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TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES AND USING BEST  
PRACTICES

A MASTER'S THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY  
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY

MAGGIE LEMAY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

MAY 2019

BETHEL UNIVERSITY

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES AND USING BEST  
PRACTICES

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MAY 2019

APPROVED

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### Acknowledgments

I want to thank my family, especially my parents who have supported me unconditionally during this long two-year journey. A special thank you to my mother who always picks up my phone calls no matter the time or place. You know exactly what to say to bring me back to reality and make me want to do better. I am in awe of your wisdom. I also want to thank my thesis supervisor, JoEllen Ambrose. I would not have been able to accomplish this much without your knowledge, expertise, and unwavering support. You have been an amazing mentor and teacher. I hope to one day be as good at teaching as you are.

## Abstract

The teaching of controversial issues—those issues which have sparked a prolonged public debate or dispute, and usually, concerns matters of conflicting opinions or points of view—is a necessary and important aspect of any civics education program in the discipline of social studies. Despite this necessity and importance, research shows that teachers face many obstacles and challenges when teaching controversial issues. These obstacles include lack of training and time, fear of losing control, lack of community and legal support, the polarization of politics, access to the internet and social media, and, finally, teacher disclosure. The purpose of this thesis was to better understand these obstacles while also looking at research that shows how these obstacles can be overcome through the use of best practices. Research shows what training teachers need to receive, how they can gather community and legal support as well as how to create a safe and inclusive classroom environment. Lastly, research supports the teaching of controversial issues through the use of discussion, especially the use of deliberation, seminars, and role-plays.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

### **Personal Experiences**

In my short time teaching, I have had some experience teaching about controversial issues. I have had the chance to teach about and have meaningful discussions with students on various controversial issues such as abortion, school shootings, racism related to the Jim Crow Era, the Wars on Terrorism as well as dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was during those lessons when my students became most engaged, motivated, and talkative. Yet, these were also the lessons in which I felt the most anxious to teach because I was not sure how my students would respond or if I was fully prepared to facilitate the discussion. Unfortunately, I did have to deal with the repercussions of bringing a controversial issue into the classroom that I was not fully prepared to teach because I was not aware of the extreme emotions some of my students held about the topic. While this was a valuable learning experience for me in that it helped me to know my students better, it also caused me anxiety and to doubt my choices and abilities as a social studies teacher. Nevertheless, it is because of these experiences that I chose to research the teaching of controversial issues.

### **Eras of Teaching Controversial Issues**

Hatred, intolerance, and bigotry are age-old problems that every generation of students and teachers face. Teachers have had the challenge to navigate the controversies surrounding communism in the 1950s, the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War in the 1960s, and the Watergate Scandal in the 1970s as well as help their students learn about and understand these issues. Likewise, today's political climate has been charged with increased polarization and partisan politics, and the election of President Trump in 2016 has complicated matters further



creating challenges for teachers and students. Since the beginning of his election campaign, President Trump has acted in ways that have caused conflict, confusion, and concern with the American public. Research conducted by the American Psychology Association since the 2016 election, shows that Americans, especially those in minority groups, have heightened stress related to national politics (American Psychology Association, 2017).

Stress levels have also increased in the classrooms across the United States according to UCLA's Institute for Democracy Education and Access (IDEA) study (2017) of 1535 English, math, and social studies teachers across the US. This study was conducted to understand better how the first few months of President Trump's first term has affected US high school students. According to the UCLA IDEA study, 51.4% of teachers reported students experiencing increased stress due to the presidential election in 2016 (Rogers et al., 2017). Furthermore, 44.3% of teachers reported that students expressed concerns over specific policies (e.g., rights of immigrants, Muslim Americans, LGBTQ youth, or access to healthcare and a clean environment) "and that this negatively impacted students' ability to focus or their attendance" (Rogers et al., 2017, p. 10). Also, 67.6% of teachers reported that their stress levels increased during the 2016-17 school year due to the policy issues and changes brought about by the new president and his administration. From this study, it is clear that many students and teachers alike are suffering during this current political climate.

Another indicator of the current classroom environment is the increase in derogatory talk as well as an increase in classrooms or schools becoming hostile environments. For example, the UCLA study also found that 27.7% of teachers saw an increase in derogatory remarks about minority groups during classroom discussions from the 2015-16 school year to the 2016-17

school year (Rogers et al., 2017). Likewise, the study found that 40.9% of teachers stated that “their school leadership made public statements this year about the value of civil exchange and understanding across lines of difference” (Rogers et al., 2017, p. VI). Yet, only 26.8% of those teachers stated that their school leaders offered guidance and support on how to deal with these policy issues and the student’s responses to them. These findings regarding the stress levels, the derogatory language, and the lack of support teachers have highlighted just how detrimental the present political environment is to students and teachers. If schools continue to be a stressful and unsafe place for students, very little learning can take place. Now more than ever, it is vital to work towards an education system that can help students navigate and understand the present political system and its problems, but also help them to be motivated to work towards change and a better future for all. However, how to do so remains a question.

### **National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Best Practices**

In the 2013 ‘Revitalizing Civic Learning in our Schools’ statement by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), a set of six practices taken from the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (2011) were laid out to ensure meaningful and effective civics education in social studies classrooms. The six practices include Classroom Instruction, Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues, Service-Learning, Extracurricular Activities, School Governance, and Simulations of Democratic Processes. Through these six practices, it is clear that teachers need to create lessons in the classroom and opportunities outside of the classroom that help students to actively learn about and engage in the issues, activities, and practices that all citizens encounter. This thesis will focus on how to achieve the goal of helping students be active citizens and combating the ideas and rhetoric of the current

political climate through utilizing the second practice of discussion of current events and controversial issues. While all of these practices work in tandem together to promote civic engagement, the practice of discussion of current events and controversial issues forms the cornerstone of civic education. (Claire & Holden 2007; Hess & McAvoy 2015; Lintner, 2018). It is in learning about these events and issues as well as in having discussions that students can begin to understand how complex and serious these issues really are as well as how they affect people's lives (Avery, Levy, & Simmons, 2013; Claire & Holden, 2007; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Studying and speaking about these issues can help students better understand issues of race, discrimination, ethics, social and governmental policies, etc. They also have the opportunities to practice and experience tolerance, open-mindedness, and compromise (Avery et al., 2013; Claire & Holden, 2007; Hess, 2013; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Lastly, it is especially important for students to learn about these issues since these are the issues with which many students have first-hand knowledge of or experience in or whose families are still feeling the effects of today. All in all, it is important for students to know and talk about these issues since they are the issues and ideas that define us as a people or a country or which can cause conflicts, wars, or revolutions.

### **Definition of Controversial Issues**

A controversial issue is, essentially, defined as an issue that has sparked a prolonged public debate or dispute, and usually, concerns matters of conflicting opinions or points of view (Hess, 2002; Stradling, Noctor, & Baines, 1984). While this is a good baseline definition, there are few more ideas to consider when dealing with controversial issues.

Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) write, “To merit discussion in the classroom ... an issue must be the subject of conflict among knowledgeable persons, and it must matter, deeply, to members of the general public” (p. 2). This means that a controversial issue is a topic that sparks debate among people who know about the topic as well as something that is relevant and important to most people. Furthermore, one of the prominent scholars on controversial issues, Dearden (1981), wrote about controversy saying that “contrary views can be held...without those views being contrary to reason” (p. 38). Lintner (2018) adds to this definition by saying that “...compelling questions [issues] are both approached and answered from different perspectives premised on one’s social, cultural, regional, and political values, beliefs, and biases” (p. 14). Both of these definitions highlight the complexity or difficulties of controversial issues because much of the conflict or debate comes from the way that people approach or find answers to these issues. Also, there is the fact that with controversial issues, there is seldom one right answer or solution.

One more idea to remember when defining controversial issues is the idea of emotion. Because these issues are complex and vastly important to people, they can stir up strong emotions. To tie all of these previous definitions together Claire and Holden (2007) lay out a definition that states:

A controversial issue is one in which 1) the subject/area is a topic of interest, 2) there are conflicting values and opinions, 3) there are conflicting priorities and material interests, 4) emotions may become strongly aroused, and 5) the subject/area is complex. In this definition, it is clear that these issues are not simple, that the controversy can deal with

values, opinions, priorities, or interests, and that these issues can bring out strong emotions in people. (pp. 5-6)

Overall, controversial issues are those that people will often disagree on; however, they are of vital interest and importance, which is why knowing about them and how to engage in a discussion is an important aspect of being an active citizen.

### **Guiding Questions**

Despite this advocacy by the NCSS for robust civic education programs, the reality is, as shown through my personal experiences as well as the the challenging controversial issues teachers and students have faced from communism to the impact of President Trump, that putting these ideas into practice is much more difficult than it seems (Rogers et al., 2017). However, it is not impossible. I hope that this thesis can help other teachers better understand the obstacles or challenges that they will face teaching about controversial issues in the social studies classroom and come away having the knowledge, skill, and tools necessary to overcome them through incorporating the best practices in their classrooms. Therefore, my guiding questions in this thesis are: What are the obstacles teachers face when teaching controversial issues? What are the best practices that support the teaching of controversial issues? More specifically, how does the use of discussion support the teaching of controversial issues?

## Chapter II: Literature Review

Locating the literature for this thesis was conducted through searches of Education Journals, ERIC, JSTOR Arts & Sciences VI Archive Collection, Academic Search Complete, and EBSCO MegaFILE for publications from 1979 to 2018. This list was narrowed by only reviewing published peer-reviewed journals and reports that focused on social studies education, controversial issues teaching, discussion teaching methods, and professional development in social studies content areas found in journals that addressed the guiding questions. The keywords and phrases that were used in these searches were *teaching controversial issues*, *discussion in social studies classrooms*, *discussing controversial issues*, *discussion methods*, *professional development controversial issues*, *civics education programs*, and *culturally responsive teaching*. The structure of this chapter is to review the literature on the teaching of controversial issues in social studies classrooms in three sections: Obstacles to Teaching Controversial Issues, Best Practices for Supporting the Teaching of Controversial Issues, and Discussion Methods for Teaching Controversial Issues.

