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"I Can't Just Let Those Things Stand": How Social Studies Teachers Make Sense of Political Disclosure, Classroom Safety, and Controversial Issues in Contentious Times

Author
Geller, Rebecca Genevra Cooper

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“I Can’t Just Let Those Things Stand”:

How Social Studies Teachers Make Sense of Political Disclosure, Classroom Safety, and Controversial Issues in Contentious Times

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Rebecca Genevra Cooper Geller

2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"I Can't Just Let Those Things Stand":
How Social Studies Teachers Make Sense of Political Disclosure, Classroom Safety, and Controversial Issues in Contentious Times

by

Rebecca Genevra Cooper Geller

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Co-Chair

Professor John S. Rogers, Co-Chair

While discussions of controversial social and political issues are described as vital to a quality school-based democratic civic education, teachers may find it difficult to broach divisive partisan issues, especially during times of increasing political polarization and contentiousness like the United States in the Trump era. It is often taken for granted that when leading controversial issue discussions, teachers should create an open classroom climate and should enact a neutral political stance. In this dissertation, I studied the limitations of these traditional approaches to discussions in contexts of sociopolitical hostility.

This study follows up on Rogers et al.'s (2017) nationwide study of teaching and learning in the Trump era. I draw on qualitative semi-structured interviews that were conducted with

social studies teachers in diverse communities across the United States in 2017, 2018, and 2019. Drawing on theories and frameworks of teacher political disclosure (Kelly, 1986), pedagogy of political trauma (Sondel et al., 2018), and sympathetic touch (Du Bois, 1935), I explored how U.S. public high school social studies teachers made sense of their experiences leading discussions in this time of contentious and polarized national politics.

Findings from this dissertation speak to the conditions and priorities of teachers in controversial issue discussions. First, I describe how teachers experienced and understood the contentiousness and sociopolitical hostility of the national political climate as it played out in their classrooms. Second, I examine how teachers prioritized competing goals related to classroom climate; specifically, as teachers described wanting to build classrooms that were safe for their students, I explore what they understood a safe environment to be, and whose safety they prioritized. Finally, I look at how teachers thought about disclosing their personal political beliefs and opinions in the classroom.

This research offers insights into how teachers conceptualize their roles in discussions of controversial issues with young people, including the complexity and contextual nature of these seemingly straightforward pedagogical decisions, and the need for teachers to take proactive, empathetic steps to provide support and protection to young people from marginalized groups in order to challenge intolerance under the guise of academic discourse.

The dissertation of Rebecca Genevra Cooper Geller is approved.

Megan Loef Franke

Joseph Kahne

Tyrone C. Howard, Committee Co-Chair

John S. Rogers, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

To my mom, my husband, and my son

To my kids from BMA

To Choge

I hope every day that I can make you proud.

In memory of

Torian Hughes and Victor McElhaney

George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery

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I do NOT acknowledge the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic of 2020. You have not helped me.

VITA

EDUCATION

2008 B.A. Comparative History of Ideas, cum laude with distinction
Minor: Law, Societies, and Justice
University of Washington

PUBLICATIONS

Geller, R. C. (2020). Teacher political disclosure in contentious times: A "responsibility to speak up" or "fair and balanced"? *Theory & Research in Social Education,* 48(2), 182-210. https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2020.1740125

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SELECTED PEER-REVIEWED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Geller, R. C. (2020, April 17-21). *"The more valuable thing": Prioritizing conceptions of safety* [Paper presentation]. American Educational Research Association 104th Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA, United States. (Conference canceled)

Geller, R. C. (2020, April 17-21). "*I am unyielding and unkind": Intolerance, neutrality, and controversial issue discussions in an English classroom* [Poster presentation]. American Educational Research Association 104th Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA, United States. (Conference canceled)

Geller, R. C. & Rogers, J. S. (2020, April 17-21). Tensions between tolerance and free speech in classroom discussions of controversial social and political issues. In M. Pollock (Chair), *Designing supports for educators in a Trump era* [Symposium]. American Educational Research Association 104th Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA, United States. (Conference canceled)

Geller, R. C. (2019, November 20-22). *Teacher political disclosure in contentious times* [Paper presentation]. College and University Faculty Assembly of the National Council for the Social Studies 99th Annual Meeting, Austin, TX, United States.

Quartz, K. H., **Geller, R. C.**, & McQueen, S. S. (2019, April 5-9). "*A beautiful struggle": Reimagining neighborhood schools in urban communities* [Invited paper presentation in presidential session]. American Educational Research Association 103rd Annual Meeting, Toronto, ON, Canada.

Geller, R. C. (2019, April 5-9). "*Teach them that their souls matter": An autoethnography of mentorship* [Paper presentation]. American Educational Research Association 103rd Annual Meeting, Toronto, ON, Canada.

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Quartz, K. H., Cerda, J., **Geller, R. C.**, Franco, J., Jacobo, S., Lee, U. S., Mancevice, N., Rivera-Torres, K., Rodriguez, L., Stuart McQueen, S., & Wang, E. (2018, May 3). *How do research-practice partnerships generate knowledge? Fostering methodological diversity in a university-partnered community school context* [Participatory session]. UCLA GSE&IS Research and Inquiry Conference, Los Angeles, CA, United States.

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Geller, R. C. (2017, April 27-May 1). "*What does voting even mean?": U.S. history teachers' sensemaking about disjunctures in civic education for students from marginalized groups.* [Paper presentation]. American Educational Research Association 101st Annual Meeting, San Antonio, TX, United States.

SELECTED HONORS AND AWARDS

2020	AERA Social Studies Research SIG Outstanding Paper Award Nominee	
2020	AERA Division C Outstanding Graduate Student Poster Award Nominee	
2019-20	UCLA Dissertation Year Fellowship	$20,000
2014-19	University Fellowships	$26,000
2014	Elwood H. Zillgitt & Mildred B. Finney Scholarship	$3,000
2008	Phi Beta Kappa, University of Washington	

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2014-present Graduate Student Researcher
UCLA

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Fall 2017 Teaching Assistant
Ed 130: Race, Class, Gender, and School Inequality in the United States, UCLA

2008-14 Classroom Teacher
Aspire Berkley Maynard Academy, Oakland, CA
Grades 7 and 8 History, English (2010-14), Grades 2 and 3 (2008-10)

2016 Teacher Supervision
Ethnic Studies Summer School Pilot

PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATION

2010-present California Single Subject Teaching Credential
Secondary Social Studies (Status: clear)

2010-present California Multiple Subjects Teaching Credential (Status: clear)

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

My Classroom

It was my third year in the classroom and my first year teaching middle school at Berkley Maynard Academy in Oakland, California. The eighth graders in front of me (some of whom are represented in Figure 1, below) had been my students in U.S. history for a couple of months. I was still unsure of myself as a middle school teacher and we were still getting to know each other. At that point in the year, we had covered the first few strands of the state standards, from pre-colonial Indigenous civilizations through the Constitutional Convention. I had relied more on the textbook and worksheets than I wanted to, as I familiarized myself with the content. But my students were engaged, we were having fun learning together, and they were performing relatively well on exams. We were starting on a unit I was incredibly excited to teach: the Bill of Rights.

Figure 1

Some of my 8th Grade Students on the First Annual Field Trip to Washington, D.C., March 2011[1]

[1]To my beloved students: I blurred out your faces to maintain your privacy, and apologize for my meager artistic and technological skills that made it look a little like aliens stole your faces in some science fiction plotline. I love you and I think you are beautiful and I'm sorry.

I taught a couple of lessons on the First Amendment, including one focused on free speech. That lesson set up a discussion I was looking forward to in which students would grapple with whether or not the First Amendment should protect hate speech. I wrote out my lesson plan and possible follow up questions. The class's homework the night before asked them to write a short response to a guiding question. I had provided materials they could cite in our discussion. I knew that this was a group of students who were well versed in how to conduct academic discussions, take turns, use evidence, and be thoughtful. I expected them to wrestle with the margins of free speech, the consequences of hate speech and of its limitation, and to engage with difficult ideas through reasoned argumentation. I felt prepared and was excited.

But I was not prepared—not for the discussion that transpired. It was nothing like the discussion I had envisioned. Instead, just partway through the class period, I had fully lost control of the direction the discussion had taken. It was dominated by a handful of students who cited no evidence in their comments, relied solely on personal opinions, and refused to engage with different ideas. My follow-up questions were ignored. The plurality of the vocal participants—a mere four students—somehow reasoned their way to a consensus: racist hate speech should not be protected and should always be punished because a person cannot control their skin color, but homophobic speech should be allowed since people choose to be gay and therefore choose the consequences. When I intervened and pointed out that sexual orientation is not a choice, a student pointed and laughed derisively, openly mocking me. Three rows behind him sat another student who, in his advisory journal just weeks before, had written about coming out to his family but not yet at school. I thought I had created the conditions for a vibrant exchange of ideas. Instead, I created conditions that meant my gay student was subjected to homophobic speech. My efforts to facilitate a productive discussion about a controversial issue

ran right into—and then right over—the work I had done to build a safe classroom environment for all of my students.

Two years later, I had gained experience and knowledge. The eighth graders in my class that year had almost all been in my class the previous year as seventh graders, so we knew each other and had good rapport. They knew my systems and class routines. We were going to be able to hit the ground running.

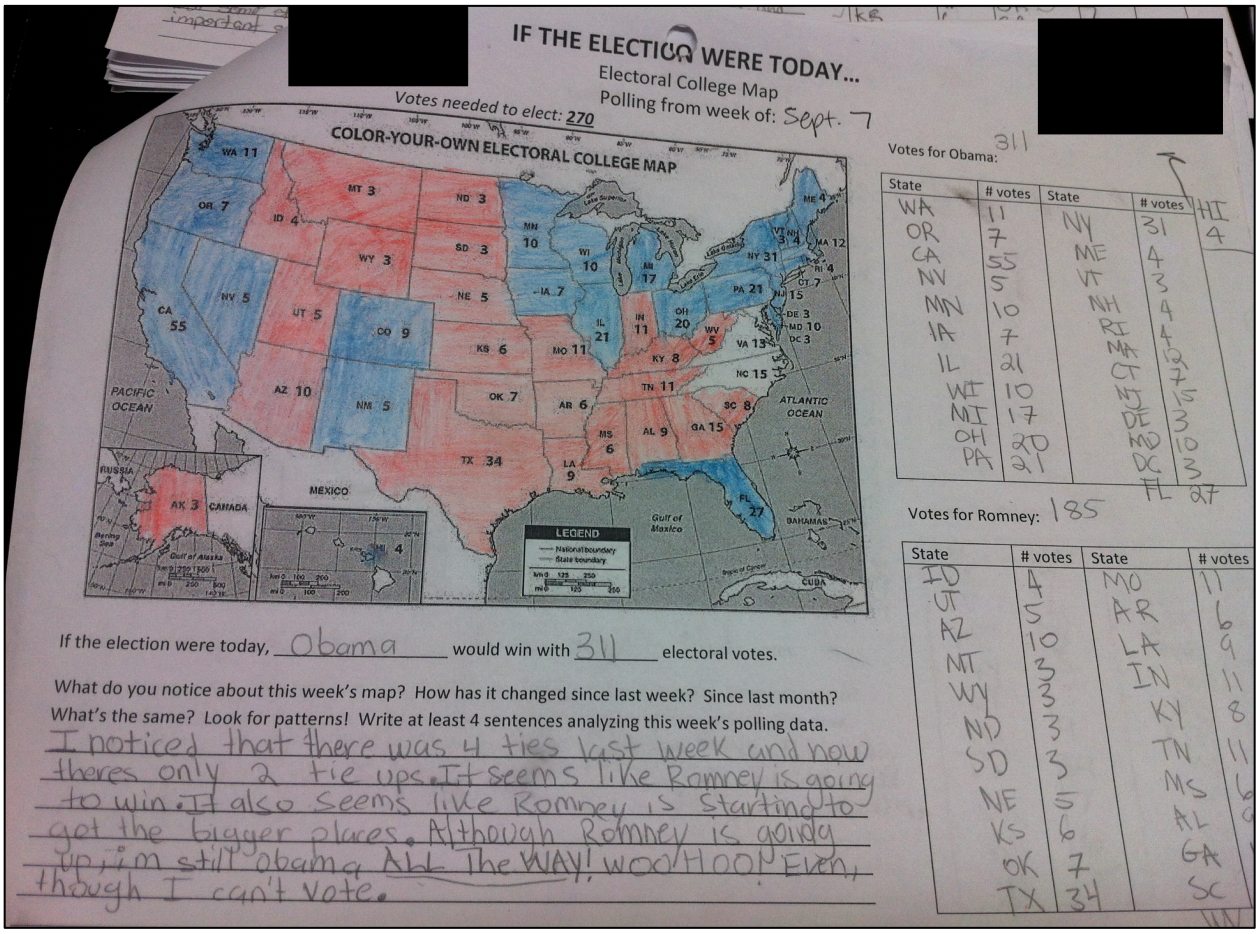
It was fall 2012, and the presidential election was near. I was eager to teach a presidential election for the first time. In my pre-planning for that year, I considered how I would deal with my personal political beliefs and partisan stances in the classroom. Like the teachers I had had as a K-12 student, I was going to be a steel trap of electoral politics. I was going to be politically neutral, withhold my opinions, and not disclose what I thought about Obama and Romney in the classroom. This was, I understood, what good social studies teachers did.

I structured my unit and weekly plans to make space on Fridays for us to keep tabs on the presidential election throughout the fall. Each week, I turned my students into mini-pundits by giving them an electoral map, a spreadsheet with the latest state-by-state polling, and some rough guiding questions (Figure 2). I offered extra credit for watching or listening to debates and speeches (and since I often ended up showing them during class, everyone benefitted). My students came in before school to ask questions about the latest news and I got incredulous text messages from numerous students when, in a debate, Mitt Romney referred to "binders full of women" (Parker, 2012). My teacher heart swelled to see my students be interested, engaged, and educated citizens.[2]

[2] *Citizenship* describes a person's legal relationship to the state (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006) and though those with power have historically drawn stark lines of exclusion around its rights and responsibilities, it is a term that has been used widely in research on civic education as

Figure 2

Weekly Electoral College Assignment (2012)



But along with all these opportunities for us to engage around the election came many chances for me to let my political opinions slip. I adamantly refused to tell them whom I would vote for in the election, even as I offered my constant commentary when we watched the debates in class. I responded to my students' "binders full of women" texts by echoing their incredulity. I rolled my eyes with them over the video of Romney's comments that Obama voters were entitled dependents who saw themselves as victims (Corn, 2012). I was chastened when students said

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if it were freely available to all. I aim to buck this trend in the literature and to challenge the exclusion of those from whom legal citizenship is withheld. For this reason, I intentionally use *citizen* and *citizenship* to apply to all, not merely those who are citizens in the strictly legal sense.

they could tell I was voting for Obama, but mostly for insufficiently hiding my partisan preferences. Whether I was disclosing intentionally or unintentionally (Niemi & Niemi, 2007), I was not at all thoughtful about any ramifications for how it was that my political opinions made their way into my classroom.

My insistence on performing non-partisanship, though I did not see it at the time, was counter to how I thought about teaching in many other ways; I deeply valued treating my students as the whole, intelligent people that they were (and are), and promised not to shy away from talking about difficult topics with them. These, and all of my experiences in the classroom inform the research I conduct and how I understand the promise and challenges of political and civic education. In my dissertation, I sought to learn how social studies teachers across the country think about controversial issue discussions in light of the fraught political climate that characterized the Trump era.

Explanation of Study

Classroom discussions of controversial social and political issues are broadly understood as an important, if challenging, component of school-based civic education in the United States (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Ho et al., 2017; Parker, 2003). As important as it may be for students to have opportunities in school to engage in discussion, debate, and deliberation of controversial issues, teachers may find it difficult to broach politically contentious, divisive issues with students. This task becomes even more precarious for educators in times characterized by increasing political polarization (Hess, 2009; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016).

The political climate in the United States during the Trump presidency has proven to be just such an environment, with educators across the country reporting increases in incidents of

bigotry, harassment, polarization, incivility, and bullying in schools since the 2016 presidential campaign (Costello, 2016; Dunn et al., 2019; Natanson et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2019; Sondel et al., 2018; Will, 2017). In light of these conditions, it becomes increasingly important to understand how teachers are thinking about and experiencing conducting controversial issue discussions in their classrooms. Such research can inform how teachers are prepared to think about and enact a pedagogical practice that has promise for student learning and democracy, but that teachers may find fraught, suspect, or not worth the possible consequences. What does it mean to discuss controversial issues with young people in the political climate of the Trump era? What priorities do teachers have, and what do those priorities look like in execution? How do these priorities shift relative to current events, the kind of school, the teacher's identities, or the demographic breakdown of the student body? How do teachers strive to enact neutrality in the classroom, and is a neutral stance the correct one? Exploring the dynamic between classroom discussions, controversial issues, and a broadly contentious political climate allows us as a field to understand better what is currently happening in different kinds of classrooms and what is needed to create classroom spaces in which all students can access the democratic and academic benefits attributed to this common practice.

Discussions of controversial social and political issues exemplify the challenges that Trumpism[3] and political polarization bring into schools. Research suggests that successful controversial issues discussions hinge on particular qualities of the classroom environment and culture: diverse perspectives (meaning schools are integrated and classes are not tracked by ability), administrators' support for the presence of politically charged topics in the content, a classroom culture in which conflict is normalized yet controlled by teachers to maintain civility,

[3] See below for note on "Trumpism."

and an established norm of evaluating and using evidence (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2012). Yet it is these same qualities that have become more challenging to implement as schools have become more segregated (General Accounting Office, 2016), "fake news" has abounded, incivility amongst students and teachers alike has become increasingly common, and many teachers have shied from bringing politics into the classroom for fear of sanction.

The civic education of young people in public schools is, by its nature, inherently political (Rubin & Hayes, 2010). Regardless of the conception of citizenship that it intends to impart (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), civic education necessarily communicates political messages to young people, a dynamic that may become heightened in the face of a political force as potent as Trumpism. For teachers who are tasked with such content, shifts in the nation's broader political tone may create new curricular and pedagogical challenges and opportunities that are not fully understood. In particular, the Trump era is characterized by political rhetoric and policy priorities that actively place many groups of people in danger. Such rhetoric and policies may make for alluring subjects of classroom deliberation, but can have repercussions for sociopolitically marginalized youth in ways that teachers may not account for. More knowledge can provide the field with insights to support teacher learning and practice to conduct discussions in ways that advance justice and equity, support student learning, and attend to the complexities of talking about politics with diverse groups of young people in contentious, polarized political climates.

This dissertation is a contribution to this area. I explore how U.S. public high school social studies teachers in different kinds of communities around the country made sense of their experiences discussing controversial social and political issues in the first three years of the Trump presidency. I focused on three particular components of how teachers approached

conducting controversial issue discussions in the Trump era. The first was not something I expected or was looking for when I began data collection, but which emerged loud and clear as vitally important to contextualizing the entire study: how teachers experienced and understood the contentiousness and sociopolitical hostility of the national political climate as it played out in their classrooms. Second, I examined how teachers prioritized competing goals related to building classroom climates that were conducive to controversial issues discussions in the Trump era. Specifically, as teachers described wanting to build classrooms that were safe for their students, I explored what they understood a safe environment to be, and whose safety they prioritized. Finally, I examined how teachers thought about teacher political disclosure, or revealing their personal political beliefs and opinions in the classroom. I focused particularly on how teachers negotiated competing factors in deciding whether or not to disclose, such as professional norms toward non-disclosure or feeling morally compelled to speak out against policies with which they disagreed. Therefore, in this study, I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do U.S. public high school social studies teachers conceptualize the goals of a) productive discussion of controversial social and political issues and b) classroom safe space? How do they make sense of where these goals come together?
2. How do teachers conceptualize neutrality and political disclosure as they relate to negotiating and advancing these goals?
3. To what extent and in what ways do teachers account for students' personal, political, and social positions, school climate, and community or national political climate as they negotiate or balance these goals?

Many have decried the state of democracy and public discourse in the United States, and have proposed solutions that speak to different conceptions about what precisely is the problem that needs fixing. Maybe the problem is that lawmakers need civility workshops to practice bipartisan discourse (McCammon, 2019). Perhaps what is needed is a non-partisan website that provides citizens with "a basic understanding, a basic history, a basic grasp" (para. 11) of a wide variety of political issues; *Captain America* actor Chris Evans created a website that purports to provide this kind of objective, bipartisan introduction to political questions, populated by his interviews with Republican and Democratic elected officials (Pardes, 2020). If the problem is that we lack skills to talk across partisan lines, then maybe a program that organizes retreats for Republicans and Democrats to come together in one-on-one discussions can contribute to addressing what plagues American democracy (Itkowitz, 2017). Educators are considering their role in upholding democratic discourse, too; McGrew et al. (2018) point to our collective inability to discern fake news from real news reports, which they argued can be addressed through curricula to teach young people to read digital media more critically.

In this dissertation, I locate the problem of democratic deliberation in classroom practices that are ostensibly neutral and "professional," but which in fact serve to silence students and diminish democratic education—particularly for those from marginalized communities. If the field of social studies education intends to support democratic education through controversial issue discussions, it is vital to understand what actually goes on in classrooms and how facially unbiased, extremely common pedagogical practice can in fact reify inequities and reduce access to educational spaces for young people.

Methods

This study builds on research conducted by UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (hereafter IDEA) to explore teaching and learning in the Trump era (Rogers et al., 2017). That study surveyed teachers in a nationally representative sample of U.S. public high schools in many different kinds of communities and sociopolitical contexts around the United States; this study focuses on a smaller group of social studies teachers from that broader study.

The IDEA study drew on a 2017 survey of 1,535 English, math, and social studies teachers, as well as follow-up interviews with 36 of the English and social studies teachers. For this dissertation, I conducted a secondary analysis of these follow-up interviews that were conducted with social studies teachers in 2017 (20 of the 36 interviews). In 2018, I recruited all previous interview participants to participate in another round of interviews; nine social studies teachers scheduled and completed interviews with me that summer. (Ten English teachers completed interviews with me that year as well, but fall outside the scope of this dissertation.) I conducted a final round of interviews in early 2019 with a handful of the participants that I identified as key informants from previous interviews in order to explore their experiences teaching during the 2018 Congressional midterm elections. I recruited and was able to interview four social studies teachers (and two English teachers who were, again, not included in the analysis of this dissertation). Substantially more methodological detail is provided in chapter three, and interview protocols are all in the appendices.

Study Context: Trumpism and Notes on Terminology

Within the generally contentious, polarized political climate of the years in which this dissertation was written—2017-2020—an ascendant element with consequence for this study is what many media outlets have referred to as "Trumpism," though precisely what is implied with the term has largely been left undefined. Pundits across the political spectrum that attempted to

articulate its meaning seemed to find that it is best defined by policies rooted in economic and racial nationalism and tethered to no particular ideological anchor, and by dispositions rooted in resentment, incivility, anti-elitism, and opposition (Coppins et al., 2017; Gingrich, 2017; Hanson, 2017; Krugman, 2017; Tabachnick, 2016; Tarnoff, 2016; Tobin, 2016). As Scocca (2019) wrote:

> There are many recurring themes that help explain what's happening in the United States under Donald Trump: incompetence, cruelty, racism, self-dealing, misogyny… The Trump presidency is the result of politics organized around unending partisan aggression, which has driven out even the pretense of other aims. (para. 1)

Trumpism is characterized by a dispositional tendency towards resentment, antagonism, and "trolling" of elites and those who are seen as institutional gatekeepers. "Trump's presidency has stoked dynamics in the public sphere, including White nationalism, xenophobia, and troll culture, that impede rather than facilitate discourse and have the potential to create substantive threats for many people from marginalized groups" (Geller, 2020, p. 186). Though these and other such forces as political polarization (Abramowitz, 2010), White rage (Anderson, 2016), eroding democratic norms, and anti-intellectualism are not new, their combination and magnitude have meant that the climate called "Trumpism" is particularly potent and visible. Yet precisely because these forces have been growing for a long time already, it stands to reason that they will not recede when Trump leaves office but will instead continue to plague efforts to expand civic engagement and education in the United States. The dynamics I describe in these pages—of intolerance, contentiousness, and an epistemic crisis—are not unique to the Trump era, but Trumpism has brought them into starker relief in ways that make this context particularly generative for developing greater knowledge related to the teaching and learning of democratic deliberation, civic education, and political education in the United States.

