some control (Moore, 2013).

A final problem presented in the literature when using current events in the classroom, is power news has to expose teachers’ values and beliefs. According to Kelly and Brandes (2001), teachers “think that they can remain above the fray and either be neutral purveyors of “facts” or referees of competing perspectives — or at least strive for what we will call “teacher neutrality”³ as an ideal (pg. 439). However, Kelly and Brandes believe this is a fallacy; there is no such thing (pg. 450). They say that teachers impart a bias just by virtue of what issues they choose to discuss in their classrooms (pg. 438). Teachers are people with positions which are often reflected in their classrooms, and allowing students the opportunity to deconstruct those positions may feel like a release of authority for teachers, which may be difficult for some (pg. 448).

Conclusion

The research on current events in the classroom is difficult to access. On one hand, it creates a convincing argument for the use of the news in the classroom, while on the other

exposes the weaknesses and teacher hesitations for bringing it in. Very little of the research has been conducted systematically, but is rather first hand-accounts and anecdotal. Although logical conclusions are drawn, they need to be taken at face value. Respondents to Haas and Laughlin (2000) were most likely invested in the idea of using current events and therefore took the time to respond, and Journell's sample was only 6 teachers. Also, Moore only used 3 teachers of a media literacy program for his anecdotal research.

For my own research, although it will be small in scale as well, I hope to fill the holes left in this body of literature. Some of my research reflects on what teachers are doing now in the GTA, why the disconnect exists between the enthusiastic views on current events and the evidence to back them up, and what teachers can do to combat the obstacles they have to face when choosing to use current events.

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Procedure

This research study is a qualitative in nature and compares several case studies. Collective case study research methodology is the best way to delve into the issue of using current events in the classroom because it is something teachers face every day and therefore have varying perspectives on. It allows me, as the researcher to “purposefully select multiple cases to show different perspectives on the issue (Creswell, 2013, p. 99).” There are history-making stories happening all the time, and teachers need to decide what to present to their students and how. Teachers all do it differently and I wanted to know their thought processes when they come across such events, how they deal with them in their classrooms, as well as their general experiences with the issue. No-one will know better than the teachers themselves.

For these individual cases, I enlisted teachers from the York Region District School Board and the Toronto District School Board. My questioning revolved around their experiences using current events in the classroom and how that has changed over the course of their careers.

In this research I conducted a literature review. It focused on contemporary understandings of the effectiveness of current events in the classroom, as well as current pedagogical practices. It also discussed teachers’ views on the subject from an American perspective.

The literature review was followed by face to face, phone, or Skype interviews with a number of participants. By speaking with my participants by voice, rather than over email or social media, I had the opportunity to gain information from their body language, intonation, and facial expressions as well as their words.

Once the interviews were completed I compared the data using charts, and colour coding systems. It was then analyzed and I drew conclusions based on patterns and themes that emerged.

Instruments of Data Collection:

The primary data collection strategy for this study was collected in semi-structured and informal interviews with the participants. They provide their own opinions and narratives with respect to their experiences using current events. All interviews, face to face, phone, or Skype, were digitally recorded for accuracy. Each interviewee participated in one hour of questioning which will be broken up into two 30 minute interviews, or four 15 minute interviews, depending on their schedule. Sample questions can be reviewed in Appendix B.

Also, I kept a log of my own notes throughout the course of the interview process. Those notes include observations of how the participants answer questions and their body language, as well as my own initial reactions to the information they provide.

Participants

Determining participants is what Creswell (2013) says is the most difficult part of case studies. There needs to be boundaries, so in order to focus my study, yet include as many perspectives as possible, it includes four participants. They were found through my own personal network of teachers as well as those of my colleagues. The reason I wanted four participants is I feel that anything less than that number may exclude some points of view that are worth exploring. I feel that although I only had a limited time to conduct this study, an issue I will

elaborate on later in this chapter, I wanted as much opportunity to allow for differing points of view as I could.

