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# Democracy & Education

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## Supporting Students to Read Complex Texts on Civic Issues The Role of Scaffolded Reading Instruction in Democratic Education

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the role of scaffolded reading instruction in democratic education. Focusing on a case study of a high school civic unit on the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis, it argues the importance of such reading instruction. Students noted the challenges they experienced when reading complex texts on the topic. Yet, scaffolded reading activities that helped students interpret and respond to the texts yielded student engagement with disciplinary material and were praised by the students. This paper illustrates the use of such supports and discusses the ramifications of their absence.

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### **Introduction**

**P**ARTICIPANTS IN A democracy need to be able to understand and evaluate information about civic issues (Allen, 2016; Levine, 2007; Rebell, 2018). Citizens can turn to multiple texts including journalism, literature, historical accounts, and census data charts to access this information and develop their civic knowledge (Epstein, 2014). News media play a particularly essential role in democratic education due to the ability of journalism to communicate information about current events and foster participation in politics (Levine, 2007). Yet texts on public matters can be challenging to comprehend and analyze. They can contain elements of text complexity as identified by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), such as difficult syntax, complicated text features (e.g., graphics), and assumption of prior knowledge that readers may have not developed. Accordingly, when students seek to learn

about pressing civic issues, they will benefit from the guidance of teachers who support them in their reading (Valencia & Parker, 2016). Scaffolded reading instruction is valued in democratic education as it helps students make meaning of civic knowledge embedded in texts that could be difficult to access.

This paper brings attention to a unit enacted in a U.S. urban high school to illustrate the generative role scaffolded reading instruction can play in civic education as students read complex news media. The type of civic education assumed throughout the paper is one that is democratic in that it prepares students to deeply grapple with current civic questions, instead of solely emphasizing good character (Westheimer, 2019), and asks students to “do

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democracy” by addressing the political world outside of the school and recognizing that they can make it better (Hess, 2009, p. 15). In the focal unit, which occurred in January 2017, the students were studying the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis. To build their understandings of the issues involved and guide them to action steps, the teachers introduced multiple, complex news articles on the topic. This paper spotlights student views of the texts, surfacing the struggles that they posed and the instruction used to help the youth understand them. The result is an exploration of the role of reading instruction in democratic education and is a response to the paucity of research on how secondary teachers use texts for learning when teaching about government and politics (Valencia & Parker, 2016). Overall, the paper seeks to address the following related research questions: How do high school students respond to complex texts on a civic problem? How does the reading instruction in the classroom shape their experiences with complex texts?

### **Supporting Students as Civically Engaged Readers**

In this framing section, I first argue the importance of secondary teachers apprenticing students as strong readers and fostering content-area literacy and then discuss the role of reading instruction in civic education. Finally, I explain why teachers can sidestep opportunities to enact such instruction. This explanation provides a backdrop for the paper’s discussion of the need for teachers to address text complexity during civic education and its illustration of how teachers can enact scaffolded reading instruction to boost student satisfaction with their reading experiences and promote student engagement with course material.

### ***Scaffolded Reading Instruction***

This paper builds on the theory that secondary teachers support students to be confident readers in the content areas by giving attention to multiple and overlapping dimensions of classroom life: social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions (Schoenbach et al., 2012). Schoenbach, Greenleaf, and Murphy (2012) called the intertwined process of tending to these dimensions to support students as readers the Reading Apprenticeship (RA) approach. Due to space constraints, I briefly review the RA approach by focusing on aspects of the dimensions that are particularly salient for this paper and an analysis of the Syria unit. In the social dimension, students gain access to “social resources” to make sense of difficult texts (p. 29). Through whole- and small-group discussions, students and teachers talk about texts and deal with comprehension problems. In the personal dimension, students build a sense of who they are as readers including their reading habits, likes, and dislikes. Meanwhile, as students work in the cognitive dimension, they build a repertoire of strategies that good readers use to interpret texts. For example, good readers ask questions about texts, visualize events in the texts, break texts into smaller parts, and keep track of ideas in texts by annotating and taking notes. Finally, when tending to the knowledge-building dimension, teachers will query students’ prior knowledge on a topic and help students develop their understandings of disciplinary topics, vocabulary, and practices through the reading process.

The social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions are linked by metacognitive conversation through which teachers and students think and talk about their reading experiences. Reading instruction in the content areas can be considered scaffolded when teachers enact supports for reading related to multiple dimensions, in response to student needs, and to promote student growth.

When students encounter texts with multiple markers of complexity and that are hard to read, they particularly benefit from structured apprenticing in reading. The CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) presents a model for measuring text complexity that involves quantitative dimensions, qualitative dimensions, and reader and task considerations. While computer software measures quantitative dimensions, such as a text’s Lexile level related to word and sentence length, teachers evaluate qualitative factors of text complexity. Therefore, I focus on these qualitative factors. For informational/nonfiction texts, qualitative dimensions discussed in the CCSS involve the text’s structure, language conventionality and clarity, knowledge demands, and purpose. Structure relates to the text’s organization and use of text features such as graphics. Language conventionality and clarity relate to the extent to which the vocabulary is clear and conversational. Knowledge demands relate to the assumptions the text makes about the reader’s background knowledge. Finally, purpose relates to the extent to which the aim of the text is clear. If a text measures high complexity regarding any of these factors, teachers can design pedagogical supports to aid students in their reading.

In addition to evaluating these elements of text complexity, teachers must also reflect on what the CCSS (2010) calls “reader and task considerations.” With this lens, they consider the life experiences and motivations of their students as well as the task that students are aiming to accomplish as they work with a text. If students have high motivation and prior knowledge regarding the topics in the text, they may be able to read with more independence. As student familiarity with the issues decreases and/or the expectations of what they are to do with the texts rise, students benefit from more scaffolding. Teachers should offer reading supports in accordance with their assessment of student needs.