This study is not about Trumpism, per se; nor do I aim to say that Trump is solely and personally responsible for the political climate in the United States during the years of his presidency. However, the broader political climate is a prominent contextual component of this study, and as such, I will need to reference it throughout the dissertation. Therefore, I refer to the "Trump era" to capture the national political climate of the three years about which I write.

In addition, I would like to make a note about style guides and capitalization. Style guides such as the American Psychological Association call for the names of racial groups to be capitalized, such as White and Black. Capitalizing the names of groups such as Asian American, Latinx, or African American—which derive from the proper names of places—seems to be fairly straightforward grammatically, but there is less scholarly clarity with regards to Black and White. Black scholars have long argued for capitalizing Black as a sign of respect and a way to claim linguistic power (Appiah, 2020); W. E. B. Du Bois campaigned nearly a century ago for newspapers to write *Negro* rather than *negro* (Tharps, 2014). Oftentimes, scholars make a related argument that white, when describing the racial group, should not be capitalized as a way to decenter whiteness or, as Dumas (2016) wrote, because whiteness "is nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a set of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror" (p. 12-13). Other Black scholars such as Kendi (2019) and Ewing (2019) have argued that to capitalize Black but not White is to reinforce the "illusion" that Whiteness is racelessness, "that White people are simply 'normal' neutral bodies and race only matters to the rest of us" (Ewing, 2019). She continued, "when we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness—the things that it is, the things that it does—we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility" (Ewing, 2020, para. 10). (To the argument that White should not be capitalized because White supremacists want it to

be, Ewing (2020) wrote, "To that, I respond with an ancient African American proverb: *I ain't studdin' them* [emphasis in original]" (para. 11).) There is building consensus on the capitalization of Black, but much less agreement—even within the community of Black scholars of education—about whether or not to capitalize White. In my writing here, I have chosen to follow Ewing's guidance to capitalize White as well as Black. I do so not because it is symmetrical, grammatically correct, or to support White supremacy, but rather because Whiteness has substantive, material consequences (Harris, 1993), and to capitalize Black but not White is to elide the fact that White people are also racialized. My thinking on this point may change in the future, but in this dissertation, I will capitalize both.

I also will write about *marginalized populations* in this dissertation. By this, I do not mean those who are in numeric minorities in a given school or community. Rather, when I refer to students from marginalized groups, I mean students who are part of—or even those that dominant society *perceives* to be part of—social groups that have explicitly been targeted and marginalized by Trump and the Republican Party's political agenda and rhetoric. To illustrate, the rhetoric and policies that have these effects include (but are not limited to) the Muslim travel ban, the revocation of protections for transgender people to receive equitable medical care, and the hostility and misogyny in Trump's language when he talks about women. To be sure, some members of implicated marginalized groups may be enthusiastic Trump fans who do not feel marginalized in the least. My point is not to characterize groups as *feeling* marginalized, but rather to speak to a broader sociopolitical marginalization that transpires at a national level. Thus, in this dissertation, *students from marginalized groups* speaks to the ways in which social groups are being subjected to dangerous political rhetoric and policies and that these policies can have material consequences for young people (particularly those who are subject to multiple

policies due to being part of multiple targeted social groups (Crenshaw, 1990)); it is not intended to indicate that particular students in particular teachers' classrooms felt outnumbered or marginalized even by these political forces.

Chapter Overview

Following this introductory chapter, chapter two includes a review of relevant literature, including research on discussions of controversial issues and theories of teacher political disclosure, pedagogy of political trauma, and sympathetic touch. Chapter three outlines my qualitative methodological approach, context of the IDEA study from which my study emerged, and details the design of data collection and analysis.

The following three chapters present the findings. Each of the findings chapters is structured similarly, in that I first present an overview of the entirety of the data set followed by a deep dive profile into two teachers. This structure allows me to attend both to the broad trends across the entire study as well as to the particularities and nuances of individual teachers and their contexts. All four of the key informant participants—those who participated in each of the 2017, 2018, and 2019 interviews—are the subject of a deep dive, as well as two additional teachers who participated in 2017 and 2018. In chapter four, I focus on two findings that provide vital context for the pedagogical decisions that teachers made related to the questions driving the core of this study. Specifically, I first delve into how teachers reported that students expressed intolerant opinions with increased frequency and vitriol. I follow that with a look at their reports of what I call *epistemic contentiousness*: their sense that their classroom environments felt combative and uncivil in combination with ideologically-charged, illiberal challenges to fact, knowledge, and intellectual authority. In chapter five, I explore how teachers thought about creating classroom environments that were "safe" for discussions of controversial issues in light

of the intolerance and contentiousness they reported. In particular, I look to how they prioritized safety as it relates to free speech and to marginalized youth who were the targets of sociopolitical hostility. Chapter six examines teacher political disclosure, focused particularly on what teachers thought was the appropriate stance to disclosing their personal political beliefs and opinions as well as the factors they saw as influencing that thinking. In chapter seven, I conclude with a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature, consideration of the implications and limitations of this research, and suggestions of possible directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

This chapter's focus is a review of the literature on controversial issue discussions in social studies education. I begin by situating this study within the broader landscape of social studies education research, including looking at historical interpretation and citizenship. I follow with a more detailed look at what is understood about deliberation, discussion, and teaching controversial issues in social studies classrooms, including teacher political disclosure and classroom climate. I then briefly examine literature related to political polarization as it relates to schooling. I conclude this chapter with the theories that guided this study: a framework for teacher political disclosure, pedagogy of political trauma, and sympathetic touch.

Situating the Study in Social Studies Education Research

Social studies classrooms play a central role in civic education in U.S. public schools. "The social studies is that part of the elementary and high school curriculum which has the primary responsibility for helping students to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to participate in the civic life of their local communities, the nation, and the world," explained Banks (1990, p. 3). The content of courses varies, as there is no binding set of national standards to guide content like the Common Core State Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010) or Next Generation Science Standards (National Research Council, 2013). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) created the College, Career, and Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards (2013), but it guides methods rather than constraining content, and no national accountability structure is tied to it as is the case for math and English (McTygue, 2016). Though some have contemplated whether students should take a standardized test in civics (Brezicha & Mitra, 2019), Antero Garcia (2019a) has pointed out that young people demonstrate their civic knowledge outside of school all the time: "How we

respond in the moment to local injustices (e.g., stop & frisk) IS a test." He continued, "These are personalized tests that are high stakes yet don't count since they're not in schools" (Garcia, 2019b).

Overall, K-12 social studies is typically concerned with geography, history, and civics (Parker, 1991; Thornton, 2008), though may also include ethnic studies, economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science (Banks, 1990; NCSS, 2013). The majority of course offerings in social studies focus on history (Levstik & Tyson, 2008). Most states require a course in civics or government to graduate high school but all require numerous history courses (Godsay et al., 2012), therefore history classes have tended to comprise the bulk of state required social studies courses (Levstik & Tyson, 2008). Even in history courses in which civic education is not necessarily an explicit learning goal, the master narratives that drive much of U.S. history content send powerful messages to students about what constitutes good citizenship (Woodson, 2016).

Knowledge and Historical Interpretation

Social studies is a field rife with contestations about what constitutes truth, fact, and knowledge. Increasingly, social studies teachers have been called on to ground their K-12 history courses in what Fallace and Neem (2005) called the "methods and mentalities of historians" (p. 330): historical thinking (Wineburg, 1999), perspective-taking, and inquiry (NCSS, 2013)—broadly, historiography, in which students learn factual historical content by constructing it themselves using the disciplinary practices of historians (Fallace & Neem, 2005). As Barton and Levstik (2015) wrote, it is "widely accepted" that teachers with strong pedagogical content knowledge

> have a deep and accurate understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed, and they know how to represent that process to students. That is, some teachers know that knowledge of the past depends on interpretation of evidence, that people disagree over such interpretations, and that history can be understood only by considering perspectives that differ from our own. (p. 36)

Yet it is still true that for many social studies teachers, the primary pedagogic focus remains what is known as the "coverage model," which centers fact-based recall and a large volume of content taught chronologically (Sipress & Voelker, 2011), even absent the external constraints of a standardized exam. In such classrooms, factual historical knowledge is presented as content delivered from teachers on high to students who are merely open receptacles into which facts are deposited, what Freire (1970) called the "banking method." As VanSledright (2010) wrote, coverage model history is based on the premise that the content of history is merely "decontextualized, disembodied authorless forms of neutral information that fall ready made out of the sky" (p. 116). In these classrooms, students do not participate in the construction of knowledge, and even when some degree of historiography is taught, there tends to remain a particular narrative that is foregrounded and against which other interpretations are contrasted. Banking model social studies courses remove human construction from knowledge (Wineburg, 2001) and make it appear to students that historical knowledge is something that is static and finished with right answers and wrong answers, rather than a constant project of study, revisiting, and revising.

Many scholars, teachers, and students have sought to push back on this stagnant, traditional conception of social studies teaching and learning. That push-back has often been aimed at the focus on content over skills, the overwhelmingly White male traditional historical

narrative, and reductive epistemologies that erase perspectives and knowledges of groups who experience oppression and marginalization. Some social studies scholars, for example, have called for more explicit teaching of counternarratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Taylor, 2016) that allow for the "challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). In calling for teaching historiographic skills, scholars have emphasized the importance of teaching young people historical significance analysis (Barton, 2005), perspective-taking (Marcus & Stoddard, 2009), interpretation and evidence evaluation (Barton & Levstik, 2004), historical empathy (Grant, 2003), and sourcing authorship (Wineburg, 1991).

These skills add up to a certain kind of skepticism and critical thinking; together, they suggest that for many social studies teachers, it is important to teach students to read between the lines, look for bias in accounts, understand underlying social forces that shape both historical accounts and the present, and not passively accept a particular historical narrative as necessarily representative of truth. The idea is that by teaching students to read a wealth of sources on a given topic—the causes of the Civil War, for instance—students could bring their historiographic skills to revisionist Lost Cause literature from the 20th century that has shaped the "heritage, not hate" narrative as well as the Cornerstone Speech in which the vice president of the Confederacy made it explicitly clear that slavery alone was the immediate cause of Confederate secession in order to learn what caused the Civil War. These critical thinking skills also have relevance in other social studies settings, as students can bring comparable skepticism to texts (not only written texts, but also to digital and media texts, for instance) that relate to economics, geography, and civics.

Defining Citizenship

Civic learning has a natural (though not exclusive (Mirra et al., 2018)) home in social studies (Journell, 2010, 2016a), but there are still many disagreements about its place and form nonetheless. How young people are taught to conceptualize and enact citizenship in schools has an impact on their civic development (Castro & Knowles, 2017; Duke et al., 2008; Flanagan et al., 2007; Levy, 2011; Torney-Purta, 2002), meaning that in many ways, debates about what counts as appropriate civic learning echo partisan battles over appropriate enactments of citizenship. Though scholars have found that civic learning in schools may be often driven by rote knowledge regurgitation of content that is typified by formal, structural forms of participation (Kahne et al., 2016; Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004; Watts & Flanagan, 2007), it is also clear that the implementation of civic education in the classroom rests on teachers' ideas of what it means to enact citizenship (NCSS, 2013; Knowles, 2017; Vickery, 2016; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

It must be noted that the definitions of citizenship in the United States—both those taught in schools and that are broadly accepted by the public—often have been shaped by the exclusion of marginalized populations. Many groups of people, such as immigrants (documented or not) (Seif, 2010), those who are or have been incarcerated (Alexander, 2012; Western & Pettit, 2010), those with disabilities (Taylor, 2020), and African American youth (Cohen, 2006), have been intentionally placed outside of a "contraction of that population that enjoys, in T.H. Marshall's words, 'full membership in society'" (Western & Pettit, 2010, p. 16).

The conceptions of citizenship taught in classrooms frequently center on such nationalistic themes as loyalty, unity, consensus, personal responsibility, and heritage (Vickery, 2017; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), and emphasize formal political processes (e.g., defining

federalism or separation of powers) and individual actions (e.g., paying taxes and voting) (Godsay et al., 2012; Journell, 2010; Niemi, 2012; Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004) that privilege citizenship as exercised by those who enjoy the full membership in society. In so doing, school-based civic education defines the white and middle-class state-citizenship relationship as normal, appropriate, and proper (Castro & Knowles, 2017) and does not necessarily speak to the civic and life experiences of young people from marginalized communities (Rubin, 2007; Rubin & Hayes, 2010; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002; Tillet, 2012; Vickery, 2017; Woodson & Love, 2019). This dominant perspective in civic education also "does not acknowledge that the nation systematically violated people's rights, enslaved or expropriated people of color, or legally considered women to be second class citizens" (Epstein, 2009, p. 8). Nor does it speak to settler colonialism, the experiences of Indigenous peoples, or political tribal sovereignty (Sabzalian, 2019). For those with tenuous relationships to the nation-state, participation in formal structures may be untenable, and abstaining from them becomes a rational response to a "society that purports equality but delivers injustice" (Rubin, 2007, p. 474). Indeed, the master narratives (Woodson, 2015, 2016) and narrow patriotism that tend to undergird state standards across the social studies sub-disciplines (Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004) are likely to breed cynicism in young people when their experiences are so thoroughly divorced from the normative version espoused in class (Rubin & Hayes, 2010). Some scholars have, as a result, argued that civic education can and should be a site of intentionally critical or transformative practices (Banks, 2008; Navarro & Howard, 2017; Salinas, 2006; Swalwell, 2015). They have offered possiblities for school-based citizenship education that would attend to "diversity, conflict, and structural inequalities" (Abu El-Haj, 2007, p. 312) that shape how so many public school students conceive of citizenship, civic identity, and civic agency, grounded in such theories and practices as Asian

American cultural citizenship education (Rodríguez, 2018), Muslim and refugee transnational youth (Abu El-Haj, 2007; Deroo, 2018), anticolonial approaches to civic education (Sabzalian, 2019), young undocumented activists (Tirado, 2019), Black feminist constructs of community in citizenship (Vickery, 2017), Black critical patriotism (Busey & Walker, 2017; King et al., 2016), "lived civics" (Cohen et al., 2018), and youth participatory action research (Mirra et al., 2013).

Discussions, Deliberation, and Controversial Issues

Scholars have argued that high-quality democratic civic education necessarily includes opportunities for young people to debate, deliberate, and discuss controversial social and political issues (Guilfoile et al., 2016; Hahn, 2002; Hess, 2009; Ho et al., 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Payne & Journell, 2019). Parker and Hess (2001) called these *deliberative pedagogies*, in which students learn to problem solve and discuss shared problems to come to consensus through listening, learning, and changing their minds. Researchers have outlined numerous democratic and academic benefits these kinds of pedagogies can have for young people, including increased student engagement, political tolerance, critical thinking and public speaking skills, and knowledge of current events (Avery et al., 2013; Gibson & Levine, 2003; Hess, 2009; Maurissen et al., 2018; Parker, 2003). Throughout this dissertation, I focus on discussions of controversial social and political issues, which constitute one form of deliberation.

In particular, deliberative pedagogies are said to play a vital role in ensuring an educated, functioning democratic electorate (Parker & Hess, 2001). "After all, democracy requires listening with respect, taking opposing viewpoints seriously, and finding common ground for the common good" (Gibson, 2020, p. 1), skills that classroom exercises of deliberation are understood to build. Hess (2009) argued, "one rationale for discussion in democracy is that you cannot *have* democracy without discussion" (p. 15-16, emphasis in original), as democracy

necessarily involves public debate of common problems. Thus, discussions of controversial issues are inherent to democracy and therefore must be inherent to any kind of effective democratic education.

Teaching Controversial Issues

As one of civic education's "proven practices" (Guilfoile et al., 2016), discussions of controversial public issues are said to provide spaces in which young people can "practice the civic skills of deliberation and tolerance" (Journell, 2016a, p. 2). Journell (2016a) continued:

> Social issues provide a conduit between the static curriculum learned in schools and our democratic society. If the ideal social studies classroom adheres to Dewey's notion that schools are "laboratories of democracy," then students should be allowed to practice democratic discourse. (p. 2)

Hess (2009) argued that democratic deliberation establishes political equality by allowing all members of the classroom community the space and access to participate in decision making:

> The ideal of discussion supports the validity of intrinsic equality by implying, at least symbolically, that all members of a community are political equals and are therefore equally qualified to participate in discussion and decision making. The listening *and* talking that constitute discussion physically represent a core goal of democracy: self-governance among equals. (p. 15, emphasis in original)

Discussions of pressing public problems are said to be particularly well suited to classroom settings, where students can engage in "cross-cutting political talk" (Hess, 2009, p. 22) and where they can engage in pedagogic activities that may be somewhat inauthentic, but which provide young people with the opportunities to *learn* what it is to deliberate for democratic ends. Despite the potential for inauthenticity, Knight Abowitz and Mamlok (2019) described how the

#NeverAgainMSD students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida successfully applied argumentation and deliberation skills they developed in their government class when they confidently stepped into intense debates about gun control with NRA leaders and their supporters on Twitter and on television. Hess (2009) recognized that entrenched neighborhood and school segregation (as well as further narrowing of student populations via such mechanisms as school choice, private schools, and tracking) has left public schools perhaps less ideologically diverse than they might otherwise be, but asserted that even within relatively homogeneous spaces, enough disagreement almost certainly exists to make for substantive discussion. Regardless of the political diversity present in the classroom, deliberation presumes a certain level of egalitarianism.

Indeed, despite the deliberative ideal of an equitable, respectful exchange of ideas, it is clear that in the United States in the Trump era, such an ideal is nowhere close to our political reality. Gibson (2020) contended that as "democratic classrooms are embedded in and reflective of the social and racial inequalities at the heart of many contemporary political disagreements in the United States" (p. 2), deliberation is insufficient and can instead serve to reinforce social inequalities that it would be intended to solve. Neither the school context for discussion nor the real world of political decision-making is egalitarian, and to teach democratic deliberation as an end as if they were is to prepare "youth for an imagined civic space where all are afforded equal access to political participation and all have economic, cultural, social, and political capital necessary to affect change in their political arenas" (Castro & Knowles, 2017, p. 304). Some have argued that because deliberation is part of existing structures of inequality, using it as a pedagogical method may do "little more than maintain the unequal status quo" (Beck, 2013; Gibson, 2020, p. 6; Sanders, 1997).

Even on a more surface level, deliberation typically presumes that participants are willing to give different perspectives a fair hearing (Castro & Knowles, 2017), though confirmation bias shapes how both teachers and students take in (or reject wholesale) information that conflicts with what they already believe (Crocco, Halvorsen, et al., 2018) and the political realities of deliberation outside classroom spaces do not routinely involve giving one another a fair hearing (Apple, 2008; Sanders, 1997). Though the social studies are often seen as the logical home for controversial issues and political education in public schools, engagement with social and political questions is often seen in language arts and science classrooms as well (Cotton, 2006; Erlich & Gindi, 2018; Journell, 2013; Mirra, 2018). In fact, Journell (2013) argued that social studies educators have much to learn from controversial issue discussions in the sciences, where teaching about evolution and climate change has long been shaped by local political and cultural considerations. Indeed, despite the protests of some educators that presume that "teaching is a politically and ideologically neutral activity and that classrooms are, and should be, isolated from the politics of the school, district, state, country, and world" (Balderrama, 2008, p. 40), education as a whole project is inherently political and schools cannot be neutral spaces (Apple, 1996; hooks, 2003). This is not to say that schools are or should be engaged in partisan politics, but rather that in imparting lessons, teachers are still sending political messages to young people about what is good, right, and proper; as Mirra (2018) wrote:

> Even when we are not engaging in the world of institutional partisan politics, we are still being political in the sense that we are promoting beliefs, values, and actions that have import in public life. … If we profess to be apolitical by simply following to the letter the mandated curriculum in our districts and being as blank as automatons, that is in itself a political choice that supports the high-stakes, neoliberal accountability structure. (p. 89)

Teaching neither controversial issues nor deliberation is simple and straightforward. Teachers have been shown to avoid discussions for numerous reasons, including neoliberal accountability structures, lack of public support, feeling intimidated, fearing backlash or accusations of indoctrination, and discomfort with or having strong opinions themselves about the topic at hand (Busey & Mooney, 2014; Engebretson, 2018; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2011b; Miller-Lane et al., 2006).

Open vs. Settled. A key component of these discussions is how teachers determine what constitutes a controversial issue and how they frame these issues as appropriate for deliberation. Scholars have suggested that teachers should focus their teaching on issues that are open, or ripe for debate with multiple legitimate viewpoints, rather than on those that are closed, or settled because the matter is societally settled, or lacks numerous legitimate viewpoints (Hess, 2009; Journell, 2018). There is broad agreement that "teachers need to thoughtfully evaluate the openness of issues and only present those deemed as open for deliberative consideration in their classrooms" (Journell, 2017, p. 341), but there remains considerable debate about which criteria teachers should use to determine an issue's openness.

For example, a teacher might look to whether evidence-based, empirical arguments exist on both sides of an issue—what Journell (2017) calls the *epistemic criterion*—and if they do, then that issue is open and should be taught that way. A capacious criterion is the *behavioral* one, by which an issue should be taught as controversial if any contradicting views on the topic exist at all; but this measure neither accounts for the fact that one could likely find some dissent on just about any topic, nor does it discern between rational or irrational viewpoints (Journell, 2017). Or, a teacher might apply what Journell (2017) calls the *political criterion*, which would measure an issue as open for the purposes of classroom deliberation if neither side infringes on

defined public values in society. Another teacher might look to whether the issue has traction in the public sphere, a *politically authentic criterion* (Journell, 2017). Yet justice and equity are still largely orthogonal to these determinations with some notable exceptions (Conrad, 2020; Journell, 2017, 2018; Payne & Journell, 2019). Journell (2017) is careful to point out that these criteria are specifically for determining whether or how to frame an issue as open for the purposes of discussion in the classroom setting, and not for judging students' opinions as wrong.

Hess (2009) also wrote about how controversial issues may move from one category to the other, what she called "tipping" from closed to open or open to closed over time:

> Tipping refers to a number of processes by which topics (which have managed to get into the curriculum in the first place) shift back and forth between their status as open questions (for which we want students to engage in deliberating multiple and competing answers) and closed questions (for which we want students to build and believe a particular answer). (p. 113)

This "tipping" can be complicated, contextual, and nuanced. A topic tips as social, political, and even scientific standards on different issues shift, though this change may take place at a broad social level (Hess, 2009), local political level (Swalwell & Schweber, 2016), or even only at a personal level (Stoddard, 2009). A topic—climate change, for example—may meet some of the above criteria for openness at the societal level, but be framed by a teacher as closed (in this case, as the science is settled, the issue lacks legitimate competing viewpoints). Hess (2009) has argued that teachers who present climate change as "up for debate" provide a platform or tacitly condone climate change denial. Therefore, she argues, any teacher using climate change as a controversial issue should only do so insofar as they ask students to discuss how best to solve the problem but not discuss whether or not climate change is real or shaped by human behavior.

Another issue, such as interracial marriage, might be decidedly closed on a national level and in the teacher's estimation, but pried open in the classroom by students who see it as open (Washington & Humphries, 2011). Hess (2009) wrote about "teaching in the tip" as precarious "because, by definition, there are going to be some people who support the tip and others who do not" (p. 125). Though an issue may be societally settled, it may remain hotly contested at a local level.

