

## **The Road to Ambitious Teaching: Creating Big Idea Units in History Classes**

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*Although the literature base is replete with ideas about how to develop and support rich social studies teaching, advocates have been unable to show a consistently positive effect. Good history teachers take no single shape. Grant (2003, 2005) suggests that it is the interplay of teachers' deep subject matter knowledge, knowledge of their students, and the challenging contexts they teach in which makes them ambitious teachers. In this article, based on Grant's framework, we describe four cases of ambitious history teaching using big ideas. The principal question driving the project was: How are ambitious teachers making use of big ideas to teach history? Initial findings suggest that ambitious teaching is no panacea; it is challenging, nuanced, and highly-contextualized work. Using big ideas to frame one's practice allows for richer and more complex subject matter, more varied teaching and assessment approaches, and more consideration of the interests and abilities that all students bring to class. At the same time, ambitious teachers must navigate a rocky road, one that includes the need to seize control of the curriculum, come to terms with the evolutionary nature of one's teaching practice, and respond to administrative realities. The ambitious teaching examples in this article add to the history education literature that demonstrates the kind of teaching that is possible in schools under real and perceived constraints.*

Concerns about the nature of social studies/history<sup>i</sup> teaching refuse to fade: Students routinely pan their school history courses and the textbooks used in them (Epstein, 1994; Schug, Todd, & Beery, 1984); teachers routinely employ pedantic materials, instructional strategies, and classroom assessments (Cusick, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Levstik, 2008) curriculum theorists and policymakers routinely argue over the soul of social studies/history (Evans, 2004; Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 2000; Symcox, 2002; Thornton, 2008); and, until recently, social studies academics routinely avoided any serious study of what passes for history teaching and learning in schools (Grant, 2003).

Reports of slight increases in students' performance on NAEP history exams (Lapp, Grigg, & Tay-Lim, 2002) fail to allay these concerns. Although the literature base is replete with ideas about how to develop and support rich social studies teaching, advocates for new

curriculum standards, for high-stakes testing, for professional development, and for changes in the school day (e.g., block scheduling) have been unable to show a consistently positive effect (Grant, 2003). Good history teachers take no single shape, teach in no single fashion, and assess their efforts with no single measure.

In this paper, we report on the data emerging from case studies of ten teachers from western New York who vary on as many measures as they cohere. As a group, they differ considerably by age, experience, subjects taught, and school setting. At the same time, they share three important similarities—deep knowledge of and interest in their subject matters, deep knowledge of and concern for the particular students they teach, and teaching in challenging contexts. Building on the works of Shulman (1987), Dewey (1902/1969), Schwab (1978), and Hawkins (1974), Grant (2003, 2005) developed the notion of *ambitious teaching*. While not diminishing the importance of teachers' knowledge of subject matter and students (Shulman, 1987), he notes that the contexts in which teachers work matter, especially as high-stakes testing comes to dominate education. Ambitious teachers, then, a) know their subject matter well and see within it the potential to enrich their students' lives; b) know their students well, which includes understanding the kinds of lives their students lead, how these youngsters think about and perceive the world, and that they are far more capable than they and most others believe them to be; and c) know how to create the necessary space for themselves and their students in environments in which others (e.g., administrators, other teachers) may not appreciate either of their efforts. Ambitious teachers deeply understand their subject matter and they actively seek ways to connect that subject matter with the lived experiences of their students. But they often do so while facing contextual factors (e.g., state curriculum, state tests, unsupportive administrators and colleagues) that may push them in different directions.

Although the ambitious teaching framework is a powerful analytic construct, practical pedagogical dimensions have gone largely unexamined. Missing from the social studies literature are both practical approaches to realizing ambitious teaching and studies of teachers' efforts to reconstruct their own practices around ambitious teaching principles. The teacher participants in our project have been using "big ideas" as an instantiation of ambitious teaching. Grant and VanSledright (2006) define a big idea as a question or generalization that helps teachers decide what to teach and how by centering their teaching units in meaty, complex issues that are open to multiple perspectives and interpretations. For example, a question like "was the American

Revolution revolutionary?” gives both teacher and students a place to begin their inquiry into this complex era.

The case studies we are collecting demonstrate the potential for using big ideas with students and in contexts that differ greatly. But to understand their potential, we describe the teachers in this project and how the interplay of their deep subject matter knowledge, knowledge of their students, and the challenging contexts they teach in makes them ambitious teachers.

### ***Background of the Project***

The data for this project come from a series of case studies of classroom history teaching using big ideas. The principal question driving the project was: How are ambitious teachers making use of big ideas to teach history?

