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Controversy and Social Studies Teacher Education

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Abstract

Teaching with controversy and discussion is vital for preparing students for democratic dialogue within a school setting and in society. Teachers however often struggle to teach controversial issues due to their socio-cultural and divisive nature or due to the fact that teachers are still grappling with the issue(s) themselves. This article reflects on a graduate level class based on using discussion methods to engage students in controversial and potentially divisive discourse in the secondary social studies classroom. The authors argue that effectively preparing teachers to incorporate discussion and controversy into the curriculum is a matter of social justice that starts with the teacher her/himself.

Introduction

Secondary social studies teachers have consistently noted that having students discuss controversial issues, particularly controversial social justice topics such as race, class, gender, and ethics, can be one of the more intimidating and challenging undertakings for their students (Hess, 2005, 2008). Research reveals that teachers frequently shy away from asking their students to discuss or consider controversial issues out of concern that the students, their parents, or administrators may object to the inclusion of the issue in the classroom (Camicia, 2008; Hess, 2005; Journell, 2011). Teachers themselves are not just intimidated by the concerns of parents, students, and administrators, but they too can feel overwhelmed with controversial issues due to a lack of confidence in their pedagogical approach to a specific topic/issue, and because they are struggling with how they perceive the topic/issue themselves (Journell, 2011; Yeager Washington & Humphries, 2011). However, there is a consistent theme within the cannon of social studies scholarship which argues that engaging students in discussion and learning about controversial issues can be an avenue to developing deliberation, discussion, and critical thinking skills (Avery, Levy, & Simmons, 2013; Hess, 2002, 2009; Hess & Posselt, 2002).

We agree that these skills are essential to democratic citizenship. We also contend that controversial issues discussions and lessons in social studies classrooms also provide space for students to consider social justice issues and participate in open conversations about active citizenship. Furthermore, controversial issues discussions provide opportunities for students to engage in the democratic practice of constructing and formulating informed opinions about critical issues. This article considers how social studies teachers develop pedagogy for discussion of controversial issues as part of a social justice oriented curriculum. This critical reflection is based on a graduate social studies education course that focused on using discussion methods to engage students in controversial and divisive discourse in secondary social studies classrooms.

A Review of Literature

The foundational research of John Dewey (1926) and Walter Parker (2003) establishes that education broadly, and social studies classrooms specifically, are sites where students learn social and political skills to participate in a functional democracy. In preparation for civic participation, students should practice democratic learning skills such as discussion, particularly surrounding controversial issues, that will enable them to be informed and active citizens (Parker, 2012; Tannebaum, 2013). Research also reveals that some teachers realize the importance of allowing students to discuss controversial issues as part of developing political and social attitudes in general (Letendre, 2006; Waterson, 2009).

Social studies education research pertaining to controversial issues has been based largely on four concepts: (1) controversial issues discussions as pedagogy, (2) how and why teachers include or do not include controversial issues discussions in their classrooms, (3) the practices of teachers who are skilled in leading discussions of controversial issues, and (4) student learning through these discussions (Hess, 2008). Research also illustrates how controversial issues discussions might be beneficial for students, whether teachers should disclose their views on the issue, what constitutes a controversial issue, and how discussing controversial issues contributes to democracy (Hess, 2009). This corpus of research provides the foundation for our argument that teaching controversial issues through discussion enables students and teachers alike to negotiate potentially divisive social issues through authentic and honest dialogue that fosters social justice orientations and deep democratic attitudes. We also hope to fill a void in the research as social studies scholarship has largely ignored teacher education and how we can effectively prepare in-service and pre-service teachers to engage students in controversy.

Research on Controversial Issues Discussions in Classrooms

Research has found that when students deliberate about controversial issues through discussion, they develop deeper understandings of issues and feel more comfortable talking about potentially divisive issues with their fellow students (Avery et al., 2013). Research from a 10th grade course that asked students specifically to develop their discussion skills of controversial public issues found that such a specific focus on discussion skills led students to report feeling more comfortable participating in dialogue about controversial issues (Hess & Posselt, 2002). Furthermore, a significant qualitative

study of a classroom where divisive dialogue about issues of race emerged in the context of controversial issues discussions, revealed the importance of building relationships with students before discussing controversial issues and how to plan for controversial issues discussions with students (Washington & Humphries, 2011). These studies of classrooms demonstrate that teachers need to plan controversial issues discussions carefully, work with students on the selection of issues to explore, make the focus of the discussions clear to students, and be prepared to negotiate divisive dialogue among and between students.

Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching Controversial Issues Discussions

Research on discussion and controversial issues explores how teachers' personal views on controversial issues influence their decisions to teach or not teach with controversial issues, and if they choose to do so, how their personal views influence their teaching of controversial issues (Hess, 2005, 2008, 2009; James, 2009; Journell, 2011; Kelly, 1986; Miller-Lane, Denton, & May, 2006; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Research on pre-service teachers' conceptions of controversial issues and their comfort in engaging students in controversial issues discussions found that teachers tend to present neutral or value-free stances on issues out of fear of backlash from groups or individuals beyond the classroom (Misco & Patterson, 2007). This body of scholarship suggests that pre-service and in-service teachers face both personal and pedagogical challenges when they choose to include discussions of controversial issues in their classrooms. The remainder of this article offers insight as to how teachers can foster authentic dialogue and social justice orientations through controversial issues discussions via reflections on a graduate social studies education course that focused specifically on using discussion methods with controversial issues.