Multiple reports affirm the value of literacy instruction in the disciplines at the secondary level (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Marri et al., 2011; Thibodeau, 2008), thereby further justifying teachers’ efforts to tend to text complexity through the teaching of reading strategies. So, to move more secondary teachers to incorporate literacy instruction in their classrooms, Moje (2008) argued for the pursuit of content-area literacy that assumes disciplinary differences and honors how literacy manifests in each subject area. Accordingly, teachers from varying disciplines find different content literacy strategies more or less useful, with social studies teachers reporting anticipatory activities that provoke students’ interest in the topic and note taking as most effective (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Related activities might then appear in civics project, as social studies is often the venue for civic education. As for the impact, use of reading

strategies instruction in social studies benefits students' discipline-specific and general reading skills (Reisman, 2012) as well as their content-knowledge development (Wanzek et al., 2015). Research on literacy instruction in the content areas also affirms the importance of adapting the instruction to meet students' needs (Monte-Sano et al., 2014) and listening to students' insights about the instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

Cumulatively, this research base argues for the value of secondary teachers supporting content-area literacy, or "content-driven literacy," by embedding reading and writing in their subject area, providing explicit research-based literacy instruction in regard to diverse content-area texts, and modifying it based on their assessment of students' needs and interests (Marri et al., 2011). Given the urban setting of the Syria unit, it is also worthwhile to note the successful use of these practices in urban schools as students engage with discipline-specific texts (Woods, 2009; Marri et al., 2011; Fisher & Frey, 2008). This paper builds on this work by portraying the Reading Apprenticeship approach—a helpful framework for literacy instruction in the content areas—in an urban high school during a civic education project.

### *Scaffolded Reading in Civic Education*

Scaffolded reading experiences, such as those recommended in an RA approach (Schoenbach et al., 2012), can play a valuable role in civic education. Broadly, participants in a democracy use language to engage in civic life and promote change (Allen, 2016; Freire, 1985). More specifically, "thinking with print" is a critical part of students' trajectory toward social action (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 42). As students work through print texts with support, their understandings of the civic issues portrayed in the texts grow (Lobron & Selman, 2007). In turn, when studying civic problems, teachers coach students to use particular cognitive actions as they read (e.g., visualize, make predictions, form connections with characters and events), through assignments that involve drawing, taking notes, and discussion (Bomer & Bomer, 2001). These actions are reflective of those in the RA approach to reading.

While a range of texts could feature in civic education, teachers may be particularly motivated to scaffold student reading of news media given how use of such texts supports students to become informed and value free speech (Lopez et al., 2009). Furthermore, having information about relevant current events through journalism gives people reason to participate in civil society, and participation also prompts people to seek out information (Levine, 2007). Given that news articles are routinely written for knowledgeable news consumers who have been following specific news stories over time, scaffolded reading instruction is needed to help youth gain access to these texts. Newsela, a website that curates news articles for students and teachers, is also a valuable resource, as it publishes variations of each article on multiple Lexile levels.

Also essential toward the goal of supporting civic conversations and action are critical literacy practices such as questioning and comparing texts so that students can explore multiple perspectives, textual biases, and the author's intent (Bomer & Bomer, 2001; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). The importance of critical reading

skills is particularly clear in light of recent findings on young people's weak ability to evaluate information on the internet (Wineburg et al., 2016) and prioritize textual credibility when deciding whether to pass media on to someone else (Middaugh, 2018). Problem posing, where students question texts from a critical perspective, begins once students develop a literal understanding of the text (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). After students have used comprehension strategies such as annotating and summarizing to make sense of a complex text, they can raise questions about it.

Multiple cases of civic education portray students using texts to develop informed civic understandings (e.g., Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Epstein, 2014; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Powell et al., 2001; Schultz, 2018). For example, fifth-graders in a low-income urban neighborhood utilized newspaper articles and other expository writing to learn about the inadequacies of their school building and larger trends of inequitable school funding (Schultz, 2018). They deciphered unknown vocabulary, asked critical questions about the texts, and overall engaged in "shared inquiry" that invited them to "rely directly on the text to interpret meaning for themselves" (p. 101). Schultz found that the students were uniquely motivated to engage with texts that addressed their own school and civic issues, such as funding inequity, with which they could closely relate. Other cases of civic literacy projects portray teachers' use of guiding questions, word walls to help with challenging vocabulary, and small-group text-based discussion regarding complex civic texts (Epstein, 2014). Finally, teachers may combine, condense, and edit difficult texts on current civic issues to make them accessible for their students, as seen in a case of high school students studying U.S. relations with Latin America (Rossi & Pace, 1998). These efforts were coupled with class discussions to help students parse the texts.

Civics teachers can draw on research on disciplinary literacy in history when affirming the role of reading instruction in their classrooms. An assessment of secondary students' learning in the context of a documents-based history curriculum, *Reading Like a Historian*, illustrated their growth in discipline-specific as well as general reading skills (Reisman, 2012), as referenced before. The students routinely engaged in close reading, as supported through practices including highlighting and taking notes, sourcing, considering the trustworthiness of the text, and contextualizing and corroborating. While the discipline-specific practices of civic engagement defy easy definition (Berson et al., 2017) and Reisman's work sought to spotlight reading in history, students' civic learning is enhanced through their use of strategies such as close reading and sourcing as they analyze texts about social problems. Indeed, after praising the impact of the *Reading Like a Historian* program, Wineburg and Reisman (2015) share their desire ". . . to come clean about the real intention of the *Reading Like a Historian* curriculum: it has nothing to do with preparing students to become historians . . . Its focus is the vocation of the citizen" (p. 637). As teachers advance students' disciplinary literacy skills, they advance students' readiness to participate in a democracy.