Our invited participant group consists of three middle school and seven high school history teachers. The participants were drawn from former teacher candidates enrolled in our teacher preparation programs. The ten participants were selected because they were identified as ambitious teachers using big ideas to teach global and/or American history, had varying levels of experience, worked in diverse settings, and were teaching courses with a state-mandated exam. In terms of classroom experience, four are beginning teachers, five are experienced teachers, and one is a veteran teacher. All teachers teach in the state of New York with three being in rural schools, five in suburban schools, and two in city charter schools

For the larger project, we asked each teacher to write a chapter-length reflection of his/her experience teaching one big idea unit. Because the teacher-authors are at various stages in writing their chapters, we included 4 cases as articles in this special issue of *Journal of Inquiry and Action in Education*:

Table 1: Characteristics of Teacher-Authors

<b>Name</b>	<b>School Context</b>	<b>Grade(s) Taught</b>	<b>School Subject</b>	<b>Years Experience</b>
Andrew Beiter co-author	Rural school	8	U.S. History and Geography	12
Sarah Foels	Second-ring suburban middle school	8	U.S. History and Geography	3
Joseph Karb co-author	Rural school	8	U.S. History and Geography	9
Mike Meyer	Second-ring	10	Global History	5

	suburban high school		and Geography	
Meg Sampson	Urban charter high school	10	Global History and Geography	1

We chose to frame this project around a collection of teacher-written essays, indicative of conceptual teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) for we believe, as other advocates for teacher research do, that an insider's view of the classroom offers a unique lens on understanding teaching and learning, one that an outsider, such as a university researcher, cannot provide (Anderson & Herr, 1999). However, we are aware of the limitations to this type of approach because we are relying on the self-reports of the teachers as they taught their big idea units.

For the project, each teacher was instructed to keep a reflective journal to record the planning procedures for the unit they taught, student comments made during unit implementation, successes and failures the teacher sensed were happening, and final thoughts of the overall teaching of the unit. Some teachers made copies of student assessment tasks for reference later when they wrote their essays. As a group, we met three times to introduce the project and check the progress of the teachers' writing. We each read and responded to several drafts of each teacher's essay.

In this introductory article, we present our analysis of the common themes and patterns that emerged across the teachers' essays. In particular, we each individually analyzed the four teacher essays for evidence of ambitious teaching noting patterns that surfaced across the teachers' subject matter knowledge, their knowledge of their particular students, and their knowledge of the context variables they have to negotiate looking for both confirming and disconfirming evidence. We then compared our notes and organized our findings around the three key categories of the ambitious teaching framework.

Before we present the teacher-author cases, we first offer a brief overview of the NYS social studies curriculum and testing context. We then describe the two principal constructs that drive this project—ambitious teaching and big idea teaching.

### ***The Curriculum and Testing Context in New York State***

Over the last decade, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) has instituted curriculum and assessment policy changes under the mantle of raising educational standards. For middle and high school social studies teachers, these changes have taken form in new US and global history and geography curricula and in new state exams at grades 8, 10, and 11.

The key curriculum documents are the *Learning Standards for Social Studies* (New York State Education Department, 1996) and the *Social Studies Resource Guide with Core Curriculum* (New York State Education Department, 1999). The *Learning Standards* describe the five overall content goals of the state social studies program. Those goals include the history of the United States and New York State, world history, geography, economics, and civics, citizenship, and government. Each of the standards is expressed in similar fashion. The first is illustrative: “Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.” Each standard is divided into two or more *Key Ideas* which are further broken down into *Performance Indicators* for elementary, intermediate, and commencement levels.

The global nature of the *Learning Standards* is made more concrete in the *Core Curriculum*. In that document, the specific curriculum is presented for each school year. In outline fashion, the content ideas are keyed to the appropriate learning standard, and a theme/concept. For example, the content idea “Constitutional Convention: Setting and Composition” reflects Learning Standard #5 and the concept of political systems. Essential questions and classroom connections are offered for each set of key content ideas.

Aside from coding the content ideas to the Learning Standards, relatively little is different in the latest version of US history curriculum at grades 7-8 and 11 from previous incarnations. The bigger changes occurred in the new grade 9-10 curriculum. There, the regional and cultural emphasis evident in the 1980s state curriculum was replaced with a chronological approach. The curriculum now features eight units, seven of which highlight an historical theme set within a chronological period.<sup>ii</sup> For example, unit three, Global Interactions (1200-1650) includes attention to early Japanese history, the Mongols, global trade, the rise and fall of African civilizations (e.g., Ghana, Mali, Axum), and the Renaissance Reformation, and rise of nation-states in Europe. In both the US and global curriculum, however, the emphasis is on a fairly predictable list of people, places, and events.

Change is far more evident in the new state social studies exams.<sup>iii</sup> Overall, the biggest change is that all of the state exams, administered at grades 5, 8, 10, and 11, now follow essentially the same format: multiple-choice questions, constructed-response questions, and a Document-Based Question (DBQ).<sup>iv</sup> Most readers will understand the nature of multiple-choice questions and the NYS test developers break no new ground here. Fewer readers will have had experience with constructed response or Document-Based Questions so we offer a bit of explanation below.

