Controversial Public Issues in the Secondary Classroom

Exploring Teachers' Thoughts and Perceptions

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Abstract

The present empirical study seeks to explore the perceptions novice educators have toward the use of controversial public issues (CPI) in the secondary classroom. The research attempts to do this by examining the following research questions: (a) To what extent do new teachers associate the use of CPI in the classroom with broad principles of democratic education? and (b) To what extent do new teachers view the practicality of integrating CPI within the classroom? Findings suggest that participants associate CPI with citizenship education (e.g., voting) instead of reform-oriented components of democratic education (e.g., providing spaces for historically marginalized groups and overturning the status quo). Additionally, findings suggest that although novice educators remain enthusiastic about using CPI in their pedagogy, several constraints prevent them from feeling confident about discussing critical and current issues in their classrooms. On the basis of

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these findings, future research should explore ways in which teacher preparation programs can foster a deeper understanding of democratic education in teachers and ways in which CPI can be effectively integrated into the secondary classroom.

Introduction

Scholars within the field of education frequently discuss the role of controversial public issues (CPI) in the K–12 classroom. In the broadest sense, Hess (2001) defined CPI as "unresolved question[s] of public policy that spark significant disagreement" (p. 1). When incorporated into the K–12 classroom effectively, the use of CPI can serve as a means for developing citizens who are knowledgeable about topical issues, open to the opinions of others, and capable of participating in rational dialogue about open-ended and complex topics (Brank & Wylie, 2013; Cross & Price, 1996; Hess, 2009; Macedo, 2004; Parker, 2003). Students in the K–12 classroom, in this sense, are expected to graduate from their formal schooling with an understanding of complex social issues and the various ways in which these ideas can be thought about in an autonomous and critical manner that will help society evolve through evidence-based logic and collective action (Habermas, 1989; Macedo, 2004). To that end, teachers must be aware of these opportunities and understand how to take advantage of them in the K–12 classroom.

And though CPI are only one way in which K–12 students can gain these skills, grappling with abstract issues within a relatively diverse and well-facilitated setting can encourage students to grow socially and academically in a manner that will lead them to become more effective citizens (Banks, 1993; Barton, 2012; Hess, 2004). Gutmann (1987/1999) noted that "schools have a much greater capacity than most parents and voluntary associations for teaching children to reason out loud about disagreements that arise democratic politics" (p. 58). To that effect, such opportunities are grounded in the fact that "[schools] contain more diversity than one would expect to find in a family, church, synagogue, mosque, or club" (Hess, 2004, p. 153). In other words, the classroom—regardless of whether it is in a private or public school—will likely contain a more diverse group of students in terms of religious beliefs, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and previous experiences than what students can experience outside of the classroom (Gutmann, 1987/1999; Hess, 2004). A school, therefore, presents an opportunity for students to become exposed to an array of perspectives and beliefs in a mature and controlled environment.

Such diversity presents an opportunity for students to become exposed to new perspectives and beliefs, construct opinions based on an array of ideologies, and learn to respect the opinions of others on often complex and abstract issues that are so prevalent in modern society. As Hess (2004) noted, "[the] diversity of views makes classrooms powerful places to promote 'rational deliberations of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society'" (p. 157). In this sense, the classroom has the ability not only to teach students how to engage in effective dialogue

with peers but also to respect the opinions of others and adjust one's thinking based on counterarguments that hold merit. Not only are these skills critical to foster in future generations of citizens but they are "less likely to be fostered out of the classroom" (Avery, 2003, p. 58). Therefore it is essential for those within teacher education to understand the extent to which educators understand the importance of CPI and the impact they have on developing citizens capable of participating in the public sphere through collaboration and open-mindedness.

Despite the large call for developing teachers capable of infusing such issues into the K–12 classroom and capitalizing on the present diversity (e.g., Barton & McCully, 2007; Hess, 2009; Macedo, 2004; Misco & Tseng, 2018; Parker, 2003; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017), there exists a gap in the literature detailing how teachers associate the use of CPI in the classroom with broad principles of democratic education. Such a gap is critical to explore given that a teacher with an understanding of both CPI and democratic education would likely have a better chance of effectively incorporating CPI into a classroom. To that end, those in teacher education can use the findings of this study to inform their own practice on how to use CPI and connect such a tool to broad theories of democratic education.

Additionally, limited research has sought to explore the extent to which novice educators have both internalized the content presented to them in their course work and adapted it to either their pedagogical decision-making or their knowledge of broad theories within the field of education. The purpose of this study is to provide a lens in which to better understand how novice educators think about the connection between CPI and several prominent theories that have guided scholarship in the field of education for almost a century. The aim is for this study to better inform teacher preparation programs on how to best cultivate an understanding of the benefits of CPI in the classroom among novice educators.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses Gutmann's (1987/1999) framework of democratic education to explore these associations. Gutmann defined a "democratic education"—which is used as a foundation for the present study—thus:

> A democratic state is therefore committed to allocating educational authority in such a way as to provide its members with an education adequate to participating in democratic politics, to choosing among (a limited range of) good lives, and to sharing in the several subcommunities, such as families, that impart identity to the lives of its citizens. (p. 42)

The study, further, focuses on how Gutmann explored notions of the "good life" within the context of a truly democratic education. This idea stems from the perspective that every individual is capable of obtaining his or her definition of a

"good life" regardless of background and that the school should assist in this aim by providing both equal and equitable opportunities for all students.