All of the participants currently teach in the greater Toronto area and have been in the profession for at least three years. The reason for the need for the teachers to be in the GTA is twofold; firstly, that is where I am situated and was easiest for conducting face-to-face interviews, but secondly there are a number of major school boards in the area and I had the opportunity to interview participants from three of them. This allowed me to get more opinions and ideas from a greater variety of school situations. Additionally, there is also a distinct lack of Canadian perspective in the small amount of empirical research there is on this topic, and teachers in the GTA can, at least partly, fill that hole. My participants needed to have taught in schools for at least three years so I knew they were comfortable in the profession and have had ample opportunity to discuss the news with their students.

They were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and ages; although I will not elaborate further on this subject to protect their identities. I believe that the more diverse my case study subjects are, the more variety in perspectives I can learn about. Again, Creswell (2013) stated that collective case studies look for variety in opinions so targeting participants who differ from each other; I am increasing my chances of different perspectives.

Another requirement for my participants was that they taught junior and intermediate grades, teaching grades between 4 and 10. That is the division I am currently a teacher candidate for and would like to learn more about.

Most importantly though, is that my participants regularly include current events in their classrooms as often as possible. The purpose of this study is to understand those who use the news, so I needed to find the teachers who do it often enough to practice their strategies, fine tune them, and feel comfortable implementing them. Interviewing teachers who do not use the news will not help me to understand best practices or reasoning behind using current events.

All of my participants have been given a pseudonym in order to protect their identities, as per the ethical considerations of this paper.

Rachel is a teacher in the suburbs of Toronto. She has been teaching for seven years and currently teaches grades 7 and 8 literacy and math. She has a program called “media Mondays” during which she discusses articles with her students and teaches them to write their own.

Melissa is a teacher in an independent school in Toronto. She currently teaches grade 6 literacy and investigative research. She has been teaching for ten years in the independent system. She uses media often to initiate investigations with her students.

Ashley has been teaching for six years in a suburban school in the GTA. She currently teaches grades 5 and 6 homeroom. She uses news, in particular the Olympics, as a theme to focus her units in literacy, especially when covering text features.

Laura is a secondary school teacher who currently teaches grades 10 and 12 English, civics, and history. She uses news to connect her literacy program to social justice issues and promote discussion in her classroom. She has been teaching for five years.

Data Collection and Analysis

The analysis for this study began with a transcription review of the interviews conducted. I then reviewed the transcriptions immediately after they were completed. Upon a second read-

through I made notes in the margins of the transcriptions to be used to start to identify themes later. Once all of the transcriptions had gone through the first two readings, I colour coded responses using multi-coloured highlighters based on similar themes. I also made more notes in the margins in order to draw my future attention to important parts of the interviews that may not fit with the themes.

Once all transcriptions and reviews were finished, I compared and contrasted competing data using graphic organizers, like t-charts. By using these organizers, I was able to see the intricacies of the themes and commonalities emerge.

The next step for the analysis was to identify and decide on the most prevalent and relevant common themes which were included in the final discussion of my results. Their identification came from the comparing and contrasting I had done in the previous step.

The final interpretation was to extract meaning from the common themes of the case studies as it applies to the issue of using current events in the classroom (Creswell, 2013, p. 101). This meaning is not universally applicable, a point that will be discussed in the limitations section of this chapter, but will open a dialogue and consolidate the learnings from this study.

Ethical Review Procedures

I followed the ethical review procedures for the Master of Teaching program. The participants of this study were given a consent form (Appendix A), which states the exact purpose of the study, the commitment they will need to make, exactly how their identity will be protected, and their rights as a participant to stop the interviews at any time. The form also informed the participants that their interviews will be recorded for accuracy purposes and that the

data they provided would be used strictly for this study. In addition, it gave the participants the right to receive a copy of the full written report of the study upon its conclusion, if they so chose.