## *The Evasion of Reading Instruction*

Despite the potentially strong relationship between reading instruction and civic education, teachers may evade their role in fostering it. To start, secondary teachers in many disciplines eschew the teaching of literacy practices. They can pit literacy development against content-knowledge, assuming, “Either I cover the curriculum or I teach literacy,” as if it is a “trade-off” (Plaut, 2009, p. 4). Given this conflict regarding content-area reading, both preservice and in-service teachers believe that they should focus on content, not reading (Hall, 2005; Ness, 2009; Thibodeau, 2008). In particular, Ness (2009) documented the essential absence of reading comprehension instruction in middle and high school science and social studies and the teachers’ belief that reading comprehension was a “time-consuming detraction from their content coverage” (p. 158). In teaching “around reading,” educators provide students with other means of accessing the ideas of the curriculum (e.g., lecture, show videos) (Schoenbach et al., 2012; Woods, 2009). In turn, they deny students valuable reading experiences, keep them dependent on the teacher to understand content, and avoid supporting students who struggle with content-area texts. These findings reflect those documented over twenty years ago: Secondary-content-area teachers who avoid integrating reading instruction into their classrooms can view content literacy as an additional burden, as a disciplinary threat, and as undermining their control as teachers (O’Brien et al., 1995).

The trend of dodging reading instruction plays out in civic education. In a study of students in an advanced government and politics course, students rarely used the course textbook, and the teachers enabled them to learn the content through other techniques such as PowerPoint lectures, videos, and teacher-provided chapter summaries (Valencia & Parker, 2016). When students encountered difficult texts, there was an absence of teacher support for learning from them. In this context, students struggled with high-level vocabulary and disciplinary terms, and interviews revealed that they understood very little of the texts. However, few students reported that reading the texts was difficult as they equated reading with decoding, not comprehension.

Civics teachers could cite many reasons for their avoidance of reading instruction. First, they can claim “we are not reading teachers, we are government teachers” and the belief that secondary students should not need this support (Valencia & Parker, 2016, p. 99). Second, trends in research can contribute to a distancing of literacy and civic education, as Reidel and Draper (2011) bemoan there is “no explicit attention to literacy” (p. 125) in the chapters on democratic education in the *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Education* (Levstik & Tyson, 2008) and limited discussion of social studies teacher preparation for reading instruction. The body of research on disciplinary literacy in social studies has demonstrably grown (e.g., Monte-Sano et al., 2014; Reisman, 2012), and the updated handbook on social studies research (Manfra & Bolick, 2017) does contain explicit discussion of literacy in social studies. Yet the “the field of social studies has continued its complicated and often contentious relationship with literacy” (Berson et al., 2017, p. 414). Given that civic education is commonly

pursued through social studies, this assumes restrained attention on literacy in civics.

## **Studying the Syria Unit**

In contrast to distancing the importance of reading in youth civic engagement, the teachers leading the Syria unit scaffolded reading instruction in multiple ways. Here, I review the context of this unit and data collection and analysis procedures.

### *Context*

The Syria unit was enacted in January 2017 in a small U.S. urban public high school. As illustrated in data from the state education department, the school’s student body was diverse: 1% American Indian or Alaska Native; 26% Black or African American; 44% Hispanic or Latino; 7% Asian or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander; 19% White; and 4% multiracial. The unit was enacted through an elective offering that the school called an “intensive.” Students participated in intensives during a break between the first and second semesters. The regular bell schedule was suspended, and students gathered in multi-grade groups (9th–12th grades) for themed units that were enacted for seven full school days. There were many intensives ranging in topics (e.g., the college admissions process, making radio podcasts). The school had a strong commitment to thematic learning, and humanities courses were often organized around semester-long topics.

Concerning the Syria intensive, David Sherrin designed the unit, was teaching it for the second time, and was working with a co-teacher, Daniel Marshall, who was a first-year teacher, as well with as an intern learning about teaching.<sup>1</sup> David was motivated to teach about this issue given the humanitarian concerns and complexity involved. He saw a focus on Syria as offering a rich opportunity for the students to exercise the development of their content knowledge on the topic, empathy and compassion for those whose lives are being directly impacted, and opportunities for action. As a key action step and at the conclusion of the unit, the students wrote letters to the U.S. State Department, communicating their recommendations on the war and refugee crisis. In the assignment description, David empowered them with the reminder that “you know as much or more about Syria than most Americans” and instructed them to “be specific in your suggestion and make sure to address the complexity of the problem and of possible solutions.” They also held a bake sale at their school to raise awareness of the issues among their peers and raise funds for an organization that supports Syrian refugees (see Epstein, 2019, for an analysis of their action steps).

I initially opened conversation with David about his teaching on Syria because of my interest in global civic education. David is an award-winning teacher and author of books on his teaching,<sup>2</sup>

1 David Sherrin and Daniel Marshall have asked to be referred to by their real names. However, all students’ names are replaced with pseudonyms.

2 David Sherrin was the recipient of the 2014 Robert H. Jackson Center National Award for Teaching Justice. He is author of *Authentic Assessment in Social Studies: A Guide to Keeping it Real* (2020), *Judging for*

and when I learned of his intensive on the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis, I was intrigued. At the time, much of my previous experience with civic education involved students addressing local civic problems, and I was eager to learn about a civic unit that centered an issue that was global in scope and originated in a country thousands of miles from the students' immediate homes. While the students' responses to the unit were multifaceted, their experiences with the assigned texts emerged as significant and determined the focus of this paper.

During the intensive, the teachers expected the students to read and analyze many complex texts prior to engaging in civic action through letter writing and running the bake sale. Specifically, the students received three large packets of a total of 27 news articles from varied news sources including the *New York Times*, *Politico*, *The Independent*, and *Foreign Policy*. Additionally, they viewed multiple short films largely produced by news stations and two full-length documentary films, interviewed a Syrian refugee, and visited a museum to learn about Islamic culture. The letter-writing assignment assumed that students would draw on the knowledge they gained through these texts to communicate recommendations on the war and refugee crisis to the U.S. State Department. Students also drew on text-based knowledge to create posters and flyers for the bake sale.

