Navigating Controversial Classroom Discussions

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Abstract: Conversations about controversial political issues within the public-school classroom are necessary for the whole development of students as they prepare to participate fully in democracy, part of their role as conscious social reproducers of the American political regime. Effective educators train students to critically understand and analyze political conflicts pluralistically through contemporary and historical lenses. However, teachers are caught amid a conflict within the public discourse about the appropriateness of engaging in political and controversial classroom discussions. As a result, state legislatures and local school districts are defining their stances on such issues, sometimes leading to barriers in the path of educators having productive political discussions within their classrooms. This paper provides a rationale for engaging in political conversations within U.S. classrooms by understanding the legal structure and how to use state standards to examine such issues philosophically. Finally, this article provides several perspectives and methods teachers can use to have productive political dialogue within their classrooms aligned to the identified legal structure.

Keywords: Democratic education; Political Philosophy, Controversial topics, Exploratory dialogue

Navigating Controversial Political Discussion in the U.S. Classroom

Teachers, especially those working within democratic societies such as the United States, should not limit the inclusion of controversial political topics, such as social justice issues, book bans, and LGBTQ+ rights, within their classrooms because one of their chief responsibilities is preparing students for active citizenship within a democracy necessitates deliberation and dialogue about current political problems (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Parker, 2003). At the secondary level, teachers in politically driven fields like social studies, language arts, and science, are required to deliver content that naturally brings about unplanned questions and observations from their students. Indeed, "(t)he teaching act always addresses concrete situations, each involving a complex entanglement of inseparable aspects" that must necessarily include social issues connected to their curricula (Schwarz-Franco, 2022, p. 329). Ideally, teachers embrace teachable moments in their classroom, as learning happens as much within the strictures of what is written in a lesson plan as what comes about within the context of teaching the lesson through student initiated inquiry, approaches that are at the heart of Deweyan Progressivism and Philosophy for Children (P4C) (Dewey, 1916/2022; Neuman & Roskos, 2012; Williams, 2018).

Embracing student-generated discussion requires teachers to understand that they are caught in the crossfire of political arguments about the role and purpose of classroom instruction and what ideas and instructional practices are legitimized as appropriate topics (Giroux, 2020). Due to this political conflict, teachers lack complete agency within their classrooms and must be aware of the legal context of schooling within the United States (Ostorga, 2018). Thus, if a teacher wishes to engage in

controversial political conversations in their classroom, it is incumbent upon them to possess knowledge of their legal rights, the curricular standards that govern classroom expectations, and the local district policies that further influence their lessons to ensure that they are not endangering their professional livelihoods (Eckes & Russo, 2021). Once teachers are prepared with knowledge of the boundaries of what can be accomplished within a given classroom, they must identify appropriate instructional methods and communicate their intentions with interested stakeholders, including administrators, department colleagues, and parents (Ortega Sánchez, 2022).

After knowledge of standards, political conditions, and strategies are developed, teachers would benefit most from identifying the relationship between these factors and recognize that embedded within their content standards is the pedagogical language to embrace dialogic classroom strategies, such as those recommended by P4C scholars. Without such knowledge and preparation, teachers may succumb to a simplistic classroom model, avoiding controversial political topics in general and treating what they do cover as the delivery of mere factoids in the name of safety. Indeed, as Lipman (1976) notes, simplicity is inherent in the traditionalist model that dominates curriculum in the United States, noting "the lack of attention given to reasoning" and the "deplorable trivialization of content" by teachers who fear the "specter of an outraged PTA" (p. 18-19).

This paper thus seeks to justify the role of political conversations in secondary public-school classrooms in the United States by arguing that teachers who engage in discussion of controversial political topics not only meet their role of conscious social reproducers of American democracy (Guttman,1999), but also accomplish the tasks set out for them in mandated state standards. Within this justification, the author highlights the legal and social barriers presented by legislators and the public that teachers may encounter when seeking to engage in political conversations in the classroom. Further, it recommends that teachers adopt a perspective within their classroom where they determine how in-depth they go with controversial political issues and whether they allow their students to know their thoughts on political issues, as explained by Kelly (1986) and Duplass (2020). The paper also considers strategies for implementing controversial political conversations in the secondary classroom as well as integrating supplementary materials, as seen in Sautner et al. (n.d.) and Schmidt and Pinkney (2022). Finally, once those barriers are understood, and classroom teachers have done all the preparatory work, this paper recommends that teachers consider a dialogue framework akin to P4C strategies to apply in their classroom, as Kilby (2021) and Schmidt and Pinkney (2022) explain.