This study, it should be noted, assumes that the use of CPI directly connects to a meaningful democratic education in that exposing students to "unresolved question[s] of public policy that [spark] significant disagreement" (Hess, 2001, p. 1) can encourage students to develop their own opinions based on facts and learn how to collaborate with individuals with differing belief systems to solve contemporary issues (also Joshi, 2016). Furthermore, this study assumes that a teacher who does not have a complete understanding of how CPI can be incorporated into the K–12 classroom will be less likely to integrate such issues into his or her pedagogy in the most effective manner. The primary goal of this study, therefore, is to gain a better understand of how a diverse group of novice educators connect CPI with broad principles of education. The findings, ideally, will help to inform teacher educators about how they expose their classes to both the use of CPI and broad theories of democratic education.

Literature Review

While much has been written about the value of incorporating CPI into the K–12 classroom, limited research has explored the extent to which these teachers understand and internalize the inherent value of using CPI in regard to the broad aims of a democratic education (i.e., overturning the status quo, promoting participatory citizenship, quelling social inequities, and providing a voice to historically marginalized groups).

Despite the lack of scholarship exploring the extent to which educators connect prominent theories in education with the use of CPI, there has been limited research exploring how educators perceive the use of CPI in secondary classrooms in terms of practicality. Such research has sought to describe how educators at various stages in their careers consider the use of CPI in the classroom in terms of student engagement and ability, parental and administrative support, and their own confidence and understanding of how to effectively do so.

Oulton, Day, Dillon, and Grace (2004) conducted a study with primary and secondary teachers in the United Kingdom and found that "many teachers are under-prepared and feel constrained in their ability to [use controversial issues in their pedagogy]" (p. 490). More specifically, the authors found that only one in eight teachers in the United Kingdom—where citizenship is mandated as a subject—"reported that they generally felt very well prepared to teach controversial issues" (p. 502). Such findings are certainly concerning given the stated value of using CPI in the classroom and the necessity for doing so as a means for cultivating effective citizens.

In a similar manner, Zembylas and Kambani (2012) explored how elementary teachers in Greece feel about teaching controversial issues in their history curriculum. Findings suggest that the teachers see the value in doing so but are often

hesitant to discuss CPI with their students due to developmental concerns and the context of that region. In this sense, the theories supporting the use of CPI in the classroom were consistently supported by the 18 participants of the study. However, the authors found that the practical implementation of CPI was often seen by the participants as being impractical for a variety of reasons, including the "emotional discomfort of teachers; emotional resistance from students; lack of professional development, inadequate teaching pedagogies, and lack of appropriate instructional materials; and, finally, nation-state structures and norms" (p. 111). Such a finding runs parallel to a study conducted by Oulton et al. (2004) in that it describes a group of teachers who want to incorporate CPI into their pedagogy but often feel nervous doing so and lack the confidence to do so effectively.

Expanding upon this body of literature exploring the use of CPI in the K12 classroom, Byford, Lennon, and Russell (2009) conducted a study similar to the present one in which they sought to explore how teachers perceive the use of controversial issues in the social studies classroom. Ultimately, the researchers found that their participants felt limited in the ability to use CPI due to a range of circumstances (reflecting the scholarship of Oulton et al., 2004, and Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Byford et al. (2009) ultimately noted that their participants "believe[d] discussion is important in developing an informed and enlightened citizenry and electorate" but were "less assured about teaching controversial issues to students" (p. 169). In other words, the participants in the study were interested in the broad aims of a citizenship education and wanted to achieve such goals within their own classroom. However, they were hesitant to incorporate controversial issues into their classroom as a means for achieving such aims.

Likewise, Misco and Patterson (2007) explored how preservice social studies teachers perceive their own academic freedom and the extent to which they feel comfortable integrating controversial issues into their classrooms. These authors, too, found that the climate of the school system influenced the extent to which their participants felt comfortable teaching with CPI. In this sense, participants had concerns about where they intended on teaching, the ways in which their actions would be perceived, and the extent to which they could put their job status in jeopardy by inadvertently offending students, teachers, parents, or administrators.

The present study takes a similar approach to the aforementioned studies but seeks to contribute to the existing literature in two ways. The first is by exploring the extent to which novice educators connect the use of CPI to prominent theories at the foundation of a democratic education. Though research has been conducted on how educators perceive the use of CPI and the value they place upon it, there has yet to be a study that looks into ways in which educators effectively connect the use of CPI to broad theories of democratic education.