Often, the examples provided in the literature of issues that "tipped" have tipped *towards* justice. Hess (2009) offers as one example the incarceration (Daniels, 2005) of Japanese and Japanese American people during WWII: it was once closed and settled as justified, became open as its morality was debated in subsequent decades, and is now broadly understood as closed, though now it is settled as an action that was unjust and unwarranted. In this example, the issue went from closed to open to closed again, but its tipping fell in a justice-oriented direction. Journell (2018) framed same-sex marriage as an issue that has not tipped fully at a broad social level, but that is generally trending towards being a settled issue. Like the proverbial arc of the moral universe, much of the literature on "teaching in the tip" looks at issues that tip towards justice, though there are significant and important counterexamples (e.g., Washington & Humphries, 2011).

Contextual factors can have powerful impacts in shaping how teachers approach determining if a topic or issue is either settled or open for debate. From Swalwell and Schweber's (2016) documenting of teachers who participated in local union action to Washington and Humphries' (2011) examination of how students pushed open an issue that the teacher understood to be settled, scholars have written about how different levels of contextual factors affect teachers' understanding of whether an issue is open or closed, regardless of any

criterion the teacher might be using. Other research has looked at how the political climate of the Trump presidency has shaped pedagogical decisions (Dunn et al., 2019) and school contexts (Costello, 2016; Natanson et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2019).

Controversial Identity Issues. In considering whether North Carolina's HB2 (a so-called "bathroom bill" that required people to use the bathroom that corresponded to the sex assigned at birth rather than the gender with which they identify) should be framed as an open or closed issue in the classroom, Journell (2017) described a conundrum many teachers face and which sits at the heart of this study: "when controversial identity issues are broached in classrooms, there exists a tension between encouraging students to voice their beliefs on issues that are on the forefront of public discourse and wanting one's classroom to remain a safe place for all students" (p. 339). He defines *controversial identity issues* as those that implicate students' identities. Journell (2017) takes pains to emphasize that controversial identity issues should not be removed en masse from the curriculum, that

> simply because an issue implicates students' identities does not mean it cannot be deliberated, and research has shown that tolerant discussions of open controversial identity issues can be used to increase interest in the curriculum among students whose identities are implicated. (p. 347)

Like Hess (2009) who worried that teaching climate change as open could lead to the platforming of climate change denial and provide students space to "articulate their beliefs that, at present, have no empirical justification and are based on stereotypes, misinformation, and bigotry," Journell (2017) wrote that teaching HB2 as open "would invite intolerant discourse that could result in emotional or physical harm to transgender students" (p. 347). Thus, his

conclusion was that teachers must be "thoughtful in how they frame controversy in their classes and do so in ways that are social justice oriented" (Journell, 2017, p. 349).

Race and racism are important examples to illustrate what controversial identity issues mean in the classroom. Racism is a powerful force in U.S. society and has potent effects on people's lives, which would on the surface make it seem to be important issue for students to practice deliberating in controversial issue discussions. There is potential for substantial upsides to discussions in which teachers engage in "race talk" (Howard, 2004; Howard & del Rosario, 2000), as it is believed to support positive racial identities, sociopolitical consciousness, and democratic citizenship (Howard & del Rosario, 2000; Sue, 2013). Yet whether or not the above criteria might classify various race-related issues as open or closed, research has shown that for teachers (who are overwhelmingly White in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2016)), the upsides of teaching about race and racism are often overridden by the possible consequences of making mistakes—in particular, teachers (speaking very broadly) say they lack the preparation or vocabulary to mediate conversations about race (Sue, 2013), and fear appearing or being seen as racist, resulting in avoiding race talk in the classroom (Castagno, 2008; Garrett, 2011). Race talk gone wrong can also have deleterious consequences like leaving racial stereotypes unexamined and limiting the agency of racially and ethnically marginalized students (Woodson & Duncan, 2017). Race and racism as controversial identity issues also could have the potential to invite intolerant discourse and emotional or physical harm, and to provide a platform for racist, irrational, opinions. It is unsurprising, then, that so many teachers avoid controversial issue discussions about race.

Teacher Political Disclosure. For open issues, teachers must decide whether or not to disclose their personal political beliefs and opinions with students (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy,

2009; Journell, 2011a, 2016b, 2016c; Kelly, 1986). Broadly, teacher political disclosure is seen as indoctrination and political proselytizing (McAvoy & Hess, 2013), and social studies teachers' fear of reprisal for violating this norm has led to a discipline-wide consensus that teachers should appear to be neutral in the classroom (Journell, 2016b). Both the public and teachers, then, seem to hold the same broad assumption that social studies and civic teaching and learning should be free from teachers' political beliefs (Journell, 2016b). The classroom provides too powerful a platform, the thinking goes, and "when a teacher discloses, they inflict undue influence upon a captive audience" (Hess, 2009, p. 101). However, it is naïve to think that teachers can and should be completely neutral (Niemi & Niemi, 2007); teachers are human beings with political ideas, and they reveal those ideas all the time whether they intend to do so or not (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). As Myers (2009) wrote:

> Teachers make choices about how to depict the subject matter in their classrooms and what counts as knowledge. They select themes, emphasizing some while ignoring others, and introduce curricular materials that collectively embody an understanding of their discipline and a reflection of their life experiences. (p. 32)

Even when teachers intend and strive to appear neutral, every decision they make has the effect of advocating or dismissing particular points of view (Callan, 2011; Niemi & Niemi, 2007; Stoddard, 2009).

Some scholars have argued that teachers generally should be willing to "openly disclose their political views but in a way that allows competing views to receive a fair hearing within the classroom" (Journell, 2016c, p. 9), though this stance remains unusual especially amongst social studies teachers (Journell, 2016b). Teachers' decisions about disclosing their beliefs and opinions have been found to be shaped in important ways by their context (Engebretson, 2018),

with some using disclosure as a tool for establishing solidarity with students and others backing away from disclosure in response to increased levels of contentiousness (Conrad, 2020; Dabach, 2015; Dunn et al., 2019; Hess & McAvoy, 2009; Journell, 2016c; Payne & Journell, 2019). An issue that is controversial in a particular time and place may not be controversial elsewhere, and that matters for how it is framed and taught in the classroom as well as how teachers think about disclosing.

One version of how teacher political disclosure has been theorized came from Germany, in the Beutelsbach Consensus (Reinhardt, 2018). Whereas concerns in the United States tend to center on teachers who berate students with their personal political opinions (Journell, 2016b), in Germany "when teachers were accused of manipulating students, the charge was that they—without full disclosure and against the interests of learners—were imperceptibly but potently disseminating one-sided information, judgments, and choices in their classrooms" (Reinhardt, 2018, p. 25). As Reinhardt (2018) wrote, in 1976, a set of three guiding principles for German civic educators was created at a conference in Beutelsbach—the Beutelsbach Consensus:

1. Prohibition against overwhelming the student. It is not permissible to catch students off-guard, by whatever means, for the sake of imparting desirable opinions, thereby hindering them from "forming an independent judgment." This is the difference between political education and indoctrination. Indoctrination is incompatible with the role of a teacher in a democratic society and the generally accepted objective of making students capable of independent responsibility and maturity.
2. Matters that are controversial in scholarship and political affairs should also be presented as controversial in the classroom. This requirement is very closely linked to the first point: a teacher who loses sight of differing points of view, suppressed options, and

leaves alternatives undiscussed is already well on his or her way to indoctrinating students. We must ask, on the contrary, whether teachers should in fact play a corrective role.

3. Students (as well as adults) should be enabled to analyze political problems and to see things from the perspective of those affected by them, as well as to seek ways to contribute to solutions to such problems in view of their own interests while taking into account their shared responsibility for society as a whole.[4] (p. 26-7)

These principles present a measured approach to teaching controversial issues, and to teacher political disclosure. On the whole, they encourage educators to exercise professional judgment with care and consideration. There is not a blanket prohibition on disclosure, but rather an emphasis on doing it in ways that respect students' abilities to form their "independent judgment," with the implication being that non-disclosure is less ethical and more likely to indoctrinate and deceive young people. It also speaks to the question of which issues should be considered fruitful for controversial issue discussions, aligning largely with the politically authentic criterion Journell (2017) described. The Beutelsbach consensus emphasizes the importance of presenting a broad range of political opinions on the topic—a both sides approach that will look familiar to many U.S. educators—but unlike U.S. schooling, it also prioritizes a kind of civic empathy in pushing students to "see things from the perspective of those affected by" the issues at hand and to attend to the public good. This last principle has been absent from

[4] This text of the third principle is the "revised" version, as the original text was understood to overemphasize individuals, the logical extension of which would be the "ruthless assertion of self-interest without consideration of the interests of others or a notion of the common good" (Reinhardt, 2018, p. 27). The original was written as follows: "Students should be put in a position to analyze a political situation and their own personal interests as well as to seek ways to have an effect on given political realities in view of these interests. Such an objective strongly emphasizes the acquisition of operational skills, which follows logically from the first two principles set out" (Reinhardt, 2018, p. 26).

how U.S. educators have understood the relationship between controversial issues and their own opinions in the classroom.

Social studies courses provide a particularly important space in which to examine teacher's decision-making regarding disclosure due to its proximity to so many of the deeply political questions that shape daily life. From world history courses' study of Islam to learning about Manifest Destiny and the Civil War in U.S. history to wealth inequality in economics, the disciplinary topics at the heart of social studies relate directly to many of the issues at the core of our public, partisan divides today. It is this constant relevance of content that places social studies teachers in such political places in public schools. As Hess (2010) said, "teachers are political beings and […] social studies teaching, in particular, provides multiple opportunities for teachers' political views to influence their work" (p. 227). Due to the historical emphasis on the civic role of schooling and schools as sites in which young people can be asked to develop and interrogate their understanding of the world, social studies classrooms are prime examples of settings in which teachers are confronted with many naturally occurring curricular and pedagogic opportunities to disclose their political stances—or not.

Classroom Climate and Discussion

Researchers have found that an open classroom climate in which all young people within the classroom feel cared for and that their voices can be expressed, heard, and valued is a critical component of discussions of controversial social and political issues (Avery et al., 2013; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Washington & Humphries, 2011). As Hahn and Tocci (1990) wrote, "when students feel comfortable expressing their views during frequent discussions of controversial issues they are more likely to acquire attitudes which have the potential to foster later civic participation than are students without such perceptions" (p. 358).

Avery et al. (2013) added, "when students do not perceive an open classroom climate, they are less likely to find the deliberations engaging and beneficial" (p. 112). In their study of controversial issue discussions in Europe, Maurissen et al. (2018) found that when students got along with teachers and felt they were respected, they perceived school as a place where they could express their opinions. Crocco, Segall, et al. (2018) advised that teachers establish a "climate of tolerance, open-mindedness, social trust, and commitment to the common good" (p. 69). In classroms with open climates, a "democratic ethos" (Hess & Avery, 2008) has been shown to increase students' tolerance of political conflict and intention to participate in formal governmental processes like voting (Campbell, 2008), as well as their civic efficacy and knowledge (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015).

Yet an open classroom climate also raises important questions related to discussions of controversial identity issues, where a climate that is open for all opinions may well be incompatible with a learning environment that is inclusive and respectful of all members of the classroom community. Scholars have noted that discussions of certain issues have the "potential to generate intolerant discourse that can offend, alienate, or intimidate students" (Journell, 2016a, p. 2). In such discussions, it is important for the field to understand how teachers can both support vibrant, substantive discussions on the one hand, and protect marginalized youth from bullying under the guise of academic discourse on the other. As an example, undocumented students may struggle to feel safe in a classroom discussion with peers who voice overtly xenophobic opinions; teachers can structure the classroom to protect either the peers' free speech or the undocumented students' affective and psychological safety, but likely cannot do both simultaneously. As Beck (2013) argued:

> Safety, as imagined as everyone comfortably expressing their opinions, might not be possible… It might be time to accept the unreliable and unpredictable nature of classroom safety in order to begin recognizing the complexity of the students with whom we work… What is safe for one might not be safe for another. Perhaps it is time to begin engaging other concerns, concerns that might ultimately create a safer, more just society. (p. 24)

An area of study that has relevance to this point has focused on what Britzman (1998) called "difficult knowledge." Social studies classes present unusual school-based spaces in which to explore students' sense of affective or psychological safety as it relates to content, as many social studies courses necessarily involve the study of content that may be traumatic or triggering for students, such as the Holocaust, enslavement, lynching, and genocide. Studies have focused on students' experiences of these histories, teachers' approaches to their pedagogy, and how emotions shape both the teaching and learning of such "difficult" histories (Garrett, 2011; Levy & Sheppard, 2018).

Less scholarship has focused on emotions within the context of controversial issue discussions; in one example, Garrett et al. (2020) looked at how emotion shapes how we receive and reject information in discussions, one aspect of confirmation bias, though the authors in that study did not focus only on discussions that relate to difficult knowledge or controversial identity issues. The authors spoke to the ways in which discussions can unearth a tension between the world we have and the world we want, and that "this tension often occurs when confronted with issues of racial violence, mass incarceration, or other systemic inequities related to class, gender, and sexuality that individuals often respond to on an emotional level" (p. 3). However, even this insight does not attend to the unequal distribution of this emotion across the classroom, as issues

of racial violence and mass incarceration, taking their examples, are not experienced the same ways by people across demographic groups in the United States. Still fewer studies have honed in on the role of emotions in discussions of controversial identity issues (Dabach, 2015; Journell & Castro, 2011; Zembylas, 2007), especially with respect to discussions that are taking place amidst the emboldened sociopolitical hostility reported in schools during the Trump era (Natanson et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2017).

Another relevant area of research looks at ideas of classroom safety for young people—especially Black children. McKinney de Royston et al. (2020) asked questions with important implications for my dissertation: what do we mean by safe? Which spaces are safe? And for whom is a place safe? Just as research supports the idea that an open climate is good for students, so too does it support the idea that safety is good for students. As McKinney de Royston et al. (2020) wrote, "children's perceptions of safety—socially, emotionally, intellectually, physically, and otherwise—affect their well-being, learning, and academic performance" (p. 5). Discourse about safety in schools often positions marginalized youth, especially Black and Latinx children, as the things making school unsafe for everyone else, they write, rather than children themselves who also deserve to feel safe (McKinney de Royston et al., 2020). Their important study reframes Black children as people who are also worthy of protection in schools and classrooms. Similarly, Woodson and Love (2019) argued that typical framing in civic education literature—even purportedly justice-oriented civic education research—centers Whiteness, ignoring the humanity, civic skills, and civic knowledge that Black children already possess. They insist that civic education researchers must do more to "recognize [that] Black children are already enough" (p. 95).

In the context of discussions of controversial identity issues, these works from McKinney de Royston et al. (2020) and Woodson and Love (2019) demand that teachers attend to the humanity of Black children with intention and care, as their experiences of safety will likely differ from how non-Black students experience the same classroom. That would mean that teachers actively think about, recognize, and take intentional steps to ensure that their classrooms are spaces that are genuinely safe and affirming for Black students, and by extension, students from other marginalized groups as well. Their calls insist that, rather than placing students from marginalized groups at the margins, teachers must make these students a core consideration as they think about building classroom climates that are safe for discussions of controversial identity issues.

Conversely, Leonardo and Porter (2010) look at safety from a very different angle, writing, "safety discourses on race are a veiled form of violence" (p. 141). In their analysis, "safety acts as a misnomer" (p. 147), a color-blind way to avoid discomfort for White students and not actually create classrooms that are safe for students of color. Leonardo and Porter (2010) do not romanticize any version of "safe spaces," and point out how well-intentioned efforts to create dialogic spaces that are safe for both White students and students of color are almost never, in practice, safe for students of color:

> Something has gone incredibly wrong when students of color feel immobilized and marginalized within spaces and dialogues that are supposed to undo racism. This situation should give us doubt regarding whether or not safe-space dialogue really allows for the creativity necessary to promote a humanizing discussion on race, or if it functions in Fanon's words, as a negotiating table that seeks peaceful compromise without engaging in the violence necessary to both explore and undo racism. (p. 147).

That is, an ostensibly neutral effort to dismantle racism is *necessarily and inherently* unable to provide the kind of context necessary for the work of anti-racism. Leonardo and Porter (2010) also point out that though race talk is "risky, uncomfortable and fundamentally unsafe" (p. 139), it is not tantamount to creating a hostile environment. This argument certainly has consequences for how teachers think about conducting discussions of controversial identity issues, particularly those related to race and ethnicity.

Walking the tightrope between risky and hostile is clearly a difficult but important task for teachers as they broach controversial issues in the classroom, particularly when student identities are implicated. Including diverse opinions and creating space for students is vital for a free exchange of ideas and for students to benefit academically and democratically from discussions, but so too is it critical for students from groups that are already sociopolitically marginalized to participate discussions in classrooms that do not further marginalize them. As Toni Morrison said in her 1993 Nobel lecture, "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge" (1995, p. 320). Importantly, Woodson and Duncan (2017) described a kind of classroom that could be sites of fruitful discussions despite the risks. They called these classrooms "psychologically safe classrooms," in which students and teachers alike practice vulnerability, healing, and power sharing in ways that advance learning so that "the benefits of a difficult conversation about race outweigh the risks" (p. 102). These are classrooms in which teachers address their racial blunders and normalize making mistakes so as to show students that such mistakes can—and must—be worked through if we are to live in a pluralistic democracy (Woodson & Duncan, 2017). As teachers have identified conversations about race as particularly

fraught, it stands to reason that this kind of climate of psychological safety could be productive for discussions of other topics as well.

Political Polarization and Schools

Leading discussions of topics that are inherently controversial is a tall order for educators in most times and places, and even more so amidst the kind of contentious political balkanization that characterizes the political climate in the U.S. in the early 21st century (Abramowitz, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Teachers' words and actions may be subject to increasing public scrutiny, as seen both in scholarly literature (Dunn et al., 2019; Sondel et al., 2018; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016) and in news reports of teachers who have been suspended, disciplined, publicly shamed, and removed from the classroom for such action as social media posts opposing Trump (Davies, 2016) or the women's march (Associated Press, 2017), or for policing students' political attire (Volokh, 2016).

Political polarization has numerous consequences for how citizens relate to one another; among the most consequential of these for educators is that polarization has been shown to reduce trust among citizens (Allen, 2004; McCarty et al., 2006). "Polarization causes distrust, and distrust causes polarization," summarized Hess and McAvoy (2015). This certainly plays out in national politics, but also has consequences for classrooms. Namely, social distrust breeds suspicion of wrong doing or ill intent between and among teachers, parents, administrators, students, and even people wholly outside of a schools' community, complicating civic and political education (Hess, 2009; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016). While polarization can have the positive side effect of spurring greater civic engagement (Abramowitz, 2010), its effect is largely one of suppression and silencing (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

To a certain extent, the literature has established some understanding of what schools can do within polarized contexts to foster inclusive, respectful, and engaged environments in which young people can learn to participate in civic and political life. For one, teachers can help students develop "political friendships" through activities that promote fairness, tolerance, and trust. Scholars have pointed to controversial issue discussions as one of the possible mechanisms for exposing young people to differing opinions, discussing across difference, and developing political tolerance (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2012). In order for students to learn to talk about challenging topics across difference, of course, some kind of difference must exist. Ideological homogeneity has the potential to foster political intolerance (Journell, 2012), which will often silence students and teachers in political minorities. In schools where political diversity exists, ensuring that students have access to non-tracked classes can be an important step to expanding students' exposure to political difference; in schools that are more politically homogeneous, providing students with texts and guest speakers that represent greater ideological diversity has been said to do the same (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). As discussed in the previous section, scholarship has argued for open environments that inevitably have some degree of conflict, but teachers must balance that with ensuring the classroom is also inclusive, diverse, and respectful (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Yet polarization can have substantive effects on student learning that originate from far outside the classroom walls. The problems for democracy facing both teachers and the United States is not merely that the electorate is polarized, it is that the nation is deeply, endemically, plainly unequal (Gibson, 2020). While early studies have mined student and teacher experiences in the Trump era and the political polarization of the late 2010s, much still remains to be seen. In light of polarization, distrust can be bred anew, but old and persistent fault lines can also widen.

For young people who are members of certain populations, Trumpism—and especially the administration's targeting of certain groups—can result in vulnerability both in schools and in the world. Muslim students, for example, must wrestle both with the ban on travel from several Muslim-majority countries and with the potential for accompanying increases in Islamophobia in school. Students who are undocumented or whose parents or siblings are undocumented must deal both with constant fear of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids as well as coming to school with peers who wear Trump's Make America Great Again hats and threaten to alert authorities. For teachers who want to provide students with emotional support in instances like this, doing so has the potential to appear overtly political in ways that may not have necessarily been the case in years past, and that run contrary to much of their teacher preparation and socialization.

Epistemic Crisis

Finally, a related component of the political polarization complicating how teachers and students discuss controversial and political issues is what Roberts (2017) called our "epistemic crisis." There have always been broad political disagreements on a national level that boil down, at their core, to disputes over what is true. That is, we see the world differently than one another; we have different epistemologies that shape how we make sense of the construction, meaning, and evaluation of knowledge and truth. In the late 2010s, the Trump era, this epistemological disparity has reached the level of crisis.

A Google Scholar search of articles including the term "epistemic crisis" since 2016 yields 409 articles (at the time of writing) from such disparate fields as climate science, public health, finance, media studies, and journalism. Across so many sectors of society, questions about what is true, how we know, and who gets to decide have arisen not only because of healthy

critical thinking and skepticism, but because of "fake news" and what Kavanagh & Rich (2018) called "truth decay." As Orwell (1983) famously wrote, "the party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears" (p. 81). To be sure, like other dynamics I have written as characterizing Trumpism, the rejection of knowledge production as a broad project (to say nothing of the rejection of particular critical epistemologies) is not unique to the Trump era but has certainly been exacerbated in it.

Schools have been offered as important spaces that can provide some salves for this epistemic crisis, including teaching critical media literacy in schools to help young people discern fake from real (McGrew et al., 2018). Yet it is also apparent that in response to political tumult and disagreement over what constitutes reality or made-up conspiracy theory—and, importantly, how they should regulate that disagreement—teachers often feel an impulse to neutrality, objectivity, and not rocking the boat (Dunn et al., 2019; Geller, 2020). As teachers strive to conduct rigorous, substantive discussions about tough topics with diverse groups of young people amidst considerable political polarization, all while no one can agree over what counts as a fact and what is made up, they have to make many pedagogical choices that shape what students learn, how they learn, and how they experience the classroom itself.

Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical frameworks guided the analysis in this dissertation. Next, I briefly describe Kelly's (1986) framework of four approaches to teacher political disclosure, Sondel et al.'s (2018) pedagogy of political trauma, and Du Bois's (1935) sympathetic touch.

Kelly's (1986) Framework of Approaches to Teacher Political Disclosure

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the general consensus in the United States on teacher political disclosure is that when teachers articulate their political beliefs in the classroom, it is

necessarily and inherently indoctrinating (Journell, 2016b, 2016c), so social studies teachers have adopted a broad policy towards maintaining strictly neutral positions on partisan questions. However, even those who insist they are able to withhold their political opinions have been shown to reveal their points of view through small pedagogical decisions, and some research has indicated that those who are most insistent that they can withhold are in fact more likely to disclose through sarcasm, jokes, and flippant name-calling (Niemi & Niemi, 2007). Some scholars have argued that if teachers instead disclose their political beliefs in thoughtful, responsible ways, such disclosure can have powerful, positive effects on students' own development as political beings (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2016b, 2016c). This thinking, however, has gained little traction amongst practitioners.