Conscious Social Reproduction of American Democracy

Democracy is a complex and multifaceted concept, and understanding its different facets is key to successfully engaging in political discussions within the classroom. Anderson (2020) breaks down democracy as a way of life into three different aspects: "as a membership organization, a mode of government, and a culture" (p. 89). These three levels work together to achieve their overall goals creating and maintaining a social order based upon a universal citizenship where each constituent member enjoys equal legal and political standing. Democratic government is a tool to enhance and serve democratic culture and not the sole legalistic endpoint.

As a mode of government, the political order in the United States is embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the subsequent Supreme Court cases (Diamond, 1981; Frisch, 1987). Reproducing knowledge about those documents and the democratic nature of government in the United States is an explicit goal of the American education system, as their instruction is a required part of AP US History (College Board, 2020), AP U.S. Government and Politics (College Board, 2023), and appear in state standards documents (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009; West Virginia Department of Education, n.d.). As a democratic system it "is grounded in the active participation of the citizenry in the affairs of the political community" (Sheehan, 2005, p. 50), a concept feeding into the membership and cultural aspects mentioned by Anderson (2010). Therefore, teachers are encouraged to recognize their role as leaders and actors within the political structure that purposively work to perpetuate democratic citizenry within the United States (Knight-Abowitz, 2013).

However, as Anderson (2010) notes, the understanding of and engagement with democracy cannot stop at a merely legalistic concept. As a membership organization, students are still held in their developmental stage, learning the rigors of participation in democratic society. Students are not insulated from membership and participation within democratic society, however, and schools offer a training ground for the development of democratic behaviors, notably engaging in discussion of controversial political topics. Democracy entails disagreement, deliberation, and learning to live among other citizens in a competition of ideas (Miller, 2012). Thus, within the nature of democracy and democratic education, controversy and political differences are bound to inspire student thinking and conversation concerning their lessons and their interaction with and understanding of current events. When engaging in classroom conversations about any topic, even one that may not be framed philosophically, it may generate "deep philosophical reflection" by students within the class, causing the student to take the conversation in unanticipated directions (Emmerman, 2021, p. 305). Teachers cannot be expected to stifle student inquiry in these situations, and instead have a responsibility to create classroom environments that facilitate discussions where difference of opinion not only exists but is also accepted and encouraged in their preparation of active citizenship among their students (Parker, 2003).

Democracy as a membership organization feeds into the idea of democracy as a culture. Anderson (2010) writes that, in a democratic culture, "citizens can adjust their sense of the common purpose to others' interests only through discussion and cooperative engagement with other citizens from all walks of life on terms of equal regard" (p. 94). Beyond the ballot box and formal petition, citizens most regularly engage political issues within the spaces of civil society, including public spaces and private spaces, because engagement with political issues in a democratic culture is and should be normalized. As such, the classroom is a natural public space for students to engage in political conversations.

Guttman (1999) described democratic education as an educational and political idea, where the presence of discussions on political controversies provides a source of progress that should be encouraged in the classroom. Society at large should view the role of education within the United States as one of conscious social reproduction, where all students can participate in shaping their society. That mindset necessitates that student, like the adults who teach and mentor them, have some

say in shaping the democratic society in which they live. Through participation in the cultural aspect of democracy in classrooms during their legal minority, they prepare to fully embody their equal standing as members of the democratic organization and act within the democratic governmental structures (Anderson, 2010).

However, political and theoretical disagreements concerning the purposes of the American education system may serve to stifle authentic engagement in political conversations with students. Giroux (2016) argued that, while the citizen-development purposes of structured political conversations within the classroom may seem self-evident, there is conflict in exactly how much and what kind of democracy is supposed to be perpetuated in the public school system; and whether the school should approach topics of citizenship as stagnant and prescribed or open to conflict and debate. Fonte (2004) uses a setup similar structure to Anderson (2010) when describing the design of the American Regime but limiting it to the governmental and cultural aspects. However, in the cultural aspects Fonte (2004) differs in describing it in a narrower fashion, aligning his concept more with an essentialist or perennialist view in the emphasis of the importance of "an emphasis on individualism, entrepreneurship, free-market economics, local civic associations, religiosity (compared to other developed nations), and Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment beliefs and ethical values" (p. 3). Whereas Anderson (2010) adopts a more experiential and behavioral view of culture, one not specifically tied to any set of traditions that rely upon protection and rigid transmission.