Constructed response questions have two components—a primary or secondary source document and a set of 1-3 short answer questions about the document. For example, the documents on the Grade 8 June 2003 exam include a table showing differences between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, a map depicting U.S. expansion in 1803, a letter written to Franklin Roosevelt during the Depression, and an excerpt from FDR’s Four Freedoms speech. Three questions, calling largely for literal interpretations of the texts, follow each text.<sup>v</sup>

Modeled after the Document-Based Question on Advanced Placement history exams, on the NYS exams, students are presented with 6-8 primary and/or secondary texts (e.g., diary entries, portions of public speeches, political cartoons, graphs, textbook passages). The first charge is to read these texts and respond to 1-2 short answer questions per document (as in the Constructed Response section, most questions call only for literal interpretations). The students’ second task is to respond to an essay prompt, drawing from the texts provided and from their outside knowledge. For example, the Grade 8 June 2003 DBQ asks students to read and respond to texts about the Erie Canal and Transcontinental Railroad and to address this prompt: “Discuss how the Erie Canal and Transcontinental Railroad led to economic growth in the United States.”<sup>vi</sup>

At fifth and eighth grade, students’ Constructed Response answers are worth 1 point each and their scores on this section are added to their scores on the multiple-choice section and the short answer portion of the DBQ. The essay portion of the DBQ task is graded on a 0-5 point rubric. Those scores are added to the score from the Constructed Response, multiple choice, and short answer questions to produce the final raw score.<sup>vii</sup> Raw scores are then converted into a 1-4 scale grade. A raw score of 65-84 is assigned a grade of 3; a raw score of 85-100 is assigned a 4. Grades of 3 and 4 represent proficiency; scores of 1 or 2 represent sub-standard performance. For high school students, the raw scores are calculated in similar fashion (although with additional

points from the thematic essay), but those scores are also the students' final scores. Thus, a 65 represents a passing mark; 85 represents mastery level.

### ***Ambitious History Teaching***

Although there has been considerable research on the individual factors that influence teachers' practices (e.g., teachers' subject matter knowledge, teachers' expectations of students, and the contexts in which teachers work), relatively few researchers have tried to put multiple factors into play at the same time.

Lee Shulman (1987) has done the field a huge service by looking at the intersection of two factors—teachers' knowledge of subject matter and knowledge of their students. His *pedagogical content knowledge* construct demonstrates the dynamic quality that defines a good portion of teachers' work. But teachers do not work in a vacuum. Moreover, the typical constraints teachers face (e.g., time, access to materials) are now joined by a new concern—the rise of high-stakes testing.

This emphasis on the multiple and interacting influences on teachers' work (see, for example, Cornbleth, 2002; Grant, 2003; Romanowski, 1996; Sturtevant, 1996) suggests that separating teachers and their practices from the contexts in which they work offers little yield. Although, the conditions that teachers face vary from one setting to the next, all teachers face challenges of one sort or another.

An attempt to express the complexity of teachers' worlds, ambitious teaching presumes that teachers face many conditions—subject matter, students, state policies, colleagues and administrators—all of which may confound their practices. Ambitious teachers take seriously those conditions but, in contrast to their less ambitious peers, they carve out pedagogical paths that aim toward more powerful teaching and learning. Ambitious teaching, then, is defined neither by innovations nor best practices alone. Ambitious teachers use new teaching methods, alternative assessments, and flexible student groupings, but the mere evidence of these practices without the requisite signs of robust learning opportunities is insufficient to demonstrate ambitious teaching.

Of course, other factors likely matter too. Teacher beliefs and biography, students' socio-economic class and family educational backgrounds, persistent patterns of race and class biases—these factors and more may influence the kinds of teaching and learning that develop in

classrooms (Anyon, 1981; Dilworth, 2004; Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, & Cuthbert, 1988; Pajares, 1992).

We embrace the explanatory power of these considerations, but argue that any examination of teachers' practices that puts every possible factor into play can result in analytic mush. So we take the approach that the three central features of ambitious teaching—knowledge of subject matter, knowledge of learners, and knowledge of context—give broad cover for the many other factors that influence teachers' pedagogical decisions and actions.

The literature base on ambitious teaching, while nowhere near comprehensive, is growing as researchers use the elements of this construct as a way of understanding the practices of the teachers they study (Gerwin & Visone, 2006; Gradwell, 2006; Grant, 2005; van Hover, 2006; Yeager & Pinder, 2006; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991).

The seeds for the ambitious teaching framework first were sown in Grant's (2003) study of two New York state high school teachers teaching about the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. In this work, Grant discusses the interplay of forces at work when two teachers, sharing many similarities, construct learning environments completely different from one another. He develops his ambitious teaching framework in more detail in a chapter in which he describes the journey a New York state high school Global History and Geography teacher takes as she navigates the recent changes in the state standards, curriculum, and tests (Grant, 2005). The teacher continually juggles the practical management of covering the vast 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum with her beliefs about good teaching. She does not let the curriculum and test dominate what she believes makes most sense for her students with regards to relevancy or engagement. And though the teacher is not always satisfied with her choices or the outcomes, it is her reflection and drive to make the next lesson better for her students that makes her ambitious. In short, ambitious teaching is an ongoing journey rather than a particular endpoint.

