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## Learning in Politics: Brazilian Teachers' Political Engagement as a Pedagogical Resource

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# Learning in politics: Teachers' political experiences as a pedagogical resource

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## Abstract

The suggestion that teaching is a political act has been a divisive issue among educators. However, there has been little analysis of the ways that teachers draw on their political experiences as pedagogical resources. Using a case study of seven teachers in Porto Alegre, Brazil who were involved in politics, this article explores the relationship between political experiences and teaching citizenship. The data consisted of interviews with the teachers, observations of their teaching, and classroom materials. This research shows that politics played an important role in their efforts to teach democratic citizenship. Through the teachers' diverse political experiences and ideologies, they developed different understandings of the relationship of politics with citizenship education that promote democratization and social change.

## 1. Introduction

The assertion that teaching is a political act—rather than a technical one—has been a recurring and divisive issue among educators and the public at large (Ayers, 2004; Freire & Macedo, 1997; Nieto, 2006). Some educators have argued that teachers should embrace politics by becoming conscious of the political nature of their work and recognize education as a means for promoting social justice, particularly in an era of standardized testing and “teacher-proof” curricula (Alves Garcia, 2002; Nieto, 2003). There is also considerable public opposition to the suggestion that teaching is political, driven by images of teachers as unduly influencing students' beliefs and values. Regardless of the position, much of this discussion has been based on normative assumptions about teachers and teaching rather than on the situated ways that politically-oriented teachers navigate the expression of their beliefs and experiences in the classroom. Amidst this highly polemical debate, there has been little analysis of teachers' practices in diverse cultural and political settings.

This research aims to contribute to this issue by providing case studies of teachers with significant experiences in political parties, teachers' unions, and social movements who are

responsible for citizenship education. Due to their extensive political experiences and commitments to democratic education, these teachers are uniquely positioned to inform us about the relationship of politics with teaching. Building on previous research (Schugurensky & Myers, 2003), I argue that such teachers draw on their political experiences and beliefs in diverse and complex ways that do not generally match the images of politically-oriented teachers. Furthermore, I suggest that teachers' political experiences and beliefs can be understood as a pedagogically valuable resource for teaching democratic citizenship. In fact, there has been little examination of the ways that teachers' political experiences shape their teaching practices. As Smith (2005) argued, much of the focus on teacher learning has emphasized formal disciplinary knowledge (e.g., Shulman & Shulman, 2004) rather than teachers' relevant life experiences and informal learning outside of schools.

In light of these issues, this research aimed to answer two questions concerning politically-oriented teachers' beliefs and practices of citizenship education:

1. How do teachers' political experiences foster their understandings of and commitments to citizenship education?
2. In what ways do teachers' political experiences and beliefs influence and shape their curricular and pedagogical practices in the classroom, particularly in relation to citizenship education?

Examining teachers' political experiences is valuable precisely because politics is frequently overlooked as a dimension of citizenship education practices across the world, which tend to emphasize the needs of the state for national loyalty and patriotism over the development of autonomous and critical thinking (Pike, 2007). Political experiences, when understood as

powerfully educative, can be significant for citizenship education because they relate directly to the curriculum content. Kennedy's (1998) comments are instructive in this regard:

Civics is not like teaching mathematics, and it is not an intellectual game the outcomes of which are basically irrelevant to the real challenges of life. Civics is about engagement in issues and ideas that fundamentally affect the way we live, and to teach civics effectively, teachers themselves must be engaged in these issues. (p. 39)

## **2. Situating the role of political experiences in teaching**

Argument about teaching as political revolve around the public contestation over schooling in which different groups seek to influence the official curriculum and school reform efforts. A starting point for this inquiry is Freire's (1993) position on the need for teachers to understand where they stand amidst the competing groups seeking to influence schooling. He commented:

The educational worker, as such, is a politician, regardless of whether he or she is aware of it or not. It seems to me that it is essential that every education worker, every educator, assume, as rapidly as possible, the political nature of his or her practice. That he or she define himself or herself politically. (p. 45)

Freire called for teachers to be reflective of their own subjectivities and their role in broader educational, social, and political contexts.