Fonte (2005) further illustrates how these two visions of democracy differ in application when it comes to civic education within the United States. Here, a conflict between those who wish to transmit the American regime as "built on universal moral principles and truths" (p. 75) and those who wish to transform that regime in the minds of its citizens through a value-neutral, and perhaps tradition neutral lens emerges. Writing in the context of civics education, Fonte (2005) notes that the battle is between "those who believe the purpose of citizenship education is to preserve, improve, and transmit the American regime" and those who have worked for decades to assault and diminish those universal principles and wish to substantively transform the American regime from what it is to what it ought to be (p. 98-99). In Fonte's (2005) binary, the latter camp supports a so-called counter-regime. In their effort to overturn the prevailing educational status quo, teachers of the counter-regime place the sins and errors of American history at the center of education, working to break up the idea of American citizenship through concepts such as multiculturalism. Ultimately, the counter-regime uses schools to turn students against the value systems established in foundational documents. The consequences of such a philosophy of education leads to classroom practices narrowly tailored vision to reproduce only specific content, and an atmosphere where students and teachers are not trusted to make pedagogical decisions in the classroom and that the accommodation of student interests and concerns be avoided for fear of facilitating some type of social upheaval in the process.

Fonte's (2005) binary provides a way to understand the current political trends in American education, including political discussion in the classroom. Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023) have referred to this as a populist moment for educational politics, where opposite groups are mobilized and politically engage with school officials to promote or combat the teaching of politically divisive issues, such as race, inequality, gender, and sexuality. This leads to the view that the safest approach is for schools to be viewed as vehicles for reproducing a narrow and obedient form of citizenship, much

akin to authoritarian educational structures, which have a strict and refined set of facts that are delivered to students for memorization, sometimes called the traditionalist approach (Ayers et al., 2013). Others, such as Guttman (1999), have argued that such practices would cause schooling to become stagnant and meaningless and may not do enough to overcome systems that perpetuate still-existent forms of repression and discrimination. P4C scholars cite Deweyan on this problem in comparing progressive education, which seeks to center learning upon the student and generally holds that the teacher is a facilitator of that learning, to traditionalist education, which creates a relationship of learning where the student is passive and the teacher imparts correct or approved knowledge to the student (Michaud & Gagnon, 2021). One of the dangers presented by the traditionalist position is that can devolve into simplistic trivia sessions in preparation for a standardized, high-stakes test and not for application beyond that narrow setting. Instead, Steel (2014) argues that P4C asks teachers to find time to work on metacognition. Steel (2014) cites Matthew Lipman in this context, writing, "The metacognitive act…. thinking about thought," becomes philosophy's highest pursuit in P4C (p. 188). Metacognition and philosophical inquiry are then inseparable for a progressive democratic education.

Teacher Rights in the Classroom

The conflict between the broadly Deweyan notion of education as a democratic endeavor where students have agency and Fonte's (2005) fear of classrooms that adopt such ideas being a hotbed of counter-regime activity is illustrated in the current legislative politics and legal existence of teachers in the United States. The democratic school ideal is avoided, potentially for fear of their use as something that can erode the constitutional order and many school districts and state legislatures are now determining with some exactitude the appropriate bounds of discussion within the classroom, attempting and, in some cases, successfully enacting legislation to narrow the range of acceptable topics further. In this sense, these elected officials in democratic bodies effectively determine what is and is not too sensitive or political at what age groups (Diem et al., 2015; Land, 2022). Whether it is the marginalization of Critical Race Theory (Kim, 2021; Knight-Abowitz, 2023) or narrowly defining acceptable expression about the LGBTQ+ community (Goldberg & Abreu, 2022), discussions of abortion rights (Pindyck, 2013), or climate change (Nation & Trendell, 2022), among a multitude of other matters of public concern. Debates about what is and is not included in curricula, and thus what is and is not a recognized and authorized truth via the public school system in individual states, dominate much school business as of late and drive fear and concern among teachers, sometimes leading them to censor material preemptively (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019). Given the conflict between the rival conceptions of the purposes of democratic education in the United States, teachers must be aware of their legal standing before they can effectively and safely engage in political discussions within their classrooms.