I do not anticipate any ethical issues as the nature of the study, meaning the type of information being gleaned from participants and information gathering instruments, are not overly controversial, sensitive, or intrusive. Therefore, I do not believe it will affect the lives of the participants. Pseudonyms were used in the writing of this paper as will be in any subsequent presentations of the work. Also, all participants signed the consent form only if they wished to participate and were fully aware of what the study entailed.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this research. The first is the lack of scalability. This is a small study with only one researcher, and a limited number of case studies. Case studies, are by nature, unique, therefore attempting to universally apply the information gleaned from them is extremely problematic.

In addition, my own biases in favouring the use of current events in the classroom, may have an impact on the findings of this study. This bias will influence me while I am choosing participants and drafting my research questions, so I feel it is important to acknowledge here.

Also, the topic of the study may influence those who chose to participate. The idea of news in the classroom may be polarizing as it deals with teacher's practices, and everyone has their own methods. This means that those who choose to be involved will most likely have strong opinions about the topic that they are willing to share with others.

One final limitation to my study is time. I am a full time Masters of Teaching student at OISE with 24 hours a week of class time. I also have a great number of assignments to complete outside of scheduled classes which will inevitably eat into the time I have to conduct this research as thoroughly as I would like.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Pedagogy is very personal. Each teacher is different and their classrooms reflect their own unique styles. Nonetheless, having interviewed four teachers for this research, some patterns have emerged in their practices when incorporating current events into their curriculums. All of the teachers interviewed for this research believed in the power of current events to build engagement amongst students.

In this chapter I will be dividing my findings into three separate themes and will discuss each one with reference to each participant as well as the literature. The themes are: resources, pedagogy, and teacher and student attitudes.

Resources

Resource finding and gathering was an important process for all of my participants. The teachers spent a considerable amount of time trying to find the perfect articles for their students. Rachel reported always being on the lookout for articles for her class, “I know as I read the paper on the weekends and I come across an article that I think I might be able to use, I constantly cut them out throughout the summer, throughout the year. I’m constantly cutting out articles and putting them aside because I think the kids might like to talk about that.”

In terms of best practices, the common thread was for the teachers to know their students. They gauged their interest in topics and brought in articles that would ignite a response. They wanted their students to have an inherent interest in the topic, “We are constantly using the news and events and articles and stuff to enhance programming and also to hook engagement with our students because it really gives them a more personal connection when they hear people’s story or they hear different perspectives,” said Rachel.

Ashley used this effectively during her Olympics unit. She introduced her unit with a story about the gold medals in having a piece of meteorite in them. The students were instantly engaged. She then focused on stories about athletes who had overcome obstacles as she knew her students would find those personalities interesting and even inspiring. She knew her students loved those type of stories, so she used that to her advantage.

Knowing ones' students means having an understanding of their maturity level. Melissa, who works in a fairly open school environment, is still cautious about what issues she will discuss with her students. She wants to make sure they can handle the topic to be discussed in a respectful manner. She understands that each group is different and that every class will react in a unique way to the same issue. She is also mindful of the intensity of her the topics she discusses. She tries to balance out serious issues with lighter stories, for example after a long social justice unit; she may refrain taking on another world issue in order to allow her students some balance. This is key, as Werner (2008) notes that the news is generally a gloomy topic. It is important to allow students room for hope so they don't feel worried for their future (pg. 175).

Another look-for in finding articles were pieces that generate discussion. Rachel chose issues to discuss with her students that personally affected them. She chose articles that pertained to the dramas of adolescent life including drugs, and peer pressure, but also community news that had potential to change their lives. For example a new highway was being proposed in their area so Rachel decided to discuss the implications for each side of that particular debate.

Laura used similar strategies in choosing articles with which students would be directly affected. The very day I interviewed her, she discussed the new sex-education curriculum with her students. Attending an Ontario school, her students were going to be impacted by the new

document, and the results of the discussion were very positive: “There was a fruitful discussion, a sort of back and forth going on, some kids were shier to participate,” she said. “In a class, I had about 20 kids, maybe about 5 kids were actively participating. But I must say, because it was such a controversial topic, most kids were actively listening at least, they were very attentive. I’ve never had them that quiet.”

Ashely looked for articles that had more than one side. She looked for controversial subject matters with differing points of view to incite debate amongst her students.