Although such normative calls to understand education as political are commonly made by educators, there is a need for a situated understanding that examines such conceptual assertions within complex and varied school environments. Freire, for example, developed his ideas in Brazil during a time that was different politically and educationally than today. While

this fact does not discount his insights, it suggests the need for understanding the ways that they are worked out within the current context. In fact, a key premise of this article is that being political is not a universal experience for teachers and it is reasonable to assume that a range of experiences and subjectivities, as well as school and classroom contexts, are important factors in the relationship between politics and teaching.

### *2.1. Informal learning in politics*

There is a growing international body of research that demonstrates the function of political participation as a powerful source of informal learning about democratic citizenship, for developing political awareness, and for acquiring political skills and knowledge (Overwien, 2000; van der Veen, et al., 2007). In the Brazilian context, for many years now attention has been paid to the educational function of political activities, particularly social movements (Ghanem, 1998; Soares de Almeida, 2000). Caldart (2000) and Kane (2000), for example, described the educational effect of participation in the Landless People's Movement (*Movimento Sem Terra*, or MST), a Brazilian social movement for land reform. Kane remarked on the experience of participation: "The major educational experience comes from active participation in organized struggle: de facto, the MST is itself an enormous school" (Kane, 2000, p. 40). The notion that political participation is educative and that arenas for such participation are "schools" has also been applied to other political activities in Latin America, such as Participatory Budgeting in municipal governments (Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007).

This literature indicates that the type of political activity structures the understandings and experiences of citizenship because they are based on diverse beliefs about how societies should be governed and what citizenship means. Political scientists have categorized political

activities in two groups: the largely oppositional and grassroots activities of social movements and formal, institutionalized activities that are recognized by the state such as political parties and interest groups (Tarrow, 1998). Social movements also place particular emphasis on social oppression and injustices of excluded sectors by emphasizing the “right to have rights” at all levels of social relations (the state, public institutions, families, etc.), which has contributed to the development of a more inclusive and active conception of citizenship in Latin America (Dagnino, 2003, p. 5; see also Holston, 2008). While it is impossible to capture all of the nuances of political activities with these two categories, they do portray broad differences. Social movements, which are typically oppositional and operate outside of institutional politics, are more participatory and decentralized than formal political activities. For example, the activities of protest and critique are staples of social movements because they monitor the activities of the state (Jacobs, 2002).

## *2.2. Teachers’ life experiences and their teaching practices*

In order to explore teachers’ political experiences as a pedagogical resource, I situated this study in relation to research that considers the influence of teachers’ life experiences and beliefs on their curriculum and teaching practices.<sup>1</sup> Although teachers’ life experiences have been found to be an important source for their understanding and practice of teaching (Phillion, et al., 2005), their experiences are typically reduced to a single category, such as “thinking” or “worldview.” Specific experiences are rarely examined. Also, this work skirts teachers’ political experiences and beliefs as significant influences. In fact, much of the teacher thinking literature is guided by an apolitical and functionalist understanding of teaching, which favors teacher effectiveness and efficiency over pedagogical discourses, ideologies, and values (Apple, 1995).

An understanding of the role of life experiences for teaching emphasizes the teacher as a curriculum-maker who is able to shape what is taught and how it is taught (Leander & Osborne, 2008). Teachers make choices about how to depict the subject matter in their classrooms and what counts as knowledge. They select themes, emphasizing some while ignoring others, and introduce curricular materials that collectively embody an understanding of their discipline and a reflection of their life experiences. Teachers also manage the range of topics that are allowed for discussion in the classroom. While some researchers have emphasized the influence of the official curriculum, especially textbooks, it is widely acknowledged that teachers play an important role in curriculum decisions.

However, the notion of teachers as curriculum-makers concerns some educators who fear that they will exercise undue personal influence, which has led to efforts in some nations to develop a teacher-proof curriculum. These concerns focus on the role of indoctrination and neutrality in the classroom (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Those who fear that teachers will use their position of authority to transmit their own point of view have argued that politics is not an appropriate topic for schools, even in the social studies classroom where courses such as civics, government, history, and current events include politics as a primary topic. On the other hand, Westheimer (2007) contended that politics should deal with the deliberation and discussion of diverse and controversial viewpoints rather than instilling a single perspective. Furthermore, in one of the few studies dealing with this topic, Hess (2005) found that preservice teachers' political beliefs shaped what and how they teach civic topics in diverse ways. The nature of their beliefs led some to disclose and others to hide their views. From this perspective, it seems unlikely that there is a single pedagogical approach that politically-oriented teachers would

inevitably take. In conclusion, this review suggests the need to get past simplistic indoctrination-neutrality binary of teaching using situated cases of teaching practices and classroom authority.