Kelly (1986) offered a framework for thinking about ways teachers disclose their political beliefs (Table 1, next page). The first approach he described is the stance most commonly seen as ideal (Journell, 2016b; Kelly, 1986) and most frequently adopted by classroom teachers (Hess, 2009), which he called *neutral impartiality*. Teachers who adopt this approach want students to discuss controversial issues but believe teachers should remain silent on their own political opinions. These teachers present both sides of issues and play devil's advocate in pursuit of political balance in the classroom, drawing on an assumption that a politically balanced classroom is the same thing as a neutral one (Hess, 2005). The second model of disclosure is the version generally decried as proselytizing, called *exclusive partiality*, in which teachers actively try to convince students to adopt their personal position on a political issue. This approach can be presented in an authoritative manner or merely through a subtle "attempt to stack the deck" to favor one political position and demean another, as was the main concern in the Beutelsbach Consensus (Kelly, 1986, p. 116; Reinhardt, 2018). Some scholars have cautioned that well-

intentioned justice-oriented teaching can be indoctrinating and mask political intolerance (Journell, 2012; Kubota, 2014), potentially representing a form of exclusive partiality. The third approach is what Kelly (1986) called *exclusive neutrality* in which teachers pursue neutrality by avoiding all controversial topics in an effort to preserve order and a value-free, neutral education for all—presuming that schools ever can be value free, neutral, and orderly. The final category of disclosure is *committed impartiality*, in which teachers disclose their political beliefs as they simultaneously encourage students to disagree with them, consider diverse viewpoints thoughtfully, and welcome all opinions. This approach is the one that both Kelly (1986) and Journell (2016b) have argued is generally the most ethical stance toward disclosure as it allows students to contextualize messages from the teacher.

Table 1

Kelly's (1986) Theoretical Framework on Teacher Political Disclosure

Approach	Definition	Example issue: gun control
Exclusive neutrality	Avoids disclosing by totally avoiding controversial issues	Avoids disclosing opinion on guns by avoiding discussions of all controversial issues
Exclusive partiality	Discloses openly in an effort to indoctrinate	Tells students they must oppose all gun control measures, organizes student participation in gun control effort, bases grades on student opinions
Neutral impartiality	Includes controversial issues, but tries to hide personal opinions	Provides materials from "both sides," plays devil's advocate, dodges student questions about personal opinions
Committed impartiality	Discloses openly, but encourages dissent and debate	Open about 2nd Amendment beliefs, encourages disagreement, "my opinion is just one opinion in the classroom"

Pedagogy of Political Trauma

In studying how K-12 teachers around the U.S. "responded to students' fears, anxieties, and sadness" (p. 176) in the days after the 2016 presidential election, Sondel et al. (2018) offered a *pedagogy of political trauma*. This pedagogical approach illustrates "what is both necessary and possible" (p. 177) for teachers to do to support students who fear physical or psychological

harm as a result of political rhetoric and/or policies. In education research, trauma has often been associated with school shootings (Ayers, 2015) or trauma-informed pedagogical practices (Blitz et al., 2016; Ginwright, 2016); while trauma that results from school shootings or poverty, for example, is not unrelated to politics, the idea that the political sphere is itself a source of trauma that warrants attention in the K-12 classroom has drawn increased scholarly attention (e.g., Abu El-Haj, 2007; Darragh & Petrie, 2019; Sondel et al., 2018). Three components make up Sondel et al.'s (2018) *pedagogy of political trauma*: 1) tending to students' socio-emotional well-being by providing comfort, creating opportunities for processing, and protecting safe space; 2) cultivating students' civic knowledge and capacities by teaching the election process, focusing on checks, balances, and official policies, and cultivating civic dispositions; and 3) teaching toward critical consciousness, activism, and resistance by analyzing inequality, teaching activism and social movements, and engaging in direct action.

Underlying this pedagogy is an assumption, as Payne and Journell (2019) pointed out, that young people bring their political selves into the classrooms in which they are learning, and that there is often a disjuncture between their lived experiences and the lofty democratic ideals taught in school (Rubin, 2007). As Clay and Rubin (2020) put it, "negative encounters with state agents, with police in particular, are part of many young peoples' daily civic lives" (p. 163), shaping how young people understand their relationship to the state, and Cohen and Luttig (2019) argued that carceral violence is essential political knowledge for Black and Latinx youth. "Real-world experiences, knowledges, and skills that young people deploy and develop across contexts of learning… are often positioned as taboo or unsafe to incorporate into classroom learning" (Gallo & Link, 2015, p. 361), leading to disjuncture between home and school lives for students from marginalized populations. These *politicized funds of knowledge* (Gallo & Link,

2015) shape how such young people experience the classroom content with which they interact. As Payne and Journell (2019) wrote:

> Classroom discussions about the viability of building a wall on the Mexican border or deportation policies cannot happen abstractly for many Latino/a students; they will approach such conversations with firsthand knowledge of what happens when families of undocumented immigrants get torn apart. (p. 75)

Controversial issues are not merely public questions that happen "out there" in the abstract realm of the political; they often have real, material consequences in the lives of the young people in ways that classroom discourse does not always attend to. These consequences shape not only how marginalized youth relate to the state, but also what kinds of discussions and engagement are possible in the classroom. They are not only "out there" in the abstract, but also are meaningfully present in the classroom, whether or not teachers and students recognize them to be.

In this study, I draw on the first tenet of the pedagogy of political trauma: tending to students' socio-emotional well-being. Sondel et al. (2018) found that teachers who provided such support to students did so by comforting them, creating opportunities for students to process their emotions and experiences, and maintaining the school or classroom as a safe space for students. Sondel et al. (2018) wrote, "Now, more than ever, students need to feel that their schools are supportive, critical places where they can truly be themselves and feel safe in doing so" (p. 183). As young people bring their trauma (political or otherwise) with them into school, teachers who employ a pedagogy of political trauma place an emphasis on making the classroom safe, welcoming, and caring.

Yet doing so is additionally complicated for teachers when students' experiences of the political trauma are disparate. Many people did not experience the election of Donald Trump as a trauma, but rather as a cause for celebration. Teachers in numerous studies have reported increases in harassment and bullying in schools since the 2016 election related to politics (Costello, 2016; Rogers et al., 2017), especially attributed to student supporters of Trump who "believed they had license to parrot [his] offensive language and, in some cases, use it to intimidate peers who identified with the groups Trump opposed" (Payne & Journell, 2019, p. 73). Tending to students' socio-emotional well-being becomes increasingly difficult when political trauma is unevenly dispersed in the classroom and when students' safety is, in fact, threatened by the language of other students in the same classroom. In addition, schools have often responded to these challenges by attempting not to take sides on political and partisan questions (Sondel et al., 2018). As Sondel et al. (2018) wrote, "[the] idea of remaining neutral while focusing on safety came up a lot in the data, begging the question of whether it is possible to both stay 'neutral' and assure students that they are safe at a time of great fear and trauma" (p. 180). It was this question that drives this study, particularly with respect to contexts where students are subjected to further political trauma from their peers in the classroom.

Sympathetic Touch

Similar to the idea of tending to students' socio-emotional well-being and the arguments made by Woodson and Love (2019) and McKinney de Royston et al. (2020), W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) proposed that a quality education for Black children necessarily includes a "sympathetic touch":

> The proper education of any people includes sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil; knowledge on the part of the teacher, not simply of the individual taught, but of his surroundings and background, and the history of his class and group. (p. 328)

Du Bois was writing a century ago about what Black children need in schools, and his message remains relevant today. On its face, *sympathetic touch* could be read as a suggestion that teachers should be nice to their students. Yet it is clear that his conception of sympathy went beyond kindness and demanded justice-oriented student-teacher relationships and a fundamental understanding of the history of Black people in order to address the historical and sociological roots of racism in schooling. It is an explicit call for teachers to attend to the historical systems of oppression that shape their students' lives as an essential, core element of quality schooling, not something extra that already-good teachers can add to their work. Du Bois's writing framed the sympathetic touch not as an expression of kindness but rather as steps teachers would take to mitigate harm—on both an individual student-teacher level as well as the harm of systemic, institutionalized racism and oppression.

This idea has particular implications for teachers who lead discussions of controversial social and political issues in this contentious political climate. Just as politically bifurcated contexts complicate tending to socio-emotional well-being of all students simultaneously, so too does it make it difficult for teachers to provide a sympathetic touch to all. As has often been a focus in scholarly research, a teacher can communicate sympathy to students of color and/or Black students through high expectations (e.g., Rojas & Liou, 2017), but also through routine pedagogical decisions within classroom discussions, such as stopping a discussion, redirecting comments, or in the framing of guiding questions. These decisions may reveal a teacher's

political beliefs (Niemi & Niemi, 2007) and may also provide a sense of which students have the teacher's sympathy.

Summary

Without question, it is important that students have opportunities to question their assumptions, hear and consider diverse political opinions, and develop the argumentation and critical thinking skills that discussions have been found to impart. It is also important that students have opportunities to learn in settings that are equitable, justice-oriented, and protective of their humanity (McKinney de Royston et al., 2020). In this study, I explored how teachers made sense of where these goals overlap as well as where they diverge.

The empirical literature and theoretical scholarship in this chapter highlight how important it is for teachers to support students in discussing controversial social and political issues in the classroom—and also the promise and challenges particular to doing so in the Trump era. As Hess and McAvoy (2015) wrote, civics is a question of how we live together, and because creating classroom spaces is ultimately about figuring out how to bring young people together in a classroom, it is an inherently civic act (Payne & Journell, 2019). Teachers set "the parameters so that all students can safely participate" in discussions (Justice and Stanley, 2016, p. 41), and in this study, I explored how teachers understood setting those parameters for discussions in the Trump era. As they thought about where to draw the line and their own roles in maintaining a space that was safe for all of their students, to whose socio-emotional well-being did they tend? Which students got a sympathetic touch?

In the next chapter, I provide a description of the methods that guided my study of how social studies teachers around the country made sense of discussing controversial issues, classroom climate, neutrality, and the socio-political hostility of the Trump era.

CHAPTER THREE: Research Design and Methodology

I begin this chapter with an overview of the study's broad aims and methodology. Then I describe the methods of the larger study from which my project emerged, providing important context for my study's methods. Next, I describe the design of my dissertation, including the collection and analysis of the data and a breakdown of the participants. This dissertation does not draw on all of the data collected in the course of the study, but I have described the full process of data collection (Figure 3, p. 54). I close by briefly addressing my positionality as researcher, as my identities and experiences shape how I approached and engaged in this study.

Study Aims

This dissertation emerges out of a larger research project (Rogers et al., 2017) studying teaching and learning in the Trump era; that study sampled teachers in a nationally representative sample of U.S. public high schools, and in this dissertation, I focus on a subset of the social studies teachers from that broader study. I was particularly interested in how social studies teachers situated in different sociopolitical contexts around the United States made sense of a common pedagogical practice that is purported to help young people learn to talk across political difference. How, I wondered, did teachers plan for discussions of issues that were especially personal for young people in their classrooms? What instructional goals drove their decisions, and how did they prioritize when goals conflicted? To what extent did they feel their discussions were shaped by local and national political events? Did it matter when their personal political beliefs differed from the dominant perspective of the school's community? How and to what extent did the local sociopolitical context matter for them? In this dissertation, I sought to explore these general questions with a study of teachers' experiences conducting controversial issue discussions in this contentious political climate.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this work:

1. How do U.S. public high school social studies teachers conceptualize the goals of a) productive discussion of controversial social and political issues and b) classroom safe space? How do they make sense of where these goals come together?
2. How do teachers conceptualize neutrality and political disclosure as they relate to negotiating and advancing these goals?
3. To what extent and in what ways do teachers account for students' personal, political, and social positions, school climate, and community or national political climate as they negotiate or balance these goals?

Methodology

Qualitative Research Methodology

As a study fundamentally interested in how teachers made meaning of their classroom discussion experiences, this dissertation necessarily drew on qualitative research methods. "Qualitative researchers," wrote Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). Because my scholarly interest in this study was in these areas, qualitative methods were most appropriate. While quantitative measures allow for testing and measuring relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014), qualitative methods are more appropriate for investigations of meaning-making, as Miles et al. (2014) explained: "Qualitative data, with their emphasis on people's *lived experiences*, are fundamentally well suited to locating the *meanings* people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the *social world* around them" (pp. 7-8, emphasis in original).

More specifically, as I was interested in how teachers made sense of their experiences, I relied on in-depth, semi-structured interviews. "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). This method allowed me to see through the participants' eyes into their classrooms, explore their thought processes and understandings of pedagogy, and probe the meaning they made of their teaching. It gave me neither an "objective" view of the classroom nor insight into students' experiences of the same classroom moments, but these were not the aim of this study. I was seeking to understand how the participants described their experiences and their sensemaking (Weick, 1995) in order to develop insights into contexts, pedagogy, and the participants' interpretations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Larger Study Context

My dissertation builds on research conducted in Rogers et al.'s (2017) study entitled *Teaching and Learning in the Age of Trump*.[5] That project investigated how teachers' experiences in the classroom were affected in the first few months of the Trump administration. I served as a graduate student researcher on that project as part of the research team at UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA). As I detail further below, the first phase of this study involved a survey conducted online with 1,535 U.S. public high school teachers, and the second phase involved follow-up interviews with 36 teachers. I was part of the research team that conducted these follow-up interviews.

The participants in the larger study were English, social studies, and math teachers nested in 333 representative public high schools across the United States. These high schools were representative of U.S public high schools generally in terms of school size, location across the

[5] My description of the methods in Rogers et al. (2017) draws on that report's methodological appendix (pp. 33-40) as well as my experience as a researcher on that project.

four NCES geographic regions, and student demographics—specifically, the percentage of students who qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch and the percentage of the student population who were White.

The survey was conducted in May 2017 via Qualtrics; the survey protocol can be found in Appendix A. Teachers were asked questions about their perceptions around student well-being and the well-being of families, school climate, classroom discussion pedagogy, teachers' civic beliefs and practices, and an optional free write space. Of the 1,535 teachers who completed the survey, 848 wrote responses to the open-ended question.

The IDEA research team conducted follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of 36 teachers in July and August of 2017. Because these interviews focused on facilitating classroom discussions of social and political issues, English and social studies teachers were recruited from the survey pool to continue their participation; math teachers were not. There were four steps through which the recruitment pool was winnowed. First, 798 teachers indicated within the survey that they were willing to participate in the follow-up interview; those who did not consent to further study participation were excluded from interviews. Second, the research team selected for teachers who worked in schools "in which more than one teacher reported changes in the school climate or student learning in the first months of the Trump administration" (Rogers et al., 2017, p. 36). Third, we identified teachers whose open-ended free write suggested particularly notable or interesting aspects of how teaching and learning were being shaped by social and political climate. Fourth, the free write was used to select for teachers who might have particularly important insights to how school leadership could foster or hinder "a safe, inclusive, and respectful environment amidst political change" (Rogers et al., 2017, p. 36). From there, maximum variability sampling was used in pursuit of demographic diversity of the schools in

this interview pool. Seventy-three teachers were recruited, and 36 interviews were completed, 20 of which were with social studies teachers. Members of the research team conducted these interviews by zoom. Questions followed up on topics in the survey, including school climate, students' well-being, and classroom discussions of controversial issues. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. For further information on the larger study including methodology, see Rogers et al. (2017).

Study Design

For this dissertation study, I conducted a secondary analysis of the interview data from this larger study as well as two additional rounds of follow-up interviews I collected independently. Though I collected data from 36 English and social studies teachers, this dissertation focuses only on the 20 social studies teachers in pursuit of a deeper understanding of how they navigate the particularly political nature of social studies teaching and learning today. Figure 3, on the next page, shows the full context for data collection in my dissertation and the study out of which it emerged: *Teaching and Learning in the Age of Trump* (Rogers et al., 2017), the two rounds of interviews I conducted myself, and my focus on social studies teachers for analysis in this dissertation.

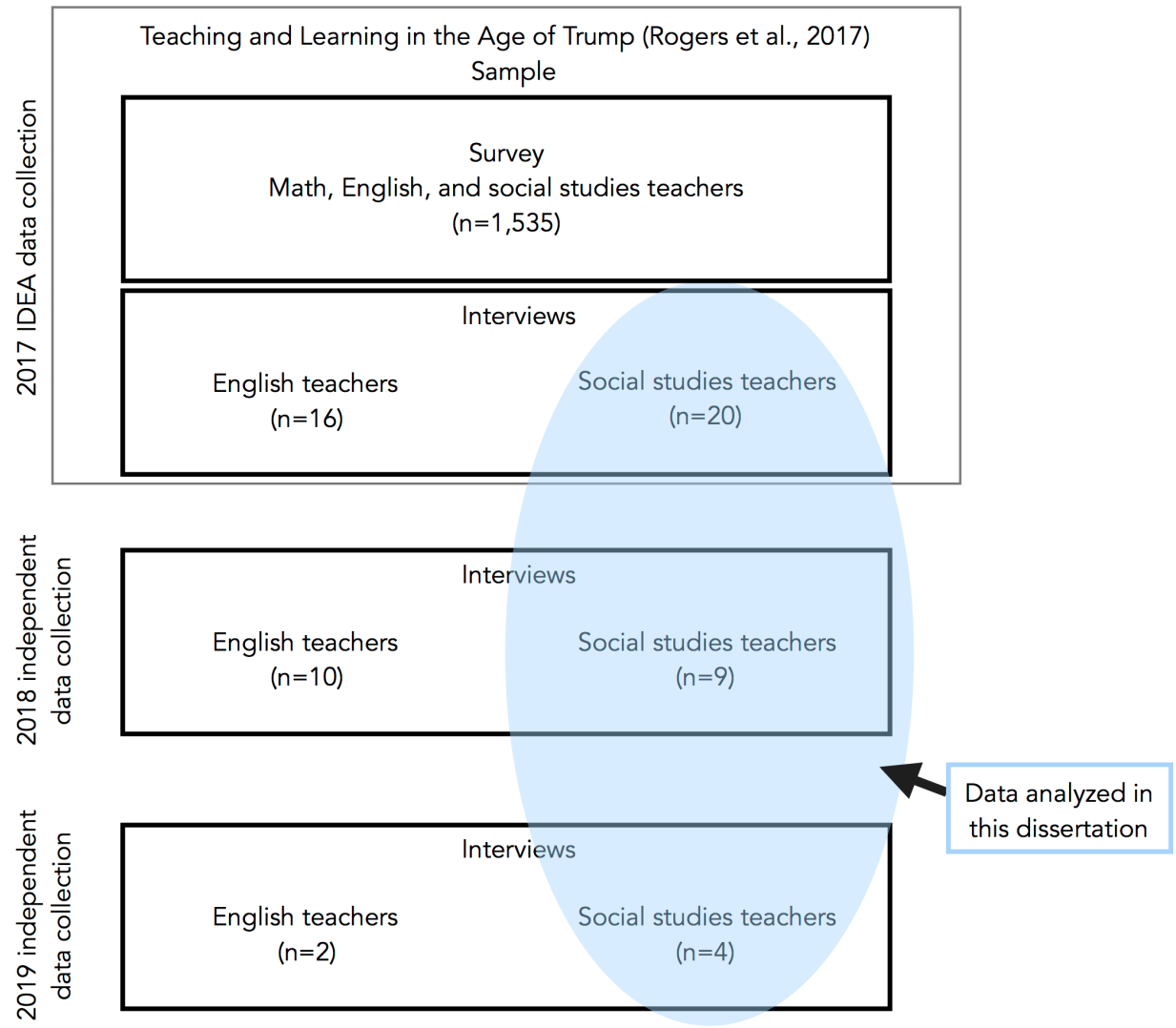
Data Collection

Beyond the interview data collected as part of the IDEA study, I conducted two more rounds of in-depth phenomenological[6] interviews through which I sought to make meaning of these particular teachers' experiences and sensemaking of discussing controversial social and political issues in the U.S. today. All interviews were conducted remotely and recorded via Zoom and lasted between 35 and 65 minutes. These interviews were semi-structured, so each

[6] Phenomenological interviews are primarily concerned with exploring subjects' experiences of the world as they experience it and the meaning they make of those experiences (Bevan, 2014).

Figure 3

Diagram of Data Collected and Data Analyzed



interview protocol was followed closely but not faithfully. I sometimes altered the sequence of questions asked; for example, the protocol in 2018 asked teachers to describe an example lesson in which students were asked to discuss a controversial social or political issue. Some teachers asked for additional time to think about such an example, so in some interviews, I skipped this section and returned to it later on in the interview. In addition, I strayed from the protocols in order to ask unscripted, probing follow up questions. In each subsequent round of interviews,

oral consent was obtained and all participants were provided the opportunity to engage in member checking to review their transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) though none elected to do so.

In spring of 2018, I reached out to all 36 English and social studies teachers who participated in the 2017 IDEA interviews to recruit them for further participation that summer. Of these 36 teachers, 19 scheduled and completed interviews (nine social studies and 10 English teachers) in the summer of 2018 (52.7% retention overall). This round of interviews focused on exploring teachers' experiences in the intervening year, with particular attention on classroom discussions of controversial issues, classroom climate, pedagogical goals, and follow up questions to the 2017 interview. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix C. I conducted one final round of interviews with a small subset of key informants approximately seven months later, after the 2018 Congressional midterm election. For these interviews, conducted in early 2019, I used purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) to select four social studies teachers and two English teachers whose previous interviews had revealed especially complex sociopolitical contexts and/or illuminating ideas about the issues at the core of this study. All six selected teachers scheduled and completed interviews. This last interview protocol focused on their experiences and efforts around teaching during the midterm elections and following up on questions from the previous rounds of data collection. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix D.

Participants

Again, though I collected data from the English teachers, my analysis and writing focus explicitly on the social studies teachers. For the purposes of transparency and completeness, I have provided a table of the English teachers' sample in Appendix E, despite their data having

been excluded in the analysis for this dissertation. Demographically, the sample of all English and social studies teachers together was largely similar to the social studies subsample described in this subsection.

All of the English and social studies teachers who participated in the IDEA study's interviews were selected to continue their participation in the rest of my study; there were no exclusion or inclusion criteria aside from their previous participation. The social studies teachers who participated in any of the three rounds of data collection are organized in Table 2 on the next page, arranged by state then alphabetically by pseudonym. In order to prevent reverse look-up and preserve participants' anonymity, I rounded the demographic data for each teacher's school to the nearest 10% and the percentage of votes that Trump won in the school's Congressional district in 2016 to the nearest 5%. The use of the 2016 Trump vote as an indicator for the local political context is vital, but also not entirely precise; school communities are substantively smaller than congressional districts, may not fall fully within one congressional district, and congressional districts may be gerrymandered in ways that mask a given community's political atmosphere. Nevertheless, the Trump vote is useful for providing some level of context that I use it throughout this dissertation.