In general, the teachers used the big three newspapers in Toronto: the Toronto Star, the National Post, and the Globe and Mail. Those were easy to access as Laura didn’t even bother to get paper copies; she just went to the websites. It is important to note that Laura teaches at the high school level, and therefore her students can generally understand texts pulled from websites with content generated for adults, including subject specific publications like psychologytoday.com.

The other participants, Rachel, Melissa, and Ashley, tended to use kids news websites and resources in addition to the major newspapers.

Ashley, in particular, struggled with finding appropriate resources, even using content created for kids. She had a class who was firmly within the J/I age range, yet their reading levels were so far below grade expectations that she struggled to find articles they could access. She found that much of the kids news sources based in Canada were at too high a level for her students so she turned to American publications. Although, Considine (2009) does say that students with a vested interest in a topic will read about it above their reading level, which does push them to improve their reading skills (pg. 475).

Rachel agreed with her, she found that reading level, especially with younger grades, was an issue when trying to find resources.

In order to combat that issue, Melissa suggested using guest speakers, field trips, and visual media to bring news into the classroom.

One other interesting piece of information came out of the interview with Melissa. She reported being criticized for her story choice based on her political views, “I’ve had moments in the past where I’ve been criticized for pulling out resources that are a little too biased to the left, and so that was a really good experience for me because perhaps that is my lens and my bias and I just need to make sure that I think of it more critically and balance things out and let the [students] come to their own conclusion, so just presenting both sides.” Although only Melissa, who teaches in an independent school reported pressures for this, it is important to note that teachers are supposed to be inherently neutral, although that is an unachievable ideal (Kelley and Brandes, 2001, pg. 439) . Melissa, a consistent reflective practitioner learned from the feedback she was getting, and highlights a critical piece of teaching as a whole.

Pedagogy

Once the teachers found the articles, they needed to carefully choose effective pedagogical strategies to use in their classrooms. They did this based on the learning goals they had for their students and the content area they were teaching.

Mostly, the participants in this study used current events in their literacy program, or in Laura’s case, English program.

The most commonly used strategy, by all four of them, is the whole class discussion. All of the teachers displayed an article on a projector, or passed out a copy of it to their students, and

asked them their thoughts. Discussion quality varied depending on the article used to start it and most of the discussions were informal and “not official” as Ashley put it. Rachel said “they really like the discussion part, because they really like to get involved and share their ideas.” The students responded favourably to being asked what they thought. “We talked about those girls that got drunk on the plane, and that got booted off the plane, and was their punishment relevant and was that okay, and we had a huge debate in class.”

Rachel then took the class discussion further with her “Media Monday” routines. Instead of bringing in the articles herself, she has the students do so. She instructs them to read the article and then create discussion questions which they will then pose to the class on their designated Monday. She emphasized the importance of the students being interested in the article, which Melissa also mentioned. This ability to ask questions of the articles is an act of critical thinking which Considine (2009), says is a tenant of media literacy education (pg. 472). It is important to note that in the Ontario curriculum, one of the four strands is media literacy. So, students must learn to analyze the media they interact with daily and communicate about it. These class discussions directly addressed these expectations.

In addition to discussion about articles, every teacher interviewed for this study taught the art of writing newspaper articles in one of its various forms: hard news, opinion, and magazine features. In order to scaffold the learning, all of the teachers deconstructed articles prior to any writing through whole class and small group discussions. Laura and Ashley mentioned highlighting key features as a common practice in their classrooms.

They also explicitly taught, through a gradual release of responsibility, the conventions of writing a newspaper article: the five W’s and H, inverted triangle structure, and the use of quotes.

They started out with modelling and slowly let the students take the task on over time. They used a lot of small group work before allowing students to do independent work in order to scaffold the learning in a supportive way: “When we go whole group to pretty much individual, I’ve kind of got a few kids that aren’t getting it or maybe haven’t had practice with it but they’re just quiet and don’t say much and don’t ask questions,” said Ashley. “So it’s a bit of a safer environment for them to ask their friends question.”

