



Teaching Public Issues in Politically Divided Times: Lessons Learned from the Media Coverage of January 6, 2021

Jeff Frenkiewich, University of New Hampshire

Abstract

To understand how educators can better teach contentious public issues in a politically divided society, the author turns to media coverage of the insurrection of January 6, 2021, perhaps the best documented instance of educators teaching a politically contentious issue. These articles provide valuable data on what lessons were taught in classrooms in the days following January 6, and they reveal a road map for how educators can balance the political demands of their communities while also helping students prepare for citizenship by understanding and working through politically contentious issues. The media was clear in communicating preferred methods for addressing these concerns, revealing a pragmatic pedagogy in which educators (a) pause the curriculum to address divisive issues; (b) model the building and maintenance of caring relationships; and (c) teach non-partisan democratic knowledge and values such as critical thinking, media literacy, and civil discourse. The author argues that the lesson strategies revealed in the media coverage of teaching the January 6 insurrection should be a model for how educators proceed with teaching politically contentious public issues in the future.

Keywords: *civics, citizenship education, January 6, current events, media discourse analysis, curriculum & instruction, education policy*

Introduction

On Wednesday, January 6, 2021, a mob supporting Donald Trump’s false claims of election fraud attempted a coup d’état against a Congress mandated with certifying the free and fair election of an American president (Feuer, 2022). The next day, teachers across the country were charged with helping students understand the events of the previous day. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, commented on Twitter, “Students across America are watching... You don’t have to be a civics teacher to know that this moment is going to be very difficult for so many educators across the country” (Meckler, et al., 2021). America *was* watching to see how educators would handle this historic event.

Teaching the events of January 6 was “very difficult,” in part, because the insurrection was the latest battle in America’s “war over knowledge,” an epistemological conflict in which Americans are fighting over what counts as truth, and what values should be at the core of what it means to be an American, including concepts central to our democracy such as religious freedom, equal

opportunity, and individual rights (Rauch, 2021). The insurrection was the capstone of the previous four years filled with lies, misinformation, and political turmoil, and teachers were now responsible for helping their students understand the meaning of the event, while themselves avoiding a land-mine in the “war over knowledge” - the charge of indoctrination (see Gordon, 2021).

The political discourse surrounding civics education in the days and weeks following the January 6 attack exemplifies America’s “war over knowledge.” It manifested in debates about how to “revive” civics instruction after two decades of neglect (Gabor, 2021; see also Barton, 2021; Groves, 2021; Vasilogambros, 2021; Walsh, 2021), related disagreements about states requiring a civics test for high school graduation (Napolitano, 2021; Vasilogambros, 2021), and the battle over so-called “divisive concepts” laws that were based on the concocted threat of Critical Race Theory in K-12 schools (McCausland, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021).

With the political divide little changed since January 6, 2021, and these “divisive concepts” laws leaving many educators “scared, confused, and self-censoring” on what to teach (Meckler & Natanson, 2022; see also Greene, 2022; LaCasse, 2021; Villarreal, 2021), it should be no surprise that many educators today carry uncertainty about how to talk with their students about politically contentious issues and events. When the next political crisis happens, many educators will just abstain from engaging students in these important conversations altogether (Hollingsworth, 2022; Wermus, 2022).

However, American educators are mandated with the responsibility of teaching our children the values, skills, and knowledge of democratic citizenship (Dewey, 1916; Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021), and we cannot retreat from our responsibility to teach tomorrow’s citizens how to participate effectively in our democratic way of life (Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson, 2021). Therefore, teachers must be able to “articulate why practicing democracy within a classroom is so important” (Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021, p.24), and they must enter the classroom equipped with the tools necessary for helping their students understand politically contentious events (Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson, 2021; Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021).

But what are the best practices for teaching this curriculum in an era where, as one North Carolina high school teacher stated in a January 8, 2021 *Fayetteville Observer* article, “it’s hard to present the truth without making it seem like you’re biased?” (Gordon, 2021). How can teachers successfully navigate the politics of this “war over knowledge” while at the same time providing their students with the values, skills, and knowledge necessary for understanding highly contentious public issues?

To understand how educators can successfully navigate these demands, I turn to what is the best-documented instance of educators teaching about a politically contentious event – media coverage of the insurrection of January 6, 2021. As happens whenever there is a crisis in domestic or global politics (Frenkiewich, 2012), the days and weeks following January 6 saw the nation’s gaze turn to the American education system with unprecedented media coverage of teachers’ lessons, opinion essays on how educators should proceed with their lessons, prepared lessons (e.g., Ascione, 2021; Kamenetz, 2021; The Learning Network, 2021), and state and local guidance on how educators should teach about the attack (e.g., Gomez, 2021; Herron, 2021). These articles are a source of valuable data on what lessons were taught in classrooms in the days following January 6, and they provide a case study for how educators proceeded with teaching a politically contentious public issue in a society anxious about indoctrination.

The media was clear in articulating preferred methods for addressing contentious public issues in the classroom, revealing a pragmatic pedagogy in which educators (a) pause the curriculum to address divisive issues; (b) model the building and maintenance of caring relationships; and

(c) teach non-partisan democratic knowledge and values such as critical thinking, media literacy, and civil discourse. The foundation for this pedagogy is grounded in long-established principles that call for teaching children democratic citizenship with lessons attuned to students' lived experiences (Dewey, 1916; 1938) and our need to build and maintain caring relationships (Noddings, 1984; 2005); when the next political crisis happens, educators would be wise to turn to these lessons as an example of how they can balance the political demands of their communities while also meeting the necessity of preparing children for citizenship.