### **3. Research context of Porto Alegre, Brazil**

In Brazil, and the rest of Latin America, teaching is caught between a tradition of predominantly authoritarian and teacher-centered teaching (Portela, et al., 1998; Reimers & Villegas-Reimers, 2006) with recent innovations and reforms that aim to empower teachers (as well as students and parents) through greater involvement and autonomy in schools (Myers, 2008; Gandin & Apple, 2002; Ghanem, 2004). The efforts to democratize the educational system highlighted this tension between authoritarian structures and democratic reforms in Brazil (Mendonça, 2001). These reforms draw on the vision of education outlined by Paulo Freire, which portrayed teachers as politically conscious cultural workers (Freire, 1970, 1998). Teachers' efforts to enact classroom and school change must ultimately confront both of these dynamics.

Porto Alegre is the capital of the southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul, which borders Argentina and Uruguay. From 1988 to 2004, the Workers' Party was elected to the municipal government for four consecutive terms. During this time, the government was responsible for implementing several education reforms that, in conjunction with national educational reforms, aimed to democratize schooling and align it with political democratization at the national and state levels (Azevedo, 1999). The Workers' Party implemented educational projects in line with its political vision of deepening democratic participation, such as with the Citizenship School and School Councils.<sup>2</sup> The Citizenship School in Porto Alegre, which was created in 1993, was designed to make the schools truly public institutions by increasing the participation of the

community in decision making, school management, and the formation of the curriculum (Azevedo & Schugurensky, 2005).

Nationally, the Brazilian educational system underwent substantial reforms during the 1990s (Hall, 2003). The key legislation was the Federal Constitution of 1988 and the Basic Educational Law in 1996 (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação, no. 9.394/96, or LDB) (Ministério da Educação e Cultura, 1996). In Article 206, the 1988 Constitution provided for “democratic participation in the public school,” which was reinforced in Articles 3 and 14 of the Basic Education Law. States adopted these laws with a range of democratic approaches to schooling based on the decentralization of school authority, which sought to include teachers, students, and communities in school decision making (Borges, 2004), such as the election of principals (Silva, 2006). Despite these efforts, the authoritarian structures and traditions in schools has led some scholars to conclude that these decentralization reforms were designed to articulate the educational system with neoliberalism (Frigotto & Ciavatta, 2003).

## **4. Methods**

### *4.1. Case identification*

The participants in this study were seven secondary teachers in three public schools in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Pseudonyms were used to protect the teachers’ identities. This sample was part of a larger, cross-national study that examined the relationship of political involvement and citizenship education among secondary teachers. The data collection occurred in two segments lasting a total of 5 months. I identified the teachers through recommendations by local educational officials. These officials introduced me to politically active teachers who then introduced me to other teachers suitable for the study. In addition, a few teachers heard about the study from their colleagues and volunteered to participate.

I selected the teachers according to the following criteria: 1) ongoing and in-depth political involvement at the time of the study; and 2) a consistent history of involvement in these activities during the past five years. I required in depth political participation, rather than enthusiasm and interest in politics, in order to maintain a connection with real political power and to maintain an emphasis on political experiences. I defined in depth political participation as having a consistent history of involvement in activities during the past 5 years. As well, I limited political participation to social and political organizations with a vision of social change. This excluded participation in some civic activities, such as community and religious organizations, which may build social capital but do not necessarily seek political change. I did not identify any conservative teachers in the sample, for two reasons: in Porto Alegre conservative parties were less activist and that these teachers would be party members but not involved in activities and the city in general, and schools in particular, were predominantly on the political left and therefore there were fewer teachers in conservative parties.