The news articles displayed many markers of text complexity. See Table 1 for an analysis of "Syria's Civil War Explained" (*Al Jazeera*, 2017)<sup>3</sup> that the students read early in the unit and that I will return to in the findings when illustrating how students made sense of it. The analysis focuses on qualitative elements of text complexity as outlined in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

While the text's purpose of explaining critical events that caused the civil war and how the war has unfolded is clear and therefore low in complexity, the text includes challenges regarding its structure, language, and knowledge demands. Additionally, the layout of the article alternated between print text and pictures marked with captions. Given this element of structural complexity, the students needed to decipher when text was a caption related to a picture, when text was a part of the article's main text, and the relationship between the two. Newsela published "Syria's Civil War Explained" (*Al Jazeera/Newsela*, 2017) in four levels ranging from 570L–1230L, in Lexile levels, and an additional version labeled "MAX" to indicate the highest possible level of complexity. Comparing the versions, many changes are evident. For example,

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*Themselves: Using Mock Trials to Bring Social Studies to Life* (2016), and *The Classes They Remember: Using Role-Plays to Bring Social Studies and English to Life* (2016).

<sup>3</sup> The original article that the students read was from the *Al Jazeera* website and was published on December 14, 2016. However, the text of the article on that website has since been updated. Therefore, for clarity, I here cite the version of the text posted on Newsela since the vast majority matches that which was in the students' packet. The one key difference is that the posting of the *Al Jazeera* article that the students read included multiple recent photographs with captions, while only one photo is included in the Newsela version.

**Table 1. Analysis of Text Complexity**

Text from Article	Elements of Text Complexity
<p>"Five years after the conflict began, more than 450,000 Syrians have been killed in the fighting, more than a million injured and over 12 million Syrians—half the country's prewar population—have been displaced from their homes" (<i>Al Jazeera</i>, 2017, para. 1).</p> <p>"In 2011, what became known as the 'Arab Spring' revolts toppled Tunisian President Zine Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak" (<i>Al Jazeera</i>, 2017, para. 2).</p> <p>"That March, peaceful protests erupted in Syria as well" (<i>Al Jazeera</i>, 2017, para. 3).</p>	<p>The text's initial reference of "five years since the conflict began" draws on a current state of affairs, as the article was published in 2016. Then, one sentence later, it goes back in time to 2011 to begin to explain the origin of the conflict. This addresses a factor of text complexity related to the text's structure that asks students to recognize and manage issues of time and sequence.</p> <p>The second sentence asks students to be familiar with Tunisia and Egypt as countries, addressing the factor of text complexity related to knowledge demands. Knowledge of the Arab Spring would also be helpful to fully understand that sentence.</p>
<p>"Initially, lack of freedoms and economic woes fueled resentment of the Syrian government, and public anger was inflamed by the harsh crackdown on protesters. Successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt energized and gave hope to Syrian pro-democracy activists. Many Islamist movements were also strongly opposed to the Assads' rule" (<i>Al Jazeera</i>, 2017, para. 5).</p>	<p>The phrases "economic woes" and "fueled resentment" present elements of complexity regarding the text's language. The authors use language that is relatively academic, as opposed to conversational, and may be unfamiliar to the students. This passage also presents additional knowledge demands, as the text assumes students know what "freedoms" the Syrians lacked and the meaning of "Islamist movements."</p>

in a less complex version, the term "Islamist movement" is explained in a full paragraph while in the original text that David and Daniel's students read, it was undefined. Indeed, the original article by *Al Jazeera* that the students read was the one that Newsela labels as at the "MAX" level of complexity.

Additionally, students had relatively low levels of initial interest in the topic of the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis. On the first day of the intensive, most students shared that they had not chosen this intensive and therefore were likely placed in it because their top choices were filled. In comparison to Schultz's (2018) fifth-grade students' familiarity with the topic of urban school inequity and motivation to read complex texts about it, the students participating in the Syria unit had life experiences that were geographically and, in many ways, likely experientially distinct from those of the Syrians. In an interview, David also reflected on this and assessed that in comparison to the first time he taught the unit, he was aware of more challenges concerning motivation and, as potentially related, the students' academic performance. Concerning what the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) call "reader and task considerations," the teachers faced the challenge of supporting students to understand complex texts about a topic

on which they had little prior interest and in reference to the notable task of writing to the U.S. State Department.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

In my work with the Syria unit, I sought to develop a case study of global civic education through the use of ethnographic, qualitative methods. First, I was with the students for at least part of each day of the unit, yielding a total of 20 hours of observation. I collected copious field notes throughout the week, documenting student and teacher actions and talk. Critical to this paper were field notes portraying students' in-class interactions with the complex texts and their work to make sense of them. I also collected curricular artifacts (e.g., worksheets, class readings) and student work samples.

Second, I conducted interviews with teachers and students. Prior to the beginning of the unit, I held a formal interview with David focusing on his design of the unit. Throughout the week, David and I also had multiple informal conversations about the unit, which were documented in my field notes. Near the end of the intensive, I held five focus groups with students, interviewing a total of 13 students in pairs or groups of three, and conducted separate exit interviews with David and his co-teacher Daniel. The teacher interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, as were most student interviews. Five students requested to not be audio-recorded, and I typed notes as they spoke during their interviews. The interviews were guided by predetermined questions. The interview questions for the teachers focused on their goals, questions, observations, and evaluations of the Syria unit. During the focus groups for the students, I utilized several prompts and activities that encouraged them to talk about different parts of the unit. One prompt that proved important in surfacing the data central to this paper involved students identifying "highs," or good moments, and "lows," or negative moments, during the unit. This focus on "critical incidents" (Brookfield, 1990) enabled students to address concrete aspects of the instruction and their learning. Focus group discussion was also aided by a visual display of curricular resources (e.g., reading packets, images of film advertisements, letter-writing assignment description). If in the review of critical incidents students did not discuss a resource or experience, I pointed to the visual and prompted them to talk about it. In general, I sought to follow conversation as it naturally unfolded, leading me to use the interview questions as a guide, not a script.