The second way in which this study seeks to fill a gap in the literature is by exploring how novice educators in *all* areas of the curriculum think about CPI in the context of K–12 schools. Because discussions on CPI can and should be integrated

into every subject in the K–12 curriculum, this study includes teachers who either currently teach or plan on teaching in the mathematics, sciences, social studies, or English and language arts fields. Ideally, a different perspective is offered through this study and its incorporation of different fields of study.

Purpose of the Study

The author of this study sought to explore the extent to which graduate students in a Middle and Secondary Methods course associate the use of CPI in the K–12 classroom with broad principles of democratic education. Additionally, the author sought to gain an understanding of the extent to which participants view the use of CPI as practical within the K–12 classroom setting. The research questions (RQs) for the present study are as follows:

> To what extent do K–12 classroom teachers associate the use of controversial public issues with broad principles of democratic education?

> To what extent are such perspectives tied to issues of social justice and citizenship skills?

> To what extent do K–12 classroom teachers view the use of controversial public issues as practical in the K–12 classroom?

What makes these RQs significant to the field of education is the participants of the study—as will be described thoroughly within the methods portion of this essay—involved aspiring teachers of the social studies, sciences, English and language arts, and mathematics fields. The RQs, therefore, were explored from the mind-sets of various content areas and from educators with exceptionally different academic backgrounds and ultimate goals. The findings, therefore, have potential to be transferable to many content areas and influence educators across the field of education.

Methods

Because this study sought to understand relatively abstract and complex ideas, a qualitative approach was used in an attempt to collect an array of robust and lively data (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Furthermore, to best ensure transferability (Guba, 1981) and both reliability and validity (Miles & Huberman, 1994), a multicase study was chosen, as it best allowed for data to be corroborated and for themes to emerge across cases (Merriam, 1998). This section describes the specific methods used to conduct the study.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used for the present study (Merriam, 1998). Fourteen participants were invited on the first day of the semester to participate

in the study. Of those invited, 12 individuals agreed to take part in the study (9 women and 3 men). Each participant was a graduate student seeking his or her master's in education degree from a small liberal arts college. Two of the participants were classroom teachers seeking an advanced degree, while 12 of the participants transitioned directly into the graduate program from their under-graduate studies. While two of the students were "traditional" graduate students, 10 were enrolled in a 1-year "fellowship" program in which a local district funds their graduate studies and the student (known as a fellow) in turn spends a year working in a school as an assistant to a classroom teacher. Additionally, nine of the participants had an undergraduate degree in a discipline related to education (e.g., elementary education, higher education), while the remaining three had degrees outside of education. Table 1 provides basic biographical information on the participants of the study.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name	Sex	Age	Origin	Fellow	Undergraduate Major	Content Area
Mallory	F	22	Massachusetts	Y	math, minors inpsychology and education	math
Pam	F	22	New Hampshire	Y	math, minor in psychology	math
Lucy	F	27	Massachusetts	Y	animal science, pre-vet	science/biology
Jessica	F	26	Massachusetts	Y	creative writing, minor in psychology	English
Zak	M	26	Massachusetts	N	communication, minor in film	English
Jamie	F	22	Massachusetts	Y	English with certification	English
Jan	F	25	Massachusetts	Y	business and English	English
Adele	F	22	Massachusetts	Y	English	English
Margo	F	22	Vermont	Y	English, minors in education and sociology	English
Gary	M	24	New Hampshire	N	history (European)	history/ social studies
Catalina	F	22	Massachusetts	Y	history	history/ social studies
Steve	M	22	Massachusetts	Y	political science	history/ social studies

Context

The study took place in summer 2016 at a small liberal arts college in the Northeast of the United States. The college—whose traditions are firmly rooted in the Augustinian-Catholic tradition—places an emphasis on social justice throughout each academic program. Students of the college are expected to gain an understanding of social justice and ways for enacting positive change in and out of the classroom. Among a variety of other objectives, the Web site of the institution states that the college's mission is to "engage other educational institutions, industry, and agencies of social change in collaborative efforts fostering a just, peaceful, and sustainable world."

The study was situated within a 6-week course designed to prepare teachers at the middle and high school levels about the organization and curriculum of the secondary classroom. More specifically, the course description as listed in the institution's course catalog describes the class as a way to introduce students to various practical and theoretical components of curriculum and instruction in the secondary classroom. The instructor of the course—who served as the sole researcher in the study—sought to blend theoretical underpinnings of the field of education with practical suggestions for how to teach effectively. The course was designed to have students flesh out issues of democratic education, social justice, and higher order thinking skills and was designed to be applicable to all students within the course regardless of their academic background or the content area in which they intended on teaching.