The overall sample of teachers interviewed, like the overall teaching force in the United States, was largely comprised of White teachers. Out of the 20 total teachers in the interview sample, 18 identified as White (90%), one identified as African American, and one identified as Asian American. Neither teacher of color participated in the 2018 or 2019 interviews. Though this sample is overwhelmingly White, it is also nearly representative of the national teaching force (Geller, 2020): White teachers comprise 90% of this sample, 84% of high school social studies teachers overall (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017), and 88% of

Table 2

Teacher Sample (Geller, 2020)

Name	Political self-identification	Sex	Race	State	Community political identification	2016 Trump vote	% White	% FRL	Interviewed in…		
Debb	Slightly liberal	F	White	CA	Very liberal	5%	40%	20%	2017	2018	
Ryan	Slightly liberal	M	White	CA	Very liberal	5%	40%	20%	2017	2018	2019
Charlie	Slightly conservative	M	White	CT	Slightly liberal	35%	50%	40%	2017	2018	2019
Jake	Slightly liberal	M	White	DE	Moderate	40%	20%	*	2017		
Susan	Very liberal	F	White	DE	Slightly conservative	40%	50%	*	2017	2018	2019
Clarissa	Slightly liberal	F	White	GA	Slightly liberal	60%	10%	90%	2017	2018	
Anne	Slightly liberal	F	White	NC	Moderate	60%	60%	30%	2017		
Bruce	Moderate	M	White	NC	Slightly conservative	60%	60%	30%	2017	2018	
Jordan	Very liberal	M	White	NC	Slightly liberal	30%	0%	60%	2017		
Jude	Slightly conservative	M	White	NC	Very conservative	65%	90%	40%	2017		
Troy	Slightly liberal	M	White	NH	Very conservative	50%	60%	50%	2017	2018	
David	Slightly conservative	M	White	NV	Slightly liberal	45%	10%	70%	2017		
Doreen	Slightly liberal	F	African American	NV	Slightly liberal	45%	10%	70%	2017		
Daniel	Moderate	M	White	NY	Slightly conservative	55%	80%	20%	2017		
Tom	Slightly liberal	M	White	OH	Slightly liberal	15%	60%	10%	2017		
Richard	Slightly liberal	M	White	TN	Moderate	65%	70%	*	2017	2018	2019
Nicole	Very liberal	F	White	UT	Slightly liberal	45%	60%	40%	2017		
Will	Very liberal	M	White	VA	Slightly liberal	30%	50%	20%	2017		
Hannah	Very liberal	F	Asian American	WA	Moderate	40%	70%	10%	2017		
Joshua	Slightly liberal	M	White	WI	Slightly conservative	60%	60%	50%	2017	2018	

Notes. 2016 Trump vote provides the percent of votes for Trump in 2016 in the Congressional district in which the school is located. Because Congressional districts are an imperfect proxy for the local political climate, teachers also described the community's political leanings on a Likert scale ("Community political identification"). % White and % FRL (Free/reduced lunch) provide a very broad idea of school demographics using data from NCES in 2016-17. Asterisk (*) indicates NCES did not have available data. In order to prevent reverse look-up of schools or teachers, election results were rounded to the nearest 5% and school demographic figures to the nearest 10%. This table is derived in part from an article in *Theory & Research in Social Education,* March 20, 2020 copyright College and University Faculty Assembly of National Council for the Social Studies (CUFA), available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2020.1740125.

the high school teaching force overall (Hansen et al., 2018). Both teachers of color were women, meaning all of the men who participated identified as White. Seven of the participants identified as women, and 13 identified as men. Politically, teachers identified across the political spectrum from very liberal to slightly conservative, though they leaned heavily towards the left: 14% identified as slightly conservative, 10% identified as moderate, and 76% identified as slightly or very liberal. Teachers reported a range of classroom experience: four teachers were in their first five years in the classroom, 11 teachers had been teaching between five and 20 years, and five were in year 20 or more. One was going on forty years as a classroom teacher.

The teachers in this study came from diverse local sociopolitical contexts. They taught in 14 different states across the United States, in congressional districts that Trump won in 2016 and those that Clinton won. At the extremes, one school was in a congressional district in which Trump won approximately 5% of the vote, and one was in a district in which he won around 65%. Due to the imprecision of the 2016 Trump vote as a barometer for the local political context as I described above, I used that information alongside the teacher's response to a question on the survey which asked them to characterize their school community's political leaning on a Likert scale from very conservative to very liberal. Of course, while the 2016 Trump vote may be an imperfect measure, a Likert-scale characterization is imprecise in its own way; for one, it is certainly shaped by their personal political perspective and their experiences, which is why colleagues nested within the same school community might characterize its politics differently. Thus, I cite teachers' characterizations to provide context for their sensemaking, but provide both points of data in the participant charts. Again, it is worth reiterating that while the schools at which the survey participants taught were a representative sample of U.S. public high schools, the sample of teachers interviewed was not—and was not intended to be—

representative of U.S. public high school teachers. These teachers were selected through the previously described process; the aim was to find teachers who would illuminate the challenging dynamics happening in schools rather than a sample that was strictly representative. In addition, the nature of the larger study's overall sample—teachers who were nested within representative high schools—meant that the interview sub-sample included some participating teachers who taught together. There were three pairs of social studies colleagues, each in a different state, as shown below in Table 3.

Table 3

Colleagues Nested Within Schools

School State	Teacher Name
California	Debb
	Ryan
Nevada	David
	Doreen
North Carolina	Anne
	Bruce

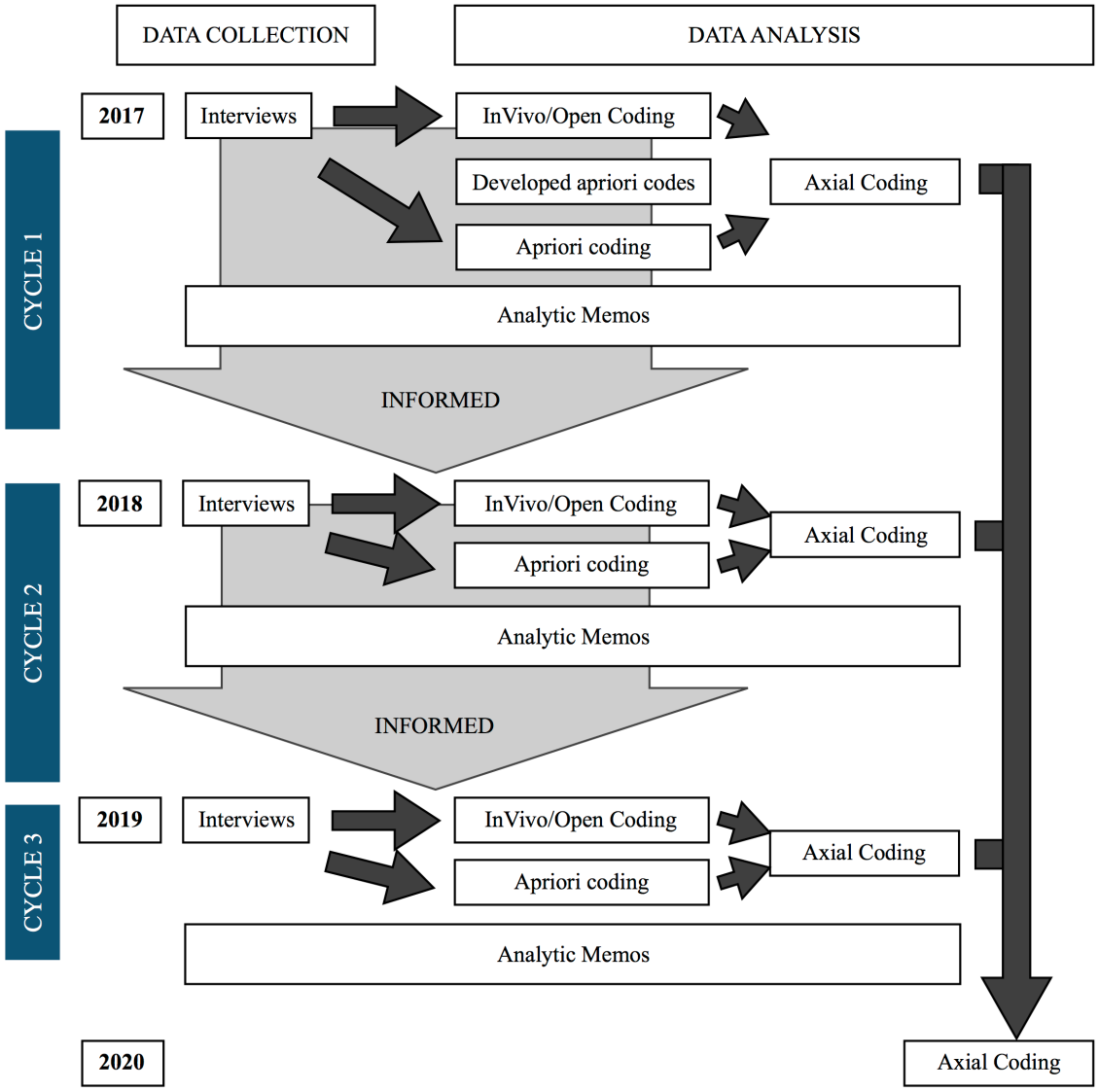
Data Analysis

In total, this dissertation draws on analyses of 33 interviews across all three rounds of data collection. Each was audio recorded through the record function in Zoom and transcribed either by a commercial transcription service or me. I checked each transcript for accuracy after the fact, eliminating identifying information and rectifying errors. I uploaded all transcripts into MaxQDA data analysis software. After each interview, I kept a log of important details about the conversation and any burgeoning themes that I sensed emerging. Throughout the collection and analysis of all data, I wrote analytic memos in which I reflected on patterns and themes emerging from the data (Maxwell, 2013). Figure 4 on the next page represents the process through which

this analysis took place: three cycles of interviewing and analysis, with each cycle made up of multiple rounds of coding and analytic memos.

Figure 4

Analytic Process



Upon completion of each round of interviewing, I conducted two cycles of coding and analysis. Each analytic cycle allowed me to fine-tune subsequent data collection as well; for instance, the insights I gained during my secondary analysis of the 2017 IDEA interviews informed the interviews I conducted the following summer, and those interviews in turn

informed the questions I asked six months later in early 2019. Combining the collection and analysis of the data allows qualitative researchers to refine the collection and analytic tools, making for more substantive findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The first coding cycle was the secondary analysis of the 2017 IDEA interviews. Because my research questions were still under construction at that point, I focused on InVivo and Open Coding (Saldaña, 2009) that emphasized the participants' words as critical analytic tools, allowing me to keep their ideas at the forefront. This initial round of coding helped me to shape the direction for this research, informing research questions, subsequent interview protocols, and analysis.

Before I conducted the 2018 interviews, I drew on the 2017 IDEA interviews, my research questions, and theoretical frameworks to develop preliminary, provisional codes for the ensuing interviews. For example, for the first research question—*How do U.S. public high school social studies teachers conceptualize the goals of a) productive discussion of controversial social and political issues and b) classroom safe space?*—I expected that teachers might articulate climate goals relating to student voice. Therefore, I created an anticipated code of "feel voice heard" as a way of categorizing those instances, should they arise. I revisited the 2017 interviews with these codes and conducted this top-down coding. These anticipated codes were then set aside and I returned to them later, as I explain below.

In each further cycle of analysis, I also began by centering the participants' own words and ideas using InVivo, Open, and Structural Coding (Saldaña, 2009). For example, it was in this round of coding that I noticed how frequently teachers described an increase in how frequently students expressed intolerant viewpoints in the course of classroom discussions. This observation was not something I had anticipated and thus was not in my preliminary coding scheme. Yet it

seemed important for understanding the contexts in which teachers were operating so I began coding these instances according to the form of intolerance expressed. Having completed coding that privileged the participants' experiences and sensemaking, I returned to the anticipated, apriori codes that I created before conducting the interviews, which were grounded in the research questions, existing literature, and theory. Once I had coded each interview twice in this way, I began constructing code categories through Axial Coding (Saldaña, 2009), compiling the codes together, tracing harmonies and tensions between the participants' experiences and the concepts found in the literature. Engaging in this analytical process allowed me to ensure the primacy of the participants' sensemaking and experiences, while also contextualizing them within the theory more broadly. At the end of each cycle of coding, I had codes that drew on the participants' sensemaking, on the theoretical frameworks, and axial codes that compiled these together. Finally, I brought all three cycles of coding together to build abstraction and develop broad insights across participants, school sites, and years, reorganizing these codes by themes and patterns (Bazeley, 2013).

My analysis in this dissertation is concentrated on exploring how teachers understood and experienced discussions of controversial social and political issues across schools and local contexts within the particularly charged national political climate of 2017 through 2019. While the sub-sample of teachers in this study emerged from a nationally representative sample of schools, my aim ultimately was not to make generalizable claims but rather to develop a deeper understanding both of teachers' experiences across diverse local contexts and of the meaning they made of those contexts. As McKinney de Royston et al. (2020) wrote, "Attempts at quantifying this type of qualitative phenomenon can obfuscate and overshadow the importance of understanding how phenomenon were communicated, experienced, or made sense of by

participants" (p. 14). As such, I limited the extent to which I quantified how often a given idea was expressed. As Dunn et al. (2019) wrote, "the presence of such contexts in *some* cases or *many* cases is worthy of exploration and analysis, regardless of the specific frequency of those factors across *all* cases" (p. 452, emphasis in original). The pedagogical decisions at the center of this study are deeply contextual and personal (Geller, 2020; Journell, 2016c; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016) and call for scholarly attention to that nuance, even if at the expense of representativeness or generalizability (Dunn et al., 2019). This dissertation explores the scope of teachers' experiences across disparate geographic, sociopolitical contexts and therefore is more interested in broad patterns than in frequency counts.

Researcher Positionality

My research, including this dissertation, is informed by my identities as a middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, multiracial Asian American and White woman and my experiences as a scholar and teacher committed to social justice in public education. My mom raised me largely by herself; she was an academic advisor in student services at the University of Washington's College of Education throughout my childhood and took me into her office with some regularity. There, her students, colleagues, and friends became my friends—indeed, my family—and taught me early lessons about racism and schooling in the United States. When I was in 10th grade, one of my mom's graduate students, Kipchoge Kirkland, mentored me on my National History Day project on *Brown v. Board of Education* (Figure 5, next page), an experience that fundamentally shaped how I thought about research, teaching, and mentorship. In such an environment, it is utterly unsurprising that I became a social studies teacher committed to social justice.

When I was a middle school social studies teacher in Oakland, California, I wanted to illuminate the ways in which the world as my students experienced it had been shaped by

Figure 5

History Day Practice at UW Educators for Social Justice Meeting with Kipchoge Kirkland

history. I wanted them to see that the content with which we wrestled daily echoed in their present; it was not relegated strictly to the lives of people who lived in centuries past, but rather had palpable, concrete consequences today. I wanted them to understand that their lives were shaped by policy decisions made by people, and that as people, they too can reshape the world into something new and just. I had a recurring current events assignment, and was well known in our building for throwing out lesson plans to talk about the news with my students. One day, as I stood on supervision duty during a morning nutrition break, a fairly new student approached me. "Ms. Cooper," he said, "I have a quick question. Why is there a conflict between Israel and Syria?" (I laughed and told him that it might be a quick question, but it was not a quick answer!)

When I organized field trips for some of my students across the country to Washington, D.C., I wanted to find ways for them to see themselves in halls of power, like when I took four Latina students to the Supreme Court (Figure 6) and was thrilled to see them excited to participate in a protest and tell me about how a protestor used pathos in her speech to the crowd outside the Court. They beamed when Justice Sotomayor asked a question during our brief time observing in the Courtroom during oral arguments. I prioritized creating a classroom space in

Figure 6

4th Annual Cubs to Congress Field Trip, Oral Arguments in Burwell v. Hobby Lobby *(2014)*[7]

which my students learned not only how to answer test questions about history, but also how to be responsible, thoughtful leaders. While I was of the mind that I should not impress my own political beliefs on my students, I did not exactly hide my bias and perspective. During the 2012 presidential election, one student asked for whom I intended to vote; another responded, "Dude, if you don't already know, you haven't been listening."

I also believed that it was important for me, as a teacher, to stand in solidarity with my students. Should I have remained quiet about threats to my students' sociopolitical well-being, I believed they would nevertheless have received a tacit message that I was accepting, comfortable, or at the least disinterested in the impact of these events on their lives. That meant, for instance, hard classroom conversations in the wake of Oscar Grant and Trayvon Martin's killings and the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. My students were aware of the news and my reactions to what went on in the world. In my classroom, caring about my students' humanity

[7] See footnote 1.

was incompatible with appearing unconcerned, complicit, and silent in the face of their political trauma. Though I was talking with my students about deeply political ideas and issues on a daily basis, I felt that I was behaving professionally because I was not flagrantly throwing out my partisan opinions but was speaking out in solidarity with their well-being. I was helping my students make sense of their world by sharing how I made sense of it. I was able to square my non-disclosure with this kind of sharing and did not feel that my stance was particularly dissonant because I was enacting the professional standard for social studies teachers and was also placing myself in my students' corner. I thought I was just threading the needle on how to be neutral in the classroom… but not too neutral.

This classroom experience, when taken in conjunction with methodological decisions, influenced the way I was able to complete this research. The nature of this study impacted my ability to build relationships and trust in my data collection, and affected where I understood myself in relationship to them as an insider or an outsider. Multiple factors ensured distance and outsider status. Conducting interviews over Zoom—and in which participants sometimes called in on the phone, so we could not see each other—necessarily created considerable distance between us. I interviewed teachers with very different backgrounds and political commitments who were from many different kinds of communities; in many cases, it was clear that they and I shared political beliefs, and in others it was clear to me that we saw the world in fundamentally different ways. With the exception of one school, I was only familiar with the local sociopolitical context through IDEA's analysis of the school and local demographic data.

From the beginning of my work with the IDEA research team, it was clear that conducting these interviews would call on me to find ways around these challenges so that I could build trust. We were discussing topics that were deeply politically charged and

uncomfortable; it could have been a source of shame for teachers to have to admit not responding sufficiently to incidents in their schools. If this study was to produce any knowledge worth knowing, I needed teachers to be willing to share these experiences with me openly. In order to work around these obstacles and to build these relationships in short time frames, I cited my own classroom experience in follow up questions. For example, when one teacher said he welcomed controversy no matter what, I responded, "I taught middle school social studies, and I remember how hard it was when students really got heated about something we were talking about in class. How do you think about the role of emotions in these discussions?" By referencing my own experience, I was able to signal to him that I was approaching the question with some level of insider status, that I understood and recognized the difficulty of the task about which I was asking. I also took care to phrase my questions in ways that communicated my sincere desire to learn about them and their practice rather than a place of judgment and censure.

As a scholar of educational equity and civic education writing during the Trump administration, I have looked back on my classroom often and considered what I would do. I appreciate that pressures and factors that did not exist when I was in the classroom are present for many teachers today. The questions that drive this study derive from my engagement with the broader literature, but are undoubtedly influenced by my experience as a teacher and my social, scholarly, and political commitments and beliefs.

CHAPTER FOUR: Context

This chapter is the first in which I present findings from my dissertation research. Before I can address the research questions, however, I must first attend to two findings that create important context for those that follow. These findings provide important context for subsequent chapters as I explore how teachers thought about disclosing their political beliefs and providing safety to students in controversial issue discussions. First, the teachers in this study—U.S. high school social studies teachers in the Trump era—described new levels of intolerance and sociopolitical hostility being expressed by some students.

Second, they also described what I call *epistemic contentiousness*, which has two primary components. *Epistemic* speaks to ways in which teachers' and schools' intellectual authority was challenged as inherently invalid and illegitimate, and *contentiousness* relates to how these challenges were hostile, illiberal, and combative in tone. Taken together, epistemic contentiousness speaks to ways in which some teachers and schools faced hostile, politically-charged challenges to the idea that they had any authority at all in constructing and providing knowledge. It is important to distinguish this from students who have critically questioned the teaching of hegemonic historical narratives, for example, because unlike in those instances, epistemic contentiousness did not involve appeals to critical reading of materials, examining other evidence and data, or reading multiple sources. Instead, as you will read, it involved blanket assumptions that data and information teachers provided were patently false *because* they came from teachers, and rejections of schools as places with any role at all to play in the production, analysis, or transmission of knowledge.

In the sections that follow, I will begin with a broad description of these two findings across all participants in the study, which will allow for an expansive examination across

contexts and participants. This zoomed out, "36,000 foot" snapshot is then balanced by zoomed in deep dives into two teachers, which illustrate how intolerance and epistemic contentiousness played out for them in their local contexts. Providing both the big picture and the deep dives allows me to speak to broad trends and patterns as well as to the particularities, nuance, and contextual specificities of the individual. The deep dive focuses on teachers who came from schools at the extreme ends of the political spectrum: Debb from California, in the most liberal Congressional district in the study, and Richard from Tennessee, in the most conservative Congressional district in the study.

Zoomed Out: Study-wide Trends

In this section, I explore teachers' accounts of intolerance and epistemic contentiousness. In order to protect teachers' anonymity, I have blurred the edges of any data that could be used to look up the teachers or contexts, and erred on the side of being more general rather than divulging details that could identify them. While this methodological decision may result in a frustrating lack of specificity in some of my reporting, I felt it was important to preserve the confidentiality that I assured the participants they would have during this process.

Intolerance

"Kids Turned It on Him"

In keeping with other research conducted since the election of 2016 (Costello, 2016; Dunn et al., 2019; Natanson et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2019), teachers in this study reported heightened levels of incivility and hate speech from students towards both their peers and teachers, and that students sometimes wielded that intolerance in the course of classroom discussions. Nicole, in a slightly liberal part of Utah, said, "At times, like, a few students were saying things just to be uncivil. Not even to convince people of their point, it was

more of just to kind of be a jerk." This dynamic echoed how Serwer (2018) has described Trumpism as a broader phenomenon: "the cruelty is the point." Teachers explicitly associated broader national political contentiousness with what they saw taking place in their schools, as Daniel, a social studies teacher in New York, did in 2017 when he said:

> This particular year—and of course it was an election year, and because certain politicians are out there spewing things to get some attention and some votes, that was our first year I had an issue where it was … a very, very difficult classroom to control.

Ryan, a teacher in a very liberal community in California whose colleague is profiled below and who is himself subject of a chapter five deep dive, echoed this point. As I describe later in this chapter, his school had serious challenges in 2016-17 due in large part to an anti-Black and misogynistic social media scandal. He said that teachers blamed it on parents and parents blamed the teachers, but he saw the impact of the national political climate:

> It's funny to me that few people have brought up the political climate and have brought up the election of Donald Trump. … I don't know how that could *not* be connected to the election of Trump… Maybe this is factors [sic] that are bigger than our school, bigger than our district.

Many described students who felt their conservative political perspective was marginalized in liberal schools and took Trump's election as license to speak out more forcefully. Tom, a teacher in a slightly liberal area of Ohio, explained:

> Students who support Donald Trump have felt empowered to bully or call out people who they think would disagree with them. That is significant, although because we're generally a liberal district, they have probably felt marginalized in the past and are now feeling more emboldened.

Anne, in North Carolina, concurred:

> The students that were in support of some of the current administration's policies … would kind of go on these rampages and I would have to bring them back in, and the students that felt victimized by some of these policies shut down.

Teachers across the country said that students—especially those who supported Donald Trump's election—had been emboldened to lash out at peers and adults.

In particular, teachers reported that these emboldened students tended to be conservative, White, and male; characterized them as increasingly vocal, angry; and recounted instances when students used blatant hate speech in the classroom. Ryan said, "There is unquestionably an increase in students—primarily White males—making jokes about people based on their race, disability, ethnicity, or gender. There have also been incidents of Nazi salutes in hallways and swastikas drawn on boards and bathrooms." Nicole felt that the time following Trump's election was singular in her career: "In 24 years, I had never seen behavior this brash. There were misogynistic, racist, classist undertones to many of their comments." She went on to recount how, after the 2016 election, an undocumented student at her school had his immigration status used against him: "He made comments before the election about, 'This is why we can't elect Donald Trump.' And so, as soon as the election was over, after he shared that, kids turned it on him." It is important to note that these reports—of students who supported Trump and his policy agenda using classroom space to voice opinions that were overtly hostile to peers from marginalized groups—came from teachers working in conservative, liberal, and contested Congressional districts. It was not a dynamic that was unique to a particular kind of place, school, or teacher.

"My God, You Can't Be Saying Stuff Like That"

The participants recounted students' comments that were transphobic, racist, misogynistic, White supremacist, xenophobic, homophobic, Islamophobic, and anti-Semitic. Without question, similar hateful behavior existed in schools prior to the election of 2016, and while intolerance in schools is not unique to the Trump era, the teachers in this dissertation did speak to their experiences of intolerance and bullying as qualitatively different. As Nicole said, "I've never seen 14- and 15-year-olds act in the way that they did until this year." In this subsection, I catalogue some descriptions of the intolerance that teachers described. Please note that the words and actions described in this subsection are vile, ugly, and deeply offensive.