#### *4.2. Participants and schools*

The seven teachers were chosen from a pool of eleven who were initially invited to participate in the study based on the selection criteria. In accordance with Stake's (1995) conception of case study, the subjects were not chosen to represent all social studies teachers but for their own individual and collective qualities. The teachers ranged in age from 37 to 56 years at the time of the study and there were three female and four male teachers (see Table 1). Five of the teachers were of European origin, one was African-Brazilian, and one was of Asian descent. They were also selected to maximize the number of social studies teachers<sup>3</sup> and the depth and variety of their political experiences. Six of the teachers taught social studies, which was limited

to history and geography, and one teacher taught English and Portuguese languages. Three of the teachers participated primarily in social movements and four primarily in formal politics.

Odair, who taught English and Portuguese language and literature, was the only teacher who did not teach history or geography. They taught in three different schools in greater Porto Alegre: five worked at Colégio A, an urban high school with morning, afternoon and night shifts;<sup>4</sup> one worked at Colégio B, an urban mixed-level school with one secondary level shift in the afternoon; and two worked at Colégio C, a mixed-level, suburban school located in a poor neighborhood with one night shift for secondary education. Odair was the only teacher to work in two of the schools (Colégios A and C).

**Insert Table 1 about here**

#### *4.3. Data collection and analysis*

The primary sources of data were semi-structured interviews with the teachers, observations of their teaching, teacher-generated class materials, and field notes. I conducted all of the interviews, which were audiotaped and transcribed by a professional, with the teachers in Portuguese. Each of the teachers was interviewed twice, once for 1 to 2 hours before the observations and the second for 30 to 60 minutes as a follow-up after the observations. I observed each of the teachers for between two and five 40-minute class periods for a total of twenty five classes. An observation form was used to collect structured data on their teaching as well as to record field notes. The classes that I observed were Ancient History, Brazilian History, World History, Human Geography, and Portuguese Language. As well, in each class I collected all teaching products, such as reading materials, worksheets and assignments. Lastly, I attended a

variety of events with the teachers, including campaign rallies, political marches, and planning sessions for the teachers' union.

Analysis of the interview and observation data consisted of inductively coding the data for recurring themes that were relevant to the research questions (Strauss, 1987). I followed the constant comparison method, which involved identifying and categorizing data segments by matching them with categories and comparing them to other segments in the same category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analyses were organized in two groupings: a) a composite of the collective case and b) a comparison of the social movement and formal politics teachers within the case. These results were communicated to the interviewees to check for validity.

#### *4.4. The teachers' political participation*

I categorized the teachers' political participation as either formal politics (unions and political parties) or social movement, according to the political activity that they stated was their primary commitment and that most shaped their teaching (see Table 2). However, most of them participated in multiple activities. All of the teachers except for Cássia were involved in political parties and five of the teachers (Emerson, Janaína, Moacir, Odair, and Tiago) were also members of the teachers' union. Party politics was the entry point into politics for all of the teachers, except Cássia.

**Insert table 2 about here**

Emerson, Moacir, Odair, and Tiago primarily participated in formal politics. Emerson was a member of the Brazilian Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Brasileiro*), and Moacir, Odair

and Tiago were members of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*). These teachers campaigned for their party and attended events and meetings. All of these teachers were also involved in the teachers' union, in which Tiago and Odair held official positions. Odair was one of the three union representatives at Colégio A and Tiago was a national union leader. In talking about their political experiences, the formal politics teachers focused primarily on issues of social class and workers' rights. They shared strong beliefs in the need to address the extreme poverty and inequality in Brazilian society.

Camila, Cássia, and Janaína primarily participated in social movements and focused on issues of social justice such as the inclusion of marginalized groups in society. Camila and Janaína were involved in the feminist movement and Cássia in the anti-racist movement. All of the teachers participating in social movements were female. Janaína and Camila were involved in multiple political activities. Their participation was related to personal experiences with injustices of race, gender and/or poverty. Cássia's experiences as a black student in an overwhelmingly white university made her more conscious of her own identity and the problems of minorities in the education system. Camila began to participate after volunteering to work with women who had been subjected to discrimination in the workplace because they had abortions. Growing up in the rural interior of Rio Grande do Sul state, Janaína observed firsthand the difficulties of poor farmers while working as a literacy teacher.

## **5. Classroom practices of politically-oriented teachers**

### *5.1. Teachers' disclosure of political beliefs*

The teachers in this study took different approaches to disclosing their political beliefs in the classroom. None of the teachers openly discussed their political party affiliation for fear of

exercising excessive influence on students and because it could discourage open discussion. The social movement teachers were willing to reveal their political involvement although they were careful because of the controversial nature of the issues.