Data Collection

The data collected from the participants included—though were not limited to—one recorded interview and a follow-up questionnaire (to triangulate findings), course assessments (a unit plan, a teaching philosophy, several open-ended reading prompts), and any relevant in-class comments made. In an attempt to prevent participants from being influenced by the researcher's own biases, which would inevitably be displayed through required readings, in-class comments, and course assignments, the data were purposefully collected as early in the semester as possible. Immediately after agreeing to participate in the study, participants were sent an e-mail to set up a time to be interviewed. All 12 interviews occurred within 2 weeks of the study beginning (and before the fifth session of the semester) and prior to the lesson detailing the need for discussion, controversy, and current issues within the classroom. Furthermore, students of the course (including those who did not participate) were asked to write much of their evolving teaching rationale and develop broad ideas for their unit plans early in the semester so that—even as the assignments evolved—the data would show their initial thoughts relevant to the RQs.

Data Analysis

After data collection had begun, individual case reports were generated for each participant (Yin, 2009). These case reports sought to synthesize critical data and ideas specific to each participant. As data were being collected, the researcher coded the data using an open-coding method (Walker & Myrick, 2006). In other words, immediately after each datum was obtained, the researcher blinded it, read through it, made informal notes within the margins, and then placed the relevant datum into an isolated document for each participant. Doing this allowed for each participant's individual "story" to be exposed in a singular document in which relevant themes could be properly organized and verified.

Once these reports had been constructed, the researcher looked for key themes among the cases throughout cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Cross-case analysis was used to best confirm any potential findings of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman claimed researchers can improve both the reliability and validity of a case study "by looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases [by which] we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying *how* and *where* and, if possible, *why* it carries on as it does" (p. 29; emphasis original). To do this, an evolving document was created where a list of "possible themes" was generated and consistently updated. Themes were placed within this document if the researcher noticed consistencies among participants (e.g., all participants described CPI as essential to the secondary classroom) or inconsistencies among the data (e.g., participants' confidence in using CPI varied by content area). These themes continued to evolve during the data collection and were triangulated and confirmed shortly after data collection ended.

Findings

Five critical themes emerged throughout the course of the study. Briefly, these findings included the following: (a) Regardless of the content area, novice educators consistently claim the purpose of education is to prepare students for the "real world" and their role as citizens; (b) participants view controversial issues as an essential component of an effective classroom; (c) rather than feeling as though they could control the context of a classroom through their teaching, the participants felt that context controlled how and what they taught; (d) participants frequently associate CPI with issues of citizenship, not social justice; and (e) novice educators do not willingly include CPI within their pedagogical decision-making without explicit prompts to do so.

The purpose of this section is to explore these five findings and connect them to the underlying RQs. Ultimately, the findings will be synthesized into one clear and concise explanation as to how the field of education can help to prepare educators to understand the value of using CPI in the classroom, the relationship

between exploring CPI and democratic education, and the ways in which CPI can be incorporated into all content areas.

Finding I: The "Real World" and Citizenship

Prior to exploring how participants viewed CPI in the secondary classroom, it is first important to emphasize the extent to which participants discussed preparing students for the "real world" within K–12 education. Regardless of the participant, data source, or point in the data collection, a constant theme was the emphasis participants placed on preparing students for what will happen in students' post-secondary experiences. Rarely did participants discuss the purposes of education without describing the need to prepare students to become ready for college, career, or civic life. In this sense, the data collected frequently reflected the aims of education as often explored by key scholars within the field. Though no specific mentions of specific authors were made, the idea of developing competent citizens who could contribute to society both personally and professionally was a frequent theme throughout the data analysis.

In her interview, for instance, Jessica claimed that schools were meant to "get [students] ready to speak in the real world" (July 20, 2016). Lucy, in a similar manner, claimed that the purposes of having a school system involve "prepar[ing] students for the real world, honestly, to make them ready to the best of their capability" (interview, July 12, 2016). Margo, too, noted that the purpose of schools could best be summarized as "prepar[ing] students for the real world, that's kind of our goal" (interview, July 8, 2016). Regardless of the participant, each referred at some point in data collection to the "real world" as being critical to a powerful curriculum and to the purposes of schooling.

Perhaps even more telling, participants were expected to complete teaching rationales for the course, which sought to have them reflect on the questions of why they wanted to teach and their ultimate goals for the classroom. Of the 12 participants, all 12 used the term "real world" within their rationales without any direction for doing so. Furthermore, each participant—to some degree—emphasized the need to prepare students for the real world, make content applicable to the real world, or integrate the real world into the curriculum. The notion of preparing students for the real world (in the broadest sense possible) certainly served as the foundation for many participants' thinking toward the purposes of education and their objectives as educators. As will be noted later in this article, however, the extent to which these ideas were connected to principles of social justice is noteworthy for a variety of reasons.