Data analysis involved open coding of all interview transcripts and field notes. Coded data were then indexed in charts to group data chunks with common codes. Some charts grouped data on the teachers' instructional goals, motivations for, and prior knowledge of civic engagement. The focus of this paper is on the enacted instruction and the teachers' and students' responses to it. Data related to this focus were grouped in charts on resources used, guided instruction, reading struggles, students' knowledge development, students' empathy development, students' text/genre preferences, civic action, student (in)attention, and responsive instruction. These charts included data from field notes as well as from teacher and student interviews, and data were occasionally cross-coded and placed in more than one chart. For example, when

expressing one of their text or genre preferences, students often commented on how those texts helped them build knowledge about the topic. I placed such a data chunk both in the charts on text/genre preferences and on students' knowledge development.

As I analyzed the data from the charts on reading struggles and guided instruction, I was able to identify the challenges the news media posed for the students and the value of scaffolded reading instruction that tended to students' social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions (Schoenbach et al., 2012). I then placed this finding in relation to data from other charts, including those on students' knowledge development, students' text/genre preferences, and responsive instruction, as well as student- and teacher-created documents, continuously drafting memos on the relations between data. In particular, data documenting students' knowledge development portrayed students exercising their thinking about disciplinary material—both through classroom talk and through written work—and these instances were often in the context of the teachers' use of scaffolded reading instruction. Overall, through the triangulation of sources and analysis of data with varying codes, I arrived at the findings discussed next.

As the resulting argument stems from data from one classroom documented by one researcher, the findings are not generalizable and do not offer cross-case analysis. Furthermore, the argument is reliant on data representing the curriculum as David and Daniel intended and not from the administration of additional assessments, such as pre- and post-tests, that may have yielded a more systematic documentation of student learning for the unit as a whole and in discrete lessons. Yet the findings illustrate the value of studying literacy in everyday contexts (O'Brien, 1995) and listening to students' insights about the usefulness of content literacy strategies (Fisher & Frey, 2008) and most specifically offer suggestions regarding reading instruction in civic education.

### **Scaffolded Reading in the Syria Unit**

The students participating in the Syria unit perceived the complex news articles featured in the curriculum as challenging. Yet scaffolded reading instruction seemed to mitigate their struggles, yielding student satisfaction, and it also supported their engagement with the disciplinary material. So, to explore these findings, next I discuss students' struggles with the news articles and subsequently, their valuing of scaffolded reading strategies. This section concludes with a description of enacted scaffolded reading instruction and the student engagement with course content that emerged.

### *Reading Challenges*

On most days of the unit, David and Daniel presented the expectation that students read news articles on the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis that had multiple elements of text complexity. The students generally found these reading experiences challenging—a theme raised in each of the five focus group interviews held with students. For example, after I prompted their views on the reading packets in a focus group with three students, Samantha responded,

“Sort of confusing. I didn’t know how to analyze it.” Her peer, Michael, continued, “Also confusing and overwhelming to remember what you read.” While these students named the challenging nature of the texts, other students complained that reading was “boring” or that they do not “enjoy reading.” In a separate focus group, Tyrone claimed, “When I was reading some of the articles, sometimes I wouldn’t really get into it. Like I wouldn’t really be interested in continuing reading.” Such statements illustrating students’ lack of interest and low motivation in reading can reflect their geographic and experiential distance from that of Syrian citizens and refugees. Students may also claim that they are not interested in a text because it is hard to comprehend. David too acknowledged the dilemmas with reading, noting the “lack of engagement” some students showed.

Reflecting students’ dislike of the print texts included in the unit, students routinely praised the nonprint texts when asked to identify the “highs,” or good points, of the unit. They spotlighted short films, the long documentary films, and their interview with a refugee. A favorite was *A Syrian Love Story* (Shakerifar & McAllister, 2015), a documentary that was raised in all the focus groups. Amelia praised it for how “it showed people’s actual experiences and conflicts they face when it comes down to the war.” Another student said that it helped him understand the “effects of trauma from the war.” Indeed, following this movie, the students had what both the teachers and I saw as a remarkable conversation about trauma. David labeled it a “really great discussion,” explaining that “[students] made connections to the personal lives of the people and to larger issues like trauma . . . how it can effect family relations, people’s choices.” When I invited Daniel to open his interview with thoughts about the unit, he said:

*I remember one discussion we had that went over an hour after we watched the A Syrian Love Story. That is the first memory that pops up and it is a very positive one . . . It was a moment when the students took control of the space and were using it for something they were interested in. They found themselves in the material.*

As illustrated by these comments about the lessons involving *A Syrian Love Story*, in comparison to comments on the news stories, students’ responses to nonprint texts seemed more positive than those to the print texts. The teachers and students were aware of how videos like *A Syrian Love Story* captivated the students’ attention and yielded their engagement in course content.

Some students briefly praised the role of the print news articles but would quickly pivot to compare them to the nonprint texts that they saw as better. For example, Charlene claimed:

*Yes, those paper articles were good. They gave me knowledge, but at the same time, I’m a visual learner . . . I’m probably going to forget that because it’s not like a picture that I’ve seen in my head, that I’ve seen in these videos. I remember the videos way more than I remember the newspapers.*

A few exchanges later, in the same focus group, Tamara also expressed her preference for the videos and emphasized the point that the print texts were “boring”: “The newspaper articles were OK. They were kind of boring for me because they were long . . .

They gave me some important information, but I feel like the videos worked better.” The students devalued the print texts in favor of visual texts. Such insights illustrate the challenges in scaffolding students’ analysis of complex print texts on civic topics.