Pragmatic Citizenship Education as a Guide for Teaching Contentious Public Issues

America's founders recognized the centrality of public schooling in promoting and maintaining a strong civil society able to deal with contentious issues (Carpenter, 2013), but it was John Dewey (1916), who perhaps best articulated why America's public schools needed to play an integral role in preparing children for the challenges of citizenship. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) argues for a pragmatic citizenship education, one in which children are taught that "knowledge is not just something which we are now conscious of, but consists of the dispositions we consciously use in understanding what now happens" (p. 400); an education aimed at preparing citizens to understand events with critical thinking and thoughtful action.

Dewey's vision for pragmatic citizenship education has influenced modern thinking on this curriculum, as many guides published in the last decade draw from and build upon this philosophy of teaching children the dispositions necessary for understanding public issues (e.g., Evans, 2021; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Schmidt & Pinkney, 2022; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Nel Noddings (2005, 2013), specifically, draws from Dewey's work to argue that educators must teach students the knowledge of how to build and maintain caring relationships; knowledge necessary for sustaining a pluralistic democracy. In short, if we are to prepare children for democratic citizenship in a politically divided society, we must provide them with the dispositions necessary for critically engaging contentious issues and events as they happen. This curriculum is especially suited for a society anxious about political indoctrination as educators' priority is focused not on teaching students what to think, but rather teaching them how to think.

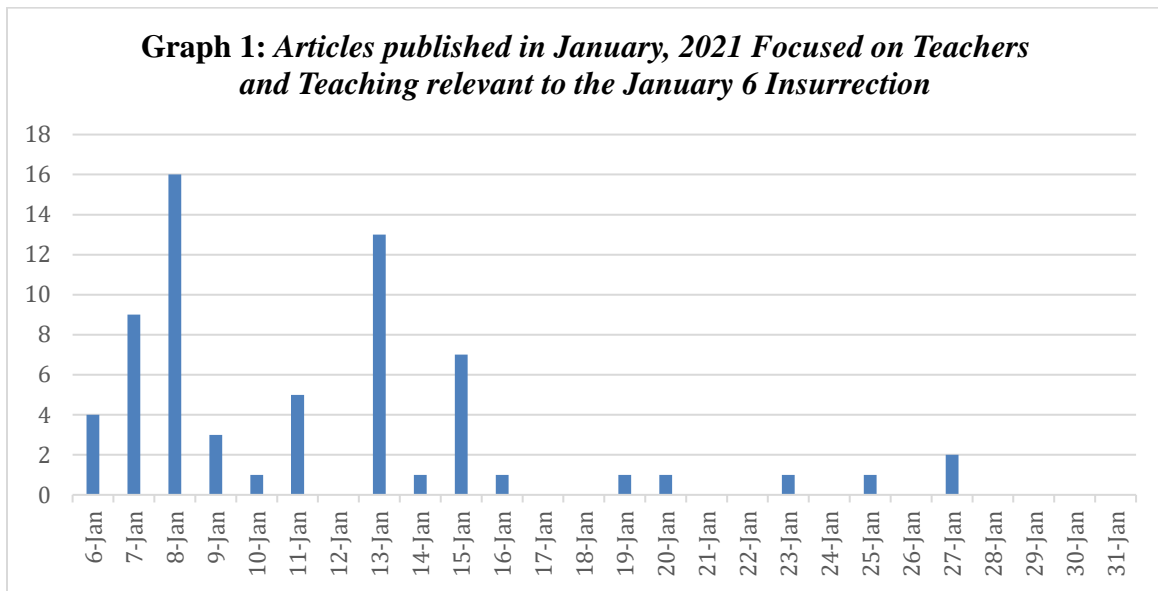
However, there is little empirical research examining how teachers employ this pedagogy while simultaneously balancing the political demands of their communities (Pace, 2021), especially communities embroiled in the current "war over knowledge." This research therefore moves the literature forward by providing a case study in how America's educators employed a pragmatic pedagogy to teach about a politically contentious public issue during a very politically divided moment in history.

Methodology

The sample for this analysis consists of 54 articles published within the first three weeks of the insurrection; that is, between January 6, 2021 and January 27, 2021. These articles report on (a) teachers' lessons pertaining to the January 6 insurrection, (b) opinion articles, policy documents, and curriculum materials guiding teachers on what they should do in regards to teaching the January 6 insurrection, or (c) stories about teachers' direct involvement in the January 6 coup (Graph 1).¹ The articles come from traditional print journalism such as the *New York Times* and

1. Due to news sharing services such as the Associated Press and Reuters, or independent reporting on the same event by different news agencies, multiple news outlets may publish or broadcast articles pertaining to the same story

Los Angeles Times, broadcast journalism such as National Public Radio, national television networks and their local broadcast affiliates, cable news stations such as Fox News and CNN, periodicals such as *Education Week* and *People Magazine*, and online publications such as blogposts and social media activity on platforms such as Twitter. The articles were gathered through repeated internet and periodical database searches throughout the month of January, 2021 using the search engines of Google, Google News, Yahoo News, and Ebsco. The search terms “January 6” and “teacher” or the date and “lesson” were used to find media reports.