All of the teachers were wary of expressing their party affiliations due to the contested nature of partisan politics and potential charges of indoctrination. Accusations that teachers promote liberal beliefs to their students and discourage contrary viewpoints have become widespread in the Brazilian media in recent years (e.g. Kamel, 2007; Mansur, et al., 2007; Weinberg & Pereira, 2008). These articles have led to an outbreak of accusations and counter-accusations of ideological bias, which reflects the struggle by groups in Brazil to impose their views and values in the curriculum as official knowledge (Apple, 1999). Furthermore, it typically presents a simplistic solution to the complex pedagogical situations faced by social studies teachers who teach about citizenship and politics.

The teachers in this study, however, exhibited more nuanced teaching that encouraged, rather than restricted, political speech by placing limits on their personal views. Emerson echoed these concerns when he defended politically-oriented teachers, asserting that they do not necessarily impose a particular viewpoint on their students. He explained his thinking on this issue by distinguishing between personal beliefs and his professional role:

I think that participation in a political party is individual and particular, you know. The people that participate like this are not going to get it and import it inside of the classroom. The guy [teacher] is a member of a party, he isn't going to arrive in the classroom and want everybody to think in the same manner as the political party.

In this sense, for Emerson teaching about politics involved placing restrictions on how and when he discussed his personal beliefs in the classroom.

Some of the teachers went to great lengths to hide their party affiliations from their students. Nonetheless, students often made efforts to find out their teachers' political associations. For example, Janaína recalled how she tried to conceal her political commitments from her students while remarking on the challenge of doing so:

The students always ask for and want a definition of my party affiliation. I don't have this discussion about which party I belong to... I never cross over to the political side, to my partisan identity. They might have seen me outside of the school but inside of the school I have never said that I was a member of the Workers' Party... It's much more a curiosity and they check out my car when I come and go from the school in order to see if my car has a sticker [of a party]. It has one, now it has one, but before it didn't.

This scenario highlights the difficulty that teachers face in portraying themselves as politically neutral and suggests that hiding political involvement may serve to decrease students' enthusiasm for, and interest in, politics as relevant "to the real challenges of life" (Kennedy, 1998).

Charges of indoctrination were a very real concern for these teachers. They were careful to avoid revealing their political affiliations because they felt that they would be perceived as indoctrinatory and disruptive. However, in deciding the ways that politics should be presented to students, they also considered the practice of promoting independent thinking and enacting democratic authority relations in their classrooms. Odair described the care that he took when talking about his political views:

For example, when we discuss these themes, you have to discuss them carefully. As an educator, I can reveal my personal position, but I have to show a lot of respect for other positions... I like to show that I have respect for the positions of the students.

Tiago was more specific about avoiding the imposition of a certain political viewpoint and the risk of indoctrination:

I take a lot of care because I don't want to be an indoctrinating teacher. I don't want to make the classroom a space for pamphleteering, for brainwashing. But how is this avoided? I attempt as much as possible to democratize my relations with my students, to be the least authoritarian as possible, and to try to be consistent with my discourse. I can't support a discourse outside of the classroom and then in the classroom do exactly the opposite.

Tiago's statement explicitly linked his political beliefs with his pedagogy. He expressed awareness of the unequal allocation of power in the teacher-student relationship and also attempted to democratize his classroom management. Democratization for him involved sharing power, which he learned about and practiced in his party and union activities.

Camila and Cássia, both involved in social movements, also expressed concerns about disclosing their political beliefs because they believed that students and their colleagues were less likely to accept issues concerning social inequalities than formal political issues. However, in contrast to the teachers' treatment of their party affiliations, these teachers were more willing to disclose their beliefs. They believed that they had an ethical responsibility to teach students about the ways that some groups, namely women and Brazilians of African origin, had been treated unjustly. For example, Camila discussed how she negotiated her identity as a feminist with her students:

Sometimes the students don't like that their teacher is a feminist. So I speak about feminism, I speak of the contradictions, but I know that some [students] are completely

against abortion. In this case, if I say that I'm a feminist I can really shock them. Only after time will I say that I'm a feminist.