### *The Value of Scaffolded Reading—Student Perspectives*

Students’ insights about their reading processes confirmed how scaffolded reading can temper students’ aversion to complex print texts. Students were able to describe the kind of instruction that helps them and how it was used with the news articles in the Syria unit. Charlene, who praised the videos for being impacting in a way that the print texts were not, shared:

*I like it when it’s read either in a group setting or to me. Because if it’s read to me, I get to underline everything I hear. Or if I sit in a group setting, I could underline, take turns reading. When I took turns reading with [the intern], it was easier. I contained that, and I kept underlining my notes.*

As seen through this metacognitive awareness, Charlene is clear about how her ability to annotate the text was supported when she read with others and the reading process was made social. Furthermore, she claimed that this process of underlining helped her “contain” the information, pointing to the way she valued exercising the cognitive skill of keeping track of key ideas. The other students in her focus group agreed.

In the final focus group, Javier also commented on the importance of group reading: “If we read it as a class or if someone asks questions about it, [that] makes you think more about the text.” His interview partner quickly concurred, stating his appreciation for when “[the class would] read a whole page and then we take a pause and talk about it,” identifying that this approach offered “flow.” While Charlene valued the opportunity to underline important information, Javier and his classmate praised collaborative text-based questioning and discussion. Such discussion can create opportunities for teachers and students to talk about what is confusing, important, and possibly misleading in texts.

Additionally, affirmative of the value of scaffolded reading, Femi, a student interviewed in the first group, explained how she missed guiding questions when they were not offered alongside a text. Here is how she responded to my question about “low” points in the unit:

*The articles. There were a lot to read. The packets are big. On the first day, we had to read and answer the question and I liked that. In the later packets, there weren’t questions . . . The questions are helpful because if I didn’t know what is going on, I can go back into the story and find out the answers and see what I learned.*

Femi was aware of her thinking and what was helpful when controlling her reading processes. She desired a structure that would help her monitor her comprehension, and the text-based questions listed on a worksheet did just that. During the final days of the unit, students were offered such structures less frequently than at the beginning of the unit when they were reading more consistently. After students began working on their letters and visual displays for the bake sale, David and Daniel gave students

choices to read from their packets or work on their letters or bake sale posters. Those who chose to read had fewer scaffolded reading structures to direct their work in comparison with those offered in the opening days of the unit. David explained that the dominant intention at this point in the unit was for the students to complete their letters and displays and that during a one-week intensive, continuous skill building was not prioritized in the way it was during semester-long classes. Yet Femi's voice is an educative one in that it illustrates how she valued scaffolded reading experiences that helped her deal with complex texts. David's and Daniel's efforts to integrate such experiences—as seen, for example, when they asked the students to read and discuss texts aloud and presented guiding questions—garnered student appreciation.

### *The Value of Scaffolded Reading—Snapshots of Classroom Instruction*

An activity that occurred close to the beginning of the unit clearly illustrated the use of scaffolded reading instruction during the Syria unit. In this section, I first offer a description of it and the way it yielded student engagement with the course material. Then, I draw from my observations of other activities to briefly present additional strategies the teachers coached the students to use to support their reading experiences.

During the focal lesson, students were instructed to gather in small groups around different news articles. Group A was to read “We are Dead Either Way: Agonizing Choices for Syrians in Aleppo” (Barnard & Saad, 2016) and draw four pictures representing the events in the article. Group B was to read “Syria’s Civil War Explained” (*Al Jazeera*, 2017) and write eight key facts and draw two pictures. Group C was to read “Syria: The Story of the Conflict” (Rodgers et al., 2016) and make a timeline of 10 dates and illustrate three with pictures. The teachers provided photocopies of the readings, large poster-size paper, and markers. Each article was between 5 and 10 pages. David explained to me that the differentiated tasks reflected the nature of the texts. The reading where students were drawing pictures contains painful and vivid descriptions of people’s responses to the destruction of Aleppo, whereas the articles on which the students were asked to create timelines and list facts covered more content. To accommodate the number of students, there were multiple iterations of the groups.

After students found their groups, they settled into a period of focused reading and responding. To illustrate, in one iteration of Group B, with guidance, the students each read one page of the article aloud, rotating in a circle, and marked stars in the margin next to details that might be included in their final poster of eight key facts. They were reading the article spotlighted in Table 1 (*Al Jazeera*, 2017) and discussed in the “context” section of this paper. As they read, they helped each other deal with points of confusion and curiosity. For example, when one student started reading a caption under a picture as if it were a continuous extension of the text above the picture, a peer commented, “That is just part of the picture,” and helped him find where to continue reading the main text. Later, a student sought to clarify the role that Lebanon was playing in the war. After reading about “Lebanon-based Hezbollah” supporting Assad, she questioned, “If Lebanon is with

Assad, why are there refugees there?” prompting a conversation about groups in Lebanon who are not a part of Hezbollah. Prior to this reading lesson, the students had watched a video portraying Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and the student was seeking to reconcile that portrayal with her new knowledge of support for Assad in Lebanon. Through classroom talk, students engaged with the content of the article.

Students also made personal reflections on the material. For example, the article noted that the U.S. started bombing targets of ISIS in Syria in 2014. During a break from reading, a student commented on the article’s reference to 2014 and said that he did not remember talking about ISIS when he was in middle school, as he was in middle school in 2014. In this comment, he acknowledged a history of ISIS and linked it to his own school experience. Students also shared their fear of ISIS and were countered by those who affirmed their safety in the U.S.