This collection of news stories represents the mainstream media discourse pertaining to classroom teaching about the January 6 insurrection. With a politically divisive issue such as the January 6 insurrection, any community discord regarding education policy or teacher actions taking place in the public forum or on social media was likely to grab the attention of mainstream media (see Durkee, 2021; Richard, 2022), and modern internet search engines will find those reports. These media reports capture discourse across the political spectrum, and they provide us with a view of both teaching practices celebrated by the community and those that are rejected as indoctrination. Importantly, with a lack of other observational data on what educators taught about the insurrection in the days following January 6, these media reports may be the best source of information for telling us what practices were used in America’s classrooms.

Within this sample, the media was clear in articulating preferred methods for how teachers should engage in lessons about politically contentious events.² Reading through each article, ped-

and facts. Articles with identical text and articles centered on the same teacher were counted as a singular occurrence as part of this sample.

2. It is important to note that while the mainstream media filters narratives, screening and selecting ideas that are acceptable to most citizens (Fowler, 2013; Malin & Lubienski, 2015), in this case, promoting lesson strategies that the media sees as acceptable to wider society, more research must be conducted before claims are made regarding a lesson’s ability to withstand public scrutiny, especially in communities that are severely divided along political lines, and in communities that are underrepresented by mainstream media. In short, this media discourse analysis provides a barometer for judging what society tolerates as acceptable practice, but it does not indicate actual conditions on the ground.

agogical methods and dominant themes discussed in the text were identified (Table 1). The accounts of teaching and the recommendations for teaching revealed in these accounts provide a treasure trove of lesson ideas and pedagogical strategies that can guide educators. When understood in conjunction with the substantial literature on citizen education already existing, these accounts provide a solid foundation for suggesting how educators can proceed with teaching politically contentious public issues.

Table 1: Occurrence of Selected Themes in Articles Covering the Teaching of January 6, 2021³

| Theme | # of Articles Discussing the Theme | % of Articles Discussing the Theme |
|---|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Argument given for Pausing the Curriculum | 13 | 24.07% |
| Teachers Creating a Safe Environment or Caring for Students' Emotional Needs | 12 | 22.22% |
| Teachers recognizing Student Voice | 10 | 18.52% |
| Argument for teaching Facts or Lessons on finding Facts | 10 | 18.52% |
| Lessons on Media Literacy | 9 | 16.67% |
| Lessons on Social Justice Issues like addressing Inequality | 9 | 16.67% |
| Teacher involvement in January 6 Insurrection | 8 | 14.81% |
| Lessons on Historical Background or Themes | 7 | 12.96% |
| Lessons on Civil Discourse Skills | 7 | 12.96% |
| Lessons allowing students to Discuss Emotions | 6 | 11.11% |
| Argument given for staying Neutral on Political Issues | 6 | 11.11% |
| Writing Prompts or journaling | 5 | 9.26% |
| Teachers Encouraging Student Questions | 5 | 9.26% |
| Argument given for Stay the Course or Avoiding topic | 5 | 9.26% |
| Lessons on Democratic Norms like Free Speech or Fair Elections | 4 | 7.41% |
| Teachers beginning class with Community Meeting | 2 | 3.7% |
| Concern for Age-Appropriate Instruction | 2 | 3.7% |
| Argument given for teaching about January 6 outside the social studies classroom. | 2 | 3.7% |
| Teachers Encouraging Healing | 1 | 1.85% |
| Teacher Notifying Parents | 1 | 1.85% |
| Lessons on Political Concepts | 1 | 1.85% |
| Total Articles in Sample | 54 | 100% |

Arguments for Pausing the Curriculum

Concern about indoctrination in schools increases whenever there is a rise in political division (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017; see also Kingkade, 2020; Micolucci, 2020), and in the days following January 6, the media was ever-vigilant searching for teachers accused of misleading and indoctrinating children about the insurrection. The media reported on teachers who spread misinformation about the event, such as one substitute teacher in Florida who was fired after telling her students that Antifa was behind the attack (Ghosh, 2021; see also DaSilva, 2021; Froelich, 2021).

3. Note: Discussion of different themes may appear in the same article.

The media also reported on lessons containing content and messaging deemed too extreme by the community. One Tennessee high school teacher, for example, was fired after having his students read Ta-Nehisi Coates *The First White President* and showing Kyla Jenée Lacey's performance of the poem "White Privilege" as hooks for lessons about the 2020 election and the attack on the Capitol (Green, 2021; Wagner, 2021; see also Schemmel, 2022).

Several news outlets reported on teachers who were directly involved in the January 6 insurrection (e.g., Associated Press, 2021; Casiano, 2021; Grzegorek, 2021; Kremer, 2021; KY3 Staff, 2021; Matusek, 2021; Popichak, 2021; Raymundo, 2021; Stimson, 2021; Williams, 2021a). Most of these teachers were forced to resign, were fired outright, or were being investigated when news of their involvement was published, but at least one teacher involved in the attack returned to the classroom and spoke about his involvement with students before being placed on leave (Berti, 2021; Fox, 2021; Grablick, 2021). Worth noting is a report of two teachers in Arkansas who were *not* removed from the job after news of their involvement in the January 6 coup attempt surfaced (Peacock, 2021).