Camila gradually introduced students to her political beliefs. The degree that the public accepted a particular issue was an important factor. The feminist movement and issues associated with it, such as reproductive rights, were highly controversial public issues that were not openly accepted in the local context.

### *5.2. Pedagogical strategies for political awareness and independent thinking*

The teachers in these cases drew on their political experiences and beliefs in their pedagogical practices for citizenship education. Their primary learning goals were to develop students' awareness of politics and the ability to think independently and critically about issues. The teachers used two pedagogical strategies to achieve these goals: 1) an enlightenment approach and 2) an inclusivity approach. The enlightenment approach focused on learning to discuss public issues critically and in an informed manner without imposing a particular viewpoint. These teachers avoided taking stances on particular issues, instead portraying them in a relativist manner that engaged the controversial nature and multiple positions of an issue. The teachers involved in formal politics primarily took this approach. This strategy is closely related with their political experiences and understanding of the political process, such as to formulate an argument, debate, and analyze issues. For example, Moacir remarked that to be able to intelligently discuss and debate was the primary benefit of political participation for a teacher: "The teacher that is [politically] engaged, in general, is always a reference for debate, in favor or against, as much for that as for this, to refute, to give an opinion, or to support." Emerson also

was careful to present diverse viewpoints on political issues, noting that he tried to keep his own political viewpoints out of the classroom:

I try, you know, to explain without imposing content. It's not my vision that will be imposed in the classroom but the combination of visions... Therefore, I don't have a way to deal with a specific issue because in reality these [political] issues, all of them, have various types of visions.

Stimulating discussion of political issues with multiple perspectives, as Emerson describes, is considered a powerful form of citizenship education that helps students to make informed judgments about public issues. Moacir's and Emerson's comments suggest that teachers who are involved in politics have knowledge and understandings that helps them to present a range of political visions on issues and to situate them within the political landscape.

To help students to think independently and critically about political issues, these teachers emphasized learning to take informed positions based on historical evidence. Tiago explained his goals: "I try to allow students to sustain their position, to make arguments. I try to have them avoid making superficial arguments so that they can sustain their position." To support their arguments, Tiago and other teachers were skilled at linking the study of historical events to current political issues. Tiago described how he used this strategy in his Brazilian history class:

We were discussing the Old Republic in Brazil and... they [the students] had to write about the leaders of political parties now in order to see how well these parties fit with the doctrines of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So we move to discussing the concurrence between party discourse and the practice of their deputies and senators.

This strategy encourages students to justify their positions based on their studies as well as to connect historical learning with contemporary issues.

The second approach was based on the strategy of inclusivity. These teachers, who were primarily involved in social movements, introduced social justice themes related to their political beliefs and activities and including political actors and marginalized groups in the curriculum who were left out of textbooks. Furthermore, they emphasized social action as a curricular goal in addition to learning about politics and citizenship (e.g. Schultz & Oyler, 2006).

Cássia, a social movement teacher, noted that her participation in the anti-racist movement led her to focus on this topic in her classroom. She described this relationship:

I became much more interested in developing this work, in speaking about population problems, about the causes, debating with the students inside of the school... Therefore, I began to develop this work inside of the school.

Race and prejudice became central concerns in Cássia's teaching and in her understanding of citizenship. She paid particular attention to her Black students in order to help them develop as students and to learn to participate in society. For her, "the most important aspect is to be able to work with the human being, to be able to help and permit, collaborate, make that the other person feel like an equal person." This statement can be understood as Cássia's principal pedagogical vision.

Camila also drew directly on themes from her participation in the feminist movement. She commented:

Today I still have my activism as a feminist, often outside of the school, but I try to bring the themes that we discuss during my participation into the classroom, although I don't present it as the platform of a particular political party.

One approach Camila discussed was to introduce feminist themes in the curriculum by studying the contributions of women in the history curriculum. She observed, “From the feminist point of view, I try to rescue the participation of women in history because, unfortunately, this is not spoken about in the great majority of our books. Women don’t exist here in this book [points to a textbook].” This strategy illustrates the intersection of Camila’s political beliefs and participation with her professional role as a teacher history.