Gerwin and Visone (2006) investigated two secondary social studies teachers' aims, methods, materials, and classroom discussions in two of the courses each taught: one state-tested, the other an untested elective course with no state curriculum. In the courses that had state exams, the teachers focused on coverage of content through rote-memorization while in the elective classes, utilized more ambitious history teaching activities. The two teachers possessed the disciplinary knowledge and skills to foster ambitious learning environments, yet chose to do so discriminately.



Like Grant (2003, 2005) and Gerwin and Visone (2006), Gradwell (2006) investigated a teacher from New York. Sarah Cooper, a third year middle school teacher, taught five sections of heterogeneously-grouped 8<sup>th</sup> graders U.S. history and had to prepare them for the end of the year state exam. Unlike her peers in the school district, she was less preoccupied with test preparation strategies and activities and devoted her classroom efforts to exposing her students to a vast array of primary source documents and engaging them in authentic tasks and assessments. In her unit on the 1920s, she devoted considerable time to the women of the era, despite being neither a focus in the state curriculum or on past state tests. She identified herself as a social historian and because of her disciplinary lens, focused on everyday people in society, not what was on the state test. Cooper emerges as a case of teacher teaching in spite of, rather than because of, the test.

In van Hover's (2006) study of seven beginning high school history teachers' perceptions of the Virginia state standards and tests, she investigated what ambitious teaching might look like within a high-stakes testing climate among new teachers. She discovered that through her observations of the beginning teachers' planning, instruction, and assessment, she determined they all have the potential for ambitious teaching yet, like most novice teachers, are preoccupied with issues related to student management, learning the content, and managing scheduling. As these teachers juggle daily classroom demands and a learning-on-the-job mentality, they did not resort to lecture or drill and kill teaching, but instead used a variety of teaching techniques and assessments.

Yeager and Pinder (2006) looked at teachers' practices as they respond to the high-stakes testing climate in Florida instead. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is administered to students in grades 3-11, but does not include any social studies content. The two teachers in their study, one a beginning white female teacher and the other a Hispanic female with seven years of full-time classroom experience, both feel the weight of the exam as they prepare lessons and implement them in the classroom. But in doing so, it is the literacy test (rather than social studies) that provides the context. The seasoned teacher works in a school climate where FCAT preparation is the highest priority. The novice teacher encounters struggles particular to most new teachers in a school climate with little administrative guidance and support. Both teachers through constant negotiation, address the needs of their students, encourage them in the classroom, and engage them in rich historical content, all in less than the best circumstances.

### ***Teaching History with Big Ideas***

Although the research base on ambitious teaching is growing, the empirical literature on teaching with big ideas largely begins with the teacher cases represented in this collection of journal articles. A few authors (Gerwin & Visone, 2006; Kelly & VanSledright, 2005; Onosko & Swenson, 1996; Smith & Girod, 2003) describe elements of big idea teaching, but, to this point, only two article-length studies detail the promise and problems of using big ideas to frame teachers' history instruction (Libresco, 2005; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991).

Some studies (for example, Gerwin & Visone, 2006; Kelly & VanSledright, 2005) only brush the surface of big idea teaching. For example, Gerwin and Visone only mention briefly the secondary teachers' use of big ideas to frame the discussions in his elective U.S. history course. Sam Tookfield, one of the teachers in the study, included big ideas such as: "Were the 1950s a simpler time than today?" "Compare the Cuban missile crisis to the decision to invade Iraq" "Should the Civil Rights movement have ended when it did?" "Would you have been a successful sit-in participant?" and "Why do we have Black History Month? Should we?" No description of how these big ideas were determined or how they were implemented in the classroom is provided, just a report that he used them.

Slightly more attention to the development and implementation of big ideas surfaces in Kelly and VanSledright's (2005) study. In it, Kelly shares his early teaching experiences as he transforms from a collective memory teacher to one who emphasizes a more disciplinary approach. He states that during his teaching internship he organized his content units around questions such as "Were all people in America included in the founders' vision?" and "Was a growing America a nation with a glorious destiny, or was it a vicious, hungry monster?" Kelly describes the struggles he endures as he attempts to use inquiry and interpretive exercises in his teaching but not exclusively focus on the nature of big ideas.

Of the two full-length treatments of big idea teaching, the first is Sam Wineburg and Suzanne Wilson's (1991) comparative case study of two high school history teachers. In presenting a rich analysis of one of the teachers of the study, Wineburg and Wilson describe the big idea questions that drive this teacher's instruction. To prepare for a debate about the legitimacy of British taxation in the American colonies, Elizabeth Jensen, an 11<sup>th</sup> grade American history teacher, has her students read numerous primary sources from the era and uses big idea questions like, "What is authority?" "What is freedom?" "What are the sources of

authority and freedom?” “What are the costs and benefits of authority and freedom?” “What is the difference between authority and power?” “What is the scope of authority?” and “What is the scope of freedom?” to foster her students’ thinking about British-American relations of the time. The most powerful parts of Wineburg and Wilson’s presentation are the words students offer as they engage with the ideas Jensen’s presents. Students used 18<sup>th</sup> century language as they debated their positions. The level of conversation—the questions (both factual and conceptual), ideas (concrete and abstract), and assertions that students make—demonstrate the power of teaching with big ideas.