### **Obstacles to Teaching Controversial Issues**

Literature and research acknowledge many obstacles that teachers and students face when teaching controversial issues. These obstacles can cause teachers to avoid teaching controversial issues altogether. Avoiding controversial issue discussions can cause students to miss out on developing skills, for example, to think critically or to work with multiple perspectives. The main obstacles that teachers face are lack of training and time, fear of losing control in the classroom, lack of community and legal support to teach controversial issues, the polarization of politics in the United States, and student access to the internet and social media. A final obstacle

is the dilemma of whether teachers should disclose their viewpoints during lessons on controversial issues.

**Lack of teacher training and time.** Many social studies teachers believe they lack the knowledge and training to teach their students controversial issues adequately. In a study by Byford, Lennon, and Russell (2009) on the attitudes and perceptions high school teachers have towards teaching controversial issues, only 35% of the teachers felt they know how to teach controversial issues effectively. Likewise, in a study done by British researchers Oulton, Day, Dillon, and Grace (2004), they found that only 12% of teachers studied stated that they “felt very well prepared” (p. 501) to teach controversial issues. These studies show that many teachers do not feel sufficiently prepared to teach controversial issues.

Teachers are also ill-prepared to teach social studies content and, in turn, controversial issues. Byford et al. (2009) found that many teachers (over 70%) feel that it is important and necessary to teach controversial issues; however, they also feel that it is difficult to do so because they lack confidence, knowledge or training. Likewise, Journell (2013) conducted a study on pre-service social studies teachers’ content knowledge. Pre-service teachers answered questions on government and institution processes, parties and important political personalities, domestic current events, and foreign current events. The results of the study showed that many pre-service (around 50-70%) answered the questions incorrectly. Also, it was the middle school pre-service teachers who scored the lowest in all four categories. Journell (2013) concluded that these results raise concerns as to how prepared new teachers are to be teaching about government, politics, and current events.

Lack of teacher preparation is also evident in the use of discussion as a teaching strategy. A study by Alvermann, O'Brien, and Dillon (1990) looked at whether teachers were correctly using discussion in their classrooms. They observed 24 classrooms where teachers stated that they were using discussion in their daily lessons. According to the study, it was found that 17 out of the 24 teachers were not. Instead, they were using some sort of recitation or lecture technique. Also, Nystrand, Gamoran, and Carbonaro (2001) observed 48 high school social studies classes and found that fewer than 10% of the classes had discussions that lasted longer than 31 seconds. Therefore, this shows that many teachers either do not know what a discussion is or are not trained properly in how to lead one. This lack of training creates a challenge especially when research shows that discussion is one of the best-known techniques to teach concept comprehension and controversial issues (Parker & Hess, 2001).

Often the content of controversial issues can become an obstacle to teachers. The content of controversial issues can be challenging to teach either because it is quite expansive (i.e., something that spans many years in history or involves many people and places) like racism or quite technical (i.e., science or math are involved like in climate change). Also, it could be that the content brings about strong or difficult emotions in the students, teachers, or other community members (Kitson, 2007; Stradling, 2001). For example, this is still true in much of 'post-the Troubles' Northern Ireland where emotions run high for students as well as teachers. Kitson's research of teachers in Northern Ireland found that there are teachers, especially those teaching in high conflict areas, that avoid teaching Irish history after 1922 because they have seen time and time again that "emotions kick in over reason" (Kitson, 2007, p. 132) when they teach about 'the Troubles.'



It can be a challenge to find the time in the midst of all of the content that needs to be covered in a school year to take the time to devote to controversial issues (Avery, Levy, & Simmons, 2013; Hess 2002; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Spending the appropriate time needed to learn about and discuss controversial issues can interfere with most mandated state curriculums, which have many standards that teachers need to cover each year (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Also, planning for a lesson on a controversial issue is ideal; however, often controversial issues come up as current events, and students and teachers want to or need to talk about them. This example is another instance where teachers face an obstacle. They not only feel anxious or uncertain about what to do or say, but they also need to determine whether they should or should not disrupt their regular schedule to talk about these issues and events (Hess & Posselt, 2002).

**Fear of losing control in the classroom.** Many teachers stay away from controversial issues, teach them in a dry and distant manner or teach parallel topics like the Arab Israeli conflict instead of ‘the Troubles’ between Catholics and Protestants if teaching in Northern Ireland (Kitson, 2007). The reason many teachers take these approaches is that they allow for more control of both the content and the emotions attached to the issues (Byford et al., 2009; Kitson, 2007; Levitt & Longstreet, 1993; McCully, 2006). Alvermann et al. (1990) found that “[c]ontrol is not an option that is easily relinquished, in spite of teachers' perceptions of the value of open forums as demonstrated in their definitions of discussion. Control is a device for maintaining the discipline necessary to carry out routines, cover content, and assess students” (p. 320).

Similarly, a study by Neimi and Neimi (2007) about partisanship, participation, and political trust in high school social studies classrooms reported that in all six classrooms studied teachers stifled student's questions and discussion in favor of keeping control or covering content. In the study, teachers were often seen asking students to be quiet and return to more 'official' activity despite these students having meaningful questions, side conversations, or opinions. Another example of teachers favoring control over discussion, was of a teacher having students fill out a questionnaire about the stance on an issue rather than discuss their opinions with the class (Neimi & Neimi, 2007). Handing out an independent assignment on controversial issues is a way that teachers can use to keep control of their classrooms. It guarantees a way to relay information from teacher to student and vice versa, yet they are not ways for students to interact with the material, delving into the heart of the issues, and taking ownership for what this information means to them or how it affects them. However, giving up that control and allowing for those emotions when teaching controversial issues can be difficult and leave teachers vulnerable (Byford et al., 2009; Levitt & Longstreet, 1993; McCully, 2006; Stradling, 2001).

For some teachers, these emotions or disagreements can scare them, especially if they do not know how to help their students process them appropriately (Byford et al., 2009; Levitt & Longstreet, 1993; Stradling, 2001). The UCLA IDEA study collected many responses from teachers saying that they avoided topics that could stir up strong and hostile emotions in their students. One teacher wrote that they are “less likely to bring up politics...[because] both sides are so emotionally charged...that they [the students] forget to respect each other's thoughts...[s]o I avoid.” (Rogers et al., 2017, p.16). Similarly, McCully (2006) in his work with pre-service teachers found that these new teachers complain that the majority of their training

dealt with the rational side of teaching and not the emotional. Training in the emotional side of teaching can be difficult to master; however, it is not unattainable (Hess, 2015). In reality, it is how to handle these emotions that teachers must be taught as well as how to help students deal with and channel these emotions appropriately before teachers can even begin teaching their content effectively.

**Lack of community and legal support.** Another obstacle to teaching controversial issues is a lack of support from the community. Many of these controversial issues can cause problems with other stakeholders in the community (i.e., the parents, administrators, and politicians). Teachers run into problems when those community members do not believe students should be learning about these issues or the different sides of the issues either because these outside stakeholders believe in a specific side or because they believe that the students are not mature enough to handle the issues (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). These outside stakeholders do have much sway in the community, which can cause problems for teachers if they would like to continue working and living in their community. In Patterson's (2010) study of social studies teacher in 4 areas of the Midwest, 91% agreed that they should be teaching about controversial issues in their classrooms; however, of those who agreed one-third of them also stated that they had experienced pressure from parents and administrators to limit what they teach about controversial issues. This study showed that if there is little support and protection for teachers who teach controversial issues and the relevant material to their students, then teachers are going to shy away or stop teaching topics that could get them into trouble, or worse, fired (Lintner, 2018; Patterson, 2010; Simpson, 2010; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

Communities engage in considerable debate over what should be taught in social studies classroom or what constitutes ‘good’ civics education (Hess, 2009; Stradling, 2001). Almost every adult was a student themselves at one time, so they feel they know best about how teachers should operate (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Most people believe that schools should be focused largely on preparing students for the workplace and giving them a basic understanding of reading, math, history, and science. Still, there is a large percentage of people who do believe that schools should be the place where students are taught about democratic participation (i.e., voting, debating, etc.), yet the exact kind of democratic participation varies from person to person and place to place (Hess, 2009). Many adults, parents, and members of the community want students to learn about the ideas that their community, as a whole, value. Parents do have the right to see to their children’s moral and religious education. In theory, this is a good thing; however, this also places today’s teachers under a lot of pressure and scrutiny because these beliefs and ideas can sometimes come into conflict with curriculum choices (Hess, 2009; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Likewise, many people are afraid that teachers, especially social studies teachers, are going to use their classrooms as a place to indoctrinate students to their own ideological and political leanings or at the very least use them as a ‘soapbox’ to lecture, rant, and rave (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

The lack of academic freedom and support from the United States legal system are obstacles that some teachers face when teaching about controversial issues. There are not many legal protections offered to them under the constitution, and the amount of freedom that teachers have had in their classrooms has not changed drastically in the last 100 years (Simpson, 2010; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Teaching, as a profession in the United States, is one that is

significantly undervalued and also highly criticized (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). In the World War I era, teachers were reprimanded and often dismissed for bringing up controversial issues about the war. After the war, teachers were allowed a little more leeway to critique society and the political climate, yet, there were still many rules in each school district about what teachers could teach and say about many controversial issues. Teachers were sometimes required to stay non-partisan and to swear loyalty oaths. The post-World War II and the start of the Cold War eras were no different. Limits were placed on teachers as well as the mistrust of teachers increased. Teachers were not allowed to bring up any critiques or differing viewpoints regarding communism. In the McCarthy era, most teachers avoided any talk of controversial issues. This avoidance happened because many teachers during that time were accused of and investigated for being communist, which could ruin their career (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

During the 1960s and 70s, communism continued to be a controversial issue because of the Vietnam War. The Civil Rights movement also became a hot topic and something that caused conflicts and controversy in many classrooms and communities (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). In the famous case of *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), the supreme court awarded students freedom of speech in schools. Yet, while students have been granted some freedoms in school, in the last 38 years, teachers have lost some of their academic freedom (Simpson, 2010). One example is the case of *Garcetti v. Ceballo* (2006), where it was decided that government employees did not have freedom of speech when working. This decision has implications for teachers because *Garcetti v. Ceballo* states that it is up to the employer, most likely a school board, to determine what a teacher is allowed to say and teach in the classroom (Simpson, 2010). Another example is the case of *Mayer v. Monroe County Community School Corporation* (2007),

in which the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals also ruled that teachers (in Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin) lose their freedom of speech once they enter the classroom (Hess, 2010). For their own protection, Hess (2010), Simpson (2010), and Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) advise that teachers be aware of the policies of their school district regarding the teaching of controversial issues, make sure that there is a written 'academic freedom' clause in contracts or collective bargaining agreements, and be politically active to make sure that the best people are elected to the school board.