### *5.3. Political beliefs and classroom power relations*

The teachers’ different choices of pedagogical strategies (enlightenment or inclusivity) were also reflected in their teaching activities, which led to different classroom power relations (see Table 3). The teachers that took an enlightenment approach focused more time in the classroom on direct teaching, questioning and (in the case of Emerson) discussion in order to develop students’ awareness of political issues and their own positions. For these teachers, creating an open classroom climate to express and form opinions was the key to developing independent and critical thinking. The teachers who enacted an inclusivity approach, however, emphasized student-centered activities and more direct interpersonal interactions with their students. Their emphasis was on reaching all students in the classroom by reducing authority relations.

### **Insert Table 3 about here**

The teachers employing an enlightenment approach practiced more teacher-centered activities in their classrooms, spending 42% (versus 27% for the inclusivity teachers) on direct

teaching and 41% (versus 26%) on questioning. Moacir's comments help to explain this approach: "I don't have any innovation [for teaching] or anything revolutionary... My manner of teaching privileges conversation that I think differs from traditional forms of conversation." According to this statement, his main goal was to promote a classroom climate that supported *participation* in the discussion of public issues and promoted the development of political positions.

The teachers who took an inclusivity approach used a more diverse and balanced range of student-centered teaching activities, which placed a stronger emphasis on the inclusion of all students in classroom learning. They favored activities that structured personal interaction with students, especially through listening to students and explaining. These teachers listened to their students for 17 percent of the time compared with about 1 percent for the formal politics teachers, and they spent 13 percent of their instructional time on explaining compared with 3 percent. Also, Cássia and Janaína were the only teachers to employ all five teaching activities. Cássia described her thinking: "I try not to work in a single manner. So it is important to diversify and vary the techniques and dynamics in class in order to reach all students."

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

This research has attempted to capture the ways that politically engaged teachers' life experiences influence the content and pedagogical strategies that they used. These cases present a situated account of the diverse ways that teachers' political commitments are a rich source of experience that inform their pedagogical practices. The teachers' political experiences and knowledge helped them to negotiate their school contexts and the expectations that teachers face in Brazil, which contains potent traditions of both authoritarian and progressive teaching. Far

from fitting into the ideal models of the political teacher as either neutral or indoctrinating, these teachers illustrate the important and complex relationship of political engagement with teaching. Furthermore, they show the complexity of teaching about politics and their often flexible and pragmatic pedagogical responses to developing their students' political awareness and independent thinking.

Teaching practices were important for these teachers precisely because schools and classroom teaching are decontextualized from politics; their political experiences helped them to connect their learning with local politics. Like the teachers in Perlstein's (2002) research on the freedom schools, the common element uniting the teachers was their belief in the importance of politics as an educational good and important goal. However, the teachers faced the challenge of working in a public school system that did not always support their goals. Their colleagues, administrators, and the official curriculum were often barriers to their efforts that they had to negotiate. Consequently, the findings support other evidence that there are structural barriers to enacting deeper changes in educational system and patterns of teaching (e.g. Al-Daami & Wallace, 2007) and that enacting incremental changes is a more realistic goal.

One lesson from this research is that whether and how teachers disclose their political views and their handling of the pedagogical tension between indoctrination and moral relativism may be less important than whether they do or do not introduce politics in the classroom. I suggest that both oppositional (e.g. social movements) and institutional (e.g. political parties) politics are important for citizenship education. Education in a broad range of politics is more likely to strengthen democracy, especially if one agrees that social movements are key actors in democratic societies. Teachers' participation in social movements is notable because it provides them with an understanding of the processes for social change and places an emphasis on the

inclusion of marginalized populations. Learning primarily about the form and function of political institutions, which is standard in many nations, is likely to promote a fragile form of democratic citizenship. The collective example of the teachers in this study suggest that making politics a central focus of the curriculum can be valuable for learning about democratic citizenship.

Still, the teachers' political participation does not completely explain the findings. Although it was not part of the original research design, gender emerged as an important construct for this study. All of the teachers active in social movements were female and all of the teachers active in formal politics were male. Thus, it seems likely that gender played some role in the teachers' pedagogical choices and emphasizes the need for further research on the role of gender with these issues. In particular, the correlation in this study of gender with an inclusivity pedagogical approach suggests that personal experiences with some form of exclusion, as each of the three female teachers mentioned, is part of the explanation. What seems probable is that gender and political participation interacted in these cases in the teachers' pedagogical choices.