While the overwhelming majority of teachers who engaged their students in lessons about the January 6 attack did so with professionalism and expert skill, stories like these have proliferated a narrative that public school teachers are bent on indoctrinating students, a narrative that has elevated society's concern, both on the left and the right, and increased scrutiny of all educators, even those teaching in a fair-minded way (Hollingsworth, 2022).

With the fear of being accused of indoctrination, it seems no surprise that many fair-minded teachers avoid engaging in politically contentious issues altogether (e.g., Gomez, 2021; Meckler, et al., 2021). After the January 6 insurrection, for example, some school districts in Florida, hoping to "avoid potential blowback from parents," told educators to avoid discussing the attack (Gabor, 2021, Jan. 14). One teacher in Des Moines, Iowa also reported that her school administrators sent faculty members a warning to be careful about how they taught the January 6 attack (Hollingsworth, 2022). One Los Angeles teacher reported that she "kept the conversation brief because she did not want to inflame tensions" (Gomez, 2021). As Anton Schulzki, president of the National Council for Social Studies and a classroom teacher in Colorado, put the concern succinctly, "there may be some teachers who are going to feel the best thing for me to do is to ignore this because I don't want to put myself in jeopardy" (Wermus, 2022).

However, despite airing concerns about political backlash, or citing educators' anxieties about deviating from the "curriculum map" (Strauss, 2021a), the media, overall, broadcast tacit approval of teachers who paused their scheduled lessons and engaged their students in discussions about the January 6 insurrection (e.g., Cruz, 2021; Harper, 2021; Herron, 2021; Holcombe, 2021; Koran, 2021; Mackay, 2021; Pelletiere, 2021; Strauss, 2021a; Taketa, 2021).

In a January 8 report in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, one high school social studies teacher in San Diego said, "You have to address it, it would be a disservice not to address it" (Taketa, 2021, Jan. 8). In a January 9 article in *People*, a vice-principal in a D.C. area school stated, "To move forward with another day of school as if what happened is a normal day would be a disservice to our students and staff" (Mauch, 2021). And in a January 11 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, one high school history and government teacher in California stated, "I can't, in good faith, teach government and not teach this... They were ready to talk about it" (Gomez, 2021).

Importantly, the media also recognized the work of educators teaching in conservative districts trying to help their students establish a fair-minded understanding of the event. On January 8, the *Fayetteville Observer* reported on one eighth-grade teacher in Nash County, North Carolina

who stated, “I know the county I teach in is full of Trump supporters who may very well be (my students’) family, but that’s not going to stop me from having this discussion” (Gordon, 2021).

Reports furthered a narrative that ignoring the issue, or not giving it proper attention in the classroom may do more harm than good. In an online article published in *Greater Good Magazine* on January 15, David Schonfeld, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at the Children’s Hospital Los Angeles stated, “educators may worry they don’t know the right thing to say and will unnecessarily upset students. But saying nothing can say a lot to children – that adults are unaware, unconcerned, or unable or unwilling to provide support in difficult times” (Schonfeld, et al., 2021). In an article published by WVIR, an NBC affiliate in Charlottesville, VA, a social studies teacher in Albemarle County, Virginia, summarized the issue, “To not bring things up is kind of a dishonesty, and I think we need to let them know that we know things are happening in the world” (Hirschheimer, 202; see also Will & Sawchuk, 2021).

In an article posted on *Erie News Now*, a website covering news for both NBC affiliate WICU and CBS affiliate WSEE, a high school social studies teacher in Erie, Pennsylvania articulated his concern for the future of our democracy if teachers do not engage students in hard conversations about politically contentious issues, “We really feel like it’s our job that our students know how to protect democracy, which means they need to understand how our government works, how our institutions work, how our elections work and how citizens can fruitfully participate in our political culture and our political society” (Jonathan, 2021; see also Barton, 2021).

These reports are clear evidence of teachers employing a pragmatic pedagogy with lessons that focus on students’ immediate interests. When the next political crisis erupts, it is imperative that fair-minded educators take the lead in preparing tomorrow’s citizens for the work of repairing our fractured nation, not ignoring the issue, or inciting more division – the stakes couldn’t be higher (Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021, p.23).

Creating a Safe Environment and Modeling Caring Relationships

Understanding that there is a need to pause the curriculum and bring children together to discuss contentious public issues is a key tenet of pragmatic citizenship education, but what else does this curriculum entail? As expected, media coverage of teaching the January 6 insurrection revealed support for a curriculum that focused on citizenship knowledge such as media literacy and civil discourse skills (discussed below). However, it also revealed educators integrating social and emotional learning with their lessons on democratic knowledge; these lessons showed teachers modeling the creation and maintenance of caring relationships, a disposition that should not be neglected when preparing future citizens.

Nel Noddings (1984; 2005) builds on Dewey’s concept of pragmatic citizenship education to argue that we must teach children how to build and maintain caring relationships, a curriculum that teaches students moral values and the ability to care for one another. Additionally, teachers must be attuned to children’s needs when working through uncomfortable conversations regarding politically contentious issues and students must be taught the skills necessary for navigating those situations (Noddings & Brooks, 2017). Others have provided frameworks for how teachers can structure aspects of this curriculum in their classrooms (e.g., Greene, 2019; Horsch, Chen & Wagner, 2002; Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Mehta, 2020). In short, if we wish to teach children how to maintain a civil democratic society in which each citizen can pursue life, liberty, and happiness, then we must engage in a curriculum that emphasizes care as a first principle (Noddings, 2003).