While classroom teachers do not shed their first amendment rights when entering the classroom, they must be strategic about how and when they engage in political conversations, as their authority has certain limitations. A primary concern is the relation of political conversations to the class curriculum. *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* (1988) affirmed that school boards control the curricula of a school district, not the individual classroom teachers. Thus, classroom teachers must implement lessons with a clear curricular purpose. This has sound reason in the public-school setting because students are legally required to attend some schooling and, as such, are considered captive audiences.

Students' state-mandated presence means they may not be subjected to the political whims of their classroom teachers (Eckes & Russo, 2021).

Acceptable topics of conversation within the classroom often rely upon school culture. What culture an individual school adopts, how their colleagues function together, and what topics are considered off-limits can vary greatly (Deal & Peterson, 2016). This variance across school cultures means that, depending on the state and community one teaches in and how the teacher engages in a discussion of political issues, there is the potential of being fired. For example, Green (2021) records an instance of a teacher, Matt Hawn, who was fired from their position for teaching White students about White privilege. In *Mayer v. Monroe County Community School Corporation* (2007), a teacher's contract was not renewed after she discussed her opinion about the U.S. involvement in the War in Iraq during a current events discussion. Courts have held that teachers hire out their speech to the district and lack absolute freedom within the classroom (Eckes & Russo, 2021). Working from the recent political battles surrounding the appropriateness of discussing Critical Race Theory inside the classroom, Ray and Gibbons (2021) illustrate the political power that can be exercised when enough citizens and legislators are motivated to stifle the discussion of topics within the classroom. States, such as Florida and Oklahoma, presently work to curtail the delivery of certain information, such as how teachers can and should teach about slavery and race massacres, through legislation (Smalls, 2023; Taylor & Fife, 2023).

The effect of politics on teachers and students is not limited to conservative aligned assaults, however. Natanson and Balingit (2022) found that teachers taking political stances from either side of the spectrum could result in teachers being fired. Conservative teachers were fired for speaking out against school social justice efforts and refusing to use chosen pronouns of transgender students due to religious beliefs. In some regards, a generalized anti-conservative bias may exist in American education. Journell (2017) notes that conservative leaning college students in teacher education programs often feel pressure to silence their opinions given the tendency of such programs to be dominated by liberal leaning students and faculty. Problematically to those who wish to have teachers prepared to engage in philosophical discussion in the classroom, the author suggests that such an atmosphere "does little to prepare preservice teachers to handle ideological disagreements in their future classrooms" (p. 123). Chong and Levy (2018) argue that political correctness (PC), especially in terms of race and sex, is considered a wide spread issue not only on college campuses, but in society at large, and a majority of Americans feel that they have had to restrict their speech to avoid potential backlash, reflective of the PC-Authoritarianism identified by Moss and O'Connor (2020) and at the heart of silencing events, such as those in Berkeley, CA in 2017 (Swenson, 2017).

Teachers must be strategic in approaching controversial political topics in the classroom. Educators state that open communication with department colleagues, administrators, and parents is critical to their success in engaging with controversial political issues inside the classroom. Teachers can and should base their classroom practices on the standards established by their districts, state legislatures, and national education entities to engage in such discussions safely and productively (Author, 2020; Ortega Sánchez, 2022). Pace (2021) further identifies that teachers who successfully engage in discussion of controversial issues, no matter the discipline do the following: (a) cultivate warm and supportive classroom environments, (b) thoroughly prepare, (c) reflect on teacher identity and roles, (d) proactively communicate with parents, other teachers, and administrators, (e) carefully

select materials, (f) frame and time of issues according to student development and knowledge, (g) emphasize creative resources and group activities, (h) steer the discussion to avoid difficulty, and (i) effectively deal with emotional conflicts.