Other content areas were also taught using current events, but the focus was on the content of the articles, rather than the articles themselves.

Rachel and Ashley had taught math using resources they found in the newspaper. They generally turned to articles using graphs and statistics in order to communicate data management expectations. The Olympics was a great opportunity for teachers to bring news into the math classroom, according to Rachel, although Ashley used it for a literacy unit. This is very much like the science and literacy teachers referenced in McClune (2012). The same event was used for different purposes by different teachers.

Science and social studies also were commonly mentioned as good fits for the news. Ashley said her students, in science, were studying biodiversity and were reading about human cloning, Laura’s civics class is based around news, and Rachel discusses natural disasters like hurricane Katrina as well as environmental issues like the Newfoundland fishing ban. The pedagogy of integration of those stories was generally similar to those used in the literacy classrooms, namely discussions, and small group work.

Melissa’s pedagogy, however, is quite different; she uses the news as a provocation for her students into a new investigation. Since Melissa’s school environment is inquiry based, it is

her job to start off a unit and guide her students to content. They also combine both the social studies and science curriculums into a class called investigative research, in which the students create projects based on what they find during the course of answering their own questions about specific topics. This means she effectively, within the confines of a structured assignment, sends the students off to research their own interests by themselves.

Interestingly enough, Laura had a similar focus on further research for interest when including current events. But, while Melissa uses it as provocation for an in-school investigation, Laura mentions news stories and directs her students to resources so they can find out more. One example she gave was when she was teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she wanted to refer her students to the plethora of racial social justice issues plaguing the world at the moment. But because of time constraints, and a long list of expectations to cover, she tends to refer her students to sources they can read for further information rather than always using class time for such discussions.

She put the onus on the students to go and find out the particulars of an issue or story, so that class time could focus more closely on the curriculum. This, according to Journell, would be a disciplined-inclusion integration of current events. Time, as Haas and Laughlin (2000), mentioned, is one of the largest inhibiting factors for teachers to include the news in their classrooms (p. 24). In fact, all of the teachers, demonstrate that theory of inclusion. They teach to the curriculum, but enhance it using current events.

Teacher and Student Attitudes

All four teachers interviewed for this study are champions of using the news in their classrooms, as are most teachers, according to Haas and Laughlin (2000). With that being said,

each participant still has a unique point of view and elicited different reactions from their students.

Every one of the teachers mentioned a change in their use of current events over time. All of them, except for Laura, reported an increase in use of the news to enhance their curriculum. Laura, however, found that her inclusion declined over time. She cited the decrease to pressure to get through the mandated curriculum as well as a faulty photocopier.

Melissa said she had an “aha” moment in which she consciously chose to include current events when she previously had not done so, “Initially it didn’t happen at all and then at some point it became a priority,” she said. She was working at a school with a daily structured morning meeting and she found herself bringing in articles, albeit informally, to the attention of her students. Eventually, with the support of an open parent community and a class of eager students, she began to bring the discussions into her literacy program, therefore moving towards integration into the curriculum. Now she frequently uses media and news and has even taught how to write a newspaper article.

Rachel also found that her inclusion had increased over time. She has accumulated a large bank of articles, and has become more confident in her ability to connect any current event to the curriculum.

Ashley, was relatively new to including current events, and found that reflecting on her practice made her previous units more effective. From her Olympic unit, she made changes to her pedagogy by adding more group work, and allowing for more practice before the final assessment.

In regards to student response, all participants reported heightened engagement levels when the class content was connected to real-life news.

Ashely found an article that not only engaged her students, but excited them. The first article she used to introduce her Olympic news-writing unit was about pieces of meteorite in the gold medals to be given out at the Sochi games. Her students were instantly hooked. Although, instead of inciting social action, she sparked a genuine interest which allowed her to teach text features under the guise of current events.

Laura experienced a similar level of engagement during a discussion of social justice issues during some shootings of African-American men in the United States while teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She said her students were so invested, they brought in videos and articles on their own, something Laura hoped her students would do.