This aspect of instruction is often missing from curriculum guides on how to teach public issues; perhaps because some versions of this curriculum have become battlegrounds in the “war over knowledge” (Reilly, 2022; see also Blad, 2020). Social and emotional learning and civics education have been framed in opposition to each other (Stearns, 2016; 2020; Strauss, 2021b, Zhao, 2020); however, the media discourse surrounding the teaching of January 6 makes clear that teaching children to build and maintain caring relationships ought to be a prerequisite for any other lessons on critical thinking and other civics knowledge. One-fifth of the articles in the sample (12 articles, 22.2%), discussed the need for teachers to create safe environments and/or model caring relationship for their students; this was the most prevalent theme after arguments for pausing the curriculum.

This value for education was captured in a January 15 article published in the *Hechinger Report*, in which one high school science teacher in Portland, Maine reflected on her experiences teaching a different tragic event, the attacks of September 11, 2001. The teacher summarized this philosophy: “In that very instant that day it became really crystal clear to me what public education really is about...It’s about teaching human beings, and it’s not science or English or social studies or math ... It’s about teaching human beings how to become good people” (Fittes, 2021). So, what can educators do to teach children how to build and maintain caring relationships?

Creating Safe Spaces

For many teachers on and after January 6, the first goal in the classroom was creating a space where students felt safe (Hirschheimer, 2021; Koran, 2021; Mauch, 2021; Pelletiere, 2021; Turner, 2022). Students expressed fear that the violence would spread across the country, and for many, the school was a harbor from the uncertainty presented in the outside world (Gomez, 2021).

The next step is for teachers to model how to manage questions, worries, and anxieties about the event as they emerge (Kamenetz, 2021). In the words of one middle school social studies teacher in Virginia, “We as adults become a little more inured to things that happen in the world around us and we forget that we have coping mechanisms that the students are just beginning to develop. I think to let them unlock those mechanisms in their own minds is a really important job for educators to do” (Hirschheimer, 2021). A high school teacher in Colorado reported that he did one-on-one check-ins with students who were “greatly affected” by the events of January 6. In his words, “This is going to be a day to listen to our students” (Pelletiere, 2021; see also Blad, 2021; Herron, 2021).

It's important to remember that the images and messages of a traumatic event such as the attack of January 6 may not be appropriate for all children (Axelrod, 2021). In a January 7 NPR report, a kindergarten teacher outside Tucson, Arizona summarized her message to her students, “I think I'd probably tell them that today some people threw big naughty grownup temper tantrums because they didn't like how the vote for president turned out. They did this instead of using their words and it was a little scary, just like it can be scary when you see another kid (or sibling?) throw a BIG temper tantrum. They were loud and interrupted our leaders while they were doing important work. But helpers stopped them and our leaders got to do their jobs!” (Kamenetz, 2021).

Also important is the realization that not all students come into the classroom ready to talk about recent traumatic events, or they may be interested in talking about other issues that are more pressing to their lives at that time. An elementary teacher in the Seattle area reported that she opened her morning meeting ready to give her students “a chance to explore their feeling,” and

more of them wanted to talk about the Amber Alert they had just seen rather than the attack on the Capitol that happened just the day before (Resmovits, & Bazzaz, 2021).

In a January 6 *Education Week* article, one high school teacher in Virginia reminded readers that each student may have different needs when it comes to how they deal with emotions surrounding traumatic events, and author Evie Blad interviewed Marc Brackett, a psychologist and director of the Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence, who reminded readers that student anger, distraction, or agitation, may actually be symptoms of feeling scared or overwhelmed (Blad, 2021). Teachers must help their students feel safe when the world surrounding them feels so uncertain.

Creating Space to Share

Once students are provided a safe place, both physically and emotionally, Philadelphia Superintendent William R. Hite, Jr. urged his teachers to create “the space, the time, the permission, the trust, the support to talk about what they observed, the emotions it generated, the questions they had” (Graham, Hanna, & Burney, 2021). A high school teacher in the Tampa Bay area echoed this sentiment, “I would simply say there is going to be a lot of raw emotion. What the teacher needs to do is realize this is going to be there and not try to shut down the emotion, but try to steer it into a discussion where everyone feels heard.” (Sokol, 2021). In a January 8 article in the Massachusetts based *MetroWest Daily News*, James Cressey, an associate professor of education at Framingham State University, summed up this strategy, “Start with letting students talk” (Razzaq, 2021; see also Miller, 2021).

Several articles (5 articles; 9.26%) reported teachers having their students write as a way to process through the events of January 6 (e.g., Graham, Hanna, & Burney, 2021; Hollingsworth, 2022). A high school teacher in Virginia told of the benefits of writing, especially when whole-class discussions are difficult due to digital environments (Blad, 2021). Writing gives students “space for vulnerability,” helps them develop voice, and “makes them feel safer taking risks” (Blad, 2021).

One high school English teacher in Massachusetts had her 11th grade students write poems about the attacks, “to talk about how they were feeling, or to record their own history of the day” (Graham, Hanna, & Burney, 2021). An elementary school teacher in D.C. asked her students to write about how the January 6 attacks might be portrayed 10 years in the future in history books (Meckler, et al. 2021). The authors of a January 7 *Washington Post* article on teachers’ efforts noted the educator, “played soothing music as the children wrote” (Meckler et al, 2021).