Teachers reported bullying associated with immigration that drew on the language of the Trump campaign and administration. While some of these comments were said to come in the course of classroom discussions, it was clear that teachers understood that off-hand comments made in the hallway colored discussions and classroom climate as well. Jude identified as slightly conservative and taught in a very conservative area of North Carolina. He recalled how students at his "overwhelmingly" White school lobbed political rhetoric at their peers:

> I'm noticing that you hear a lot of kids talking about—well, especially towards Hispanic children—the wall and, "Hey, we're gonna build a wall. You guys need to go over there and stay there. You ain't gonna be able to get back." Just things of that nature, which cause lots of stress and lots of tension in the classroom.

In addition to these comments made in the broader context of the school that impacted his classroom, Jude also described an incident in which a student made a xenophobic, racist comment in the course of a lesson:

> We were talking Columbus enslaving the Natives … and mistreating the Natives there and the comment was made, "Well, that's what needed to happen. They were just dumb people anyways like they are today. That was the purpose, that's why we need a wall."

This statement—that Indigenous people deserved enslavement and genocide and that today's immigrants are the same—caused, as Jude remembered, a "big huge rile in the classroom" with groups of students on both sides of the issue. He recalled intervening, and reflected, "I mean, my God, you can't be saying stuff like that."

Issues relating to gender came up frequently in teacher interviews as triggering intolerant opinions, including general topics like girls' education and maternal health indicators as well as specific current events like the *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump bragged about sexual assault. Ryan's students staged a walkout during the 2018 Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Brett Kavanaugh when Christine Blasey Ford testified before the Senate. Teachers—especially women—recounted instances in which students—especially boys—made overtly misogynistic in-class comments. Nicole, in Utah, said:

> I was shocked. I'm a female teacher, and you have these 14-year-old boys sitting in my class saying, like, "Women aren't fit to lead. Women should just be staying home." I mean, it was questioning women's intelligence. It was really shocking.

Some of the misogynistic comments related specifically to Hillary Clinton and echoed the misogyny she and her campaign faced. As Nicole went on to say:

> I had one male student, a 14-year-old, who consistently made misogynistic comments about Hillary Clinton. They were "Women aren't fit to lead," and, "Who does she think she is?" and then got into real specific things like Dirty Hillary and Benghazi. Then, would say to the students, like, "You guys are all stupid. She has you brainwashed."

Susan, who taught in a politically bifurcated, "purple" area of Delaware (and who is profiled in chapter six), described students' misogynistic comments in discussions of gender and equity in her AP Human Geography course:

> We were talking about … gender equality and economic gender equality … and [boys] discussed how women should not have the right to vote, citing innumerous issues: women are too emotional being number one among them, and they cause drama in everything that they're involved in.

Teachers also reported tensions in their classrooms related to sexual orientation and gender identity, with students who "were really kind of hostile towards anybody that would be challenging traditional gender norms," as described by Hannah, a teacher in a moderate area of Washington. Three teachers spoke specifically to students' making transphobic comments in classes where there were also students undergoing gender transitions or who had transitioned, such as this memory Hannah shared:

> One of the students said, "Well, isn't there really high suicide rate amongst transgender populations?" I was like, "Yes, it is higher than normal in the population, but there are reasons for that." They're like, 'Well, isn't it just because they hate themselves?" And just a throwaway comment like that, when you know there's a student two seats away who attempted suicide, who's transgender. It was just… you know, that's really raw.

Some teachers reported that students expressed homophobic opinions in the classroom, and many more observed that "LGBT students" were concerned about their well-being due to Mike Pence's position as Vice President and his long history of homophobic personal beliefs and public policies.

The most egregious incidents in these data involved racism, especially anti-Black racism. Susan recalled a student who made explicitly White supremacist arguments to defend the institution of slavery. (This student was moved out of her class when she brought the student's claims to her administrators' attention and both they and the student's parents were unmoved by her concern.) Multiple teachers cited incidents in which students displayed the Confederate battle flag; this often happened in the wake of discussions about the removal of Confederate monuments, though not always.

Worse still are the examples of when racist speech turned to racist death threats, even threats of lynching that students apparently insisted were jokes. Ryan and his colleague, Debb, worked at a school in the most liberal Congressional district in the study and which was also the site of a social media firestorm that I detail in the next section. Students at their school created a social media account that used images of their peers and school staff alongside monkeys, nooses, fat jokes, and revenge porn. Hannah, from Washington, recounted a class session in a colleague's classroom where the teacher used Kahoot, an online quiz game in which students can make up anonymous aliases. In this class, one student created the username "'Kill the' and then the n-word." Whereas some teachers reported administrators who were unmoved by students' using the n-word, Hannah's administrators went so far as to call the police and bar the student from graduation.

Two issues emerged as sources of newfound tensions and intolerance, though not generally as topics of classroom discourse. First, two teachers detailed anti-Semitism in school, including Debb, below. In both cases, they reported students' performing Nazi salutes in hallways, swastika graffiti, and Holocaust denial. No teachers described centering discussions on topics that related to anti-Semitism, but within their school contexts, this was an issue that

students brought to the fore. Second, the issue of gun control and gun rights came up potently for teachers in the 2018 and 2019 interviews following the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in 2018 and the subsequent student-led anti-gun movement called the March For Our Lives. It was not frequently cited as a planned topic of classroom discussion, but the school-level walkouts and community responses thereto clearly colored how teachers understood their local political contexts. Richard, profiled below, described especially challenging community-level contentiousness that arose in relation to the student walkouts.

Throughout this study, teachers reported these elevated levels of intolerance at their schools and inconsistent responses to it. Some teachers reported that they and their administrators took stands against sociopolitical hostility and situated themselves in solidarity with marginalized youth targeted by that hostility. Sometimes, teachers said that any student who used hate speech in their classrooms would be kicked out of class, but without having thought about what did and did not constitute hate speech, they were left understanding it the way Supreme Court Justice Stewart understood pornography: "I know it when I see it" (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 1964). This imprecise definition left considerable space for discretion and subjectivity. Many teachers also described allowing free speech to reign, as I describe in the next chapter, and largely only intervened in response to egregious hate speech or flagrant threats.

"They Really Called Out the Best Parts in a Lot of Students"

Though all teachers described some level of increased intolerance, many also spoke to efforts that students made to build bridges across lines of difference and to encourage tolerance. Many of the teachers said that students exhibited new levels of empathy, friendship, and

kindness. As Joshua said, it was "added compassion." These descriptions were not political in nature, but teachers understood them as related to the hostility of the broader political climate.

They also described students who took up new forms of civic and political participation, both at school and outside of it. Many teachers reported that more students participated in campaigns, rallies, and protests than they recalled having been the case in previous election cycles. They had students who supported presidential campaigns from Bernie Sanders to Ted Cruz, attended the inauguration and the Women's March, and organized letter-writing campaigns to elected officials. They also said that their students were much more aware of the news and asked questions about what was going on in the world.

A few also described students who responded to the political moment and its manifestation in their schools with actions grounded in justice and self-advocacy. Ryan and Debb's school, described in depth later in this chapter, was the site of vile racism, but they also reported multiple instances of student organizing. Ryan said that in the wake of the election, a number of students took it upon themselves to create a group that peer-taught lessons grounded in educating about oppression, social justice, and racism. Their students also organized three walk-outs in the three years of this study: one following the 2016 election, another to participate in the March For Our Lives, and one more during Christine Blasey Ford's testimony at Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court Senate confirmation hearing. Ryan recounted that a number of students shared their personal experiences with sexual assault at that final protest—something that Nicole also remembered happening at her school during the 2016 election, particularly at the release of the *Access Hollywood* tape. Tom recounted that some of his students organized a donation drive to send supplies to the water defenders at Standing Rock. These teachers

described these efforts as coming from students, not driven by adults, and coming in direct response to national political events.

No participants in this study suggested that their school was immune from increased levels of intolerance; every teacher in the study had a specific story of a moment when students expressed hate speech or intolerance. Together, these data are not generalizable to all schools, but they do paint a clear, widespread picture of educators in various parts of the U.S. grappling with increasing intolerance towards marginalized youth in schools.

Epistemic Contentiousness

Teachers also described conditions I have called epistemic contentiousness, in which some students, families, and community members lodged ideological challenges to the inherent legitimacy of schools and teachers to provide knowledge at all—particularly when the teachers involved were women. As previously discussed in chapter two, deep contestation with regards to fact, truth, and "valid" ways of knowing is endogenous to public schools, and to social studies courses in particular. Some teachers seek to foster habits of skepticism and critical thinking so students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge, but producers of knowledge themselves who bring a critical eye to what they read. The epistemic contentiousness that teachers in this study described, however, was not confined to disputes of historical interpretation; rather, they involved interpersonal hostility and hate speech that took place alongside and sometimes in conjunction with rejections of the knowledge taught. Teachers described struggling to deal with students who trusted misinformation from partisan sources, discounted anything that disconfirmed their misinformation as obviously biased liberal indoctrination, and whose contestations often were aimed at data that suggested sexism, racism, or American un-exceptionalism.

For instance, multiple women teachers recounted instances when boys in their classes were unwilling to consider data or sources at all, particularly when related to gender equity. Two teachers in this study, Nicole and Susan, taught Advanced Placement Human Geography courses in which this happened. When Nicole's class studied the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI), a composite measure of "average achievement" in each nation that draws on numerous variables (UNDP, 2019), she intended for her students to learn skills in data analysis. She noted that some factors in the HDI calculation meant that the U.S. was lower on the list than some students may have expected, including those relating to gender equity. Nicole said that she noted that though the wage gap between men and women is a significant part of how gender equity is conceived of in the U.S., it is not a component of the HDI, which instead uses such gender-related factors as how many women are in elected leadership or girls' access to education. One of her students "turned it into, like, 'The whining women in the United States,' and, "The only reason that we're not up there, women aren't as qualified as men so they shouldn't be paid as much as men.'" Her student dismissed the data, its source (the United Nations), and her authority to provide and interpret data in the classroom, all while misrepresenting what was even measured in the first place. Susan described similar push-back from students when she taught the HDI:

> I get students who are like, "Why are you saying America is not the best?" And like, I'm not. I'm just showing you that, "Here is the data of life expectancy. These are not things that I'm making up to you."

She said that boys in her classes made similar comments in relation to lessons in which students looked at maternal mortality rates worldwide and in relation to "other developed countries. And then they'll say, 'Oh, I don't think that's true.'" She took pains to state that she understood and

valued different perspectives and historical interpretations, but that the students in question were unwilling to engage with sources that "maybe don't agree with what they believe to be true." Ryan did not experience this gender-related epistemic contentiousness firsthand, but recognized it as a pattern that happened for his colleagues who were women with students who were boys.

Teachers also reported that students' challenges to textbooks went beyond the kind of academic skepticism that teachers sought to engender and into, as one teacher put it, "paranoia." Susan described a moment when her AP Human Geography class was studying natural resources on the planet when she said, "Our textbook … gives [an] … estimate of how much we know as far as proven reserves of natural resources for coal, gas, and oil. It's right in the book. And [my student] was like, "'That's not true.'" Ryan remembered a lesson that he taught about Hernán Cortés and the colonization of the Aztecs that was in part designed to teach students to interrogate sources and read critically. After reading a textbook account, he said he asked students if there were reasons not to trust it, and was taken aback by a student's assertion that the U.S. government controlled textbook content, had manipulated this textbook, and made up lies due to its 19th century, colonial rivalry with Spain over the territory that is now the southwestern United States. While Ryan acknowledged the role that states play in crafting the standards that shape textbooks, he felt this student's belief that the federal government lied about Cortés in a 21st century high school history book for the sole purpose of exacting revenge on another country because they competed for land over 150 years ago (and which, incidentally, is part of the United States) as paranoid and weird. Again, while Ryan's objective with the lesson was to foster critical reading skills, this student went well beyond that to a conspiratorial place.

In addition to textbook content, teachers reported similar challenges to content in the classroom. Susan felt that "things that are not supported factually but have become very

commonplace have to be discussed in class, even if you know they're not accurate," going on to offer the causes of the Civil War as an example:

> I see it a lot with what caused the Civil War. I get a lot of kids going about that. "It wasn't slavery, it was states' rights, was it economic differences…" I have a lot of students that really don't want to say that it was slavery, even though pretty much all modern historical literature that we have on the issue says that that was the cause of the war. It's what the primary sources say. It's in the Declaration of Secession for the [Confederate] states. But then you get a parent that's going to come back to you and say, "You're teaching your kids a liberal history."

Hannah said that every couple of weeks, students at her school made noise that teachers "weren't teaching in a balanced way." Clarissa shared a story from a school near hers, where a homework assignment to learn about the five pillars of Islam became a local news story: "It was all in the news, like, 'I don't want my kid learning about this. Why aren't they learning about the Bible?'" As has been true for many of the dynamics I have described already in this chapter, anti-Muslim sentiment is hardly new but is an ongoing tension in many communities that has become combined with these broader patterns of intolerance to factor into interactions between students and teachers.

Zoomed In: Deep Dives

Turning away from the general trends in the data, I now focus on two particular teachers whose contexts spoke potently to these two themes. Both of them experienced heightened levels of hate speech and intolerance at their schools as well as epistemic contentiousness. Whereas the zoom-out allowed me to see the broad patterns across the diverse contexts in which the

participants taught, these zoom-ins allow me to see the local, particular ways that the themes manifested for individual teachers and their contexts.

Debb (California)

"There was a little chunk of them that [were] like, 'Fuck this Social Justice Warrior, liberal, P.C. bullshit.'"

Debb taught social studies in a community in California that she characterized as "very liberal." The school was located in a Congressional district that Clinton won in 2016 by a margin of over 90%, meaning Trump won approximately 5% of the total vote. It was by far the most liberal setting in this study. While her school was not located in a big city, it was in a very large metropolitan area. With regard to the student body's racial demographics, the plurality of students at was White at 40%, with Asian and Hispanic[8] students making up the next largest racial subgroups at her school. The school's community and its student population were largely affluent, though 20% of students qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch. As I elaborate below, the teachers in this wealthy, liberal, White community reported some of the most intolerant and contentious incidents in the entire study.

Identifying as a White woman, Debb had grown up in a conservative family, but had settled in this very liberal part of the country. She identified herself as being slightly liberal. She had over ten years' experience in the classroom, and was interviewed for this study in 2017 and 2018. Her colleague, Ryan, also participated in this study and is profiled further in the next chapter, and I draw on some of his interviews only to support Debb's descriptions of the school context and culture.

Intolerance

[8]In my descriptions of school contexts, I use the NCES terminology for racial categories for consistency with their records.

Though Debb clearly read her local political context as very liberal, she was well aware that that liberalism did not necessarily mean it would be tolerant. Talking about students' concerns related to silence and citizenship status (Dabach, 2015), she said, "I think they're in a community where they feel comfortable saying, 'My moms' or whatever, but not comfortable necessarily saying, 'My parents are illegal,' or 'I'm illegal.'" Events at her school in the 2016-17 school year underscored how even an electoral margin of Clinton +90 could obscure intolerance. A number of incidents took place at her school, though a social media scandal was particularly high-profile. As her colleague Ryan described, the year of the presidential election, a group of 11th grade boys

> created an account that had pictures, photoshopped pictures of African American students and coaches from school with nooses around their necks in some cases. It was all racist stuff. A picture of a girl next to a monkey. These were people that they knew by the way, some of whom thought they were these guys' friends.

Ryan was quick to mention that the students who created the account were not all White, and also said that the targets of these lynching "jokes" were all Black. To be clear, this was a social media account premised on students' taking photographs of their Black peers and school staff and then superimposing nooses around their necks. In other posts to the social media account, they mocked peers for their physical appearance or weight, and doctored pictures of girls to be sexually explicit. Ryan and Debb both described a feeble response on the part of the school administration. She explained as well that when the students responsible for the account came back to school after being disciplined, school leadership

> allowed the [student body] to stage this big sit-in and wait… outside the office, which was really stupid and dangerous and it went horribly wrong… There was violence. In this

liberal community, somebody punched a guy in the nose because they were like, "You're a racist."

This social media incident and its aftermath resulted in the reassignment of multiple administrators at the school site and numerous lawsuits—including suits from the parents of the perpetrators who argued that any discipline violated the students' rights to free speech. Tensions ran high throughout the year; Debb felt district leadership overcorrected their weak initial response to what transpired at the school. As an example, she said, the day of the aforementioned sit-in, district leadership contacted the school staff and families to inform them all that a noose had been found hanging from a tree down the block from the school campus, scaring students. Later that day, another message went out clarifying that, in fact, it was not a noose, but rather a rope swing for children. Debb felt that administrators went "overboard in communicating everything" in that case because so little had been communicated about the previous incidents. This social media incident took up most of the school's bandwidth that year, and its shadow lingered across multiple years that the teachers participated in this study.

Yet it was not the only example of increased intolerance at this high school. Debb and Ryan told of year-long problems with anti-Semitism that same school year. A group of 9th grade boys, they said, repeatedly drew swastikas on classroom whiteboards and performed Nazi salutes in the hallways. Debb remembered a day when a substitute teacher covered for her; upon her return the next day, she found that students had pried the letters off of her classroom computers' keyboard, rearranged the keys, and replaced them to spell out "fuck Jews." She said, "I had one-on-one conversations with some kids and they were like, 'My friends and I thought we were being funny and I didn't realize how hurtful this was.'"

Debb characterized this anti-Semitic expression as part of a broader, subversive trend in the school and community centered around memes, anti-liberalism, and "owning the libs" (Scocca, 2019). She described how, for some, this trend was a way to push back against an overwhelmingly liberal context: "Within our liberal enclave, there were a group of mostly freshmen, a small group of mostly freshman boys, who started to really push back against liberalism and so they said a lot, 'Oh, it's so P.C. [politically correct] here. Everything is so P.C.'" This perspective came up in her recounting of the social media scandal, the anti-Semitic "jokes," and classroom discussions. She recounted how some students felt "put upon" by discussing sexism or having to read a novel with a main character who was gender non-conforming. Debb remembered confiscating a student's Confederate flag-adorned pencil case; she was surprised when the student's father, an attorney she understood to be educated and liberal, was upset and argued the flag was a symbol of free speech. Though this anti-liberal trend was personified in a relatively small group of people in the school and community, its impact was substantial. In some ways, Debb saw it as the product of somewhat normal teenage subversion, as though passing around anti-Semitic and racist memes was simply how a young person rebels in a place where liberalism was hegemonic. She said, "They think, 'Ooh, look at this, I'm shocking. Look at me." Yet she also saw it as a manifestation of actual discomfort and anger: "There was a little chunk of them that was like, 'Fuck this Social Justice Warrior, liberal, P.C. bullshit.'" From Debb's perspective, expressing intolerant—particularly anti-Semitic, racist, and sexist—views was a reaction to growing social acceptance of intolerance, incivility, and cruelty:

> One, I think they probably felt it, a little bit like, "Oh, it's always about social justice." They feel that way. Two, I think they're emboldened to let that out. Three, I think they do it because they know it bothers people. It's almost like this form of rebellion.

Though only some of the hate speech and bigotry that Debb described came up within the context of classroom discussions, it was abundantly clear that such incidents taking place in the school community had a palpable effect on her ability to conduct discussions in her classroom, even of topics that were unrelated to those events.

Epistemic Contentiousness

In addition to the increased, emboldened intolerance described in the previous section, Debb revealed regular epistemic contentiousness bubbling under the surface of her classroom discussions. This dynamic came from boys, was aimed at her, and emerged around multiple topics she mentioned, especially related to gender. From "jokes" about class content as "fake news!" to teaching evaluations that characterized her as a "dogmatic liberal feminist… trying to brainwash the kids," she repeatedly spoke about a group of 9th grade boys she taught who ideologically wrote off and undermined her intellectual authority as a teacher.

To illustrate the nature of epistemic contentiousness at Debb's school, I trace her descriptions of interactions with students from the 2017-18 school year. The two moments I highlight here illuminate her experience of both contentiousness and epistemic challenges. The first example illustrates gendered contentiousness and came early in the school year, when she received an email to her school email address. The email address itself from which it came, hippityhoppitywomenareproperty@___.com, referenced an anti-Muslim, misogynistic song of the same title by an obscure alt-right musical group whose name intentionally abbreviates to KKK. Debb said that the body of the email had misogynistic, Trump-related memes but was

largely nonsensical. While the email did not identify its sender, she said the student bragged to others about having sent it, and that they in turn reported it to her. Though she knew who sent the email to her, the student faced no official sanction.

The second moment illustrates the challenge to epistemology and truth, and came in a classroom discussion that centered on police brutality based on a fiction text the class had read that included real statistics related to criminal justice in the U.S. The student, who Debb described as "a big NRA [National Rifle Association] gun guy" with aspirations to be a police officer, vehemently disputed the idea that different racial groups get different treatment from police officers, arguing that any disparities that may exist in crime rates are due to different levels of criminality:

> He really pushed back that there is not different treatment, it's just that people break the law. And these were freshmen, again, so they're young. But it elicited tons of responses from kids. Somebody said, "An African American [juvenile] male is *x* times more likely than a White [juvenile] male to face adult sentencing." And he was like, "This isn't true. This book has facts that aren't true." And then other kids were like, "No, what are you talking about?" He was just really adamant that no, they [Black people] commit more crimes.

The student in Debb's class was unreceptive to arguments that were inconsistent with his previously held, incorrect belief that Black people are inherently more criminal than White people. Neither his peers nor evidence from the text disabused him of this belief, so Debb contributed additional data to support their argument:

> I knew that wasn't true, so I grabbed my phone really fast and I just did a fast Google search to try to infuse some facts into the conversation, and I found this story from the

Washington Post that was about a study that just came out… about sentencing and it backed up what the author put in the book. And so, I was like, "I just want to respond. Here's this page."

She did not feel that her contribution to the discussion changed his mind in any way; indeed, she worried that by stepping into the discussion as she did, she had added to an ideological dogpile that would lead him to digging in his heels further. She struggled to find the most productive and appropriate way to address his misconception in light of the pattern she had already seen from him and his peers to cry "fake news," discount information that felt wrong (Garrett et al., 2020), or ignore her teaching as liberal "dogmatism." She said, "I want him to ask questions and learn about the world and I don't want to have him feel like I was trying to brainwash him, but, you know, he was saying something that wasn't true." As she weighed how to teach when asserting facts became tantamount to partisan brainwashing, Debb mused on what it might mean for him in the future, "I think he thinks that I'm everything that certain media sources say is blind and ignorant in the world. I don't know what he'll be like when he's an adult. Right now, he's so young."

Richard (Tennessee)

"There is a core group of those extremely angry, male, conservative students who I think are feeling incredibly disenfranchised by both the school and their peers and it concerns me."

Richard taught social studies in a Tennessee community that he characterized as "moderate," though it was in the Congressional district that voted for Trump by a margin of 30%, meaning he won approximately 65% of the total vote in 2016.[9] (His school was in the most

[9] As mentioned in chapter three, I draw on both the teacher's characterization of the political community as well as the 2016 Trump vote, as neither alone provides the full picture of the political context; both figures together allow for a more complete portrait.

conservative Congressional district of those in this study, though there were schools in more conservative Congressional districts in the sample of English teachers that are not in this dissertation.[10]) 70% of the student population at his school was White, with smaller populations of Black and Hispanic students. NCES did not provide data on free- or reduced-lunch eligibility at his school, but did record that approximately 20% of students at Richard's school were eligible through direct certification (including, for example, qualifying via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps).