Another case study, undertaken by Andrea Libresco (2005) investigated Paula Maron, a veteran 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, and her response to the implementation of the new New York state elementary social studies exam. In her study, she describes Maron’s design and implementation of her 4<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum around overarching questions. Her big idea question for the entire school year was: “Has the history of New York State been a history of progress for all?” Additionally, Maron uses big ideas for each of her units. For example, she asks her students “Did colonization of New York State result in progress for all?” “Did the American Revolution and Constitution result in progress for all?” and “Did the modernization of New York State result in the progress for all?” To assist her students in answering these broad questions, she provides primary sources, Internet websites, historical fiction, and other reference materials. Students work individually and in small groups on various types of assessments like essays, panel displays, human timelines, and role-plays. Libresco found that when the teacher used big ideas to frame her units, Maron acted as a facilitator and was able to have students work as historians; engage in perspective-taking and historical empathy; learning reading, note-taking, communication, and focusing skills; and make connections across subject areas.

This smattering of research studies whets the appetite; they demonstrate the power of a good idea to transform teachers’ and students’ classroom experiences. Missing, however, are deep explorations of the ideas, experiences, and outcomes of big idea teaching. No pedagogical approach comes without problems and the teachers who report on their practices in this journal record a range of challenges as craft their instructional approaches. But each also records the energy and insights that develop as their students grapple with real ideas.

### ***The Road to Ambitious Teaching***

Ambitious teaching offers no nirvana; it can be challenging, frustrating, and complex. But as the teacher-authored articles in this issue (and the summary below) attest, teaching with big ideas presents the kind of ambitious teaching and learning opportunities to which teachers say they aspire. Key to such teaching are three sets of knowledge: knowledge of the subject matter, knowledge of the students one is teaching, and knowledge of the one's teaching context. In the following sections, we describe how the teacher-authors employ these different kinds of knowledge.

### *Knowledge of Subject Matter*

As noted above, New York state has a long history of creating state-level content curriculum. These curricula typically are highly specific and unwieldy (i.e., the 11th grade US history curriculum is 22 single-spaced pages). Rather than adopt a defensive strategy (McNeil, 2000) and give every construct some measure of attention, ambitious teachers know the ideas that resonate within their fields. It is these teachers' strong content knowledge that enables them to put big ideas in front of kids when the state curriculum, state tests, and their colleagues do not. Some of those ideas are substantive or content-centered; others focus on methodological issues.

Take for example, Joe Karb and Drew Beiter, two middle school teachers from a rural school district. They looked to the state curriculum for guidance about teaching the Holocaust. What they found is that the Holocaust receives only passing notice--a short 25-word listing of related topics and themes. They understand that a curriculum document cannot cover every issue in depth, but they worry that teachers may interpret the brief reference as license to skim over the Holocaust:

This document is not designed to be all-inclusive, but it seems strange to us that an event which can teach students so much about life is given only cursory attention. This brief mention—coupled with the pressure of the state assessment—results in many teachers spending less than one day on the Holocaust in their race to cover everything else.

Unlike many other teachers, Joe and Drew choose otherwise and schedule two weeks of class time to the Holocaust and modern day genocide. They note that some teachers find it hard to justify such use of time given that there may only be one question on the state exam. They believe, however, that “teachers do have a responsibility to be more than assessment robots and teach lessons that will impact students' view of the world.” Their beliefs about history and the

better understanding of it, emphasizes the notion of depth over breadth, an approach encouraged by education reformers (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) and adopted by other ambitious-minded teachers (Kelly & VanSledright, 2005).

Mike Meyer, a teacher from a second-ring, affluent school district, also looked to the state curriculum for direction when he tried to develop a unit about early Africa. Finding little there, he looked at past NYS Global History and Geography exam questions. He concluded that the same couple of questions appeared year after year. Disappointed, he worried about the mixed messages that seemed inherent in the state curriculum and assessment approaches:

I found it interesting that the state made a point to ask a question pointing out that there were civilizations before the Europeans arrived, but made no point of asking about those civilizations. I also thought that it was unfortunate that the area of the world about which my students probably knew the least required me to teach the least about it. I started to feel that it was wrong to send the message to the students that Africa doesn't matter.

Still not satisfied, he approached some of his department colleagues only to find they spent very little time on Africa: In effect, their units boiled down to content coverage of past state exam questions, similar to other teachers in New York state whose main concern in mandated tested course is test preparation (for example, Gerwin & Visone, 2006).

Like Joe and Drew, Mike uses his strong understanding of the content to drive his teaching. He understands that Africa has played a dynamic role throughout history:

The case of Africa shows where race and power can affect history and how that flawed history can continue to affect modern views of race and power; history and racism are historically connected and constructed; and to address modern problems, it can be instructive to examine where they came from.