**Polarization of politics.** For the last few decades and especially today, teachers have found it challenging to teach in an increasingly politically polarized society. The polarization of the political scene has caused many difficulties for the US public because extremist views have become more mainstream (Ornstein, 2014). Also, since the 1980s, the process of how politics operates has broken down. Legislation in the past on difficult issues was the product of bipartisan compromise (Hess & McAvooy, 2015; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Some examples are the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the National Environmental Protection Act of 1969. However, today's polarization of politics has undermined a bipartisan approach as evidenced by the Democrats pushing through the Affordable Care Act in 2009-2010 as well as by the partial government shutdown in late 2018-early 2019 due to the fact that the Senate, House of Representatives, and President Trump could not agree on whether or not to fund the building of a border wall along the US-Mexico border. Thus, research today is finding that many Americans do not see an end to the unwillingness of opposing groups or political parties to work together or compromise (Pew Research Center, 2018c).

Since the 1960s the two major parties in the US have, as Hess and McAvoy write, “purified” (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 21). This purification is due to the move of some Democrats to advocate for more liberal issues like the civil rights movement, which then caused the Southern Democrats to change the Republican party because the Republican party did not want to change legislation as dramatically as the Democrats did. This purification happened again in the 1970s with the rise of Evangelical Christians in the Republican party who were decidedly against the more liberal policies and activities of the Democratic party. These moves added to the ideological purification and gave each party clear and distinct stances on major issues like civil rights or abortion. In other words, people who identify as Democrats are very much on the left of an issue while the Republicans are on the right (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). This is still true as of 2017. After surveying over 5,000 adults, the Pew Research Center has recorded the largest gap between republicans and democrats on various political issues. There is now a 36-point gap between the two parties on ten different issues while in 1994 (when the survey started) there was only a 15-point gap (Pew Research Center, 2017).

As a result of the polarization of politics, more communities and the schools in those communities are becoming more homogenous in terms of political views and values. Research shows that many communities and schools are moving backward from the desegregation mandates of the 1960s and 1970s. This backward movement means that more people are choosing to live in areas where there is little diversity culturally or politically (Bishop, 2008; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Hess and McAvoy (2015) write, “This partisan information-seeking is a part of a larger demographic trend in the US to associate with those who hold the same political views—thereby increasing ideological amplification” (p. 42). This trend shows that people in

some areas of the US are not being exposed to opposing viewpoints, which can solidify their own opinions and beliefs. A lack of exposure to opposing ideas, peoples, and viewpoints, which can lead to polarization can be another obstacle to teachers and make them wary of teaching about controversial issues (Hess, 2013; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Likewise, Campbell (2005) shows in his research on open classroom environments that homogeneity in the classroom can stifle classroom discussions on political topics. He found that as the percentage of black students in a class increases, white students report there to be fewer classroom discussions; and as the population of white students increases, black students report that their teachers are less likely to encourage discussion. Thus, teachers need to be aware of how racial and issue-stance homogeneity can affect their classrooms and not allow it to halt learning about controversial issues.

**Access to the internet and social media.** Adolescent's access to the internet and social media can be an obstacle to teachers when teaching controversial issues since the internet is an unregulated source of information as well as another platform that students can use to be hostile. Today, a lot of what students learn about everything from the latest new pop artist to the latest news story, they do so online, and even more often than not from a social media platform. According to a study by the Pew Research Center (2018b), the top platforms that teenagers use are YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat. In this same survey, it was reported that 95% of American teenagers have a smartphone or at least access to one, and 45% of teenagers report that they are constantly online. Today's generation of teenagers is probably the most connected and well-informed generation out there. Two-thirds of teenager's report that the internet and social media help them to stay connected to friends as well as interact with diverse people and issues.



However, teens do recognize that the information on social media may not be entirely reliable. Only 37% of teenagers surveyed believe that social media is a trustworthy place to go to gather information (Pew Research Center, 2018b). Also, the internet and social media are places where students are bullied for their looks, ideas, or beliefs with 59% of teenagers reporting that they have been the target of cyber-bullying (Pew Research Center, 2018a).

Despite teenagers recognizing that the internet and social media may not be the most reliable source of information, it is still hard to not fall into its trap. There is a phenomenon where companies like Google and Facebook can track the online behavior of their customers and send them more of the same products and ideas, therefore, turning the internet into a tunnel or box for people who do not know better. This notion means that for more people when they go on the internet to learn about things like politics, they will be sent to articles and sites that correspond to their already held beliefs. They will not be shown news articles about or ideas from opposing sides or views (Pew Research Center, 2009; Smith, 2009). Lynch (2016, May 7) sums up this phenomenon when he writes:

Googling is like being in a room with a million shouting voices. It is only natural that we'll hear those voices that are most similar to our own, shouting what we already believe, and as a result, Google can find you confirmation for almost anything, no matter how absurd. (para. 11)

Overall, the internet and social media are positive entities that help students stay connected and experience diverse people and ideas; however, for teachers teaching controversial issues the internet and social media can become an obstacle in that it may mislead students or force them down the wrong path when searching for information. Also, it could be another source of a

hostile environment where students are bullied or criticized for their beliefs or appearance (Pew Research Center, 2018a).

**Teacher disclosure.** A final obstacle for teachers is whether to disclose. This topic of teacher disclosure is even a controversial issue within the study and research of teaching controversial issues as well as when teaching US government and politics. When asked, most teachers and members of the public would say that teachers should stay neutral when teaching about and discussing controversial topics, especially if the idea of the lesson is that students learn about multiple different perspectives and need to come to their own conclusions (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2011; Oulton, et al., 2004; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Staying neutral when teaching or facilitating a discussion helps keep the teacher away from being blamed for trying to indoctrinate students or of using their classrooms to promote their own beliefs politically and morally. Staying neutral also helps teachers avoid coming under scrutiny from the administration, parents, or other members of the community about their opinions and beliefs, which could cause them to possibly lose their reputation or even their job (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Lintner, 2018). Yet, in reality, this neutrality is ideal. It is difficult to say if teachers should stay neutral when teaching controversial issues or if they should tell their students on which side of the issue they believe.

It should be asked whether disclosing one's ideas, beliefs, and arguments are wrong and not in the pedagogical interest of the students. Kelly (1986) argues that teacher neutrality is virtually impossible and not helpful to students, especially when teaching about controversial issues. Kelly understood that teachers unknowingly state their opinions and beliefs about topics. This notion is backed up in two recent studies. Journell (2011) observed six US government

classes during the 2008 presidential election and studied how the teachers taught about the upcoming election as well as the reactions and perceptions of the students about their teacher's instruction choices. In the study, four teachers attempted to stay neutral whereas two teachers taught using Kelly's notion of 'committed impartiality.' Journell (2011) found that those teachers who were trying to stay neutral about their choice of candidate often let it slip whom they support through small comments or choice of lesson materials. According to the students interviewed, these unconscious choices can be confusing or misleading if they think that their teacher is the bearer of only facts and not opinions. Yet, some of the students in the classrooms of the teachers who disclosed liked knowing their teacher's stance and opinions because then they knew exactly where they stood. They said that it helped them learn better even if it was to make them realize that people can be biased and that they need to stand up for their beliefs (Journell, 2011). Likewise, Niemi and Niemi (2007) came to the same conclusion during their study of six US government and history classes in upstate New York. They found that teachers can reveal their stance on a topic or issue through body language, name-calling, or snide remarks made during a lesson or discussion.

Another reason that Kelly (1986) believes that neutrality is not helpful in the social studies classroom is because it does not allow students to see an adult model how to have an opinion on a topic, how to relay their arguments, and participate in discussions with those opinions and arguments in an appropriate, tolerant and civil manner. Staying neutral also makes it so the teacher cannot fully participate in lessons or discussions in a meaningful way. Kelly advocates for the practice of 'committed impartiality' where teachers disclose their opinions and beliefs to their students but do not give too much weight to them or disclose them in a way that

forces students to have to take up those beliefs and opinions as well (p. 130). This 'committed impartiality' brings about the best of both worlds because teachers can model good civic discourse and participation and students can still be free to learn about the many different perspectives and sides to an issue while coming to their own conclusions. Hess (2009) calls this practice "balance" (p. 102).