Rachel found her students excited, but also amused by some of the stories they found. Her students like humorous articles about people's poor choices. They also live in a community where students have little experience with the world, so she finds her students are surprised by the stories they read in the newspaper for Media Monday.

But more than just building enjoyment, all four teachers saw value in students making connections to the content. In fact, in Melissa's classroom, a large purpose of introducing current events into the classroom was so the students could get involved and make a difference: "They always want to know why; why are we doing this, why are we talking about this," she said. "I think they need to understand why it's important in order to feel engaged in it, which I think perhaps is sort of the nature of the school, that they, everything they do is grounded in something outside of the school. It's not just about pulling out a textbook and saying we have to learn about

this because we have to learn about this; we often lead them in a direction and it's usually connected to a bigger picture, something in the community, or something they actively want to engage in outside of the classroom.”

The research tells us personal connections are key to igniting engagement amongst students. McCullough (2006) had high engagement with her current event assignment in a university setting. It shows the authenticity mentioned in Newmann as well. Since the students' work had larger implications, the authenticity of the work, and therefore engagement increased.

Melissa recalled an instance where her current group of students, actively engaged with an issue they found in the news: “There was a project where they were speaking out against the development of a mine, a quarry, and they were sort of able to make a difference in that discussion, in that controversy,” she said. “So I think engaging them in that makes them that much more excited, and feel like they are having an impact, which they are.” The students had made the issue their issue by joining in the debate and therefore became invested in the outcome. The students and teacher found a way to connect to something seemingly out of the realm of their personal experience.

Rachel also finds stories of real people resonate with her students. She says it shows them different perspectives which they find interesting and helps with relatability. Galczynski et. al. (2012) would also argue that any social justice issue covered would help to promote positive citizenship within the students. They believe that keeping these issues in the classroom, allows students to recognize differences amongst people and to teach students positive understandings.

With all of that said, it seems, that Rachel summed up all of the teachers' described experiences most poignantly by saying “Current events rock!”

Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Implications/Recommendations:

Personal:

This research has had a profound effect on me as a teacher. I came into this project with the notion that news had an important place in the classroom, and this research only solidified that.

I learned how critical the connections piece is to fostering engagement in my students. Having my students take what they are learning and piece that together with their lives, community, and world makes content more accessible to students.

Not only that, but student interest is a key piece as well. All of the teachers I spoke to took careful consideration of the student population they worked with when they chose news to discuss in their classrooms. They thought about the population, community, as well as personal interest of the students.

In addition, I have become more conscious of the resources I used when referencing news for my students. In my practicum experiences I was placed in classrooms of older students or of higher achieving students, so I never truly had to face the issue of reading level. But, by talking to teachers with a broader experience, I am now aware and will bring that into my practice.

Best Practices:

During the course of my data collection I have identified a number of best practices for current events inclusion in classrooms. For this section, best practices are ones that have been used by more than one of the research participants.

The first best practice is to know your students. This includes reading level, interests, community, family life, etc. When choosing articles to discuss with the class, having a keen sense of what will interest them, or at personally touch them in some way, will have a profound effect on the level of engagement of the class. All of the teachers reported that knowing the students was the best way to choose articles for them. This took time and energy, but it yielded results in the form of excitement and lively debate. The teachers also used a variety of reliable sources including big name publications like Time Kids, The Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, National Geographic, and teachingkidsnews.com. The idea of reliability has to be explicitly taught to students so they can understand why articles are being chosen from specific sources.

Barring the opportunity to do that, a second best practice is to have students choose their own articles. This way, the students are seeking out information on their own and furthering their own knowledge on a topic. This also demonstrates a passion for a subject.

Thirdly, teachers should deconstruct articles with their class. Some students have limited experience with news articles and in order to truly delve into them with any critical eye, or to produce their own, the formula for a well-written newspaper article should be explicitly taught. In order to do this, teachers should model an effective deconstruction and then have students do it in groups, and then by themselves. This strategy of gradual release of responsibility will allow students ample practice with articles before starting on a more challenging project.