State Standards and Controversial Political Topics

Teachers wishing to engage in controversial political conversations must understand their relationship within the curricular power structure and, thus, the truth-telling and creating mechanisms of which they are a part (Giroux, 2020). The curricular power structure, and the way education is governed in the United States, varies from state to state, due to the complexities of educational decentralization within the United States. Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023) argue that the decentralized nature, while limiting the national ability to adopt cohesive standards and practices, does give local-decision makers the ability to implement lessons on controversial topics without the need to make a national overhaul of educational policy.

Further, Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023) mention that inquiry and deliberation are necessary in overcoming the difficulties of overgeneralizing populist arguments, where the population are contrasted to a vague elite. Deliberation and inquiry, instead of turning students into political combatants, has them coolly address controversial topics from a moral perspective. These points are inherently in line with the strategies and approaches of the P4C movement (Echeverria & Hannam, 2016). Higher order thinking skills sought by P4C are reflected by the verbiage used in state standards. As an example, Pennsylvania government and civics Standard - 5.3.12.G calls for students to "Evaluate the impact of interest groups in developing public policy" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009, p. 15). Evaluation itself requires more than the ability to just recite facts, and to engage in evaluation of the roles of interest groups in the development of public policy suggests that, if teachers are to actually take the development of democratic citizens in their preparation to enter their full power as voters, they need to be aware of all issues brought into the public square, especially those that are considered controversial and are likely to require their evaluation prior to voting. Indeed, just for Pennsylvania standards alone, "analyze," the third highest level of Blooms Taxonomy (1956), is used 4 times and "evaluate," the highest tier, is used 16 times for a total of twenty of the overall twenty-five standards listed for grade 12 civics and government (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009).

Scholars have rightly questioned the philosophic potential of verbs used in state standards, largely derived from Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). Indeed, it would seem that Bloom's Taxonomy is only capable of achieving traditionalist goals, driving students to attain on specific content and demonstrate proficiency in certain, narrowly tailored behaviors (Pring, 1971; Bertucio, 2017). However, Schnee (2017) suggests that educators need to revise their thinking about the verbs used in Bloom's Taxonomy. While Schnee's (2017) Revised-Revised-Bloom's Taxonomy was directly designed for application in philosophy classes, it provides a way for any instructor to apply philosophical tasks within their classrooms while using the state approved language. Further, this approach pedagogically justifies viewing verbs like "evaluation" and "analysis" beyond the simply task-oriented understanding and moving to the metacognitive levels, empowering teachers to engage in discussion of controversial topics while staying aligned to the common language provided by Bloom's Taxonomy.

Strategies for Controversial Political Discussions

Perspectives

Knowledge of standards and recognizing often that secondary standards especially require the teacher to engage in philosophic thought, the teacher must help students clarify and illuminate unsettled, controversial issues. Teachers would then benefit from considering what perspective they will adopt in the classroom. Kelly (1986), as cited in Duplass (2020), establishes four perspectives teachers can adopt when engaging in controversial issues: (a) exclusive neutrality, (b) exclusive partiality, (c) neutral impartiality, and (d) committed impartiality. Exclusive neutrality involves avoiding current events in the classroom to avoid the teacher's appearance of a political stance. Exclusive partiality involves intentionally omitting competing political ideologies to indoctrinate students based on the teacher's preferred orientation. Both are dismissed as being antithetical to the development of civic identities among students. Duplass (2020) thus recommends using either neutral impartiality, where teachers remain silent on their personal political beliefs and attempt to moderate "impartial, objective investigation and discussion" or committed impartiality, where teachers make their views on controversial issues known at the outset, so that students are better prepared to judge the teacher's ability to treat the subject fairly (p. 147). The perspective they take is based upon the notion of what the teacher "can get away with what [their] community lets [them] get away with" (Author, 2020, p. 199).

In the secondary science classroom, for example, Bordeging and Dagistan (2018) note that common perspectives of pre-service teachers who wish to engage in discussions of controversial science topics routinely try to remain value-neutral in the classroom and encourage the discussion of multiple perspectives. However, pre-service science teachers acknowledged the difficulty of remaining completely value-neutral, especially when topics like evolution and climate change are no longer debated in the scientific community, and their validity has reached consensus (Bordeging & Dagistan, 2018).