Finding II: Using Controversial Issues Is a Valuable Tool in the Classroom

Regardless of content area, each participant emphasized the need for bringing some level of controversy into the K–12 classroom as a means both to engage students and to inform them on issues occurring in society. Such a finding reflects

the scholarship of Byford et al. (2009), Oulton et al. (2004), and Zembylas and Kambani (2012), who all noted that their participants expressed the value of using controversial issues within their pedagogy. Throughout data collection, participants consistently noted that CPI would be a positive addition to a secondary curriculum and that students would benefit from the exposure. In many cases, the reason for doing this was because the participants did not trust whether students would research current events themselves or understood how to find informed opinions outside of the classroom (often citing the breadth of sources available to students online). This finding reflects Avery's (2003) claim that most K–12 students would not have the opportunity to explore CPI outside of the classroom nor have the correct resources to do so effectively even if they had the inclination.

Adele—an aspiring English teacher—for example, claimed that CPI must be discussed in schools, stating, "If we don't discuss them with students, who will?" (interview, July 11, 2016). Steve—a future social studies teacher—in a similar sense, noted that "some of [the students'] parents would be misinformed and, you know, just start spewing something from a sound bite they saw on the Internet" (interview, July 11, 2016). Likewise, Catalina—also focusing on the social studies—emphasized the need for incorporating CPI into the classroom (referring to it as "essential"), explaining that students are "usually pretty closeminded . . . because all they know is their parents' opinions or people around them" (interview, July 12, 2016). Pam—who sought to teach math—similarly noted that discussing CPI (specifically, "the news") was important because "it's important for kids to be aware of them in school because I know a lot of kids wouldn't . . . and don't watch the news or read the newspaper or whatever so I think talking about in school is important" (interview, July 20, 2016). Such findings reflect the fact that the participants recognized the value of using CPI if for no other reason than to expose students to different ideas that they were unlikely to hear outside of the classroom.

Though the justification varied among participants, each individual stated that CPI did have a place in the curriculum. However—and as will be discussed in the next finding—the extent to which they emphasized the use of CPI in the classroom differed based on the participant.

Finding III: Context Matters for Using Controversial Public Issues

An essential finding of the present study was the emphasis placed on "context" in the classroom. Ultimately, what was found was that the participants did not feel as though they could control the context through their teaching. Rather, they felt that the context controlled how they taught. This section explores this idea in three separate subsections. This finding reflects the previous scholarship by Oulton et al. (2004) and Zembylas and Kambani (2012), both papers also noted the practical issues preventing teachers from integrating CPI into their pedagogical decision-making.

The content area is important (RQ2). This research is unique in that its participants stem from a variety of content areas (i.e., mathematics, sciences, social studies, and English and language arts). These differing backgrounds and teaching interests became essential to the findings. Before exploring this idea, however, it should be noted that the vast majority of participants—regardless of their academic focus—connected the purposes of education (broadly speaking) to the development of effective citizens. Participants constantly wrote about and spoke of the role schools play in teaching students to follow the news, vote, and engage in dialogue with one another. And these ideas—when placed within context of CPI—were often effectively connected by participants. Despite this, however, participants constantly demonstrated that CPI could (and, occasionally, "should") occur within certain content areas.

Pam (an aspiring math teacher), for instance, claimed, "I don't necessarily know how I would do it in a math class because there isn't really much discussion on current relevant issues cause most math was discovered like years and years ago, but I definitely think it's important" (interview, July 20, 2016). Furthermore, Pam noted that CPI are best suited for the social studies (postinterview questionnaire). Similarly, Mallory—a fellow math educator—claimed, "I think it would be more difficult for a math classroom to discuss CPI, but if the issues had any relation to math I think it would be good to cover those topics as they came up" (postinterview questionnaire). Lucy (a science educator) noted that she would discuss various issues with students, but only if "it falls within the curriculum," giving as an example "something like evolution, which is in the main text" (interview, July 12, 2016). Lucy, like many of the participants, expressed concern about going outside of the state-provided curriculum if the topic was considered "sensitive."

Ultimately, the math educators did not see where math and CPI could overlap (despite recognizing the value in using CPI), the participants focusing on ELA noted that controversial issues likely could only be spoken about within the context of an appropriate text, the science educators felt as though relevant science topics (e.g., global warming) could cautiously be discussed, and the social studies educators both felt as though they had more leeway and were even charged by their peers with this responsibility given the nature of the social studies.

The school, student, and district matter. Despite the majority of participants suggesting that they felt somewhat comfortable discussing CPI in their classroom with their students, they all seemed to hesitate when considering the practicality of doing so successfully within the larger context of their schools. Once again reflecting prior studies, participants frequently mentioned the fear of upset parents, offended students, or unsupportive administrators. There existed a sense of fear in the participants that they could get in trouble for "crossing the line" or encouraging students to think in a way that opposed the views instilled in them by their parents (whether religious or political). This finding mirrors the questions asked

by Cornbleth (2002), who explored the lack of meaningful teaching in schools by describing school climates as often being "chilling," "conservative," "stifling," "bureaucratic," "threatening," "restraining," "drought-stricken," "pathological and pessimistic," and "competitive" (or a combination of all of these features).