Richard identified as a White man, and had been teaching for well over a decade. He identified as slightly liberal. He participated in all three rounds of interviews (2017, 2018, and 2019). As was the case in the above section for Debb, I have highlighted intolerance and epistemic contentiousness in Richard's school and community contexts. However, because Richard's descriptions of a particular group of students spoke to both dynamics at the core of this chapter, I have included his discussion of these students, who he called the *good ol' boys*, as a separate third subsection.

Intolerance

Richard described numerous ways that intolerance permeated his classroom, school, and community, most frequently describing incidents of racism. He remembered a Latina student who was "told to go back to her country and harassed extremely, extensively, quite frankly, even though she was born in the United States, an American citizen. Her parents are legal." He remembered "a rather serious incident where a young man got quite aggressive with a transgendered young woman." He described the language students used in the classroom as

[10] In addition, though Richard's school's Congressional district voted for Trump at a higher rate than others in this study, other teachers' immediate school communities may likely have been more conservative than Richard's (such as Jude's).

"abhorrent" and "xenophobic," and frequently talked about problems with bullying. He also described a "battle in the bathroom" over racist graffiti:

> There was some vandalism in one of the boys' bathrooms. Racial slur, the n-word, was carved into a wall. Told administration about it. They said, "Oh, well let's put a work order in for it." And I tried to pressure them and say, "You know, this is more important than most types of vandalism. … We really need to get this off the wall." They did not fix it. It was up there for months. At one point an English teacher and I actually came in with a power sander and did it ourselves to get it off the wall. … Now, interestingly, after we power sanded it off the wall, someone, I presume a student, drew some swastikas and some other racial epithets where we had removed the n-word. And the battle in the bathroom goes on.

Richard returned repeatedly to his administration's weak responses to these incidents, where he felt the school leadership prioritized public relations over a student-centered response to take care of those who reported these incidents. While his school was in a broader community that was very conservative, he saw his school as being situated in a place that leaned moderate or even liberal, and that that leaning reflected some in the school climate itself where conservative students had been the ones to be marginalized. That changed in 2016:

> Especially following the presidential election, a group of students who, I think, generally speaking have been marginalized in our school a bit, felt pretty emboldened to lash out at what has been the norm: kind of a more progressive, moderately—if not majorly—liberal segment. Those students had always been there, but they hadn't been quite so bold. Around the election, and especially after the election, incidents of bullying by those conservative students toward students who had kind of been the norm became much more

> prevalent. I think those students felt much more emboldened to do so… As a result of that lack of action [from school administrators], I think the students who were perpetrating bullying felt like that was an implicit—if not endorsement, at least permission—to continue what they were doing and even escalate it at times.

Richard made it clear in all three interviews that his administration had almost a laser focus on protecting the school's image rather than protecting its students. He recalled that the senior class president wrote a letter to the school board after these bullying incidents were feebly addressed by school leadership, and that the principal's response was not contrition or concern that students had been subjected to racism or sexism, but, as Richard put it, "Now I've got a PR [public relations] mess on my hands." With bullying going largely unaddressed, it is unsurprising that the groups who were targeted in these incidents he recounted—students who were Latinx, Black, and LGBTQ—"kind of went underground" and "hid from this." As he explained about the transphobic incident, "it had an effect on all of the students who may have been gay or another marginalized groups that, 'Hey, if this can happen to her, I certainly don't want this happening to me.'" He also connected these incidents of intolerance and bullying to the national political context, particularly the 2016 election and the 2018 March For Our Lives student walkout movement:

> During 17-18, it got ramped up tremendously after the rally against gun violence. Once again, I think the bullying became pervasive again. This year, the midterms didn't seem to enthuse anybody. Nobody seemed to be up in arms about it or that concerned with the election. I think it's gone back into… it's an undercurrent. It's always there. There's always that kind of feeling and that threat, but it's become much more *passive* aggressive as opposed to the *aggressive* aggressive that we were seeing out of some of those

students during the post-2016 elections and also post-rally against gun violence. [Emphasis added]

Epistemic Contentiousness

Whereas Debb experienced epistemic contentiousness as a few students utilized it against her, Richard's experiences were not necessarily directed at him but rather permeated his classroom, school, and community broadly. He described how students and parents challenged content, especially on religious grounds. One parent, he said:

> demanded that [her] child not be allowed to attend any session in which the Islamic religion was mentioned in any context. That … she would leave the classroom at any time that world history was discussing anything to do with Islam or Islamic people.

In another situation, he recalled his principal received a letter from a local priest after Richard's Catholic students complained that a unit on the Protestant Reformation was "unfair to Catholicism." In yet another, Richard was brought in by the principal after a student misunderstood a lesson he taught on non-canonical books of the Bible. "We still have students who are in our general biology classes who are getting up in arms about the teaching of evolution in the classroom," he said. He also told a story related to religious pluralism that happened around the time of the 2016 election, which he felt contributed to students' feeling emboldened:

> Our librarian put up a display in the library's display windows that said, "Coexist" and had numerous religious groups' logos, symbols, in it. There were a few high-profile students who said that this was discriminatory against their Christian origins, against their Christian faith, and made quite a splash in the local media and with the administration.

Though the librarian put her foot down and kept the sign up, Richard felt the message from administrators was clear that they should avoid controversy first and foremost.

Richard also described widespread, general contestations about epistemology, intellectual authority, and fact. He found it disorienting "that I do have to now defend factual information. … I have to defend knowledge, reason." Contestations took place in relation to such sources of information as CNN: "Our civics instructors were showing clips from CNN, and … this created a [sense of] 'We need a more balanced perspective' as certain parents complained about using CNN as a news source for classroom activities." He also talked about how these concerns about source validity preemptively shaped decisions he made as he anticipated challenges and contentiousness. In his 2017 interview, he elaborated:

> I had a wonderful film that I used to show in economics that featured Elizabeth Warren as a prominent interview subject when she was a professor at Harvard Law. Great content, not terribly biased, but because of her role now as a senator and a major player on the political scene, I was, quite frankly, a little bit afraid to show that film and discuss it because of potential accusations of my being biased by doing so.

Even though he felt the video was an effective tool for teaching economics content, he ruled it out because he expected that the mere presence of now-Senator Warren would be instantly disqualifying for too many of his students. His students' desire for "both sides-ism" came out clearly in his economics course:

> There tends to be a movement among students this year that I don't quite understand. That when I present things, in terms of data, numbers, especially in my economics class, that these things have to have some sort of alternative, some sort of balancing other facts to make them fair and balanced.

Richard's oblique references to "alternative facts" (as coined by Trump administration advisor Kellyanne Conway (Swaine, 2017)) and Fox News's former motto of "fair and balanced"

(Grynbaum, 2017) align with his impression that it was his conservative students who were spearheading this "movement." Similarly, he taught the idea of "liberal democracy" as just "democracy" because he feared the word liberal would "throw them off."

In addition to challenges to particular content or sources, Richard had the sense that for some of his conservative students, schools themselves are endogenously untrustworthy and inherently biased against their political interests. He explained:

> The academic environment itself has, for many of the students, become a place where their political enemies are in charge. And any sort of dialogue is brainwashing in their view and often they feel beat up on by both their peers and the school employees.

Understandably, his sense that a segment of his students felt inherently threatened by discussions of any kind weighed on him as he considered what and how he taught. As I will revisit further in following chapters, Richard—and similarly situated teachers—grappled with how to balance the concerns of conservative students who felt constrained by social justice pedagogy as well as those students who were the objects of their lashing out. In addition, though Richard described epistemic contentiousness more frequently and more potently than Debb did, he felt he never had students outright rejecting the validity of information that he presented in class. "I don't know if some of them thought, 'Okay, he is biased, he is programming us,' but if they did, they held their tongues," he said.

The "Good Ol' Boys"

Overlapping Richard's reports both of student intolerance and epistemic contentiousness was his discussion of a group of conservative students who had saw themselves as oppressed and marginalized in school. As he explained:

> We have a kind of a core group of—probably shouldn't refer to them in this way, but we often do—the "good ol' boys." They tend to refer themselves that way also. Very kind of country … who feel … that the general atmosphere is one of what the liberal students would call tolerance and acceptance, what these particular conservative students would call persecution of their deeply-held social beliefs and trying to erase their freedom.

Despite being in a local context that he described as "moderate," Richard's sense was that conservative students saw themselves as victims of liberal oppression in school, which he associated with both the intolerance he described and the epistemic contentiousness in his context. He recognized the dissonance in their taking such a stance in light of the broader conservative context, and the way that they placed themselves in inherent opposition to the school:

> Here I am in Tennessee. … Everything in our government is conservative. Conservatives dominate. But I see a certain element of very angry, predominantly young men who feel like they're disenfranchised in school and that is coming out not as, "I can go and change school and we can make school conservative." It's "school is the enemy, everyone here hates me, everyone's degenerate."

Throughout the interviews, Richard made it clear that this group of students saw themselves as estranged both from their high school and from schooling as a broader enterprise. In many ways, Richard's descriptions of how the good ol' boys saw themselves within school aligns with conservative political talking points about academia (Meyrat, 2018), as when he said, "I think … that kind of deep distrust of academia has filtered down, in a way, to high school, at least where we are, that the system is run by liberals and they're trying to indoctrinate you. And just kind of a general turning off, educationally." Their distrust of school informed pedagogical decisions; he

described a discussion in which a good ol' boy said something that Richard characterized as "race baiting, essentially, that almost had a riot in one class," and that the class was able to "academic discussion our way through that." He reflected on his role as the teacher in that moment:

> I can see why teachers try to shut that down immediately, and send such children to the office. But that seems to just feed into [the] mythos of … this group of students that prides themselves on contrary views, being the counterculture.

The Russian nesting-doll contextual layers in this situation resulted in conservative students who felt marginalized within a relatively moderate school community that was within a very conservative broader local community that was itself in a national political context that was dominated by Trumpism and characterized by contentiousness and polarization. Hence, despite their holding political beliefs that were ascendant in the local context, the good ol' boys felt that articulating those positions in the classroom meant inviting their own oppression. He said, "I don't think that the conservative students feel unsafe to express [their political beliefs]. They feel oppressed, that they'll be beaten down … [or] marginalized if they do express them by the majority of people and even by the school staff." Richard elaborated that his students' concerns about social repercussions for their conservative views meant disengaging from discussions and engaging further in bullying:

> It was like they were afraid—this is particularly the conservative students—of being ganged up on by the other students in an academic discussion. So, they had a tendency to reject the classroom, say, "I can't be heard here; I'm not going to try." … So, it came out with threats on social media, bullying in the hallways, bullying in the parking lot, that kind of thing rather than a bold statement of here's what I believe in, let's talk about that.

Clearly, Richard saw the increased levels of bullying, contentiousness, and intolerance as a lashing out that was related to their feeling alienated in the classroom. Underlying his comments about the good ol' boys was a marked concern about the extent of their anger and violence:

> When they get very, very angry, feel like they don't have a voice, there is a core group of those extremely angry, male, conservative students who I think are feeling incredibly disenfranchised by both the school and their peers and it concerns me. I'm very concerned that … one of them will snap and turn to violence beyond just the kind of bullying that has been occurring.

Richard recounted numerous conversations in which this group of students talked about their gun collections and bringing their guns to school daily, which colored his concerns about violence in his context.

These concerns were deeply tied to his school's experiences around the March For Our Lives. The national student-led protest movement was a flashpoint in many communities around the country, and especially controversial in Richard's. As he told it, the student organizer at his school was then a 17-year-old student who, because of her organizing activity, was doxxed (her personal, identifying information was publicly revealed without her consent and with an implicit or explicit threat of shame or violence) (Muldowney, 2017) by local conservative radio, who he said also called out specific teachers. As a result, Richard said, the student organizer and her family received numerous threats to their safety. A public forum was organized in advance of the walkout; he recalled a community member commenting, "Well, if they think they can have this [protest] without guns defending them, they're going to find out it's a turkey shoot." This kind of overt threat of gun violence resulted in supervision of the school's protest by the local police department and SWAT team, during which Richard remembered some of the good ol' boys

"doing peel-outs in the parking lot with their pick-up trucks, making as much noise as they could, flying the Confederate battle flag, and just trying to disrupt as much as possible." While he took care to place blame for the shooting threat or doxxing on community members and not on his students, Richard also made it clear that this turn of events had dramatically increased his concerns for physical safety in ways that were palpable and substantial. He felt it had made his more liberal students "legitimately" fearful about contributing to class, and he worried about being "outed" as a liberal who was taking students' rights away. He distinguished the fear that different groups of his students had: his more liberal students who feared physical violence and his conservatives who feared being ostracized for expressing unpopular opinions.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined U.S. high school social studies teachers' experiences with heightened sociopolitical hostility and epistemic contentiousness in their classrooms since the 2016 presidential election. Across the diverse local contexts sampled in this study, teachers reported students' using their schools and classrooms as settings to articulate intolerant opinions, often in the name of academic discourse, and challenges to their having any authority at all in producing and providing legitimate knowledge. As Debb and Richard's cases illustrated, these dynamics showed up in communities across the political spectrum, from conservative to liberal. In the next chapter, I explore how teachers understood the relationship between classroom climate, controversial issues, and the sociopolitical hostility at the core of this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: Striking a Balance

This findings chapter explores participants' ideas about classroom climate, controversial issues, and "safe spaces" in the political context of the United States in 2017-2019. As I did in the last chapter, I begin with a zoomed out, macro perspective across the whole study and follow with two zoomed in, micro perspectives. In this chapter, I focus on how teachers thought about "safe spaces" in their classrooms in light of the unleashed intolerance that some of their students simultaneously exhibited.

Zoomed Out: Study-Wide Trends

"No Matter What, Your Views Are Welcome"

The teachers described their ideal classrooms as open, comfortable, respectful, engaging, and—above all—safe. Teachers spoke with particular frequency about the idea of safety, a somewhat nebulous and imprecise classroom goal that, on its surface, likely seems reasonable and which is supported by the research on controversial issue discussions. This subsection focuses on exploring how teachers conceptualized safety with respect to classroom climate in the Trump era. In particular, I consider how teachers understood what it means for students to be safe.

Over half of the participants spoke to a form of safety where all students could express their opinions. They wanted classrooms where all students could feel comfortable expressing themselves and feel heard. As Tom, in a slightly liberal part of Ohio, described, he wanted his students to "understand that no matter what, your views are welcome, because it's the only way we can work through these issues." Joshua, who taught in a "pretty red county" in a slightly liberal part of Wisconsin, concurred:

> My goal always is to have a room that everyone feels comfortable in, that they feel free to be able to voice concerns or opinions, and that it's a productive room that we can get things done, but also be inclusive to a variety of opinions.

Teachers articulated this goal even as they concurrently described student speech that increasingly included ideas the teachers themselves described as "rough," "vile," and "hate speech."

The participants described a variety of steps that opened their classrooms up to all students' opinions. For one, they tended to feel that remaining politically neutral themselves was an important part of how they created a comfortable environment for students of all political perspectives. I explore how teachers approached disclosing their political beliefs in detail in chapter six, but it is important to note that there was overlap in the steps they described taking both to create an open classroom climate and to disclose their political beliefs.

Over half of the participants described efforts to ensure they taught "both sides" of each issue, and connected that to their sense of how welcome different groups of students could feel in the classroom. Many teachers defined good teaching of controversial issues as necessarily requiring teaching both sides of each issue. Susan said, "I would like for them to be able to see both sides of an argument and then try to formulate whatever their opinion is on that." This presumes that each issue has only a pro- and a con- position, and that each of those viewpoints is valid and legitimate. Scholars have argued that when deciding which issues to teach and how, teachers need to weigh whether each sides' viewpoint is, in fact, legitimate (and have offered criteria for making that determination, as laid out in chapter two). Few teachers in this study, however, made this determination, instead arguing that almost all issues needed to be on the table, and each issue needed to have both sides represented. That pedagogical stance necessarily

meant, for example, that teachers taught both sides of topics like climate change (including offering platforms for climate change denial) or same-sex marriage (including platforming arguments that homosexuality is wrong and immoral). The pull to "both sides-ism" (Phillips, 2018) was both endogenous and exogenous, deriving from teachers' own ideas about good teaching of controversial issues and from outside sources as colleagues, administrators, and district leadership.

In further descriptions of what a safe classroom entailed, the participants described safe classrooms as those in which students acted in ways that were civil, respectful, and empathetic. For a few teachers, their understanding of an empathetic classroom was operationalized in ways that prioritized supporting marginalized youth. Clarissa, a social studies teacher in Georgia, rejected making gestures towards "objectivity," saying, "I cannot be ambiguous in the face of hatred, especially for my Hispanic students who need to feel safe and supported in the current political climate." For others, however, respect and civility were vague terms that lacked much substance beyond, it seemed, asking students to be nice to one another, without much regard for justice or enforcing boundaries on speech that was hostile to members of the classroom community. Daniel, from a slightly conservative part of New York, remembered that after being caught off guard when some students made Islamophobic comments during a discussion about 9/11, he told his class the next day, "I said, 'Look, you can believe what you want to believe, that's fine, but when you're in my room you have to be very respectful to people that are around you.'" He elaborated:

> I didn't change their minds at all; … that was not my goal. My goal was to teach them kindness and that you can have these opinions, but when you have people in front of you that are your age that are going through things just like you are, you may want to tighten

> up the venom. It ended up really becoming a really beautiful last few months in that classroom. I gotta tell you that was my, by far, favorite class to be part of.

Daniel described emphasizing kindness when he felt the discussion began to jeopardize his ability to manage the classroom. From his description, the resulting class dynamic sounds perfectly lovely. Yet it was also intentionally permissive to anti-Muslim statements, as he was not intending to challenge students' intolerant opinions. Daniel was concerned with the tone and vitriol of spoken comments and the presence of Islamophobia *in his classroom*, but not necessarily with the *underlying* anti-Muslim sentiment. He said that his students later told him that they did not realize they had a Muslim classmate; but would their Islamophobia have been acceptable had she not been in the room? His choice to underscore "kindness" did not, based on his description, include treating his Muslim student with enough kindness to denounce explicitly the bigotry to which she was subjected in school. While it may well be true that he and his students created a "beautiful" classroom experience the rest of that school year, doing so without confronting students' Islamophobic sentiments raises serious questions about what, exactly, it was that students took away from his class. By asking them to enact kindness, but not justice, what lesson did he really teach? Daniel's students may have learned to speak with civility, respect, and empathy, but this example illustrates how this capacious interpretation of classroom safety may be necessarily exclusionary, even inherently unsafe, for some students.

"How Do You Draw the Line?"

At various times, teachers described building classrooms that were empathetic and safe for all opinions as they simultaneously reported the escalating frequency of student intolerance described in chapter four. They talked around a tension that some, though not many, grappled with explicitly: as Ryan (profiled below) said, "it's really hard to balance trying to keep a

classroom that's safe for all perspectives and that's welcoming of all perspectives with trying to push back against some of the more extreme perspectives that we're hearing now." The 2018 and 2019 interviews—in which half of the sample did not participate—were more purposefully focused on this tension while the 2017 interview was broader; thus, I did not take the absence of data from teachers (especially from 2017 interviews) to necessarily mean that they were unreflective or willfully ignorant of how marginalized students might be experiencing discussions in their classes. Unsurprisingly, participants had disparate ideas about where to draw the line between a classroom that was safe for all opinions and one that was safe for students who were experiencing intolerance and hate speech.

Some of the participants described drawing the line in ways that favored openness, whether or not students made intolerant arguments. Bruce, in a slightly conservative part of North Carolina, encouraged students to voice their opinions on difficult topics and expected the rest of the class to hear and respect that opinion. He saw the back-and-forth of opinions merely as a natural part of teaching using discussion: "I try to be the mediator, and we just consistently talk about 'it's okay to have a different opinion; let them speak and then we'll move on.' Doesn't mean you have to agree with it. But you do have to respect it." He held this stance even when the opinions in question were intolerant toward other students in the classroom, and felt that the proper response was for the targeted student simply to speak their own opinion back. When pushed to consider situations in which such a discussion got out of control, Bruce asserted he had strong classroom management skills and would simply redirect.

He placed few limits on topics he would entertain in the classroom beyond what made *him* uncomfortable. When discussing issues that had personal repercussions for his students, he said he waited for students to demonstrate that they were upset before intervening in discussions.

He emphasized that extreme viewpoints needed to be brought into the light, feeling it was a "disservice" to those holding extreme viewpoints: "the best way to show that your idea is extreme is to let you see other, non-extreme opinions." He spoke with confidence that he knew his students well enough to be aware of all issues that would hit too close to home for someone, and that he was good enough at reading the room to know when to move on if such a topic came up. He described student discomfort as productive, an indication that students were making progress, though he did not differentiate between students who were uncomfortable because they were the target of sociopolitical hostility, those who were uncomfortable because they were accused of being intolerant, and those who were uncomfortable because a discussion forced them to consider some of their previously-held assumptions. He recalled instances when, for example, students became emotional in the course of discussions of "female issues" such as abuse and abortion; Bruce said he referred them to the school social worker for support.

On the other hand, Clarissa was one of the few teachers who drew the line in ways that privileged the safety of marginalized youth rather than the openness of the classroom climate. She taught in a slightly liberal area of Georgia, and pointed to her undocumented students as playing a significant factor in her approach to teaching since the 2016 election. She explained:

> I just feel this responsibility to make sure that they know that I'm not judging them and that I want them to feel safe, and supported, and comfortable in my classroom. I felt that if I didn't make it clear that I didn't support those policies that those students would always wonder about me and maybe not feel so comfortable with me. I wasn't okay with that, so it's been really tough. It's been a really tough time because you don't want a parent complaining about indoctrinating their kid or whatever, but it's been incredibly hard for me to put that aside.

Clarissa said that she wanted a classroom that was open and inclusive and wanted her students to be open to new ideas, but she also wanted to make sure that her undocumented students saw her as being in their corner. She said that prior to the 2016 election, she had been more concerned with appearing to be politically neutral. Since then, she understood her silence (especially as a White woman whose students were largely students of color) would be interpreted as support for Trump, and that that would carry political weight for her students. Though she articulated classroom goals around openness and inclusivity, Clarissa struggled to articulate the boundaries to those goals. She explained, "Like, 'I want to be open and inclusive to other ideas,' but when those other ideas are super racist or homophobic or hurtful in some kind of way, like, you're supposed to be open to that?" Her challenge in this effort, however, was "How do you draw the line? And where do you draw the line?" When I followed up by asking where she does draw the line, she was unsure, only knowing that "hate speech" was beyond it.

"Everybody Take a Breath"

The teachers in this study described a number of steps they took to navigate the tensions among discussing controversial issues, students whose identities may be implicated by those discussions, and escalating intolerance in the classroom. Some described pedagogic decisions intended to impose control onto discussions and to limit opportunities for these tensions to manifest, including such changes to teaching methods as reducing the frequency of discussions or asking students to respond to a written prompt rather than discuss the issue. Susan also said that she limited the number of times that each student could contribute to a given discussion and evaluated the "quality of their statements, so that makes sure they'll say something better." Others continued to hold discussions, but avoided topics they saw as flashpoints, as did Joshua who said, "we kinda skirted around certain issues." Alternately, some, like Richard, continued

teaching issues that were contentious but framed them in such a way as to limit uproar: "when it comes to stuff like the entitlements, for example, that sort of thing is definitely in my economics curriculum. We have to address it. But I make decisions about how to address it." In these instances, teachers did not tell students what they could and could not say necessarily, but they did create constraints on issues that they hoped would minimize politicized interpersonal conflict in the classroom. Teachers have general authority in classrooms to set parameters on what students say, how they say it, and when; in these cases, increased concerns about intolerance and contentiousness influenced their choices to restrict and control students' speech.