Setting the Rules

The structuring of classroom rules is simultaneously an embrace of standards and of good dialogic practice. Requirements for students to understand the legislative process and embrace of understanding the importance of rules and social cohesion run throughout state standards in the United States. When teachers are free to engage in political discussions in their classrooms, they should do so in a structured format. Teachers exercise control over how discussion and debate occur within the classroom, and tools are available to accomplish this. Teachers can set up rules to discuss these topics and have straightforward ways to facilitate difficult discussions that allow students to gain insight from varying perspectives (Quaye, 2012). Successful secondary social studies teachers, for example, who engage in discussions of political topics, especially controversial ones, rely on having students use structured and agreed-upon classroom rules (Author, 2020). When students understand the rules for successful dialogue in school and ideally have a say in rules construction through democratic processes with teacher guidance, they have the potential for more meaningful, authentic,

and productive conversations (Duplass, 2020; Jordan & Bradley, 2022; Parker, 2003). Teachers also need to allow time to structure the learning process for students to begin to successfully grasp the concepts under examination (Slakmon & Schwarz, 2019). Avoiding too much and too little control in preparation for and during classroom discussions is something to be worked for in such a student-centered classroom model (Aveni, 2014; Skidmore, 2019).

An example model for middle-level and secondary social studies educators can start by using the National Constitution Center's (NCC) Constitutional Conversations and Civil Dialogue Toolkit, mainly about setting expectations for discussion in the classroom (Sautner et al., n.d.). Establishing norms of discussion and debate can ensure classroom discussions do not devolve into shouting matches among ideologically opposed students. This process allows the teacher to begin the socialization of their students into democratic participation within the classroom. Ideally, the teacher moves from this socialization process to allowing students full participation in developing the agenda for topics and leading discussions (Slakmon & Schwarz, 2019). The NCC toolkit asks teachers to separate the constitutional issues at stake from the political issues. This provides a more thorough foundation for students to grasp what can and cannot be done by government actors, first and foremost. From an educator's standpoint, this also gives them a strong foundation on which to tie the discussion in clearly mandated curricular material. Teachers outside social studies can coordinate with their social studies colleagues to create interdisciplinary lessons if they feel unprepared for content knowledge or consultation on the best path forward with such discussions (Ortega Sánchez, 2022).

Schmidt and Pinkney (2022) discuss anchoring discussion of contentious issues in an open-ended guiding question that allows students to take positions for or against an issue after uninterrupted thinking time of three to five minutes for individual thought processing, potentially as an organizational tool. Teachers should also provide students with several sources so students can be informed on multiple perspectives of the issue and dedicated Q&A time to ask clarifying questions and write anonymous questions to the teacher. Students also need an exit opportunity in case the topic becomes too much. In structuring the conversation in class, teachers can utilize strategies including: (a) assigning, (b) self-selection, and (c) self-selection flipping. In structuring the discussion, the teacher can assign students familiar or unfamiliar perspectives, allow students to select, or students may also be assigned to flip perspectives.

Using Supplemental Resources

Once teachers and their students understand the goals of political and constitutional conversations, as well as knowledge of district requirements and culture, and state curricula standards, they then need to know where to find the resources to have productive political conversations. Students need to have a structured approach to concept attainment and have a way to understand the ideas with which they are expected to grapple (Schmidt & Pinkney, 2002). While many teachers lack the agency to cultivate a robust set of supplementary materials, lacking a supportive context that values teachers as reflective professionals, plenty of other teachers are afforded such freedoms and trust (Ostorga, 2018). Identifying how to approach contemporary political debates and effectively tie them to their historical context is a successful strategy for integrating such approaches into the classroom (Ortega Sánchez, 2022).

Using current events is a time-honored strategy within the social studies classroom to address political concerns, especially controversial political topics (Duplass, 2020). For example, while studying the periods surrounding the U.S. Civil War, teachers, or their students, could identify local government announcements that have to do with renaming public property that bears the name of Confederate leadership and generals, such as the renaming of public roads (City of Alexandria, VA, n.d.). Held within the website are more items about how the city council of Alexandria, VA, handled the renaming of Jefferson Davis Highway. Teachers could then have students analyze the decision-making process of local government and delve deeper into the rationale behind why such things occurred. The teacher in this situation could be as in-depth as they are allowed to be by the district. Borrowing from the NCC Civil Dialogue model, teachers could easily keep it on the "constitutional" level if they do not feel safe engaging in political questions.

