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One novice teacher and her decisions to address or avoid controversial issues

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ABSTRACT

Building upon Thornton's (1991) work on teachers as "curricular-instructional gatekeepers," the author explores what guided the curricular decision-making for one novice teacher concerning controversial issues that center on race, social class, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues. Qualitative case study revealed context, student demographics, and teacher positionality as influencing this teacher's choices regarding these themes in her curriculum. Findings indicated that this teacher was willing and able to challenge racist views in her classroom when she was a student teacher and her students more closely mirrored her own race and social class. When she was a full-time teacher of students who were of a different racial and class background, she was unable to similarly challenge their homophobic beliefs. Implications for teacher education are discussed.

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Introduction

With each student comes experience and knowledge about who they are and how the world appears to them. Our teachers are no different. They enter preparation programs with entrenched beliefs about school and students, and throughout their preparatory programs, they are exposed to new ideas and theories that they must combine with their decades of educational and life experiences. As these ideas are introduced throughout coursework, they not only combine with each individual's history but with the ideas of other future teachers in their learning community. The dialogue and refinement of new ideas mixed with old happens constructively, yet how preservice teachers journey through these ideas throughout their preparation programs is largely unknown. Multiple curricular models aimed at preparing teachers for a diverse student population have characterized the contemporary curriculum landscape. Antioppressive education (Kumashiro, 2002), critical multicultural education (May & Sleeter, 2010), feminist pedagogies (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014) among others offer frameworks, strategies, and methods to guide teacher preparation toward transformative teaching and learning. Yet all of these methods are subject to the same reality that when teachers are licensed and hired, what actually happens in the classroom is largely at the discretion of the teacher, and teacher educators are left hoping that what was taught in the university will outweigh the pressures felt by state tests or a community less dedicated to the aims of social justice. Villegas and Lucas (2002) offered a six part vision of culturally responsive teachers that seems to leave little to chance as it includes being socially conscious, affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, owning responsibility as a teacher, knowing how and facilitating knowledge construction, knowing her students, and designs instruction based upon their readiness. However the outcome

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of what happens when a teacher attains or possesses each element and still does not find success is perplexing and is precisely what drew me in to the case of Leah, a novice social studies teacher who I followed throughout her teacher preparation program and into the first year of teaching.

What is known is that when the time comes to design and teach lessons, teachers have a degree of freedom in deciding what is taught and how (Bickmore, 1993; Thornton, 1991). Social studies teachers in particular have a responsibility to present their students with a diversity of perspectives, a multitude of topics, and in ways that allow them to practice the skills of democratic citizenship (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). This means that students should be discussing, deliberating, and grappling with the topics pertinent not only to the development of human history but also to the development of the human present and future. Often, this means that controversial issues – or issues that can potentially create controversy – belong in social studies classrooms. In this study, I investigate the experiences of one novice teacher over the course of her preparatory and first year of teaching in an effort to better understand how context and teacher positionality influenced her curricular decisions. The research question guiding the inquiry is: What influences one novice teacher, Leah, in her curricular decisions in two different schools with relation to race, social class, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues? Through rich, longitudinal data, nuance of the novice teacher's development is revealed and insight into that process is gained. Building upon Thornton's (1991) work on teachers as "gatekeepers" who determine what curriculum is allowed to enter the classroom, I am concerned about what guided the curricular decision making for Leah and in turn, what she decided to make space for in her student teaching experience and first classroom.

Review of literature

Controversial issues study and the role of the teacher

Including controversial issues into the social studies curriculum has been advocated for since the beginning of the twentieth century. While the definition of what is a controversial issue has changed throughout that time, the call for incorporating controversial issue study has not. The accepted definition of controversial issue study in social studies classrooms is a "lesson, unit, course, or curriculum that engages students in learning about issues, analyzing them, deliberating alternative solutions, and often taking and supporting a position on which solutions may be based" (Hess, 2008, p. 124) and is deeply connected to one of the primary purposes of the social studies: to create informed and active citizens. Controversial issues study supports this goal in that the process of deliberation and decision making are essential for the maintenance of an effective democracy in a pluralistic society. The interpretation of what then is controversial is bound by time and space as what may be a controversial issue in some schools or classrooms may not be controversial elsewhere (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Additionally, topics considered not controversial or conflictual can be taught with similar methods to those that are (Bickmore, 1993). All of these decisions ultimately rest in the individual teacher.

Controversial issues have been studied in-depth within social studies (Hess & Posselt, 2002; Hess, 2008, Hess & McAvoy, 2015) as they are often viewed as integral for developing democratic practices in schools, and many reasons for limiting controversial issues study have been revealed. Fear of community backlash (Ho, Alviar-Martin, & Leviste, 2014; Miller-Lane, Denton, & May, 2006; Patterson, 2010), pressures from high-stakes testing (Misco, Patterson, & Doppen, 2011), and lack of understanding around academic freedom (Misco & Patterson, 2007) all have been noted as reasons why teachers avoid controversial topics in their classrooms. Subsequently, these can all lead to self-censorship. Self-censorship research shows teachers remaining cautious (Daly, 1998), and preservice teachers preferring to teach about "comfortable issues," defined as historic and public issues rather than contemporary and personal ones (Misco & Patterson, 2007). How teachers develop their views about what to include and not include as controversial issues and what informs how their decisions are made is still an area ripe for investigation.

The role of social studies teachers in bringing controversial issues into the classroom is paramount and highly dependent on the individual teachers and communities in which they work. While teachers disagree on what constitutes a controversial issue (Hess, 2002), there is consensus on the necessity of bringing diverse public issues into the classroom in order for students to hone the skills of democracy (Hess & Posselt, 2002). It is also clear from the research that teachers disagree on whether to share their personal views with students on certain issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Miller-Lane et al., 2006). In one study, most teachers decided against disclosing personal views on controversial issues with their reasoning of either hoping to maintain a tolerant classroom climate or out of a fear of community backlash (Miller-Lane et al., 2006). While the majority chose not to disclose a personal stance on particular issues, many took the stance of disclosing their commitment to values such as tolerance, compassion, and inquiry. Although the expression of democratic values is inherent in the social studies, the warning here is for the larger curricular choices, of which there are many. If teachers shy away from even including controversial issues in the curriculum out of fear from reprisal from the larger community, this essential piece of educating for a future democracy risks being lost. Controversial issues can be included in the curriculum without the necessity for the teacher to disclose personal views, if so preferred, and can be approached in multiple ways (Bickmore, 1993). Regardless, controversial issues should be included so that students can practice the skills of democracy in the one place designed for such training.

Research also indicates that even when teachers state that they do not explicitly share personal views in the classroom, often these views were shared in off-hand cynical comments made during the course of a lesson (Neimi & Neimi, 2007).

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