Ultimately, this study suggests that teachers' knowledge of and experience in politics can be valuable for their teaching and for students' learning about democratic citizenship. The teachers' pedagogical practices connected the classroom with the political arena in ways that traditional civic education does not. If citizenship education is to also prepare and encourage youth to participate actively in the political system, an important concern in established as well as newly formed democracies, it follows that teachers may require a deeper understanding of politics than is typically accessible in teaching training programs and professional development.

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**TABLE 1: Teacher Profiles**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of teaching</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Teaching subjects</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Primary Political Participation</b>
<b>Camila</b>	Female	40	5	White/Europ.	History	Colégio A	Social Movement
<b>Cássia</b>	Female	46	25	African-Brazilian	Geography and history	Colégio B	Social Movement
<b>Emerson</b>	Male	56	28	White/Europ.	History	Colégio A	Formal Politics
<b>Janaína</b>	Female	37	18	White/Europ.	History, geography and literacy	Colégio A	Social Movement
<b>Moacir</b>	Male	40	15	Asian	Geography	Colégio A	Formal Politics
<b>Odair</b>	Male	37	10	White/Europ.	English and Portuguese language	Colégios A and C	Formal Politics
<b>Tiago</b>	Male	40	18	White/Europ.	History	Colégio C	Formal Politics

**TABLE 2: Teachers' Political Participation**

	<b>Form of Political Participation</b>	<b>Primary Political Affiliation</b>	<b>Secondary Affiliations</b>
<b>Camila</b>	Social Movement	Feminist movement	Workers' Party; Teachers' Union
<b>Cássia</b>	Social Movement	Anti-racist movement	None
<b>Janaína</b>	Social Movement	Feminist movement	Workers' Party; Teachers' Union
<b>Emerson</b>	Formal Politics	Brazilian Socialist Party	Teachers' Union
<b>Moacir</b>	Formal Politics	Teachers' Union	Workers' Party
<b>Odair</b>	Formal Politics	Teachers' Union	Workers' Party
<b>Tiago</b>	Formal Politics	Workers' Party	Teachers' Union

**TABLE 3: Teaching Activities**

Average percentage of total instruction time					
25 lessons total					
	Direct teaching	Questioning	Facilitating discussion	Listening to or answering students' questions	Explaining
<b>Cássia (sm)</b>	17	27	33	14	9
<b>Janaína (sm)</b>	26	32	12	11	19
<b>Camila (sm)</b>	51	9	0	40	0
<b>Emerson (fp)</b>	29	0	71	0	0
<b>Moacir (fp)</b>	30	67	0	3	0
<b>Odair (fp)</b>	86	7	0	0	7
<b>Tiago (fp)</b>	49	38	0	0	13
<b>AVERAGES</b>	41	26	17	10	6

(Chart is derived from Mok & Morris (2001))

sm=Social movement teacher; fp=Formal politics teacher

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<sup>1</sup> This approach is premised on the belief that teachers have agency in their professional roles and are key actors in schools: “Given that teachers play the key role in interpreting, mediating and realizing what goes on in educational institutions, their values, motivations and understandings have considerable influence on professional practices of all kinds” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 57).

<sup>2</sup> The movement for the Citizen School in Brazil began in the late 1980s. The first example, although not yet using the expression “Citizen School,” occurred in São Paulo while Freire was the Secretary of Education from 1989 to 1992 (Gadotti, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Presently, Brazilian educators typically use the term “social sciences” instead of social studies because of the connotation of the latter term with the efforts of the military dictatorship to inculcate patriotism and allegiance to the state (Ministério da Educação e Cultura, 1999, p. 8).

<sup>4</sup> Most public schools in Brazil are organized into morning, afternoon and night shifts each with a new group of students, teachers, and administrators. It is common for Brazilian teachers to have patchwork schedules that are spread out across two or three teaching shifts in different schools. Although some schools offer secondary education during the morning and early afternoon, like the typical school day in the U.S., the majority of secondary students in Brazil attend the night shift (Herrán & Rodríguez, 2001). As well, secondary schools often share the same building with primary schools, which operate during the morning and afternoon shifts.