However, other teachers may be free to engage in such deeper discussions and may want to bring in the political opinions surrounding the issue. The teacher also has room to maneuver within the political debate to tie it back to curricular materials. Moving beyond documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which are likely required parts of the curriculum, the teacher may have the discretion to introduce other documents. For example, the modern political discussion about Confederate monuments cannot be separated from historical documents associated with Jefferson Davis and the "So-Called Confederacy" (Prize Cases, 1862; Wilson, 2017), like secession documents and the Confederate constitution. Teachers can identify documents from websites like The Library of Congress, The Gilder Lehrman Institute, The Miller Center, The Avalon Project, or Teaching American History to supplement their curriculum with primary source documents. Students can then compare the ideas expressed in those documents with the political principles discussed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, tying together those required documents with those that will further enlighten students about current and historical political debates and controversy—legitimizing the teacher's engagement with them inside of the classroom.

Teachers can also have students find documents independently through WebQuest (Brozo, 2006). A structured WebQuest allows the teacher to open the process of finding documents and outside commentary on controversial political issues to their students, so they have the responsibility of bringing diverse ideas into the classroom, which also may avoid a negative association with the teacher being perceived as advocating for one position over the other akin to the autonomy stage of classroom management, illustrated by Duplass (2020). This situation further allows the teacher to train students to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources; all of this can be attributed to teaching critical thinking (Liang & Fung, 2020), something deemed positive enough to be rhetorically exploited by American politicians (Sanacore, 2021).

Again, this is not limited to the social studies classroom. Science teachers, when confronted with political issues, can use similar strategies to engage in discussion of disputed issues and even those viewed as controversial within the United States, such as global warming, the effects of pollution, and environmental regulation, by tying their discussions to current events articles about these topics and analyzing government responses to these issues. Kilby (2021) also recommends using various modeling strategies within the classroom, especially socio-scientific modeling. Here, students would be

encouraged to identify mainstream and academic articles concerning a topic, pull data from the articles, and then organize the arguments surrounding the topic. This provides some distance for the teacher in delivering the material and centers it back on their idea that students are investigating questions and identifying and organizing appropriate resources to answer the questions posed by the teacher.

Dialogic Approaches

Daniel (2021) argues that P4C can help students argue dialogically with a view toward a common good" (p. 69). In this sense, Daniel (2021) embraces the transmission of "cultural heritage" called for by Fonte (2004, 2005) but adds that schools also have a responsibility to develop students' "responsible and critical" analysis of their curriculum, their life experiences, the society in which they live (p. 69). Dialogue allows teachers to move beyond the simplistic and traditionalist rationale that views students as empty vessels and teachers as the experts that fill them with nourishing knowledge (Gergen, 2015). Freire (1992) notes that dialogue is the authentic way to bring people out of naive thinking and the top-down learning process that stifles authentic learning and its democratization. Dialogue creates the conditions where active engagement in the collaborative construction of meaning is to occur (Wells & Arauz, 2006). However, the teacher needs to ensure that dialogue is productive and that students can become autonomous and successfully guide their learning (Duplass, 2020).

Kilby (2021) highlights four primary pedagogies for engaging in classroom dialogue: (a) teacher-directed dialogue, (b) mere conversation, (c) adversarial dialogue, and (d) exploratory dialogue. Each approach has its benefits and drawbacks and may apply to different settings depending on the perspective adopted by teachers and their freedom within the classroom. Teachers may wish to engage in a more neutral role within the classroom, adopting either a teacher-directed dialogue or mere conversation model, especially if they adopt the neutral impartiality perspective. While these approaches may provide the needed distance for the teacher from position advocacy, both lack a high level of analysis and critical thinking on the part of students and are generally a more passive form of learning. Both fall victim to being primarily controlled by the teacher in the classroom and lack organic, student-centered strategies and student-generated ideas (Kilby, 2021). However, teachers may wish to not go beyond teacher-controlled methods as they may want to maintain control of the conversation over concerns of engaging too profoundly in political talk (Duplass, 2020).