Barton and McCully (2007), who teach and work in Northern Ireland, embrace the idea of teacher disclosure and write extensively about how and why many of the teachers who teach about politics and controversial issues in Northern Ireland tend to disclose their social and political leanings to their students. This practice is motivated by the need to rebuild trust and understanding that was lost during the decades of turmoil between the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. They write, "...where few people have been untouched by the Troubles...it seems disingenuous for teachers to pretend that they have no opinion" (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 15). Barton and McCully advocate for teachers knowing and understanding the culture of their classrooms or communities as well as being aware of the purpose or intent of their pedagogical choices. They even tell teachers to voice their own confusion, frustrations, and uncertainties with their students in order to show the complexity and difficulties of the issues they are studying. While the case of Northern Ireland is quite extreme, the practices there are ones US teachers can look to when dealing with some of the emotive issues like the Black Lives Matter movement.

This cultural understanding and acting with intention that McCully and Barton (2007) support are also two topics about which Hess and McAvoy (2015) write. Teachers interact with many different students every day and their choices of topics, materials, and whether they disclose their beliefs and opinions have an impact on their students' learning. Unlike for Kelly

(1986) and Journell (2011), Hess and McAvoy (2015) see teacher disclosure as complex and operate on a 'it depends' basis since for them teacher 'sharing' really depends on "the context, evidence, and aims of the...classroom" (p. 193). They agree that true neutrality in the classroom is impossible, but they also argue that teacher disclosure can sometimes limit student autonomy or the openness of a classroom.

Hess (2009) conducted a study on teacher disclosure where they interview teachers and students about their thoughts and experiences regarding this topic. Half of the teachers interviewed were in favor of sharing their views with students while the other half were not. All the teachers had valid arguments as to why they would or would not share ranging from being a good role model to fearing that they would influence their students too much. Also, most students (79%) thought it was okay for teachers to share their opinions; however, many stated that they did not want their teachers to try to persuade students to believe one way or another. Still, Hess (2009) found that students were supportive of whichever stance their teacher took on sharing; however, students of low socio-economic status were more likely to change their opinion to their teacher's opinion if their teacher shared. Lastly, students who were in classes where their teacher did not disclose stated that they were given more opportunities to "think more" (Hess, 2009, p. 105) and figure things out on their own.

With these findings from Hess (2009), Hess and McAvoy (2015), Journell (2011), Kelly (1986), McCully (2006), Barton and McCully (2007), and Neimi and Neimi (2007) it is clear that teacher disclosure is something that can challenge teachers in their pursuit of providing students with a good, fair, and balanced civics education. They need to understand how all of their choices and actions before, during, and after a lesson can affect their students learning and

understanding. They need to know and understand the beliefs and values of the community in which they are teaching to determine if disclosure is something that will help their students learn how to be active citizens or if it will confuse and sway students to one side or another. Overall, there is no definitive answer to the disclosure question if teachers understand their environment, use research, and have strong goals and a purpose for their teaching, then they will make the right decision to disclose their beliefs or not.

### **Best Practices for Supporting the Teaching of Controversial Issues**

Research and scholarship show that teaching controversial issues in social studies classrooms in the 21st century is not impossible or a hopeless endeavor. Instead, it is doable and essential (Hess, 2002; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). All it takes is some training, preparation, and lots of hard work. This second section will focus on the literature that discusses the best practices that support teaching controversial issues. Such practices include how teachers select controversial issues, gather support from colleagues, parents, and other community for teaching controversial issues, set up a safe and inclusive classroom environment as well as what training is needed for teachers to teach controversial issues.

**Selecting controversial issues.** This question takes us back to our definition of controversial issues, its purpose in the curriculum and school community, and the resources needed to teach controversial issues. Earlier we defined a controversial issue as an issue that has sparked a prolonged public debate or dispute usually concerning matters of conflicting opinions or points of view (Hess, 2002; Stradling, 1984). Yet, the expanded definition by Claire and Holden (2007) helps to clarify the complexities of many controversial issues. Thus, the five-part definition of:

[A] controversial issue is one in which 1) the subject/area is a topic of interest, 2) there are conflicting values and opinions, 3) there are conflicting priorities and material interests, 4) emotions may become strongly aroused, and 5) the subject/area is complex. (pp. 5-6)

Hess and McAvoy (2015) delve deeper into what is a controversial issue by answering the question of “which issues should be included in the curriculum?” (p. 14). For Hess and McAvoy, there are two ways of classifying issues 1) empirical or policy and 2) open or settled. There is a matrix that can then be formed by these two ways of classification. Empirical issues are those that can be dealt with through inquiry, evidence, or experimentation. There is usually a right answer. Policy issues are those questions that look at public policy and use empirical issues and more to find a solution. Open questions are questions that can be debated or those that have valid arguments on all sides of the issue. Settled questions are those questions where there is an answer or a correct stance. An example of a settled question is slavery—it is not okay for a teacher to ask kids to debate or discuss whether slavery should be legal or put back into practice. As a rule, most questions that are about open policy issues are those that students should be learning about and discussing because these are the same issues that the general public are struggling with currently (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Another consideration in selecting a topic is whether the issue is a tipping point/question. Tipping is a term developed by Hess (2009) about questions that are changing or tipping from open to closed or from closed to open. The idea of tipping was taken from writer Malcolm Gladwell (2000) and by tipping Hess and Gladwell mean that the public—a community or government—have or are making changes to how they think or view a specific topic. An

example is same-sex marriage. For many years, the issue of same-sex marriage was closed. It was illegal for people of the same gender to be married. In the past few decades, this issue has been changing or tipping. Fewer people believe that it should be illegal for a same-sex couple to marry. Roughly 62% of Americans now believe that homosexuality should be accepted and not discouraged (Hess, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2017).

A tricky part of the designation of open/closed/tipping questions is that these designations can ebb and flow. Some parts of society may see an issue as tipping or tipped and another part may not. This ebb and flow of controversial issues are many times at the heart of disagreements over curriculum or what should be taught as controversial in schools (Camicia, 2008). This is why it is important for teachers teaching about controversial issues to know and understand the course material as well as the community they will be teaching in so they can make conscious and informed decisions about which issues to teach (Hess, 2009; Pace, 2018). Take, for example, torture. During the early 2000s when the war in Iraq was a topic of daily discussion, the issue of torture and what was technically legal and illegal forms of torture were up for debate. In some classrooms, this topic was presented as an open question because it was considered as an open question within the national government; yet, for so many, the issue of torture was a settled question—it is always illegal and against everyone's human rights (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). These instances are where teachers may need to make some difficult choices, and where a teacher's understanding of controversial issues, as well as the political climate, need to be honed. Issues like torture require teachers to reach out to other colleagues and people in their community so that they can get advice and support to make the best choice for their classroom (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).



**Gathering support of colleagues, parents, and other community members.** Having little legal and professional support when teaching controversial issues is a significant obstacle for many teachers. It is understandable that teachers do not want to do anything that could put their career or reputation on the line. However, there are steps that teachers can take to protect themselves from losing their job or reputation, and still be able to teach controversial issues and topics (Simpson, 2010; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Many schools or school districts have policies on how teachers should teach and approach controversial topics, and as a teacher, it is beneficial for teachers to know these policies. If these policies do not align with the beliefs or syllabus of the teacher, then they either rethink what they want to teach or change the school policies by talking to the administration or the school board. Another way that teachers can protect themselves and gather support is to make sure they have an academic freedom clause in their collective bargaining agreements. Lastly, there should be a protocol in place for how parental complaints are dealt with when it comes to parental concerns on what is being taught or the resources (like films or books) used in each class (Simpson, 2010).

Teachers face the challenge of either their school not having a policy about teaching controversial issues or that they are not familiar with the policy. Sharp (2009) surveyed 56 teachers about their school- or district-wide policies on teaching controversial current events. In the study, only 9% of teachers responded ‘yes’ to the question “Does your school and/or district have a policy related to the teaching of controversial current events?” (p. 12). Also, of those teachers who responded yes to the previous question only 35% of teachers responded with ‘very familiar’ or ‘familiar’ to a question about the actual policy. Likewise, the study asked those same 56 teachers about any restrictions that were placed on them when teaching about

controversial issues after 9/11 and 73% said ‘no.’ Of the teachers who said ‘yes’ the reasoning behind the restrictions was to protect students from violence as well as unwanted opposing viewpoints about 9/11. Also, one teacher said it was because their school wanted to focus on the curriculum and state-mandated testing (Sharp, 2009). This study shows that many schools do not have policies in place about the teaching of controversial issues; however, the schools also do not place many restrictions on teachers unless they have a good reason.

Involving other colleagues, administrators, community members, and parents, helps to keep everyone informed and on the same page. Informing others on what happens in class each day and asking for the support of others, makes teaching easier, especially when it comes to teaching difficult and sensitive topics. Hess (2002) observed principals sitting in on discussions of controversial issues. Also, Hess and McAvoy (2015) observed entire social studies departments collaborating to create a legislative simulation that involved every senior social studies student. These examples show that there are communities where adults help each other to create lessons and opportunities for students to learn about difficult, but important issues. Within this community, teachers and administrators can check in with each other to make sure everything is going smoothly. Lastly, Hess (2009) also observed a classroom teacher who involved parents and guardians during an open house evening where students and parents were allowed to discuss a controversial issue as the students would in class. This practice showed parents and other community members what happens in class giving everyone a better understanding of what the students are learning as well as the different skills they are developing. Likewise, it is to the teacher’s advantage if parents or guardians are kept up-to-date about the topics or issues that will be discussed in class, especially if a controversial issue will be

discussed. A great example is through a weekly or monthly newsletter from the teacher (Pace, 2018). This way a teacher can speak with anyone who has any disagreements to offer their rational or to see if an accommodation can be made for individuals before a topic is introduced.

**Creating safe and inclusive classroom environments.** To create a safe and inclusive classroom environment teachers need to understand the beliefs that they have about their students, forge strong relationships between themselves and the students as well as between the students, and have a clear structure for classroom rules and procedures. Lastly, teachers teaching culturally diverse settings need to understand and use culturally responsive teaching. It is important that these ideas and practices are put into place before teachers ask their students to learn about and work with controversial issues.