When they completed the article, they reviewed all their starred points and chose eight to include on the chart paper. Some bullet points read as follows: “The lack of freedom and economic woes angered Syrians. That led to protest”; “Assad later killed hundreds of protestors”; and “Although the U.S. disagreed with Assad’s government, they didn’t want to get involved.” As seen in Table 2, these points include language drawn directly from the text, as well as language that was composed by the students. As the students integrated the vocabulary and ideas presented in the article into their own notes, yet did not exclusively copy the text, they were working to make the terms and ideas their own. High-level vocabulary (e.g., “economic woes”) was used

**Table 2. Students’ Text Interpretations**

Text from Article	Text on Student-Composed Poster
“. . . peaceful protests erupted in Syria . . .” ( <i>Al Jazeera</i> , 2017, para. 3) “Initially, lack of freedoms and economic woes fueled resentment of the Syrian government, and public anger was inflamed by the harsh crackdown on protestors” ( <i>Al Jazeera</i> , 2017, para. 5).	“The lack of freedom and economic woes angered Syrians. That led to protest.”
“The Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad, responded to the protests by killing hundreds of demonstrators and imprisoning many more” ( <i>Al Jazeera</i> , 2017, para. 4).	“Assad later killed hundreds of protestors.”
“Although the US has stated its opposition to the Assad government, it has hesitated to involve itself deeply in the conflict, even after the Assad government allegedly used chemical weapons in 2013, which US President Barack Obama had previously referred to as a ‘red line’ that would prompt intervention” ( <i>Al Jazeera</i> , 2017, para. 15).	“Although the US disagreed with Assad’s government, they didn’t want to get involved.”

appropriately, and the students highlighted important factors regarding Syria's civil war. In my fieldwork journal, I noted that during this exercise, "the classroom had a calm feel to it," yet this was about more than student satisfaction—students engaged with meaningful disciplinary knowledge. Furthermore, during whole-group discussion the following day, a student from this reading group commented on the Syrians' lack of "freedom of speech" as related to the article's point about Syrians' "lack of freedoms." He retained this idea, again showing his comprehension of course material.

Once the groups completed their posters, Daniel directed the students to switch to new groups and related tasks. Students who were previously in Group C would move to Group A, B to C, and A to B. He asked them to read the news pieces associated with their new groups, look at the work the students before them did, and "improve upon it." This experience continued to encourage group work and invited engagement with journalism and student-created texts, as students were to identify information to record on the poster that the previous group had not included. Following this rotation, the posters were hung and displayed for the rest of the unit.

While this activity illustrates the use of group reading, annotating, drawing, and note taking to support students in their reading of news articles, the teachers utilized additional scaffolds in the Syria unit that guided student interaction with the course material. During discussion, the teachers would ask students to make connections to class texts, ensuring they were using texts for learning. In one instance, David and Daniel offered students sentence starters (e.g., "Something in the text that I agree with is . . ."; "Something in the text that angers me is . . .") to promote text-based discussion. In other instances, the teachers would ask students to link their oral statements to class texts. For example, in the unit's opening lesson, students studied photojournalism of Syria. As they shared their thoughts, David asked, "How did you learn that from one of the pictures?" These methods illustrate the way David and Daniel asked students to engage with the texts in their classroom talk.

David also routinely asked the students to write questions they had about the texts. This was utilized in a lesson that involved students reading articles about refugee experiences, again in small groups. It was enacted before the poster-making activity discussed previously. In one group, students read a news story about the drowning of refugees after their boat sank as it traveled toward Greece. It assumed that the reader was knowledgeable about the war itself. Once they completed the article, and in response to David's posted prompt—"What questions do you have?"—students asked, "What are they getting away from? Did any make it to Greece?" While the first question would be addressed in a later lesson, the second question prompted other group members to look back in the article and find the sentence confirming that some refugees survived and swam to the Turkish coast. Through questioning, students were able to articulate curiosity about wartime life in Syria and instigate a rereading process to develop their knowledge of the event. Overall, in the context of scaffolded

reading instruction, the students used supportive strategies to explore the content of the unit.

### **Learning about Scaffolded Reading in the Syria Unit**

This paper illustrates the value of scaffolded reading instruction, and particularly the RA approach (Schoenbach et al., 2012) in a high school unit on the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis. Students reported satisfaction with the lessons that offered guidance in keeping with the multiple dimensions of the RA approach, and in the context of these lessons, they engaged with disciplinary content. Regarding the social dimension, students had opportunities to read and discuss texts together, something they appreciated. They engaged the cognitive dimension when they kept track of ideas through notes, asked questions, and visualized events in texts by drawing pictures. For knowledge building, they discussed disciplinary content (e.g., Lebanon's role in the war, Syrians' lack of freedom) and had opportunities to build on and respond to their peers' ideas. Finally, the students operationalized the personal dimension when they shared their likes and dislikes about the texts and the various forms of instruction they experienced. This was particularly fostered in the student focus groups but such sharing might have also featured during in-class instruction. The apparent seamless integration and impact of the dimensions in the RA approach suggests its utility in democratic education. Indeed, given students' struggles with the language in the news articles, and the requirement of interpreting language for engagement in participatory democracies (Allen, 2016; Rebell, 2018), the reading instruction utilized in the Syria unit can be seen as a necessary part of their democratic education.

With clarity on the role of scaffolded reading instruction in democratic civic education, teachers can integrate complex texts into their civic instruction and teach with them, as opposed to avoiding them (Valencia & Parker, 2016). To start, teachers might enact shared readings, as such social activities are appreciated by secondary students, and note taking exercises, which social studies teachers commonly frame as effective (Fisher & Frey, 2008) when reading texts about civic problems. Relatedly, Valencia and Parker (2016) have called on civics teachers to consider teaching strategies such as annotating and asking students to use texts during tasks. The use of such instruction is on display in the Syria unit. It is especially worthwhile that the students had this support in reference to news media, given the complexity of these texts and the role of journalism in fostering democratic participation in politics (Levine, 2007). Through scaffolded reading instruction, these students have experienced the value of gathering information about a current matter through the free press. Civics teachers are also likely to find text adaptation, as allowed through sites like Newsela, valuable to lessen a news article's complexity and facilitate students' comprehension of current civic issues (Rossi & Pace, 1998).