Another practice is to make connections. By explicitly drawing links between the concepts being taught in class and real life stories, students can see how what they learn matters to them outside of the classroom. This will heighten engagement in the students. This can be done through the course of discussions, explicit instruction, or mere mentions. Students should

learn to make the connections themselves as well because their personal connections will increase engagement even more.

Lastly, talk about it. Teachers want to promote discussion amongst the students based on the articles they study in class. This sometimes is a strategy that promotes the connections teachers should seek to make between content and news. Also, students feed off each others' engagement and opinions which supports communication, engagement, and critical thinking skills.

In addition to in-service teachers implementing these best practices into their classrooms, it is worth noting pre-service teachers should have exposure or practice implementing news into their planning. During my time at OISE, we had discussed current events and real-world connections in quite a few of my classes, but only in one did we actually write an assignment where we had to explicitly connect the curriculum to the news. Especially since it takes time for teachers to become comfortable straying from the curriculum, as evidenced by Rachel, Ashley, and Melissa's stories, any direct exposure to these ideas would be helpful.

Further study

Empirical research into this practice is limited. The keywords 'current events' and 'news' are rarely seen in educational dialogue. This research is just a small glimpse into the practices of teachers who are using the news to the best of their abilities.

In the future, I think research over time would be helpful as all of the teachers in this study reported their inclusion strategies and frequency to have changed over their careers. I wonder how profound the changes are.

For a more wide-scale look at news inclusion practices, perhaps a survey-style or more large scale semi-structured interview process with in-service teachers across Canada would be helpful.

I also think more in depth research into the opinions of students to learning about the new in school would be beneficial. Everything we do as teachers is for them, and it would be interesting to see how they perceive these practices in action.

Also, I believe a quantitative look at the number of schools subscribing to news-media for students would be an interesting future study. Teachers in this study found significant issues with finding appropriate resources for their students, yet there is a plethora of them out there. I want to know how easily accessible they are and how school administrations are facilitating these types of practices in their schools.

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APPENDICES**Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview**

Date: September 30, 2014

To Whom it May Concern,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying best practices of the inclusion of current events in the classroom for the purposes of a investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Arlo Kempf. My research supervisor is Dr. Rose Fine-Meyer. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of 60 minutes of interviews that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer. If that is not possible, we can arrange digital interviews using the telephone, Skype, or email.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and if you wish I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Meredith Morrison

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Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Meredith Morrison and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: _____

Name (printed): _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Teacher interview questions:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What is your teachable?
3. What grade/subject do you teach?
4. Have you ever used news in your classroom?
5. What is the best experience you have had incorporating a news event in the classroom? Why do you think it went so well?
6. What capacity did you use a news story?
7. How did you introduce the news story?
8. How did the students react to it?
9. Did you use any follow up activities related to the news story? If so, what was it? If not, why not?
10. What was the worst experience you have had incorporating a news event in the classroom?
11. Why do you think it went wrong?
12. What did you learn from that experience?
13. Do you think it deterred you from using current events in future lessons?
14. Do you find it difficult to incorporate real world news into the classroom? If so, why, what challenges do you face?
15. Do you feel any subjects specifically lend themselves to the inclusion of current events?
16. Do you find it difficult to discuss news in certain subjects? If so, which ones?
17. Have you ever discussed current event incorporation with your colleagues? If so, in what capacity?
18. What types of attitudes do you find in your school towards incorporating news into the classroom?
19. How would you characterize your own attitudes towards using current events in the classroom?
20. Do you think it is necessary to talk about current events with students? Why or why not?
21. Do you think this practice is used enough in schools?
22. Are there any obstacles that you can identify that prevent teachers from using current events in the classroom?
23. Are there any systemic changes that you think can be made to allow for more inclusion of current events?
24. Do you think you can stand to incorporate more current events into your program?
25. Has your current event inclusion changed over the time, from when you first started teaching until now?
26. Do you think the curriculum lends itself to the inclusion of current events?