***Teacher's views and beliefs about education.*** Teacher views about education and the abilities of their students can dictate the atmosphere of a classroom as well as their attitude and the attitudes of the students. Hadjioannou (2007) observed and studied an eighth-grade teacher who had created a safe and inclusive classroom environment and was now able to utilize discussion-based lessons effectively. In this study, the teacher believed in and focused on lessons that incorporated active learning, exploratory learning, and collaborative learning, and as a result, the classroom discussions were longer, more in-depth, and had more student participation. Also after the discussion, students said they enjoyed the discussion and learned a lot. Hadjioannou saw this teacher show respect for students' opinions and make it clear to the students that they saw everyone as intelligent, capable learners. This teacher also built upon students' previous experiences and background knowledge as well as incorporated different perspectives when teaching lessons. This practice, according to the observations of Hadjioannou and student

feedback, helped the students to feel safe and more included as well as be more willing to participate in discussions.

***Building relationships.*** Building relationships with students is vital to creating a safe and inclusive environment. Teachers cannot establish a rapport without first getting to know their students (Hadjioannou, 2007). Establishing a rapport takes time and much effort on the part of the teacher, but in the end, it is invaluable in helping students feel safe, included, motivated, and able to achieve their full potential. This effort was shown by the teacher in Hadjioannou's study when she observed the teacher showing interest in student's stories, asking for their opinion, and celebrating the unique talents of her students. This interest, according to Hadjioannou (2007), showed the students that their teacher cares for them as well as respects them, which can help students feel more comfortable to talk, build connections, and take risks. Another way that the teacher in Hadjioannou's study connected with her students was through the use of humor. Humor or jokes were used most often to ease tension and show students what they have in common. Laughing together is an excellent way to connect and move beyond everything that can be different or dividing (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007; Hadjioannou, 2007; Pace, 2018).

Forging relationships between the students is just as important as building relationships between the students and their teacher. It is vital that the students trust each other, especially considering that the students are the ones who will do the most interacting and collaborating during a lesson. Therefore, the teacher needs to also incorporate student-to-student get-to-know-yous in the form of conversations, games, and activities (Hadjioannou, 2007). Again, this can take time, effort, and patience; however, it is important to recognize if the

students do not understand or know each other, then they are not going to be able to work or learn together properly.

***Setting clear classroom guidelines and procedures.*** Knowing the classroom guidelines and procedures is another way that students can feel a sense of safety and inclusion. Hadjioannou (2007) observed that the students in her study be given clear and explicit instructions and guidelines by their teachers. For example, the teacher stated her expectations at the beginning of the lesson as well as gave clear directions about the task that the students were to complete. These two practices allow for teachers to efficiently manage their classrooms because students know how to behave and what to expect each day. Furthermore, these guidelines and procedures need to be easily understandable, doable, fair, and agreed upon by the students in the classroom. Also, if a student does fail to comply with the rules of the class, the teacher needs to know how to discipline the student firmly, but while maintaining their dignity and not disrupting the rest of the class. This way to discipline was something that Hadjioannou (2007) witnessed the teacher in her study do well, which in turn, helped all the students feel cared for and safe.

***Culturally responsive teaching.*** A final tool that can be used to create a safe and inclusive classroom environment is culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching is a practice where teachers understand, incorporate, and capitalize on the home cultures of the students in their classrooms. Culturally responsive teaching uses the idea that there is a connection between a student's culture and behavior (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008). To be culturally responsive, teachers need to take the time to understand the different cultures in their classroom—even their own. This way teachers will be able to create lessons and activities that capitalize on the different strengths of each culture so that they can better help their students feel

included and be successful learners (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Culturally responsive teaching goes hand-in-hand with teachers getting to know their students. Knowing about the different cultures of their students allows the teacher to plan to use different learning styles and teaching methods more often since both of those can vary significantly from culture to culture (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Some ways that teachers can implement culturally responsive teaching are through choosing lessons that are relevant to the students such as teaching poetry through the medium of rap music (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers can also utilize humor or direct commands when giving instructions since some students respond better to these approaches (Bondy et al., 2007; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005).

***Agonism.*** Teaching using the idea of agonism is a final technique that teachers can use to help to make sure they are creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment. Agonism is a political term that looks at the positive aspects of specific types of conflict. It is derived from the Greek for 'struggle.' Agonism sees the conflict between two groups of people or two ideas as something that can be harnessed and used for good or change. Throughout history, there have been many instances of pluralism and unequal treatment. In essence, there have always been people who have different beliefs and understanding of certain issues as well as people who have gained more from the current political system (Lo, 2017; Mouffe, 2000). While many deliberative processes or discussions ask people to take a step back from their emotions and become extremely rational beings, if the tenants of agonism are present, this is not the case (Mouffe, 2000). People's emotions or irrational thoughts, ideas, and feelings should not be

pushed aside; instead, they should be valued and discussed because they may lead to other understandings, solutions, or compromises.

The current state of affairs in the US in the 21st century is one of those times. Today, we see pluralism in how to deal with policies regarding immigration. We are also being made aware of the rampant inequalities and unfair treatment of specific groups of people, especially when it comes to the Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movements. With all three of these issues, people are becoming antagonistic, and there is much 'gridlock' in society and politics (Pew Research Center, 2018c). This conflict and inability to come to a compromise can spill into the classrooms of teachers teaching about these issues. There may come a time when some of the students still feel like they cannot discuss some of the controversial issues rationally or some students believe that they could never make a decision on an issue with certain other individuals in the classroom. For teachers, this does not mean that they steer clear of these issues; it just means that they need to switch tactics or methods (Lo, 2017; Mouffe, 2000).

For example, a teacher utilizing agonism within a discussion method like deliberation would still have the students look at all the perspectives of the issue, but when student groups are to come to a decision, they would discuss and then decide based on their own beliefs and reason, not necessarily the ones that they used in their earlier discussions/arguments. Also, teachers teaching with agonism can make sure that students understand that decisions reached on controversial issues during deliberations are temporary and the 'best' for now, but can be renegotiated whenever deemed necessary (Lo, 2017). This understanding allows students to know that this is not the last time specific issues will be discussed and that the outcome may be different each time depending on the circumstances. This renegotiation process is a good thing

because it offers a more realistic view of politics—in that ideas change and what was right for that time, may not be right for another (Lo, 2017).

### **Discussion Methods for Teaching Controversial Issues**

This final section will focus on how discussion methods support teachers (new and veteran) in their classrooms when teaching controversial issues. Discussion is a broad term that encompasses many different types of discourse that can be used in the classroom. The three types of discussion that this thesis will focus on are deliberation, seminar, and role-play. Discussion methods are useful when teaching about controversial issues; however, depending on the type of issue, the purpose of the lesson, or the skills that students are utilizing or developing, a specific type of discussion should be used or favored over the others. Discussion in its various forms was chosen as a way to teach controversial issues not because it is easy to teach or even to participate in. In fact, discussion can be one of the most challenging teaching methods as well as the teaching method where students and teachers feel the most vulnerable (Hadjioannou, 2007; Parker, 2006).

Despite this difficulty and vulnerability, when executed well, there are many learning outcomes of discussion. Students develop a sense of self-esteem, but also a selflessness; they develop a sense of community; they improve their communication skills, their critical thinking skills, and their analytical skills; they develop morally and ethically; they learn how to research and question; and they learn how to look at another perspective and actually consider it (Hess, 2002; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker & Hess, 2001). Students, especially in social studies classrooms, also learn how to engage in the social processes of democratic societies with the other people in their classroom, community, and potentially, the world. Having these skills is



why knowing how to utilize these discussion methods in the classroom is so vital to every teacher tasked with teaching controversial issues.

**Discussion.** Discussion is the cornerstone of any social studies classroom. Scholars such as Hess (2009; 2002), Avery et al. (2013), Byford et al. (2009), King (2009), Parker (2001; 2006), McAvoy (2015), and McCully (2006) have visited many social studies classrooms all over the country and world to observe and research how different teachers are teaching about controversial issues. At the core of their work is the premise that good teachers utilize some type of discussion method. Discussion seems like an easy method to employ in any lesson; however, research tells us it is not used often or done well. Any teacher can confirm that trying to facilitate a discussion can be more difficult than it seems (Parker, 2006). For example, in a study of 48 high school social studies classes by Nystrand et al. (2001), it was found that fewer than 10% of them had discussions that lasted longer than 31 seconds. It also found that of those 10% of classes, most were on the honors track.

There are many definitions of discussion. Christoph and Nystrand (2001) define discussion generally as the “free exchange of information among three or more participants (which may include the teacher)” (p. 150). More specifically, Dillon (1994) defines discussion as:

[A] particular form of group interaction where members join together in addressing a question of common concern, exchanging and examining different views to form their answer, enhancing their knowledge or understanding, their appreciation or judgment, their decision, resolution or action over the matter at issue. (p. 8)

In the first definition, Christoph and Nystrand (2001) see discussion as more of a conversation with just the exchange of information as the central point; yet, according to Dillon (1994), discussion does many more specific things like ‘examine different views,’ ‘enhance knowledge,’ or even ‘enhance a resolution or action’ about an issue. Dillon’s definition adds some power and specificity to what it means to have a discussion.

A study by Chiodo and Byford (2004) asked middle and high school students’ their opinions about their social studies courses and whether they liked social studies or not. In the study, it was found that students who enjoyed social studies had teachers who used a variety of teaching methods to keep learning fun and to aid in differentiation. However, when students were interviewed about different teaching methods, students stated that they did value the use of discussions and debates. The high school students, especially, liked discussion and debates because it was “beneficial for post-high school success and improved communication skills” (Chiodo & Byford, 2004, p. 20). From this study, students appear to understand the importance of and need for lessons that incorporate discussion.