A high school teacher in New York made the argument for student journaling, “To give them a chance to journal silently, even five minutes, with some prompts, really goes a long way for them to be able to really put together vocabulary and express how they’re feeling” (Cruz, 2021, Jan. 8). This vocabulary is essential if we expect children to further engage in critical thinking and civil discourse about contentious public issues (Noddings, 2013).

Teaching and Promoting Non-Partisan Democratic Ideals

Along with the call for a curriculum aimed at building and maintaining caring relationships, the media also broadcast the need for teachers to help students critically think about the event with fair-minded lessons that promote non-partisan democratic ideals.

Several articles (6 articles, 11.11%) communicated educators’ desire to maintain a neutral posture when teaching the event. As Kirsten Taketa reported in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* on

January 8, “Many teachers said they are being careful to avoid pressing their own beliefs and opinions onto students” (Taketa, 2021). Austin White interviewed a local teacher in the *Pueblo Chieftain* on January 11 who “tries to stay as politically neutral in his classes as possible to allow students to form their opinions on good principles and facts” (White, 2021; see also Axelrod, 2021; Sanchez, 2022).

Many teachers “reflexively” adopt this “neutral” posture (Siegel-Stechler, 2020), or “balanced” approach (Hess, 2004), when teaching politically contentious issues, especially in a political environment where society is concerned about indoctrination (Greenfield, 2021; Wermus, 2022). However, the media also communicated that a neutral posture alone does not adequately address the realities of our politically charged society. For example, in an opinion piece published on Bloomberg.com on January 14, Andrea Gabor (2021) recounts how one teacher in Virginia attempted to maintain a balanced classroom discussion about the January 6 insurrection, only to see certain students bombarded with “racist attacks from classmates.”

Teachers must not become “paralyzed by being unbiased,” especially on principles that are important for citizenship in a pluralistic democracy (Will & Sawchuk, 2021). Therefore, the question becomes not how teachers can maintain a neutral posture, but rather what biases they *should* bring into their classroom and which biases they should leave at the door (Camicia, 2021; Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson, 2021; Siegel-Stechler, 2020). In other words, what dispositions should teachers promote in their classrooms? As Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (2015) state in *The Political Classroom*, “For the most part, teachers who make good decisions about when and how to share their political views are first and foremost setting a tone of fairness and mutual respect in the classroom” (Hess & McAvoy, 2015 p. 202 quoted in Camicia, 2021, p.292; see also Resmovits & Bazzaz, 2021).

The media discourse surrounding the January 6 insurrection reveals that society celebrates mindful teachers who consider these biases and “make good decisions” to advocate for non-partisan democratic values articulated in the U.S. Constitution. Specifically, the media privileged teachers who promoted students’ dispositions toward critical thinking, media literacy, and civil discourse.

Critical Thinking

Many of the media reports (9 articles; 16.67%) in the days following January 6 focused on educators directly addressing the nation’s growing support for authoritarianism and the associated social justice issues that underpinned the attack (e.g., Fittes, 2021; Kamenetz, 2021). One teacher in Vermont went as far as to state, “If you are a teacher, especially if you are a social studies teacher, and you are not planning to address the racial inequalities & white supremacy in what happened today, change your plans. Your students need you to” (Barton, 2021).

Having students consider public issues is essential for the maintenance of our democracy, but how educators present those lessons may differ depending on the political environment in which they teach (Wermus, 2022). As discussed above, some public issues - like institutional racism - have been politicized to such an extent that classroom discussions of those topics may put certain teachers at risk of charges of indoctrination. Also, teachers must consider that no matter how powerful or important their message is, students with closed minds are not listening (see Koran, 2021). So, a pragmatic educator helps students develop the dispositions for critically thinking about these issues rather than trying to promote a certain set of political or moral beliefs, with

the faith that students who practice fair-minded thinking will come to a fair moral judgement on their own.

At its base, critical thinking about contentious public issues starts with questions and the ability to “rethink or change” views on issues when new facts or understandings become apparent (Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson, 2021, p. 308), and many reports on teaching the January 6 attack focused on educators encouraging their students to question what happened on that day. In an interview published by WBNG on January 7, Rachel Murat, New York’s 2020 Teacher of the Year, said, “If we’re going to have people that want to be civically engaged as adults, we’re going to need to develop that fostering (sic) of asking questions and being curious” (Dixon, 2021).

Challenging students to come up with their own questions can be as simple as beginning the class with a prompt to write down whatever questions or thoughts come to mind (Hirschheimer, 2021; Stevens, 2021), or as one teacher in North Carolina did, show the class various pictures taken inside the Capitol at the time of the attack and ask students, “What do you notice?” and “What do you wonder?” (Harper, 2021; see also Blad, 2021; Matson, 2021; Resmovits & Bazzaz, 2021). A high school teacher in Massachusetts started the class with the prompt, “It was an extraordinary day and it became, obviously, even more extraordinary. What are your reactions, thoughts or questions?” (Razzaq, 2021).