Adversarial dialogue allows students to take their stances and the teacher to step back and referee the conversation and tends to lead to the domination of specific ideas expressed within the classroom and the withdrawal of others who may not want to engage in such conflicting views (Kilby, 2021). As such, teachers should seek to avoid this combative, war-like format instead of a more productive and democratic orientation (Gergen, 2015). Instead, exploratory dialogue allows students to explore topics and embrace the notion that we live in a pluralistic society with differences of opinion (Parker, 2003), where there is necessarily no single perspective that dominates. Exploratory dialogue seeks to allow students to deepen the way they reason about topics by allowing students to produce their knowledge as opposed to having it deposited by the teacher in a more teacher-directed fashion. With exploratory dialogue the student must engage with the topic through active thought, not just through memorization of facts, encouraging students to take ownership of the ideas and

conflicts expressed in the discussion. The exploratory dialogue approach may help to diminish the fears of teachers indoctrinating students with their personal political views because it allows the teacher to act as the moderator of discussion without taking center stage (Kilby, 2021).

Teachers have a variety of discussion techniques to integrate into their classrooms depending on the culture of their school and district. If the classroom teacher thoroughly prepares their political discussions in an informed way that realistically tries to accommodate those discussions to the needs and expectations of their students and community, they can successfully integrate the discussion of political concerns within their classroom and do so without drawing the ire of stakeholders.

Conclusion

Engaging in political conversations in the classroom is a necessary part of the teacher's role as a conscious social reproducer of the American political regime entrusted to develop children who will exercise the full authority of citizenship within the United States. While some teachers completely disengage from these conversations, only allowing a single student to express their thoughts on the topic before moving on (Author, 2020), they risk diminishing the learning and growth inside their classroom. However, these concerns are not unfounded, as case law within the United States has repeatedly established that districts and, through their democratically elected agents, the school boards, are in control of the curriculum within any given classroom, and teachers merely hire their speech out. With that knowledge, teachers need to be cognizant of their school and district culture, communicate transparently with their district and its leadership if they plan to engage in political conversations within the classroom. Teachers must then be prepared with strategies to engage students in political conversations by tying it to state standards.

Schools in the United States must realistically embrace their task of taking a pluralistic group of students, each with unique influences, perspectives, identities, and behavioral expectations, and coordinating them to interact productively in various public settings in both childhood and adulthood. To effectively take those students and to train them to participate authentically within a democratic system, teachers cannot simply impart sets of pre-formed information for their eventual regurgitation. Instead, teachers must teach students to think dynamically about their world and productively dialogue with others (Ayers et al., 2013; Dewey,1916/2022; Parker, 2003). Thus, the nature of training students to live in a democracy necessitates that teachers are realistic about the nature of differences of opinion and the necessity of dissent and disagreement in democratic systems, allowing their students to engage in well-structured political dialogue within their classrooms (Stitzlein, 2011) while facilitating that it to be a safe and productive process (Schmidt & Pinkney, 2022).

The narrative surrounding controversial political topics within the U.S. public school classroom can teach us to find a better way to connect philosophical dialogue in the classroom through the strategic interpretation of state content standards. An awareness of applying Blooms Taxonomy's higher order verbs, such as "analyze" and "evaluate," from state standards to philosophical debate, along with a reliance upon other content factors identified within standards, such as use of primary

and secondary sources, help teachers design learning experiences that meet district and state curriculum expectations and still engage in discussion and reflection on controversial political topics.

The author recommends a more thorough analysis of Bloom's Taxonomy verbiage present across multiple grade levels and states to identify common threads as to philosophic potentialities provided by those standards to provide more precise practical recommendations to teachers. While this paper specifically focuses on education as it manifests in the United States of America, the pedagogical struggle to incorporate more dialogic approaches and philosophical education in the classroom exists in other countries as well (Conlon, 2020). This includes analyzing both elementary and secondary standards, as the verbiage and frequency of higher order thinking verbs will likely differ, requiring further examination as to how best approach controversial political conversations in the elementary classroom, especially. Educators in other democratic countries should also take account of the political atmosphere of their schooling system and make themselves aware of the established standards and recommendations which govern their practices in schools as well.

Teacher educators across democracies would benefit from discussions and analysis of the legal and political context in which a teacher is employed and have their teacher candidates reflect upon their own experiences and knowledge. This should also include encouraging teacher candidates to consider practical matters like attending school board meetings, or their international equivalents, and to analyze pertinent public policy documents and statements of position by concerned parties and politicians.

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