Both Gary and Catalina (each seeking to be a social studies teacher), for instance, noted that they would only use CPI if he or she felt comfortable with the class and felt the students could handle discussing more sensitive issues. Margo, too, noted, "It would depend on the class, realistically" (interview, July 8, 2016). Likewise, Zak mentioned that he would feel comfortable teaching CPI, but only in a relatively progressive environment. Having grown up in a seemingly open-minded pocket in the Northeast, he hesitated when asked whether he would feel so confident doing so in the Southeast, noting, "It totally depends on where you are and the community you are working with . . . but I know that I am very comfortable to have the support of the vast majority of parents and teachers and administration" (interview, July 18, 2016). Likewise, while discussing Black Lives Matter, Jan talked about the climate of her school, noting,

> I think if I brought in something like Black Lives Matter or kind of anything pertaining to race I might get a little backlash from it. I don't work at a particularly liberal high school, which is bizarre for [this area] . . . the high school that I work at is oddly conservative, the students at least. (interview, July 18, 2016)

As an interesting anecdote, Jan similarly described in class a situation in her field placement in which a parent complained about a text being read in class (July 6, 2016). Because of the parent, the student had to be assigned a separate reading and be removed from the class whenever the initial text was being discussed in class. Jan, despite expressing the importance of using CPI earlier in the semester, seemed influenced by this incident and made clear that she felt some issues were simply inappropriate for the classroom, a feeling likely perpetuated by the context she was teaching within at the time.

Experience matters when considering CPI. An additional theme relating to how context mattered to the participants was that of their own background. Many participants alluded to the fact that they did not feel comfortable incorporating controversial issues into the classroom early in their careers. When asked if he would discuss CPI with his students this upcoming year, Steve (an aspiring social studies teacher), for instance, claimed, "Probably wouldn't talk about it this coming year because I'm in a various precarious position as a fellow. I don't have a full-time job, I'm not part of the union, I don't have tenure, it's also a private school so they could probably fire me at their discretion but they wouldn't" (interview, July 11, 2016). Such a comment reflected the idea that teaching using CPI was somewhat "risky" for novice educators, who had concerns regarding job security.

Upon being asked whether she would use a seemingly controversial text in her English classroom in her first year of teaching, Jamie, similar to Steve, noted

that she did not want to "rock the boat too much as a first-year teacher" (interview, July 18, 2016). She later discussed how—in theory—using CPI in the classroom is a "great idea" but feared offending someone as a new teacher and thus would use the prescribed curriculum until she felt comfortable as a teacher. This finding reflects the work of Misco and Tseng (2018), who found that teachers in Taiwan often choose to place value on direct instruction and content knowledge due to a wide range of factors including—though certainly not limited to—"the role of high stakes exams, limited time, and the seductive hold of the textbook" (p. 8). In other words, such a finding ran consistent with similar literature in that it demonstrated how teachers at all levels see the use of CPI as being both risky and impractical.

Finding IV: Controversial Public Issues for Citizenship, Not Social Justice (RQ1 and RQ1a)

Despite attending an institution emphasizing the need for social justice and the overturning of the status quo, the participants—by and large—connected the use of CPI to practices of citizenship (e.g., voting, following the news, and engaging in evidence-based dialogue with peers). More often than not, the use of CPI in the classroom was connected to keeping students "informed" and preparing citizens who "could make up their own minds" (each contextualized in the vaguest sense). Rarely were controversial issues discussed in a manner that aligned with components relating to Gutmann's notions of democratic education or the good life. Even further, rarely did the data collected emphasize equitable treatment of historically marginalized groups or using pedagogy to provide a voice to those who have traditionally been silenced. Such a finding is representative of Nie, Junn, and Stehlik's (1996) essay outlining the dichotomy between political engagement and democratic enlightenment (with the participants heavily aligning with the former). And though there is certainly nothing inherently wrong with associating the use of CPI with practices of citizenship, one could argue that it does students a disservice by not introducing them to the critical side of education.

This is not to say, however, that issues of social justice did not appear within the data. Within their group unit plan, Margo, Adele, and Jamie (all aspiring English teachers) constructed a lesson plan framing "justice" within *To Kill a Mockingbird* (a text also referenced by Zak in his interview). Though the lesson was never explicitly connected to present-day issues, the participants did integrate themes relevant to many of today's struggles (e.g., legal reforms due to racial profiling, as seen in the "Scottsboro Boys" of the 1930s).