In her Bloomberg editorial, Andrea Gabor (2021), reminds teachers that “having students help guide discussions by encouraging them to ask questions helps to protect teachers from community blowback. It also gives students a greater stake in the conversation.” Teachers can position themselves as active learners alongside their students. As one D.C. area teacher put it, “I reassured them [her students] those were questions I had myself, but I didn’t have the answers” (Meckler, et al., 2021, Jan. 7). A Colorado high school teacher put it another way, “I’m in no better stance ... to really understand what’s going on” (White, 2021, break in original article).

The media reported on many teachers, especially teachers working in politically divided communities, who used thematic teaching and historical analogs to help their students understand the events of January 6 (e.g., Harper, 2021; Rosenberg, 2022). In an article published by CNN on January 23, a high school history teacher in Virginia suggested comparing the events of January 6 to other historical events to “help put some context around the riots” (Holcombe, 2021). He suggested using conversations about immigration during the 1920s, or the British burning of the Capitol during the War of 1812 as foundations (Holcombe, 2021; see also Chasanov, 2021; Meckler et al., 2021). Using historical analogs can be useful because they can limit discussion of a highly combustible topic such as January 6 and turn thinking into abstraction and conceptual understanding. Teachers can take some of the emotion connected with an event out of the classroom to allow students to think about ideas without the shadow of politics influencing their conclusions.

Media reports of educators teaching the January 6 insurrection showed how educators who model critical thinking encourage students to make connections to similar events, and those discussions often steered towards fair-minded conclusions about what happened without any prompting from the teacher (Cruz, 2021; Gomez, 2021; Holcombe, 2021; Meckler, et al., 2021). As one Missouri high school teacher working in a district represented by an election denier stated, “Most of my students had not fully viewed the events and were shocked...Most of our community in southeast Missouri voted for Donald Trump. However, not one student spoke up to defend him or his crowd that stormed Congress yesterday” (Meckler, et al., 2021; see also Koran, 2021). This raises the central importance of facts when engaging students in critical thinking about an event.

Clarifying Fact from Disinformation

It is important to note that *all* students come into the classroom with some level of background knowledge and opinion about current events. American classrooms are increasingly diverse (Blad, 2021), and as one teacher on Twitter reminded readers, even students with special needs, who people may assume are not aware of events, are “engaged and aware politically” and should not be discounted when it comes to their ability to raise questions (Strauss, 2021a; see also Resmovits & Bazzaz, 2021).

The *Washington Post* reported on one fourth-grade teacher who decided to let his students bring up the topic of the January 6 attacks, “and it didn’t take much to open the floodgates, even over Zoom” (Meckler, et al. 2021). As one elementary school teacher in Asheville, North Carolina stated in a January 8 Blue Ridge Public Radio report, “If we give the eight or nine year olds, the respect of honoring the fact that they to (sic) bear witness to these experiences and events and give them an opportunity to speak to them, it only helps them feel seen and heard more” (Herrington, 2021). In the words of one high school teacher in New York, “students in every way, shape and form need their voices to be heard...In order to do that, they also need to feel that their voices matter” (Axelrod, 2021).

However, it’s also important to recognize that not all students come into the classroom with the same level of knowledge (Blad, 2021; Turner, 2022), and it is the educator’s responsibility to model critical thinking that shows students how to find and evaluate reliable information so they can build their knowledge (Axelrod, 2021; Peddie, 2022; Will & Sawchuk, 2021; Wilk, 2021).

Especially when events are happening quickly and facts are still unclear, teachers must model critical thinking and their role as an active learner. In a January 8 article in the *Burlington Free Press*, Alex Shevrin Venet, author of *Equity-centered Trauma-informed Education*, argued that it’s okay for teachers to not know the answers and to model that. She recommended that teachers, “position yourself alongside your students as a questioner, rather than positioning yourself as an arbiter or sage” (Barton, 2021; see also Dixon, 2021). It’s important for teachers and their students to remember that some facts can be clarified the next day while others can be identified as central questions that need to be “held” until the facts are revealed/clarified.

Modeling active learning, teachers can then engage their students in the search for facts relevant to the issue, a prevalent theme in the media coverage of January 6 (10 articles; 18.52%) (e.g., Fittes, 2021; Graham, Hanna, & Burney, 2021; Strauss, 2021a). *Good Morning America* highlighted Jenn Sims, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Alabama who reminded the audience of the importance of establishing facts when looking at politically contentious events: “Too many teachers are having what I call both-sides-ism. A teacher needs to step in and provide empirically accurate information” (Pelletiere, 2021, Jan. 7; see also Rosenberg, 2022; Singer, 2022). In her January 11 column in the *Chicago Tribune*, Heidi Stevens (2021) reminded readers, “Without an agreed upon set of facts, how can we combat climate change, deadline (sic) viruses, the social problems that plague and harm us?” This search for facts raises the need for teachers to show their students how to discern reliable sources when finding information.

Media Literacy

A 2021 study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that exposure to digital media is associated with increased beliefs in conspiracy theories, particularly related to COVID-19, while

exposure to traditional media was associated with decreased belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation (Coninck, et al., 2021). This finding is important for understanding why students need education on media literacy, specifically where to find reliable sources of information.

There is a clear difference between *The Washington Post* and TikTok, just as there is a clear difference between MSNBC and Fox News, and students need to learn how to discern facts from misinformation along with how to appraise political bias embedded in media reports. Students need lessons that teach them the value of institutions that deliver reliable unbiased facts, and they need to learn the value of fact checking information that comes from any of those sources.