It is also important that teachers teach students how to participate in discussions. Parker and Hess (2001) recognized the problem that many teachers were teaching across the country who did not know how to teach students how to participate in discussions, especially discussions on controversial issues. Therefore, Parker and Hess came up with the idea of ‘teaching with and for discussion’ to solve the problem of how to explicitly train teachers in how to teach discussion to their students and use it frequently in their classrooms. For Parker and Hess, there needed to be discussions frequently happening in classrooms—that is the ‘with.’ The ‘for’ is teaching

students and teachers what discussion is, how to prepare for a discussion as well as how to participate in one.

Parker and Hess (2001) concluded that just having pre-service teachers participate in simulated discussions was not enough for them to learn how to teach students what to do before, during, and after a discussion. They saw that facilitating and participating in a well-executed discussion was just too tricky without explicit instruction and much reflection for both students and teachers. Thus, Parker and Hess formulated a course of explicit instruction. This instruction came in the form of a typology that broke discussion into three types: deliberation, seminar, and conversation. For each type of discussion there is an explanation of the aim, the types of text used, focus questions, and a specific *exemplar* for each discussion. This typology can help teachers be purposeful when choosing a type of discussion as well as when giving specific instructions to students. The typology from Parker and Hess can even help teach the students all the differences and nuances between the various types of discussion allowing students to better understand the goals and purposes of discussion in the classroom. Taking inspiration from this typology, three types of discussion will be described below to help teachers know not only what types of discussions they can use, but why and how they should incorporate them into their lessons on controversial issues.

**Deliberation.** Deliberation is a discussion method where the participants come to a solution, decision, or compromise together at the end (Avery et al., 2013; Parker & Hess, 2001). Parker (2006) writes, “deliberations are social occasions that provide opportunities for discussants to think, speak, listen, and learn together, with and across their differences, about a specified topic... participants speak and listen to decide” (p. 12). In the classroom, one of the

best ways to use deliberation is to employ the technique of Structured Academic Controversy (SAC). SAC is a scaffolded deliberation technique that was developed by Johnson and Johnson in the late 1970s through to the 1990s (Avery et al., 2013; Johnson & Johnson, 1979). A SAC is ideal for a social studies classroom since it gives teachers and students easy steps to follow and allows for students to look at multiple perspectives and utilize a variety of teaching materials to reach a decision or compromise. Since SAC is scaffolded and highly structured, it can also ease the fear that teachers have of relinquishing control in their classrooms when allowing students to discuss controversial issues (Avery et al., 2013; McNeil, 1986).

A SAC follows a structured plan, and when done well, it can take many days to complete. First, the group is given a question or an issue such as ‘Should the Federal government place a travel ban on people traveling to the US from Muslim countries?’ or ‘Should the US have dropped the atomic bombs on Japan at the end of WWII?’ Second, students learn background information about the question to have a basic understanding of the issues and ideas surrounding the question. The students are also given materials that support each side of the question to use in support of their arguments. Third, the students are organized into smaller groups (ideally 4-6 people in each group), and then, each small group is broken into two sides. Students are randomly assigned a side of the question for which they will create an argument in support of (Avery et al., 2013).

The SAC deliberation has several rounds. For the first round, the small groups read the materials and gather information that they can use to support their argument. Once students are ready to present their cases, they do so. The other side can ask clarifying questions if needed. After each side has offered their argument, the students switch sides and reread the materials to

gather arguments for the other side. Then, again, each group presents their case. After each group has had the opportunity to argue both sides, the group has an open discussion to reach a decision on the question. Finally, the whole class comes together to talk about what the individual groups decided. The class along with the teacher will then debrief and reflect on the process, the materials used, and the decision reached. This last step is vital to helping students understand the process as well as the importance of deliberation (Avery et al., 2013). For many scholars and teachers, deliberation is one of the most powerful tools democracies have and teaching students how to participate in deliberation is vital to the continuation of democratic principles (Parker & Hess, 2001; Hess, 2002; Avery et al., 2013). People will always have differing and even opposing opinions on important issues; however, it is our job in a democracy, as Diana Hess writes, to figure out how we can live together. Being able to deliberate and reach a decision or compromise, even if it is temporary, is one way we can answer Hess' question. Likewise, Avery et al. write that at the end of deliberation the "'I,' in essence becomes 'we'...I may not like the group's consensus position, but if I feel the process was fair and all views were given an equal hearing, I am more likely to feel positive about the group's decision" (Avery, et al., 2013, p. 106). Deliberation can help to legitimize the processes of democracy and help people feel a better sense of fairness, tolerance, and cooperation.

The Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) program is a good example of SAC in practice. Avery et al. (2013) led an evaluation of the Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) project, which was a 5-year project that involved over 20,000 students and 400 teachers from 10 different nations. As a part of the project, teachers participated in professional development that helped them learn and better implement SAC into their lessons. Teachers in DID were required to

conduct at least three classroom deliberations on topics of their choosing depending on their students and the curriculum. The findings from this evaluation were positive (Avery et al., 2013). The teachers involved said that the professional development on SAC helped them understand and facilitate better lessons dealing with controversial issues using a deliberation strategy. Participating teachers also liked that through these PD sessions they were able to find a learning community that could offer them advice and feedback. When teachers were observed in the classroom, it was clear that they understood the SAC model because they were implementing SAC correctly (Avery et al., 2013).

According to the students' experiences in DID, most students agreed with the statement "I learned a lot by participating in the deliberations" (Avery et al., 2013, p. 111). Also, many students—and students from many different countries—who were interviewed stated that they learned to respect the other ideas in the classroom and were more easily able to understand the different perspectives of the issues they studied and deliberated. Furthermore, students stated that they preferred deliberations because they allow for more active participation by all members of a class since they work in smaller groups at the beginning. Overall, the DID project showed that giving teachers the training and support to implement SAC helped to give the students the structures and tools to learn about controversies, develop the skill of perspective taking, and feel a sense of ownership over their learning (Avery et al., 2013).

**Seminar.** A seminar is a method most often associated with the term discussion. It is a strategy where a group of people come together to talk about a specific issue or question ideally using some text or evidence to support their ideas. While deliberations and SAC focus on an issue or question to find a solution or compromise, a seminar is a discussion based on using

materials (i.e., texts, films, or objects) to explore or develop an idea or issue. The participants in a seminar are only looking to come to a better or more profound understanding of the issue or the material used (Parker, 2006; Parker & Hess, 2001). A seminar is probably the easiest type of discussion to plan, but one of the hardest to execute well since this is a type of discussion that can be dominated by silence, a few participants, or where textual evidence may be lacking. A seminar can also be one of the types of discussions that can be the most challenging to control or facilitate, especially if the teacher lacks training, knowledge, or classroom management (Parker, 2006).

One example of a seminar is a Socratic seminar, where students use a guiding question to discuss a text or a collection of texts. Before starting a Socratic seminar, it is crucial for teachers to remember the ‘with and for discussion’ technique from Parker and Hess (2001). Students need to be taught how to participate in the discussion as in when to speak, how to speak, and what not to do (i.e., trying to prove that you alone have the right answer or correct understanding). It is also essential to give students the time to prepare for the seminar. Students need to be taught any background knowledge or information and have time to read and process the materials that will be discussed adequately. Hess (2002) concluded that some teachers found it helpful to give students an assignment such as reading comprehension questions or a worksheet to be completed before the seminar so that students could actively participate in the discussion better. Lastly, as the teacher, it is important to insert themselves into the discussion only as much as necessary. Ideally, the teacher should be available to answer clarifying questions or for prompting questions if the discussion slows down too early or by choosing speakers if necessary. They should never dictate or dominate the conversation (Hess, 2002). All in all, seminars should be a place where

students learn how to discuss ideas, topics, and issues with other people while using the lesson materials to ground their thinking and expand their understandings.

**Role-play.** Role-play is a type of discussion that simulates real-world events, situations, and processes for students to experience and discuss relevant, important issues. Role-plays ask students to take on a specific character or persona, which allows students to gain a better understanding of how the real world works as well as the different people that are involved in these events and processes (Hess, 2009; Stradling, 2001). Role-plays are a perfect example of how to effectively introduce multiple perspectives. While role-plays are often simplified versions of the actual event or process, they still teach students valuable lessons about the complexities, nuances, and sometimes shortcomings of real-world politics (Stradling, 2001). In this section, we will focus on mock legislature sessions and mock town meetings as examples of role-playing, yet any type of governmental process that deals with discussion and controversial issues could be used by teachers. The key to a successful role-play lies in the preparation of the teacher (Hess, 2002; Hess, 2009; Stradling 2001). Teachers need to spend time with their students helping them understand the purpose of the role-play, what their specific role is, how to prepare for it, and then what to do on the day/week of the role-play.

Hess and McAvoy (2015) have observed and interviewed both students and teachers who took part in a well-executed mock legislature session at a highly diverse high school. In this mock legislature session, all the senior government classes were required to take part in the role-play and spent the entire semester preparing for a mock legislature session (p. 85). Over the course of the semester, the teachers work collaboratively to make sure that the students know how the US legislature works, how bills are drafted and pushed through the system, and how to



deliberate. Students also learn about the different issues that real legislators are working on currently. To prepare for their own legislature session, students spend time researching issues, discerning which party they are a part of and drafting their own bills for the mock legislative session. The unique part of this mock legislature is that the students are not assigned a side on an issue; they research and create an argument for a bill for the side in which they believe (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, pp. 86-105). This opportunity gives students a chance to determine their political leanings as well as provide them more of an incentive to succeed.