Zak, similarly, when asked about issues that he would definitely talk about with his students, noted that he—as a gay man—would discuss issues of sexual orientation with his own students in the K–12 classroom. Zak noted that he would require students to read a text involving a same-sex couple and would not fear any repercussions for doing so. To Zak, it seemed, simply normalizing LGBTQ individu-

als was an essential component to his teaching and a way in which he could prepare his students for the real world through engaging discussions. While discussing his interest in discussing LGBTQ issues in the secondary classroom, Zak claimed,

> They are for the most part . . . the most tolerant and accepting generation the world has ever seen from my personal experience so I think that anytime there's an issue about injustice or inequality or something that is just inherently unfair it sparks interest in the students that I have and that interest pushes them to want to do well and success so I would want to bring in current topics that kind of revolve around the issues of inequality and social justice and you know whatever you want to call it. And see what they take from that because based on my experience, I know they're goanna be fascinated on it. (interview, July 18, 2016)

Reflecting Zak's ideas regarding LGBTQ issues in the curriculum, Catalina noted,

> I did my undergrad thesis on incorporating LGBTQ and gender studies into the United States history 9–12 curriculum so I think . . . although it's not taught right now . . . there are so many things going on in the world with LGBTQ issues, gender issues, just popping up . . . present-day things . . . past curriculum that we can just put it into the content and get it in with the standards as well. (interview, July 12, 2016)

Though she never explicitly discussed integrating LGBTQ issues into her classroom or curriculum, Catalina's recognition of these issues demonstrates an understanding of their importance within the K–12 school system. Within her teaching rationale, as well, Catalina claimed students from "every identity group" should be included within the curriculum.

Despite these examples of participants seeking to integrate themes of justice, equity, and equality into the secondary classroom, the vast majority of data demonstrated a lack of association between the use of CPI and the broad principles of education that emphasize overturning the status quo, assisting historically marginalized groups, and providing an equal education for all students regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, or socioeconomic status. Most examples of "citizenship" and "real-world issues" reflect a less controversial approach. For instance, Jamie, in her teaching rationale, claimed,

> The content needs to matter to the students for them to remember it and revisit it later on in life. The best way to do this is to incorporate real-life events or age-appropriate struggles they may be going through. For example, the novel *Feed* tackles the controversial issue of being overly attached to technology.

Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with this objective or curricular strategy, but similar pedagogical decision-making overshadowed the references to critical pedagogy as described by leading scholars in the field (e.g., Banks, Ladson-Billings, Freire).

Finding V: Though Valued in Practice, CPI Were MIA in Practice

Each of the 12 participants in the present study noted that using CPI in the secondary classroom was a good, meaningful tool for students. Thus it could be expected that CPI would be integrated into the unit and lesson plans generated by participants for the course. However, none of the four unit plans submitted at the end of the course made a single reference to CPI. This is despite the fact that participants had an entire class session on using discussion and current issues and comprised four different content areas (social studies, science, math, English and language arts). Additionally, this finding is surprising given that the vast majority of participants acknowledged the use of CPI as a powerful teaching tool in their interviews and postinterview questionnaires.

More specifically, the units (and individual lessons within them) did not mention having students read the news, discuss current issues, or even relate content to present-day issues. Rather, the lessons constructed in each unit plan often "played it safe" by creating a teacher-centered environment structured around engaging activities (e.g., using iPads, group work, source analysis). The unit plans included only two instances of students explicitly being expected to engage in discussion with one another, and both of these examples focused on students discussing prescribed content as opposed to present-day issues.

Furthermore, of the 12 teaching rationales submitted and analyzed, there existed only two passing comments about the use of CPI in the classroom (both of which were written by students housed in the social studies), and again, they were not related to critical ideas in the field of education. This shows—among a number of other findings—a concerning disconnect between how the participants valued CPI and the extent to which they either felt comfortable using them or felt their use to be practical in the secondary classroom. Such a finding runs parallel to the aforementioned scholarship by Oulton et al. (2004) in which it was found that only one out of every eight teachers feels confident enough to integrate controversial issues effectively into his or her pedagogy.

It should be noted that participants were purposefully not encouraged (at least not explicitly) to integrate CPI into their unit plans for fear of not having authentic data. This was done to avoid receiving biased data wherein the participants provide answers they feel the researcher wants to see. However, it is telling to see how many of the participants left CPI out entirely on their own volition. This is despite the participants having several conversations about current issues, doing readings on the value of discussion (specifically Diana Hess's 2004 piece on the use of discussions), and being interviewed about the use of CPI in the secondary classroom. Regardless of all of this exposure to the use and benefits of CPI, the participants did not even allude to its use in their unit plans.

Implications

The findings of the present study expose two key implications: (a) There exists a disconnect between the literature being published and presented within higher education and educators' understandings of critical themes and ideas and (b) though educators may value using CPI, they often struggle to understand how to incorporate such topics into the classroom or fear what may happen if they do. Broadly speaking, these two implications explore how the theory and practice of using CPI pose issues to educators regardless of their level of experience. This section briefly discusses these two points and suggests directions teacher education can go to better prepare educators to use CPI within their pedagogical decision-making and practice.

Despite frequently discussing "real-world" issues throughout the course of data collection, these issues were rarely related to topics of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or socioeconomic status. Rather, the "real world" typically was connected to political topics such as voting, reading the news, and understanding constitutional rights and privileges. Though there is certainly nothing wrong with these tenets of the "real world," it is essential for teachers to understand the value of real-world issues relating to diversity, equity and equality, and justice. Such a finding relates to the first research question in that it demonstrates the limited extent to which novice educators have internalized principles of social justice and learned to connect them effectively to pedagogical strategies and tools.