Controversy and Pedagogy

The Discussion and Controversy graduate methods course was offered at a mid-size institution in the Midwestern United States in Spring 2014. Although the course is open to graduate students from various educational disciplines within curriculum and instruction, social studies education students have primarily elected to take advantage of the special topics course. The student population in the course was homogenous in nature and represented the social studies teacher education program at the institution with all students being of Caucasian background. The course was previously taught by a Caucasian professor who took a very "non-critical" approach to the course as evidenced by the syllabus. The prior professor focused solely on controversy and discussion as a form of democratic education, but I (first author) as a Black male teacher educator with six years of experience working in inner-city schools knew the value of engaging my homogenous graduate students in critical content and conversations that would allow them to look deeply at social justice issues and subsequently allow their students to do the same. A graduate research assistant (second author) completed a review of literature before the semester began that allowed me to design a course that was social justice oriented, pragmatic in nature, pedagogically balanced, and inclusive with regards to how controversy was defined and approached in the classroom. Furthermore, the course and its assignments were designed to disrupt the asymmetrical practice of "professor as expert" (Oesterreich, 2002, p. 290) by including writing, texts, and discussions that drew

upon the lived experiences of the graduate students in their respective classrooms and communities. Overall, the course addressed the following big idea questions with regards to controversy:

1. What is the rationale in engaging students in learning and discussion about controversial issues?
2. What methods are most effective for engaging students in controversial social justice issues such as race, gender, sexuality, and religion that have been proven through research to be divisive not just in classrooms, but in society?
3. What is the role of the teacher beyond pedagogy in engaging students in learning and discussion about controversial issues and topics?
4. How do you know which topics and issues are salient? Open or closed? How can you tap into the lives of your students to bring to the forefront the hidden curriculum?

The Course

Students were responsible for analyzing the assigned readings and writing 2-3 page responses to the reading that included critical questions. These responses and critical questions were used to provide direction for the weekly discussions, providing students with the opportunity to respond and critique their peers' opinions. Students also participated in student led discussions in which they were to choose a controversial social justice issue they experienced difficulties teaching due to their beliefs. Students were then instructed to find academic scholarship that presented opposing viewpoints regarding the issue, and also a practitioner manuscript that offered suggestions for helping teachers engage students in the issue of choice. Lastly, students developed a unit plan accompanied by a practitioner manuscript pertaining to their controversial social justice issue with which they struggled to teach. Sexuality and religion were the most common controversial issues that the students identified as being most difficult to teach due to their own belief systems. Race and gender identity were two other topics that were prominent throughout the course as well.

The course was laid out in three stages and reflected the cannon of literature on social studies and controversy. In addition the course addressed voids in the literature. The first goal of the course was to build a rationale for the inclusion of controversy and divisive issues in the classroom. As our classrooms are supposed to reflect society and the issues that are often found within society, it is imperative that classroom teachers are engaging students in controversial issues. Also, the practice of engaging students in these issues through discussion is democratic in nature (Parker, 2010). Secondly the course focused on controversy as pedagogy: helping teachers identify what is controversial, when to disclose, and how to use various resources and pedagogical approaches to make controversy engaging for students. While discussion is an effective means for engaging students in controversy, we explored several other methods such as media, literature, film, and rigorous research projects for helping to engage students in controversial issues. Students also developed a list of methods for determining student opinions prior to classroom discussions through the use of anonymous surveys. The final aspect of the course was designed to engage teachers in the controversial issues that they struggled to teach the most. This aspect of the course reflected a social science approach, as the

conversations were content-based in nature. Students stretched beyond education and delved into the fields of race scholarship, sexuality, theology, and politics. In course evaluations students noted this aspect of the course as being most helpful in helping to inform their understanding of particular issues and consequently their teaching.

Critical Course Reflection

Beyond class discussions we also completed document jigsaws, media reviews, film reviews, and invited guest speakers to present their respective scholarship. We used video conferencing with various scholars to provide a discussion of their work as well as engage them in opposing viewpoints that may have emerged in response to their writing. After reflecting on the course in addition to student course evaluations, informal survey evaluations, the authors (professor and graduate research assistant) arrive at two insights. First, the need for this course is critical as controversy cannot be avoided in the classroom, and this is often a missing part of secondary teacher education in general. Students in the graduate course shared similar sentiments in expressing the need for this course to not only continue, but also be made a mandatory graduation requirement. In a critical course reflection, Segall and Gaudelli (2007) noted that pre-service and in-service teachers often leave their teacher education programs with the same conceptions of teaching as when they entered. Therefore, teachers are not equipped to deal with the academic, professional, and emotional challenges that can occur when controversial topics naturally arise through the curriculum. Teachers struggle with controversy as it appears naturally in the curriculum, and they are even more hesitant to engage students in controversial topics and issues that do not appear so naturally in the curriculum. Yet these are topics that students want to engage in (Thornton, 2004) either due to their interests or lived experiences that can formulate the hidden curriculum (Scheiner-Fisher & Busey, 2013).

Secondly, teachers still need the opportunity to explore controversial social justice issues in order to effectively engage students in discussion about controversial topics. Common feedback given regarding the course was that teachers tended to avoid topics such as immigration, racism, sexuality, gender, and religion because these were issues that the in-service teachers in the course had strong beliefs about, or were still in the process of formulating an informed opinion. As a result, they tended to avoid these discussions altogether. The social science research aspect of the course helped teachers to inform their opinions of the issues they struggled to grasp, as well as truly understand multiple and opposing perspectives on the issue. Informal surveys on the course showed that all teachers enrolled were now more likely to engage students in their respective difficult issue now that they were aware of opposing viewpoints that could arise. Moving forward, social studies teacher educators must find ways to engage pre-service and in-service teachers in learning about controversy and its pedagogical implications, for the betterment of our schools and the students who inhabit them.

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