For the students, the actual day of the session is a culmination of all their hard work and gives them a reason to do well. Also, over the semester the teachers' roles change from teacher to facilitator to coach (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). On the day of the mock legislature session, the role of the teacher is limited to providing support or review if needed. The students are the ones left in charge of the process, except for the 'Supreme Court,' which is comprised of the teachers (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Hess and McAvoy (2015) interviewed students and the feedback on this mock legislature session was overwhelmingly positive. Students stated that they have a better understanding of their government and the issues that are being discussed and decided upon. They also have a better understanding of where they fall politically. Students also said that this role-play made them more politically aware and want to be more politically active. Teachers see students take an active role in their learning, learn how to deal with sensitive issues sensibly, and overall, understand better how parts of the US government operates (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Another type of role-play that Hess (2002) observed was a mock town meeting done by a teacher who taught seventh and eighth grade in a charter school. Hess (2002) writes that "[t]he

primary reason she [the teacher] uses Town Meetings is her belief that it helps her students better understand multiple perspectives on an issue” (p. 26). Preparation for the town meetings starts at the beginning of the year when students are taught what a town meeting is and how they should participate in one. Students are shown example videos of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ town meetings. Students typically spend a week preparing for each town meeting. During this week students read and study background material on the issue that will be discussed. They, together with the teacher, create different roles for the town meeting. Then, each student selects a role and begins to prepare their questions and arguments based on their chosen character. Students are also encouraged to choose a role that represents a position or idea that is opposite from their own beliefs so that they can gain a better understanding of the other side (Hess, 2002).

Town meetings happen on one day for a (sometimes extended) class period. On this day, the classroom is transformed into a meeting hall. The tables are arranged in a circle, and everyone is interspersed throughout the circle. Nametags are made so everyone knows each other’s character as well as where to sit. During the town meeting, the teacher acts as a facilitator. The teacher permits students to speak, asks clarifying questions, and raises different issues when the discussion has slowed. Yet, overall, it is the students who should do most of the talking in the town meeting (Hess, 2002).

While these are only two examples of role-plays that teachers can utilize in the classroom to discuss controversial issues, they highlight some of the best practices and ideal outcomes. For these role-plays to work, teachers need to be prepared themselves as well as be able to prepare their students. Teachers need to allow for enough time for their students to be able to research, read, and process the materials as well as give them enough time to execute the role-play (Hess,

2002; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). In the end, role-plays are a helpful way for teachers to allow students to have a relevant and engaging experience with real-world processes and issues as well as gain a better understanding of multiple perspectives (Hess, 2002; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Stradling, 2001).

**Debate.** Debate is a teaching method that can be used to teach students to explore different questions and issues related to history and politics; however, when it comes to actual discussions and the teaching of controversial issues, there are mixed feelings about the use of debate. Debate, according to Johnson & Johnson (1985), “exists when two or more students argue positions that are incompatible and a winner is declared on the basis of who presented their position best” (238-239). Because of this definition and various other reasons, some do not see debate as a suitable method for teaching about controversial issues. Parker and Hess (2001) write that debate “is a way for groups to make a decision...*without discussion*” (p. 285). In a debate, there is a winner and a loser. Debate participants are not looking at both sides and weighing options. Debate is not about understanding the other side; it is about having a better argument. Also, the winning side is not determined by the group, but by the outside judge (Parker & Hess, 2001, p. 285). Therefore, debates, while not something that should be avoided altogether in a social studies classroom, may not necessarily be the best method for teaching students about controversial issues because debate has little to do with perspective taking and working collaboratively to find solutions.

## **Conclusion**

From the lack of training to whether teachers should disclose their personal beliefs, research has shown that teachers face many obstacles and challenges when teaching about

controversial issues. Researchers know that teachers believe in the importance of teaching controversial issues; however, actually knowing how, what, and when to teach controversial issues is something that teachers and those who train teachers need to improve on. In order to overcome these obstacles research has compiled some best practices that support the teaching of controversial issues. The focus is on the preparation of teachers as well as preparing the learning environment. Lastly, research also shows how utilizing discussion methods helps support the teaching of controversial issues, specifically when using deliberation, seminar, and role-play. These discussion methods help teach students how to use research to support their arguments, see different perspectives, and work collaboratively—all skills that are needed to be an active citizen.

## Chapter III: Discussion and Conclusion

### Summary of Literature

The philosopher and education reformer, John Dewey, wrote in the 1930s that education is to:

Prepare individuals to take part intellectually in the management of conditions under which they will live, to bring them to an understanding of the forces which are moving and to equip them with the intellectual and practical tools by which they can themselves enter into the direction of these forces. (p. 71)

Fast-forward 80 years and Hess McAvoy (2015) have rephrased Dewey's ideas into the notion that today's political classrooms help students to answer the question: "How should we live together?" (p. 5). This quote of Dewey's as well as the question from Hess eloquently restates the aim of this thesis—to better understand how teachers can help their students learn about the controversial issues, while also giving them the discussion skills which will prepare them to change themselves and the world for the better.

**Obstacles to teaching controversial issues.** In summary, the research tells us that teachers face many obstacles when trying to teach controversial issues in their classrooms. There are six main obstacles that teachers face. First, research shows that teachers feel unprepared to teach these issues due to the complicated subject matter, the difficulties of teaching and facilitating discussions as well as the intense emotions that can be attached to these issues (Byford et al., 2009; Claire & Holden 2007; Lintner, 2018; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker & Hess, 2001; Rogers et al., 2017). The study conducted by Byford et al. (2009) showed clearly the

disconnection between teachers knowing that they should teach controversial issues and what actually happens in the classroom. In the study, teachers reported that they believe in the importance of teaching controversial issues; however, they also answered questions saying that they did not teach them because they lacked the training and confidence to do so. This lack of training was also made clear in Journell (2013) study where he found that many pre-service teachers lacked the basic knowledge of history and politics to be of help to their students when discussions or questions arose about current events or controversial issues.

Teachers also find it challenging to use and facilitate discussions. Alvermann et al. (1990) found that many teachers were saying that they were using discussions but, in reality, it was a lecture by the teacher or the actual discussion lasted only a few minutes or less. Still, many teachers were found to not have any training in what it means to have and be in discussions (Parker & Hess, 2001). These findings are why Parker and Hess (2001) coined the idea of teaching ‘with and for’ discussion. They realized that teachers need to be trained in how to teach their students how to prepare for a discussion as well as in how to participate. Research also shows that teachers lack time to devote to controversial issues due to already packed schedules and a rigid curriculum structure (Avery et al., 2013; Hess & McAvoy 2015; Oulton et al., 2004; Zimmerman & Robertson 2017).

Second, teachers fear losing control in their classrooms. Teachers need to maintain a level of calm and structure in their classrooms, and it is also their job to keep the students safe and productive. Allowing students to learn about and discuss controversial issues can disrupt that or cause anxiety if not done correctly. UCLA’s IDEA report as well as research conducted by Kitson (2007) and McCully (2006) highlighted the negative emotions that can be present in

classrooms. The UCLA study showed that there are many American students and teachers alike who have been placed in stressful and often hostile environments due to the policy issues that are supported by the Trump administration (Rogers et al., 2017). Also, Neimi and Neimi (2007) found that teachers also made decisions in their classrooms that stifled productive student talk in favor of keeping control of the classroom.

A third obstacle is that the profession of teaching is often undervalued by the community causing teachers to lack the community and legal support they need to do their jobs well (Simpson, 2010; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Many parents, school board members, and other community members have strong opinions on what teachers should be doing in the classroom. These opinions are often at odds with the school curriculum and create obstacles for teachers who do not want to lose their jobs or reputations because of the limitations of their academic freedom. Zimmerman, Robertson, and Simpson traced the history of academic freedom in the US from the beginning of twentieth century highlighting that teachers have, for the most part, struggled to be free to discuss controversial topics with the resources and methods they feel are best. Today, unfortunately, many teachers struggle with academic freedom due to school policies (Simpson, 2010; Hess, 2010; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

Fourth, teachers are teaching at a time when the polarization of politics and the increase in the use of technology are fostering extremism and exacerbating current political problems (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Ornstein, 2014; Rogers et al., 2017; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Political parties in the US are as ideologically different as they have been for the last 30 or so years (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). This polarization means that today's students are growing up in a time where they see less tolerance and compromise. Likewise, the internet, social media, and the

24-hour news cycle not only give students greater access to information, but they also give students access to incorrect (i.e. fake) news or allow people to post almost anything they want on Twitter or Instagram for millions to see (Pew Research Center, 2018a).

Lastly, teachers face the obstacle of teacher disclosure. In other words, they face the dilemma of whether they should state their personal opinions and model ‘good’ civic behavior or stay neutral to allow students to form their own opinions and conclusions (Barton & McCully, 2007; Journell, 2011; Kelly, 1986; Hess & McAvoy 2015; Neimi & Neimi, 2007). Despite many teachers who advocate for staying neutral because they do not want to push students in one direction or another or because they do not want to be seen using their classrooms as their soapbox, research by Journell (2011) and Neimi and Neimi (2007) shows that this neutrality is hard to maintain. Teacher beliefs or biases slip out through comments, body language, choice of materials, or the duration they chose to talk about certain topics, ideas, or people. However, according to the research, full disclosure by teachers was not ideal either. Journell found in his study that often this stance confused students or caused them to move further to one side or the other. In the end, Kelly’s (1986) notion of ‘committed impartiality’ or Hess’s (2009) idea of ‘balance’ where teachers state their beliefs but make sure that all views or opinions are heard and respected, is the practice that teachers should strive for since it allows for teachers to model real and meaningful civic behavior.