For teacher education to fully develop educators capable of working toward a more just and equitable society, novice teachers must develop a stronger grasp on broad concepts, such as "democratic education" and "critical theory," that extend beyond citizenship skills (e.g., voting and reading the news). Educators at all levels need to gain a better understanding of the complexities between these types of academic "buzzwords" and better learn to connect them to their pedagogy.

Furthermore, educators need to gain the skills necessary to recognize when their teaching poses opportunities for students to become immersed in discussions that reflect the broad themes of a democratic education. In other words, if students are discussing one of any number of current issues before class, a teacher must be trained to best take advantage of that moment and use it to assist students in grappling with the topic in a mature and educated space.

To that end, educators must gain a more explicit understanding of how and why such ideals are important for a democratic experience within a K–12 classroom. As was frequently seen throughout the present study, the participants often failed to connect key ideas regarding CPI with the broad themes of democratic education that often serve as the foundation of the field of education. As noted by Misco and Tseng (2018), "without a rationale for teaching controversial issues and a disciplinary focus, preservice teachers consentingly mentioned the gravitational center of content knowledge and its consumption by students" (p. 8). An educator may have a working understanding of how to incorporate sensitive issues into his or her

pedagogy, but a threshold of effectiveness will exist in the absence of a working understanding of why such practices are necessary and how they connect to the prevailing literature within the field.

Practically speaking, the findings of the present study suggest that teachers from all content areas do want to use CPI in their classrooms but are often concerned with doing so either because they do not understand their place in the curriculum, fear they may offend someone, or simply do not have the tools to do so effectively. Because of this, teacher educators need to better model how to lead discussions (see Avery, 2003) and incorporate CPI while simultaneously explaining to educators both their rights and responsibilities in the classroom. Teacher education, in other words, should not assume that aspiring teachers can learn how or why to incorporate CPI into their own classrooms. Rather, it must be assumed that teachers must be taught through interactive modeling to fully grasp ways in which to use CPI in their pedagogy. Educators—regardless of their experience or level of training—must be explicitly told what they can and cannot say, the means for working with parents and administrators effectively, and strategies for not indoctrinating students through discussions on sensitive issues.

Conclusion

While a robust body of literature detailing the need for using CPI does exist, there exists a noticeable gap in the literature on how teachers understand the connection between the use of CPI within their pedagogy and the broad aims of a democratic education (i.e., creating citizens who can actively contribute to a pluralist society and are reform oriented in nature). This study takes an interdisciplinary approach to best understand how the traditional K–12 teacher associates broad themes of democratic education as key components of an effective educational experience.

Furthermore, this study offers a new perspective through which to better understand how novice teachers think about their roles in the classroom and the extent to which they internalize the broad theories presented to them throughout their course work. Prior to this study, minimal research existed looking specifically at the extent to which novice educators effectively internalize underlying themes in the field of education with their own pedagogical practices. Such research is important given that, on a more practical level, the field of education must open a line of research exploring how teachers understand the use of CPI in the classroom and perceive their feasibility within the traditional curriculum as a means for better preparing novice educators to implement such pedagogical strategies (Avery, 2003). Once novice educators can better understand the value of using CPI, it can be assumed that they will be more likely to effectively integrate CPI into their own practice.

The findings of the present study also demonstrate a need for educators to be better trained to understand both broad concepts in education (e.g., "democratic education," "critical theory") and how such ideologies apply to various forms of

pedagogy. Many of the broad terms serving at the foundation of teacher education remain abstract and complex, and new teachers—who are being inundated with a wide range of theories and pedagogies—need to be exposed to these words and encouraged to grapple with them in more exhaustive ways within their course work. This is not to say that teacher education does not work to help new teachers understand broad theories of democratic education, only that such aims need to be advocated for more intensely within the course work of pre- and in-service educators. Should teachers have a better understanding of such ideas, perhaps they would be better suited to connect various pedagogies to the key aims and objectives of the field.

Furthermore, the study proves that teachers often do not integrate sensitive issues into their teaching on account of an overly cautious environment and an underlying fear of offending parents or students (reflecting the findings of Cornbleth, 2002). For educators to effectively integrate CPI into their classrooms, they must feel supported to do so and more accurately understand the reasons for doing so and the ways in which such justifications align with the foundational principles of a democratic education as put forth by leading scholars within the field. Certainly there is no simple panacea for this issue, and teacher education can only assist educators so much in terms of feeling supported. However, teacher education can help classroom educators understand their rights and responsibilities in terms of what they can and cannot say to students and ways in which they can present content meaningfully and safely. Doing this, ideally, will help build the confidence of educators and let them understand that a school setting is the ideal place to bring in CPI and help students engage in meaningful dialogue with peers who have opposing views and backgrounds.

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