In addition to its immediate educative impact, David and Daniel's teaching emerges as significant, given a broader context of secondary education and civic education that eschews reading instruction and related calls for increased attention to adolescent literacy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004) and recognition of the

centrality of language and literacy in content-area learning (Moje, 2008). In too many secondary classrooms, teachers sidestep their responsibility to teach with and through text (Schoenbach et al., 2012; Ness, 2009; Plaut, 2009; Woods, 2009), including in civics-oriented classrooms (Valencia & Parker, 2016). Specifically, the absence of reading instruction in civic education avoids critical opportunities for students' growth as readers and civic actors, leading them to possibly make uninformed judgments about texts and civic matters. Conversely, through the pursuit of complex civic texts, students' opportunities to develop nuanced and expansive civic knowledge grow. Accordingly, teachers need to confront the absence of literacy instruction in secondary content areas and cultivate an appetite for textual challenge and skills to deal with these challenges in civic education. David and Daniel's instruction signals what this looks like.

Furthermore, in its surfacing of student voice, this paper offers an insight into students' thinking about reading and presents an opportunity to honor students' skills. Operating in the metacognitive dimension (Schoenbach et al., 2012), students spoke of their reading struggles and preferences, positioning us as able to learn from them. In comparison with students who claimed texts on government and politics were easy, simply because they were able to decode them (Valencia & Parker, 2016), these students knew to label many of the texts as hard to read and "confusing." Indeed, the texts were complex, especially given the readers' low initial interest in the topic, and the students' awareness of this should be praised.

The students also offered that reading with others, annotating, and answering guided questions were helpful, and when these scaffolds were absent, they were missed. Other students will display different interests, and teachers should teach a flexible set of reading strategies based on their assessment of students' needs (Marri et al., 2011; Monte-Sano et al., 2014). For example, returning to issues of student interest and motivation, teachers might decide to at least temporarily address civic issues that are more immediate in the students' lives and local in nature, creating opportunity for students to read texts about civic problems that are familiar. When expressing their wishes, the students in the Syria unit focused more on the value of scaffolded reading activities, and with their enactment, students had opportunities to consider a global civic issue and therefore expand their civic horizon and sympathies. With knowledge of the reading practices that benefit them, the students can use these skills in regards to questions about Syria and ideally transfer them to their study of other civic issues.

Having built some knowledge about the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis through scaffolded reading instruction, the students who participated in the Syria intensive can proceed with more reading, problem posing, and informed civic action. While problem posing critical literacy practices, such as querying the intent of the author and whose voices are missing (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004), are not highlighted in this paper, I frame the reading practices discussed here, including small-group reading, annotating, and note taking about texts, as part of a repertoire of practices that civics teachers can develop in the context of democratic education. They will not alone suffice if we hope to develop citizens with critical consciousness and who are able to evaluate the

trustworthiness of a text. These citizens will need to interrogate what they read (e.g., ask whose voices are silenced and included) and compare multiple texts on the same topic (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) through strategies such as lateral reading (McGrew et al., 2017). This paper does not seek to distract from the importance of such critical literacy skills and the teacher preparation that supports it (Reidel & Draper, 2011). Instead, teachers should consider the reading instruction discussed here as instrumental in fostering students' confidence in approaching textual challenges and initial understandings of texts. As students first develop a literal understanding of a text before engaging in problem posing (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004), students' abilities to pursue a text through collaborative reading and annotating are foundational to their abilities to determine a text's trustworthiness.

As teachers extend the RA approach to support critical literacy practices, they should also be thinking inclusively about scaffolded instruction for multimodal texts. While the RA approach is mostly spotlighted here in reference to the print news sources that the students found most challenging, teachers can support students to engage the RA dimensions when working to comprehend texts in various genres, including the films that the students so enjoyed. Indeed, researchers recommend that teachers offer scaffolding so that students can access and parse the content of documentary films like *A Syrian Love Story* (2015); specifically, students can take notes on a graphic organizer to keep track of what they are viewing and questions they have, discuss their views of the documentarians' perspective and argument at various points during the film, and compare the film to other sources of information (Marcus & Stoddard, 2009; Stoddard & Marcus, 2010). Marcus and Stoddard (2009, 2010) have argued that such instruction will help students view the film critically and use the data presented in it for analysis—actions that they will otherwise likely avoid. Importantly, their recommended tasks of note taking, questioning, and text-based discussion are reflected in the RA approach to reading instruction. Marcus and Stoddard's recommendations for analysis of documentary film continue to point to the value of the RA approach when studying civic issues.

Further research is needed to explore the shape and impact of scaffolded reading instruction in democratic education. Following the discussion just had, more exploration on the links between the RA approach to reading, critical literacy, and civic participation is needed. Additionally, given findings of how disciplinary reading programs lead to the growth of general reading comprehension skills (Reisman, 2012) and content knowledge (Wanzek et al., 2015), researchers might more systematically explore this in civic education. Finally, I query how the relationship between literacy and civic engagement may contribute to the justification of a place for civic instruction in the curriculum. Given the Common Core State Standards' (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) emphasis on reading complex texts and the overall marginalization of civics in schools (Rebell, 2018), the connection between civic education and literacy may motivate more classroom teachers and school

administrators to integrate civic education into their schools. I hope for this paper to foster such discussions.

## Conclusion

David and Daniel integrated scaffolded reading instruction into a civic unit, and it was valued by the students and fostered their engagement with disciplinary content. This encourages the integration of complex texts, including the likely use of news media, and the RA approach (Schoenbach et al., 2012) in democratic education. When the RA approach is used, teachers honor reading as a problem-solving experience that is supported by tending to students' social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building skills. Students benefit when they work with peers to make sense of texts, name their reading habits and interests, ask questions about texts, visualize what is described in texts, keep track of ideas in texts, and use many other potential strategies that can aid civic learning. There is no one set of instructional practices that will be appropriate for all students in all contexts, yet I hope this paper encourages teachers to identify and adapt aspects of scaffolded reading instruction, including those enacted in the Syria unit, in democratic civic education.

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