Given his sophisticated understanding of Africa's past and present history, Mike chose to frame his unit around the big idea question "Why don't we know anything about Africa?" hoping his students would come to some of the same conclusions he has.

Joe, Drew, and Mike all make instructional choices based on a number of factors, one being their sophisticated understanding of history. While strong content knowledge alone is not an absolute predictor of creating ambitious learning environments, it does play a major factor (Grant, 2003; Yeager & Davis, 1996; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991)

Meg Sampson, a first year teacher working at an urban charter school, also looked at the New York state Global History curriculum and state exam questions to make content decisions. In Meg's case, she was developing a remedial course for a small group of students who needed extra assistance in preparing for the state social studies competency exam, which they had all previously failed. Although she selected topics that appeared most frequently on past exams, she framed her units of study around big ideas as a way to engage her largely discouraged students: "I felt that the use of a big idea for each unit and lesson would allow both the students and me to approach a large amount of material in relevant and understandable ways."

After trying out big ideas as a student teacher, Sarah Foels, a middle school teacher teaching in a second-ring suburb, decided to structure her course around thematic big ideas rather than the traditional chronological format of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade US History state curriculum. Collaborating with the other eighth grade teacher in the building, Sarah created an experimental curriculum that she believed, "could actually improve our assessment scores by making students think globally about what they were learning."

Meg and Sarah, like the others in this research project, looked for guidance from the state curriculum to determine how they would design their lessons and units. But instead of following the heading outlines in the state document, they, like Paula Maron in Libresco's (2005) study, choose to structure their academic units around open-ended questions, in other words, big ideas. In each case of this research project, these teachers used their content-knowledge backgrounds to seize control of the curriculum. They knew well the state curriculum, but they also knew that they could manipulate that curriculum to best serve their pedagogical needs.

### *Knowledge of Learner*

Ambitious teachers know their subject matter well, but they also know well the students who attend their classes. Such teachers realize that, although there are general patterns to student interests and behaviors, their particular students often bring local patterns and idiosyncrasies to bear. And it is recognizing those unique qualities their respective students possess and making pedagogical choices to complement those attributes that make each of these teachers ambitious. The teachers in this group reach out to their students through many means, be it connecting history to students' everyday lives, linking past events to present day circumstances, assisting them in constructing their own historical interpretations, or focusing on everyday peoples' lives of the past.

For example, one teacher linked students' everyday life experiences to a historical conflict. Sarah noticed that her students struggled to defend an argument about an unfamiliar event when working with historical documents. To make the less familiar, familiar, Sarah structured her lesson around a dilemma her students likely encountered in their everyday lives before moving on to the actual historical issue.

I decided that students would have an easier time connecting to the overarching goal of the lesson if I first posed the following personal questions at the beginning of class: "Think of an argument that you had with someone. What reasons did you give to support your ideas? What reasons did he or she give to support his or her ideas? Who was 'right' and who was 'wrong'? Explain."

The result of Sarah's opening lesson activity was that she had almost 100% student participation and evidence of more complex historical understanding from her students. She explained that students now seemed capable of expressing more varied and complex positions:

As a result, the majority of students said that neither side was completely right or wrong – they just had different perspectives and, therefore, different opinions . . . it seemed as though my students were beginning to see that perspectives on an issue changed depending on the individual person.

Sarah's use of metaphors and analogies is similar to Elizabeth Jensen, the American history teacher in Wineburg and Wilson's (1991) study of the role strong subject knowledge of teachers plays in their classrooms. Jensen, like Sarah, understood that abstract ideas can intimidate students and by framing historical questions around ideas students already know can bridge the gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

Meg Sampson similarly wanted to connect history to her students and did so by tracing the chronological development of modern day problems. Enthusiastically, she framed her course around big ideas in hopes that "students would find more success with the content if [she] could help them relate to it." She believed that, "if I could make world history relevant to them and show them that the struggles of the past are the same as the struggles today, that they would find that information much easier to recall and use." Meg linked current issues like religious conflict to its historic roots as ways to reach her students. The goal she defined was "to show them that the events of the past and the events of the present are rooted in current ideas and emotions." Barton and Levstik (2004) might argue that Meg is taking on an analytic stance to teaching

history. That her reason for having students study the past is to understand how present-day society came to be. In doing so, Meg is helping her students prepare to be contributing citizens in a pluralist democracy.

Mike, like Meg, found ways to engage his students about the historical basis for modern day issues like racism. In his unit on Africa, Mike wanted his students to answer the big idea question, “Why don’t we know anything about Africa?” Through trial and error, he found that, by acting as a facilitator, his students were better able to construct their own historical understanding: “I found that when I taught with big ideas, when I allowed students to search for answers, and when I led a class without ‘leading’ the class, students were more engaged, more willing to take on bigger concepts, and more able to look at issues bigger than information for the test.” Although he is quick to point out that not all students benefitted to the same extent as others, Mike knows he is making progress when students offer comments such as, “I feel that learning about Africa is important because it might change how we view people of color today.”