**Best practices for supporting the teaching of controversial issues.** Despite all of these obstacles, the research and scholarship show that teaching about controversial issues is not an impossible or a hopeless endeavor. There are some best practices that teachers can follow to create environments and opportunities for students to learn about and have meaningful



discussions about controversial issues in the classroom (Hess, 2002; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). It only takes is some training, preparation, and hard work. Teachers need to know how to select the controversial issues they will teach and learn how to discern the purpose and relevance of these issues to their students and the curriculum (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). They need to understand the difference between a closed and open question as well as an empirical and policy question. Ideally, when picking controversial issues to teach, they will choose ones that are open and political since these will allow for the best discussions. They also need to be aware of tipping questions or points and make sure they fully understand the topics and the environment they are teaching in when it comes to these tipping point issues.

Likewise, teachers need to learn how to utilize colleagues, administration, and the community to gather support for the methods and issues they want to teach (Hess, 2009; Pace, 2018; Parker & Hess, 2001; Simpson, 2010; Sharp, 2009). First, teachers need to be aware (if they exist) of policies that their schools have about teaching controversial issues. Alternatively, if schools or districts do not have policies, teachers need to make them or talk with administrators about how to go about teaching controversial issues. Teachers should also work together with other colleagues to create lesson plans or observe and give peer feedback. Keeping parents and administrators involved in what is being taught also fosters trust, communication, and openness. Informing parents or guardians can be done through writing letters home or inviting parents to sit in on class (Pace, 2018).

Another vital component is spending time creating a safe and open environment in the classroom where students know their teacher and each other as well as the classroom procedures, guidelines, and expectations well (Hadjioannou, 2007; Pace, 2018). Teachers also need to

understand how they can use culturally responsive teaching and agonism in their lessons to reach all students, especially those from minority cultures. These are practices and procedures that take time and need to be put in place before any teaching or discussions of controversial issues can happen.

**Discussion methods for teaching controversial issues.** Most importantly, when it comes to teaching about controversial issues teachers need to know and understand how to teach, as Parker and Hess (2001) put it, ‘for and with’ discussion. Teachers need to not only learn how to utilize instruction time to help students prepare for discussions so that they have the information and knowledge they will need to contribute to a discussion, but also teach students how to participate in a discussion. In terms of discussion, there are specific discussion methods that work best when teaching controversial issues. These include deliberation, seminar, and role-play. All three are vastly different and have a specific purpose. Deliberation (also known as Structured Academic Controversy) is for a controversial issue discussion that can or needs to end in a compromise or a decision. Seminars are a type of discussion that is more centered around a deeper understanding of the issue or the materials used to discuss the issue. Lastly, role-plays are ideal for issue discussions that highlight real-life practices or procedures as well as allow students the chance to ‘put on a character’ to understand the issues or ideas more fully (Avery et al., 2013; Hess, 2002; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). All in all, these three discussion methods help students to see the many sides of each controversial issue as well as interact and talk with the other members of their class in order to create a dialogue that promotes tolerance, open-mindedness, and collaboration.

### **Limitations of and Implications for Further Research**

There is a large pool of research about civics education—about its problems, its impact, and its necessity within social studies curriculum. There is also much research about best practices in social studies and in how teachers across the disciplines create safe and inclusive environments and utilize culturally responsive teaching. Likewise, research abounds in the use of discussion methods across all disciplines, but especially in social studies and language arts classrooms. To keep the focus on the obstacles and best practices of teaching controversial issues, research was limited to articles on civics education and to those studies and articles that were about the teaching of current events and controversial issues in the classroom. This allowed for a better understanding of why teachers did not teach about controversial issues as well as how the best practices affected students' understanding and skill mastery when only learning about controversial issues.

For research on creating safe and inclusive classroom environments and culturally responsive teaching, the research focus was expanded beyond social studies classrooms or the teaching of controversial issues since those parameters were a bit limiting, especially when combined with a focus on discussion methods. However, research was mostly conducted on how teachers created safe and inclusive classroom environments while implementing discussion methods. This led to research primarily from the discipline of ELA that showed how important open, safe, and inclusive classrooms were for utilizing discussion methods. While there was some research on the effects of classroom environments in social studies, there could be more research on these effects while teaching controversial issues using discussion.

Apart from some background articles on what discussion is, or how teachers use discussion, the research for this thesis was limited to using discussions in the discipline of social studies. There were many studies about discussion and how it is used in the classroom. So many were only about how teachers and students misunderstand what discussion is; yet, there were only a few (mostly from Hess and colleagues) that discussed how and what to teach when teaching using discussion. Thus, further research about how to best teach discussion methods and then utilize them in the classroom needs to be conducted. Also, more research about explicit teaching of how to teach for discussion could be beneficial to those who train teachers.

In regard to language, research was only conducted on articles and studies from English speaking countries. The bulk of the research for this thesis was from studies based in the United States; however, there was some valuable research found coming from UK educators. For example, work from Oulton et al. (2004) as well as Claire and Holden (2007) gave great insight into how teachers from the UK face the same obstacles and challenges as teachers in the US. Likewise, McCully's and Barton's (2007), as well as Pace's (2018) work about how teachers are teaching about controversial issues in Northern Ireland, helped to show how complex and challenging it is to teach about controversial issues, especially in times after extreme conflict. The work from Northern Ireland also offered practical advice on how to teach pre-service teachers as well as how to deal with the emotions that go hand-in-hand with controversial issues. Further research on whether these practices could be implemented or how successful implementation is in the US could be beneficial to teachers especially in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. Lastly, the study about the Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) project by Avery et al. (2013) that was implemented in ten countries across the world was a helpful

piece of work when writing about deliberation and controversial issues showing the successful multicultural appeal of deliberation.

There were two significant limitations of the studies and research about teaching controversial issues and teaching controversial issues using discussion methods. The first was that outside of Hess and her colleagues, not much research has been conducted on the various discussion methods, especially seminars, role-plays, or (not) using debates, and their use or effectiveness in teaching about controversial issues. Thus, more research needs to be conducted about how different discussion methods fair in different social studies classrooms.

The second limitation was that many of the studies about teaching controversial issues used small sample sizes or data pools that may not be representative of all people or random. For example, the study conducted by Byford et al. (2009) about teachers' attitudes and ideas about teaching controversial issues only looked at a small number of high school social studies teachers (67) from just two states (Indiana and Oklahoma). While these data does give us a glimpse into what teachers think about teaching controversial issues, to gain a better understanding of teacher attitudes and ideas, a further study of many more teachers across many more states would need to be conducted.

Small sample sizes are also evident in the studies done about teaching controversial issues using discussion methods. This small sample size can be seen in the work done by Diana Hess and her colleagues (Hess, 2002; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). All of these studies gave valuable details and insight into all the classrooms that they visited and studied, which will help teachers reading the research know exactly how to organize their classrooms and what to do every step of the way. However, the research does not show that many teachers were using these practices

causing the question to be raised of whether these methods can be replicated by other teachers. Further research on whether other teachers across the US can take what the teachers that Hess and her colleagues studied did and replicate the methods needs to be conducted.

### **Professional Application and Conclusion**

Today's students need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and tools that will allow them to be successful in the 21st century. In other words, they need to be prepared for the impossible or the unimaginable. More so in the last decade than ever, teachers are required to prepare students for lives, careers, and political systems that may not even exist yet or that will look completely different when they graduate from high school or university. This is why the idea of '21st-century skills' has risen to importance. To ensure success students need to be taught the skills necessary to do almost anything the future asks of them. These skills or ideas have been distilled down to three categories: Learning Skills (critical thinking and problem solving, research, creativity, and innovation), Literacy and Digital Skills (good oral and written communication, presentation skills, media and technology literacy); and Life Skills (initiative and self-direction, leadership, adaptability, global awareness, appreciation for diversity, etc.) (21st Century Skills, 2014). Overall, students need to know how to be critical, solution focused, and understanding of the diverse, interconnected, and global community in which they live.

Many of these 21st-century skills can be taught through teaching controversial issues using discussion methods, thus making the teaching of controversial issues even more important. Teaching students to deliberate controversial issues allows them to look at different sides of an issue, which will help them become better critical thinkers and problem solvers. This exposure to multiple perspectives will also come in the form of having different materials and ideas to read,

watch, or research further allowing students to focus on their literacy as well as technology skills. Likewise, exposing students to all sides of an issue helps them to understand differences and the diversity of different people's realities. This exposure opens students up to look beyond themselves since most controversial issues affect many different kinds of people—some across the globe. Thus, students can become more globally aware.

Teaching students how to be active citizens is a challenging endeavor, but necessary nonetheless, especially when it comes to discussions of controversial issues. Reading about the research done on the teaching of controversial issues as well as with the political climate as charged and hostile as it is today, it is not surprising that so many teachers struggle to teach those issues. Teachers do have so much to accomplish and consider every hour of every day and often work with little support or guidance on what is right or best. However, research shows that there are many researchers, teachers, and politicians out there who are working diligently to make sure the civic education of today's students is not unsatisfactory or lost altogether. This thesis has highlighted some of the fantastic examples of teachers who are providing their students with opportunities not only to learn about controversial issues but also about how to discuss those issues in a critical and productive manner. These best practice examples are only the tip of the iceberg, and hopefully, there will be more writing and research about how teachers are successfully teaching about controversial issues in the near future—teaching about controversial issues is too important to our country's and students' wellbeing and future to ignore or teach inadequately.

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## Appendix A

# Teaching Controversial Issues: Overcoming Obstacles and Using Best Practices

1. What are the obstacles teachers face when teaching controversial issues?



- Lack of teacher training and time
- Fear of losing control in the classrooms
- Lack of community and legal support
- Polarization of politics
- Access to the internet and social media
- Teacher disclosure



2. What are the best practices that support the teaching of controversial issues?



- Selecting controversial issues
- Gathering support of colleagues, parents, and other community members
- Creating a safe and inclusive environment in the classroom



3. How does the use of discussion support the teaching of controversial issues?



- Deliberation
- Seminar
- Role-play