The media coverage of teaching January 6 and the many opinion pieces published in the weeks following the attack, revealed strong public support for media literacy as a top priority for educators (9 articles; 16.67%) (e.g. Gabor, 2021; Holcombe, 2021; Sokol, 2021; Williams, 2021b). Many articles focused on the need to help students discern reliable sources for information (e.g., Meckler, et al. 2021; Sokol, 2021). In the words of one Pennsylvania social studies teacher, “You have to take the information and make sure your facts are correct so you can start thinking about the situation in a way that's reasonable and makes sense and that's something we're trying to teach our students everyday” (WENY, 2021).

For some teachers, lessons on media literacy after the January 6 attack focused, not only on finding reliable information, but also on how that information was conveyed. One teacher in San Diego, for example, had students examine various media outlets to see if the people who participated in the attempted coup were described as “rioters,” “protesters,” or “Trump supporters” (Taketa, 2021; see also, Davis, 2022). This same method can be used having students compare the images media outlets use to represent the event (Gabor, 2021). The key aim here is to develop students’ critical thinking when it comes to media.

Civil Discourse

Helping students develop the values, understandings, and skills associated with media literacy is important, but equally so is developing students’ abilities to participate effectively in civil discourse about public issues. Wheeler-Bell and Swalwell (2021) state, “a healthy democracy creates and protects spaces for rich and vibrant public debates about what problems exist, why they exist, and what we should do about them” (p.18). In the words of Steven Camicia (2021), “Students need to learn how to participate in democratic communities, and discussion is central to this participation” (p. 289 citing Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996 and Parker & Hess, 2001; see also Rubin, 2021).

Students need to know that democracies require citizens to challenge ideas and criticize views, and that healthy civil discourse in classrooms should not threaten or end friendships (Onosko, Kopish, Swenson, 2021, p. 308). In his report on teaching the January 6 attack, *Times Herald-Record* reporter Daniel Axelrod stated, “teachers should make young people feel heard and emotionally supported, while apolitically teaching that Americans can be civil while disagreeing” (Axelrod, 2021). In fact, reasonable deliberation can bring communities together by showing individuals they have more in common than they thought (McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021; Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021). Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson (2021) remind readers that creating classroom spaces where students build and practice civil discourse requires careful unit planning and instructional strategies that promote this type of activity.

One technique for helping students develop a disposition for civil discourse is modeling the creation of ground rules for discussion. For example, it was reported that an AP US government teacher in Asheville, North Carolina "...encouraged [students] to listen, tolerate differing world views, and above all else, 'be kind'" (Gordon, 2021). Another teacher in Pitt County, NC asked her class, "How do you disagree with someone in a respectful manner?" (Gordon, 2021).

In a January 6 *Tampa Bay Times* report, one Florida high school teacher reminded readers that educators must be role models of human empathy, especially when discussing events as hurtful as the January 6 attack (Sokol, 2021). A 20-year veteran social studies teacher in New York said he requires students to "explicitly acknowledge" points of agreement with their peers before expressing any disagreement (Matson, 2021). An educator in Massachusetts highlighted the need to, "help students have robust discussion, disagreements and collaborative sessions through our civic dispositions" (Razzaq, 2021, Jan. 8). Teachers acknowledged that passions can be strong on both sides of an issues, but if we hope to avoid events like the January 6 attacks from happening again, teachers must find ways to "help shape those conversations into civil ones" (White, 2021).

Conclusion

On the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of President Kennedy, WBNS TV in Columbus, Ohio reported on differing reactions to the news of the president's death in the aftermath of the assassination (10tv.com, 2013). The report interviewed Douglas Gray, who on Friday, November 22, 1963, then a sophomore at Murrah High School in Jackson, Mississippi was taking a test when he heard the announcement that someone had fired on the president's motorcade in Dallas, Texas. Gray's teacher ordered the class to remain silent, but from other rooms he could hear, "cheering and whooping and hollering" (10tv.com, 2013). The next period, Gray and his classmates learned that the president had died, and in reaction, the music teacher in charge of the class ordered the students to sing "Dixie" – a direct insult to the slain president who had fought for the expansion of civil rights (10tv.com, 2013).

Half a century later, Gray as well as millions of other students who were in school on that tragic day could recount exactly where they were when they heard the news, and could recount how their teachers and school administrators responded. Fifty years from now, today's students will remember how their teachers reacted to the insurrection of Wednesday, January 6, 2021 just the same. When the next political crisis erupts, the stakes involved will be no different.

Teaching today, in this "war over knowledge," is harder than ever, and teachers must be courageous in their attempts to balance the political demands of their communities with the necessity of preparing children for citizenship. However, the work is needed, and media coverage of teaching in the days and weeks following January 6 provides a map for how educators can successfully prepare students, our future democratic citizens, to examine, discuss, and debate contentious public issues.

In January 2022, I repeated my research methods and found about a dozen media reports of teachers' lessons concerning the insurrection that took place the year before; on the two-year anniversary (January 2023), media coverage was even less. The media may have lost interest in covering how teachers help students understand this still-contentious issue, but America's educators must remember these lessons so we can be prepared for the next time an event like this happens.

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Jeff Frenkiewich teaches philosophy of education, school policy, and social studies methods courses at the University of New Hampshire.