Teachers like Mike, who refine their teaching methods and incorporate more open-ended questioning techniques, report both their excitement and delight with the seeming improvement in their students’ historical understanding (Bain, 2000). However, ambitious teachers also know there is still room for growth and that it is likely not all students reached the same complex historical awareness.

Another way some of the teachers in this group tried to relate history to their students was through the personal stories of those who lived during major historical eras. One of Joe and Drew’s goals for their big idea unit was to foster perspective-taking among their students about an extremely sensitive and horrifying topic, the Holocaust. To help students understand the sheer numbers of victims, they focused on the individual victims’ stories: “So to teach the numbers of the Holocaust, we had to scale that big number down to one—in other words, *one* student relating to *one* victim, thus making the incomprehensible tangible.” The payoff, they report was immediate and intense: “The students reacted in serious and somber ways, seeming to internalize the power of the activity. ‘What we did today made me see that they were people too,’ said a student.” By constructing the activity in this way, Joe and Drew were able to lay the psychological framework for students to care about the Holocaust. Numerous studies (ie. Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; Kohlmeier, 2005; Levstik & Groth, 2002) support Joe and Drew’s



inclination that students are especially interested in individuals from the past and how they constructed their lives, even those connected to the Holocaust (Schweber, 2003).

Ambitious teachers, then, understand that there are no generic students; constructing powerful teaching units, then, means knowing how their students make sense of the world. For when students can connect to the past, they are more likely to remember it and use it in their everyday lives (Gradwell, 2006; Grant, 2003)

### *Knowledge of Context*

That teachers work within a nested set of contexts proves challenging on multiple levels. Ambitious teachers realize, however, that the people and policies that surround them may offer as many problems as possibilities for rich teaching and learning. The possibilities, manifest in the instructional practices of the teacher-authors represented in this collection of journal articles, have taken root in soil that was not always fertile. Each teacher had to negotiate a set of challenges from without and from within, any of which could have caused him or her to abandon the effort. We argue, as the teachers do, that the potential for big idea teaching clearly outweighs the associated contextual problems, but in order to avoid minimizing those problems, we present an accounting of them in this section.

The problems related to the contextual environment each teacher faced varied somewhat, but can be grouped under three general categories—lack of experience working with inclusion students, working in an overly test-oriented school climate, and resistance from students.

Joe and Drew summarize the several contextual factors that they negotiate daily: “We teach, after all, in an imperfect world that is rife with obstacles, roadblocks, and constraints. Standardized assessments, teacher in-service, and snow days all chip away at the time we have with our students.” Instead of letting these possible barriers to rich instruction get in the way of their teaching, they look past them to better reach their students: “Our intent is not to pretend that these obstacles don’t exist, but instead to acknowledge, understand, and even embrace them as a ways of advancing our profession.”

When Sarah first learned she was going to be taking on a section of inclusion students, she doubted her students’ abilities and questioned her own ability as a teacher. She asked herself several questions: “How were students with disabilities going to handle generalizations and abstract ideas?” and “How was I going to manage such a big class and still accomplish what I

had tried out the year before?” Later, as Sarah began to introduce big ideas with her inclusion students, she learned that they are powerful intervention with all groups of students:

Most importantly, I realized that no one was left out of the learning experience.

Both regular education and special education students were actively participating in our more student-centered class. The units seemed to help students at a variety of academic levels understand the general themes that appear in U.S. history and made it easier for them to chunk specific details together to better memorize facts for the assessment.

Sarah learned what the teacher in Gradwell’s (2006) study sensed about students with diverse academic abilities. Sara Cooper, the teacher who was the focus of the study, had a wildly diverse section of 8<sup>th</sup> graders with equal thirds identified as gifted, regular education, and special education. Cooper did not let the class make-up of students be the determining factor for how she structured her course or dictate the types of materials she used with them. And in the end Cooper, like Sarah Foels, learned that all her students performed well on class assignments and state assessments.

Sarah, Joe, and Drew all teach middle school and although their state exam has fewer consequences for students than the high school exams do, they cite continuous pressures to prepare students for the exam. As a high school teacher, Mike has a different set of pressures with relation to state exam preparation. What makes Mike’s situation so interesting is that the students in his school routinely pass the state exam. The pressure, then, is to pass at the “mastery” level:

I am aware that in many school districts the main concern is just to get students to *pass* the tests. In our school and community, it is *assumed* that we will get all the kids to pass the tests, that is, to achieve a score of 65 or above. So for us, the goal is to get as many students as possible to achieve a score of 85 or above.

New York state policymakers set the pass rate at 65 out of 100; the mastery mark is 85. Parents, community members, and administrators in the district in which Mike teaches demand more than students merely passing the state exams. As Mike puts it, “the pressure isn’t for passing, it is for excelling.”

As frustrating as the misunderstandings and lackadaisical support by one’s administrators can be, even more discouraging is the resistance students often display when confronted with

more challenging teaching approaches. Most teachers assume that students will enthusiastically and immediately embrace rich instructional opportunities. After all, the standard student complaint of, “this is so boring,” suggests that they desire a more engaging alternative. As Dewey (1902/1969) pointed out, however, we get used to the chains we wear: Students accustomed to pedantic, but easy schoolwork may whine about it, but they may actually rebel when presented with more interesting, but more challenging tasks. Bizarre as this reaction sounds, it happens with sufficient regularity as to be recognized by most teachers.

That it happens is small consolation for those to whom it happens. Meg paints her experience in clear, if plaintive fashion: “The students came in and the first thing I encountered was skepticism and uncertainty. They accepted my approach to the course and were responsive to working with me, but the big ideas took them off guard.” But what Meg found after framing and reframing big ideas that related to her students’ lives is that, with persistence all things are possible: “I felt inspired; the big ideas were starting to have the effect I hoped they would. The students engaged with the material and began relating to it by inserting anecdotes from their lives.”

These teachers describe the tender negotiations they must sometimes engage in in order to teach the way they want. Joe and Drew put it succinctly: “In short, no worthy goal is ever reached without working around challenges that emerge; teachers are no different. In fact, knowing that these impediments exist is important, for that knowledge allows us to prepare and react accordingly.” The teachers in this group encountered both perceived and real contextual constraints, yet they chose to teach ambitiously in spite of them.

### ***Implications***

The teacher cases presented in this article have implications for teachers, students, schools, and researchers in the field of history education.

Ambitious teaching is no panacea; it is challenging, nuanced, and highly-contextualized work. Practicing teachers need to look for intersections of subject matter, kids, and context, and realize that, at times, these elements can conflict. In those instances, teachers will need the skills of negotiation and compromise, though always with an eye toward the greater goal of rich teaching and learning for *all* students.

These cases of ambitious teaching are instructive for pre-service teachers as well. Beginning teacher examples like those of Meg Sampson and Sarah Foels illustrate that you do not have to be a seasoned or veteran teacher to utilize more engaging approaches like teaching with big ideas. Despite having little professional experience in the classroom, Meg and Sarah pushed themselves and their students to toward higher standards in teaching and learning history.

There are implications for students too. Students get used to “doing school.” Bored, but comfortable with teaching that does little to challenge them, they may resist when first confronted with a teacher who asks more of them than they think they can provide. All the evidence points to the notion that students will rise to the expectations set for them, but that does not mean that the path will be without bumps. So teachers need to help students understand that real learning, powerful learning will take effort. It may be confusing at times, but in the end will be worth it.

Additionally, there are implications for school leaders. Although it is true that schools are generally open enough to allow for a wide range of teaching practices, school administrators need to realize that ambitious teachers are the ones most likely to push forward the school’s reputation. But to take best advantage of that expertise, administrators need to look hard at the organizational, logistical, and governance structures in the building to ensure that teachers are able to concentrate their efforts where they will be most useful—the classroom.

Finally, the ambitious teaching examples in this article and in this journal issue add to the history education literature that demonstrates the kind of teaching that is possible (Shulman, 1987) in schools under real and perceived constraints. More examples of empirical and conceptual research are still needed with other types of students and in different kinds of settings. Possible research pursuits include the following questions: How do ambitious teachers develop their knowledge of the subject, learner, and context? How might teacher educators prepare teachers to be ambitious teachers? How does ambitious teaching impact students’ understanding of history? More descriptive cases of ambitious teachers and teaching will provide a more nuanced understanding of what it means to teach history in schools today.

## ***Conclusion***

Ambitious teaching is no nirvana, a state that one achieves and then never leaves. Using big ideas to frame one’s practice allows for richer and more complex subject matter, more varied

teaching and assessment approaches, and more consideration of the interests and abilities that all students bring to class. At the same time, ambitious teachers must navigate a rocky road, one that includes the need to seize control of the curriculum, come to terms with the evolutionary nature of one's teaching practice, and respond to administrative realities. These issues present no small set of obstacles but, we assert, as the teachers do, the potential for ambitious teaching clearly outweighs the associated problems.

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## **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> In this paper, we use the terms “social studies” and “history” interchangeably.

<sup>ii</sup> The eighth unit, Global Connection and Interactions,” focuses on a range of issues: migration, technology, status of women and children, ethnic and religious tensions.

<sup>iii</sup> A description of the new exams and sample questions are available at the NYS social studies website:

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/social.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade tests also include a thematic essay.

<sup>v</sup> The third question under each document asked students to recall a piece of information not apparent in the document and presumably learned during class.

<sup>vi</sup> In addition to the Constructed Response and DBQ tasks, students answer 45 multiple-choice questions.

<sup>vii</sup> Adding the multiple-choice, Constructed Response, and short answer questions together, students can earn up to 69 points. Point totals are calibrated, however, such that 59 points earns a passing score of 65. That means that students can pass the exam without even writing the DBQ essay.