When teachers described how they responded to incidents of sociopolitical hostility, the stances they described were often reactive. This often entailed changing the subject or "shutting it down" when discussions got away from them. As this study relied on teachers' reports and did not include any observations of these discussions, I cannot say precisely how this "shutting down" happened. Their descriptions ranged from telling students, "Let's keep it grounded, everybody take a breath" (Susan) to "This is not what we're doing today" (Richard) to "You guys are crossing a line" (Hannah). Therefore, their interventions did not necessarily involve policing students' intolerance, though sometimes did. In the last chapter, I quoted Jude's description of a lesson in which a student associated Columbus's enslavement of Indigenous peoples with building the border wall today. He recounted how following that lesson, two Latina students approached him privately to say the discussion had made them worried for their well-being:

> They just wanted me to be aware [that] they were upset and [un]comfortable. I said, 'Hey, I know.' I'm always one that if something like that goes on in my class, I completely change the topic immediately. I don't let stuff like that go on.

Susan talked about her approach to students who made comments that were "not appropriate for the situation":

> I'll make sure to pull that student aside and have a conversation with the student about why they felt that that was appropriate to say, so that way it doesn't come at an antagonistic way because then students will shut down.

In order to preserve classroom control and to keep students engaged, then, she described not confronting inappropriate comments in front of the whole class. Instead, she had private conversations later that she felt might allow her to preserve some measure of control. Nicole also took students aside to "correct" but also did so in front of the class:

> I had to have more outside-of-class conversations with students, and actually, a few in-class, in front of the students. You know, a student would say something that was totally inappropriate. Like, "Dirty Hillary…" and rather than wait until after class, I mean, I kind of feel like it's my responsibility to let everyone know that some things are just never okay to say.

In articulating what was "just never okay to say," Nicole was one of the few teachers who said that they regulated partisan language. Like four other teachers in the study, she also described giving other students the opportunity to jump in when someone made a problematic comment. Speaking about this same student and a group of girls in the class, she recalled how "every time he opened his mouth to say something, they were ready to pounce," elaborating, "when he started saying things, they would say like, 'Can you back that up? Do you have data to back that up?' Because they just got tired of the random quotes about women." Clarissa had two students who would frequently confront one another on the day's topic in her class, as she explained, "I had a really outspoken student who [was] very well-versed, very liberal. She would just take him

down. They would just go up for the throat." With these teachers, it was not always clear from the interviews the extent to which this strategy stemmed primarily from an effort to empower students to respond to one another and how much came from their own reticence to be the one intervening.

At other times, they described trying to be proactive about managing discussions to mitigate contentiousness. Susan, for example, recalled anticipating flash points that could arise in certain discussions:

> I try to predict what I think might be some points to become controversial in class and try to come up with a plan for, if this is to happen in the classroom, what is the way that I'm going to handle that? Because sometimes when you do talk about things, it can get pretty heated, sometimes in particular if the kids are very passionate about what they're talking about.

Other teachers leveraged relationship-building with students as a way to manage partisan contentiousness in the classroom. Richard, for instance, talked about attempting to reach out to the students he thought were likely to disengage or disrupt—his school's good ol' boys—to keep them connected to school in ways they might not otherwise:

> Those students that feel marginalized … and unaccepted, building some sort of a trust with them whether it's just, "Hey, I also go hunting." "I enjoy this particular thing that you enjoy" goes a tremendously long way to making them feel less persecuted and more willing to engage on a more academic basis as opposed to just those knee-jerk, "I'm oppressed" kind of reactions.

To be sure, teachers build relationships with students for myriad reasons, not only for these purposes. Teachers in this study, however, made explicit connections between their efforts to

build relationships with certain groups of students and the political climate in their classrooms as they discussed controversial issues.

Three teachers reported collecting data from students about their perceptions of school and classroom climate through questionnaires and surveys. Hannah, in Washington, for example, noted how her data collection yielded disparities in how different groups of students experienced climate at her school. The students from marginalized groups "were the ones who were like, 'Yeah, it doesn't feel very good here. I hear things all the time.' Whereas the mainstream students were like, 'There's no problem, what do you mean? Like, there's no problem.'" Less clear from the interviews were the actions they took based on the data collected.

Two teachers addressed controversial identity issues themselves either by flatly dismissing students' concerns or by relying on institutional safeguards to protect them. In doing so, they preempted intolerance that might have come from other students. Tom described discussions about immigration in which some students brought up their concerns about being deported. He recalled responding, "You have protections under the Constitution, and we just talked about this. Of course he can't do that. He's supposed to uphold the law. He can't do that." He later elaborated, "It's not like they're going to come into your house, and pull your mom out of her bed in the middle of the night. We don't operate like that. We're not a dictatorship." Doreen had both immigrant and gay students in her class who voiced concerns about Trump and Pence's election in class. When a gay student worried what could happen to him, she said she told him, "Nothing. You have your rights. Supreme Court already said you have rights." Even when the Trump administration began issuing executive orders that exacerbated her students' fears, she said, "I'm like, 'We've gotta wait. It's probably going to take Congress a while. Maybe the courts will get in there and do something.'" Notably, neither of these teachers

described the kind of overt sociopolitical hostility as other teachers did, and both only participated in the 2017 interviews; I would have been particularly interested to see how these two teachers approached discussions on these topics when these very institutions failed to "get in there and do something."

As many of the preceding paragraphs illustrated, teachers talked about discussions of controversial identity issues almost as if they were hazardous minefields, full with opportunities for missteps. Yet there were also examples that teachers provided of controversial identity issue discussions that sounded generative and empathetic. Joshua, in Wisconsin, talked about empathy and safety in the context specifically of a discussion relating to public policy related to opioids and noloxone, the drug that can be given to treat narcotic overdose in emergencies (Chamberlain & Klein, 1994). Joshua said his community was hit hard by the opioid epidemic, so it was a discussion that he knew would be personal, particularly as one of his students had lost a family member to overdose. He described his students' taking the topic and discussion very seriously, even though the impacted student elected not to participate in the discussion:

> Most of the students in that classroom understood the situation of one of the students in that classroom, and that particular discussion in that particular classroom on that particular topic was probably the most respectful and the most understanding… The students in that room, they had empathy that day for that topic because of what someone in the classroom had gone through. That's the one thing I'm trying to get kids to understand, but until those topics… impact either them or somebody within their community, the empathy part is difficult to attain.

His students were able to operationalize a kind of civic empathy (Mirra, 2018) around a particular personal issue for a classmate who they understood as part of their community; it was

not clear if that same empathy existed in his classroom for other students whose lives were impacted by issues that were more likely to be associated with people of color. In that class session, Joshua's students were able to rise to a goal that many participants spoke to as vital and elusive: helping students develop and work from a place of empathy, particularly for those outside of the classroom community.

Zoomed In: Deep Dives

Charlie (Connecticut)

"My biggest fear is can I present both sides and not have to tiptoe around offending a particular student who may hear things from their own background and their own perspective that perhaps I may not have considered."

Charlie taught social studies in a Connecticut community that he characterized as "slightly liberal." The school's Congressional district voted for Clinton in 2016 by a margin of 30%; Trump won 35% of the total vote. Charlie repeatedly described his school as very diverse, as its students came from a catchment area that cut across suburban and urban areas. In addition, his school offered a special program that was open by application for students from nearby communities outside their attendance boundary and which pulled from a more rural area. Just about half of the student population was White, with Black and Hispanic students making up most of the rest of the student body. Forty percent of the school's student population qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch.

Charlie identified as a slightly conservative White man. He had been teaching for over 10 years when he began participating in this study. He was interviewed in all three years in which I collected data (2017, 2018, and 2019).

"We Have a Very Diverse School"

Throughout the entire study, Charlie emphasized three things: the racial, socioeconomic, and political diversity of his school's population; his school's concentration on empathy to navigate that diversity; and his personal focus on being, as he put it, "genuinely objective." Because his school drew from such diverse geographic areas within the region, Charlie said he would tend to see "a generalized difference between rural, White, farmer-oriented, conservative-oriented kids who generally are in this [special state] program, and the rest of our high school [which] is very diverse with a wide variety of racial and economic backgrounds." He insisted repeatedly that any contentious political dynamics that might exist within the school were not intolerant or threatening for students, but rather were positive and stoked students' excitement in the content. He relished in this diversity in his school community and classroom, absolutely viewing it as an asset that enhanced students' learning experience.

Charlie gave a lot of credit to his school's commitment to "cultural perspective training and multicultural professional development" for teachers. This professional development was positive, supportive, and well-received by teachers, Charlie said. He reiterated throughout the interviews that the challenges that other teachers reported were not present in his classroom or school because his school had taken such pains to ensure that teachers prioritized building relationships and rapport with students. He described this professional development in positive terms as centered on equity, inherent bias, Whiteness, and intersectionality, and said it supported teachers in "really trying to get to know what kids are going through on a daily basis, so that you can be empathetic when interacting with them and keeping your expectations realistic for what they can accomplish."

Charlie also prioritized creating an open climate and was confident in his ability to shield his political beliefs from his students. He wanted to create a classroom in which his students

could "feel free to share their opinions without fear of criticism or anyone taking offense." He said that he took pride in his ability to build this open climate in a school with so many disparate worldviews and political opinions, and expressed confidence that he was able balance them effectively. "I really try to do a very good job of being objective and hearing both sides, and it's really easy to get caught up—especially in our current political climate—with one political view or another," he said. He said that a few times a semester, he would have students complete a questionnaire as a sort of classroom climate temperature check. He believed ardently that his strong relationships with students and his playing it down the middle ensured that the diverse, heterogeneous student population was able to discuss contentious political issues productively.

"More and More Committed to Taking These Things Head On"

Charlie did not shy away from topics that he knew could stir emotional responses from his students. Indeed, he said he specifically sought out topics that he expected would "bring up contentious viewpoints," such as whether "the n-word … is still a concern" and "whether or not immigrants should be admitted into the country." Charlie recognized that these discussions brought up strong emotions, recalling a student who left the room in tears upset by her peers' comments. But he saw these emotions as having a pedagogic role—for the students he described as ignorant:

> We had this debriefing afterwards and try to address, like, "Hey, why do you find these things upsetting?" And the kids who are saying them … have—not an epiphany necessarily—but at least have to understand why what they're saying is [offensive], because no one in there is intending to be offensive. They just don't know.

It was not clear, despite my asking, what pedagogic role he saw painful emotions playing for the students who were upset by offensive comments in class. Charlie took the position that whether

or not these issues were broached in the classroom, young people would talk about them in conversations "allowing bigotry or ignorance or misunderstanding." So by holding them in the classroom, he thought, the guidance of a teacher could instead encourage "understanding, acceptance, [and] perspective."

Yet, he also said that his students made problematic statements about other groups of people in the classroom. When students made dehumanizing comments, he said, other students jumped in with "statistics and facts and information to refute some of those concepts." Thus, he felt his role was not to respond to the intolerance he anticipated, but rather to prepare his students to be the ones responding. He framed transgender bathroom policies, the n-word, and immigration as all "debatable issues" while also recognizing students in the classroom to whom they were personal topics. He said,

> We have a number of transgender kids in our school. … When we were doing the n-word lesson, half the class is Black. We're doing the immigrant debate, a third of my kids are first generation immigrants that came over.

Charlie appreciated that this proximity made the discussions more difficult for students, but also "all the more important to have." Like Joshua, he felt that it created incentive for students to take the topics more seriously. Scholars have written extensively about frameworks and criteria for determining whether a given issue should be taught as legitimately up for debate in the classroom (Hess, 2009; Journell, 2017), but Charlie felt that in his classroom, placing any limits on controversial issues would be "shying away from it." He understood controversial identity issues as flashpoints, but did not, based on how he described preparing, take any particular steps to structure discussions of those issues in ways that would ensure safe learning environments for all of his students.

"Both Sides at the Same Time"

In the 2018 interview, I asked the participants to walk me through an example of a controversial issue discussion, and the bulk of our interview thereafter centered on this example. Charlie described a mini-unit in which his class explored students' rights to free speech, beginning with Tinker v. Des Moines (1969) and building towards a discussion organized around whether or not schools can legally limit students' wearing the Confederate flag. Charlie said this class included Black students as well as a White student who called himself the "classroom redneck" and who had previously worn a Confederate flag belt buckle. He described the discussion as not "super contentious *in* the classroom, but the following days and weeks led to an incredibly contentious situation afterwards" when the "classroom redneck" responded to the discussion by walking through the school waving his Confederate flag, shouting obscenities and "racist, racist things." In response to his protest, other students held a walkout and organized a student-led assembly emphasizing the reality of racism in the U.S. today.

Throughout the interview in which Charlie described this sequence of events, I tried to probe his understanding of the tension at the heart of this chapter: how to hold discussions that were open to all opinions while also providing a psychologically safe environment for marginalized youth, such as the Black students in this particular class. He said that he frequently asked students to discuss controversial issues that he knew were personal for students in his class, and I sought to understand how he was able to do that with a heterogeneous student population and contentious political climate. In this mini-unit, he had broached a topic that was contentious, controversial, *and* related to the identities of young people in his class. I sought to understand how he made sense of the impact that this lesson had on his students and school.

In his mind this lesson had been very successful, even though it prompted racist backlash that landed the school in national news stories. Charlie was pleased that he and his students had prepared thoroughly for the discussions, that—unlike some of his colleagues—he had not shied away from discussing something controversial for fear of being accused of being racist, and that he had been genuinely objective in ways that allowed him to moderate the heterogeneous political views in his classroom.

I asked Charlie six questions to try to get at how he thought different groups of students, especially his Black students, experienced his "objective" approach in this lesson about the Confederate flag and whether or not it should be considered protected speech in schools. Returning to his description of this particular class as having both a "classroom redneck" and Black students in it, I asked him how particular groups of students might hear his objective tone. He responded:

> It's funny because I can be accused of being racist for defending some policy or rationale for policy that Trump has; some students in there say, "Well, if you're defending Trump, you're a racist too." So you have to deal with that. Then at the same time, other kids in the classroom will say, "Well, if you're for letting all these illegal immigrants coming in, then you must be a raging liberal." You can be accused of being both sides at the same time.

Despite my explicit framing asking him to consider how his Black students felt about his objectivity, Charlie returned repeatedly to accusations of bias from *both sides* as indication that he had found the right ground on which to stand. I later asked specifically if he thought his Black students felt safe in his classroom during the Confederate flag discussion. In response, he described a class-wide debrief in which, he said, his Black students were upset because they

were friends with the "classroom redneck" but felt peer pressure to form a "Black coalition" and beat him up, and the other conservative White students talked about their fears of being called racist or of a school shooting in retaliation from the Black students. Methodological constraints leave me reliant on Charlie's account of the initial discussion and this debrief; nevertheless, it is notable that in response to six different questions directly asking him to put himself in the position of the Black students in his class, he reflected from the position of "both sides-ism" or talked about his Black students through their friendships with the White student in question.

Ryan (California)

"As long as people are being respectful, they're entitled to their own opinions, and it is a safe space for you and anyone else to believe what they want to believe and to be who they are and that's all I can guarantee here."

Ryan taught social studies at the same school in California as Debb in chapter four. As you will remember, their school was in a very liberal Congressional district, with a student body that was largely comprised of affluent White, Asian, and Hispanic students.

Ryan identified as a slightly liberal White man. He had been in the classroom over five years when he began participating in this study, and was a math teacher before switching to social studies, which he said made him "inclined towards more technical, less super controversial things." He participated in all three years in which I collected data (2017, 2018, and 2019). He described his school as one with high levels of student activism; over the course of these interviews, he recounted three times when students staged walkouts in protest over national news events: the 2016 election results, Brett Kavanaugh's Senate confirmation hearing, and the March For Our Lives.

"I Try to Create a Safe Space"

Ryan emphasized repeatedly his efforts to create a classroom that was inclusive and thoughtful, where all of his students could feel accepted. He felt it was especially important as someone teaching government and politics to ensure that his classroom was a safe space for people with different political perspectives and beliefs. He described building this climate through extensively modeling open-mindedness and representing both sides of the issues he taught. He said that because his school climate was extremely liberal, he would "often present the conservative perspective and I'll just say, 'So guys, 48 million Americans voted for Donald Trump. Just a reminder guys. Reminder.'" He continued, saying that if he were teaching in an overwhelmingly conservative classroom, he would do the same to articulate liberal points of view. He felt that doing this both contributed to all students' understanding of the issue overall and provided the few conservative students he had some cover to speak up in class.

Ryan was transparent from the beginning of the study that he shied away from topics that he felt ill-equipped to moderate, especially race and racism. "I'll be honest with you. I avoid a lot of super controversial topics," he said. He expressed concern that his inexperience and ignorance created opportunity for missteps, though he seemed primarily concerned with his own likelihood of saying the wrong thing.

The year after the blowup over the social media scandal, Ryan held a classroom discussion centered on whether social media was destructive to democracy. He had forgotten that his 12th grade students had, the year earlier, been the 11th grade class most embroiled in the scandal. He said that students became visibly agitated during the discussion, his efforts to settle them were unsuccessful, and the discussion did not lead to fruitful learning in any real way. On top of that, he described receiving a phone call from the parent of one of the students who was a passive participant in the social media account (which is to say, not one of the account's targets,

not one of those who created it or its content, but rather someone who chose to follow the account on social media). He said the parent "called me in tears and was like, 'My child has gone through hell and now he's been going through it again in your class.' And I was like, 'Fuck.' … I had *no* idea, and this is blowing up." In retrospect, he was acutely aware that his discussion question dug up the previous year's tumult, but seemed dismayed that he had not anticipated that this particular question would have that effect. This phone call, he said, made him "more gun shy" of discussions and shook his confidence in the safety of his classroom space. Though this example did not relate to students from marginalized groups, the point remains that he did not account for how the focus of the academic discussion could interact with students' lived experiences.

In spite of the intense level of hate speech that had taken place within his school, Ryan was generally confident that it did not affect his classroom. He reported much lower levels of epistemic contentiousness than his colleague Debb did, and observed that at their school, discounting the intellectual authority of the teacher had become something that boys did to teachers who were women. He assumed that because he was a White man who told students he had grown up in a rural community, shooting guns, his conservative students identified with him and "don't feel the need to do that stuff."

Ryan was particularly concerned that the ascendant liberal viewpoint shut out any conservative students who might feel repressed. He had the sense that despite his efforts, dissenting views were stifled. Like Bruce, Ryan felt that it was important to bring students' extreme viewpoints into light. He described numerous conversations with conservative students about their online activity that he thought was radicalizing and disconcerting. He worried that his students watched Ben Shapiro videos on YouTube that had concerning effects on how they saw

the world; he observed that a classroom consequence of their online radicalization was that they felt too smothered by liberals to articulate their conservative viewpoints in school and to be challenged on their thinking by classmates. He said that conservative students saw how students who were part of the social media scandal were treated as pariahs and that the lesson they learned was to avoid comparable social censure by just not opening their mouths and not rocking the boat. He worried that as a result, students parroted liberal viewpoints in school in order to get through, but enacted very different politics outside of school (including on social media).

He also seemed to be largely at a loss as to what he could do differently. By 2019, he had developed a few ideas he wanted to implement to create greater ideological diversity in his school and classroom. For one, he and some other faculty planned to hold assemblies in which teachers, staff, and administrators would discuss controversial issues amongst themselves as a way to model respectful disagreement on political issues. For his government class's final project that year, he said he was going to have students work in small groups that would simulate acting as campaign advisors to each of the "primary candidates." When I sought to clarify if that meant only Democratic primary candidates, he paused. He had intended for that to be the case, but when I mentioned the primary challenge to Trump that former Massachusetts governor Bill Weld's was launching at the time (Battenfield, 2019), Ryan began rethinking his plan on the fly. He was excited by the idea of revamping the assignment in a way that he anticipated would contribute to his class's political balance, and contemplated additional steps he could take in the few months that remained of that school year to welcome more conservative viewpoints.

I emailed him in the summer of 2019 to see if it would make sense to interview him about these efforts. Ryan said that he had not been able to implement any of these plans about which he spoke, but that he was signing up for an online program called Mismatch that would serve as a

sort of video chat pen-pal system between his school and a much more conservative one. We were not able to complete the additional interview.

"It's Difficult to Balance Those Things."

More than most participants, Ryan spoke directly to the tension at the heart of this chapter. In 2017, he reflected, "It's really hard to balance trying to keep a classroom that's safe for all perspectives… with trying to push back against some of the more extreme perspectives that we're hearing now." He strove for this balance even though he felt, as described above, that his class was largely not subject to the school's general level of contentiousness. With that said, there was one instance in particular that illustrated his wrestling with how to create that openness he sought while not permitting the perspectives he described as "anti-community."

Early in the school year, he said, he asked students to complete a survey with questions designed to help students identify their partisan beliefs (loosely, an Are You a Democrat or Republican? test). The idea, he explained, was that students believed themselves to be liberal Democrats but may not necessary hold the corresponding beliefs; this survey would help them understand the political opinions they actually held rather than parroting their parents' beliefs. He then debriefed with students, including, as he said, "Oh wait, five percent of students in this class said that gay people shouldn't be able to get married?"

Located in a superlatively liberal community in which LGBTQ identities and families were normal and common, this comment prompted perhaps the most crystalline example of Ryan's efforts to find balance in the classroom. When asked to explain how he kept a classroom that was safe for the perspective that same-sex people should not be able to marry while also pushing back against homophobia as a perspective contrary to community in his context, Ryan explained that a student raised this very question:

So when that happened, I had a student come to me after class—a gay student—and say… I have this poster up in my classroom, [that] says, "This is a safe space for everyone." It has a rainbow flag on it, and it's by an activist group. … In any case, that was up on the wall, and this girl came up to me and said, "I don't feel like this is a safe space because you're letting students who … don't respect me in this classroom." And we had this discussion, and I said, "Look, I mean, let me present my perspective here," because I was like, "This *is* a safe space. It's – everyone we will – as long as, you know, people are being respectful, they're entitled to their own opinions and it is a safe space for you and anyone else to believe what they believe and to be who they are and that's all I can guarantee here." And so, I don't know. I wish, I mean, I know her and we had a good relationship. But she was still upset and she's like, "Well, whatever, I disagree." But she came around kind of. But it was... I don't know. It was a tough conversation.

Despite his clear articulation of the challenge at hand for so many teachers in this study—encouraging speech and openness while also tamping down on intolerance—Ryan seemed to be fairly clear about what he would and would not allow in his classroom. This student plainly expressed her feeling unsafe in the classroom with people who she felt were hostile to her identity. Ryan, on the other hand, saw opposition to same-sex marriage as an opinion to which students were entitled—as long as they voiced it respectfully. He did not view it, as she clearly did, as an opinion that was "extreme" or "anti-community."

Summary

Aware of heightened levels of contentiousness that students were experiencing in the classroom, in school, and out in the world, teachers were rightly concerned with creating classroom spaces that were safe. Yet as in all things, the devil was in the details. Teachers' ideas

about what constituted a safe classroom environment tended to focus on open environments, where all students felt comfortable expressing their opinions. They did not generally recognize how such openness could have the effect of shutting out students from marginalized groups. Ultimately, this chapter highlights how it is that teachers make the call as to what constitutes an "extreme perspective" that warrants eviction from the classroom community. In most cases in this study, they have set the bar very high, leaving marginalized youth subject to intolerance as a part of their educational experiences. In the next chapter, I focus on how the political climate has shaped and affected the way teachers think about disclosing their political beliefs in the classroom.

CHAPTER SIX: Teacher Political Disclosure

The third and final findings chapter[11] explores how participants made sense of teacher political disclosure, or their decisions related to revealing their personal political beliefs and opinions in the classroom. As in the previous chapters, I again begin with the big picture snapshot of the whole study and follow with two closer looks at individual teachers.

Zoomed Out: Study-Wide Trends

I begin the findings section by using Kelly's (1986) framework to assess the different approaches that teachers adopted toward disclosure and what they described doing to enact each approach. Second, I turn to how they described changes to these approaches over time, including in relation to the 2016 presidential election and across the three years I collected data. I end the section with attention to the factors that influenced how they thought about disclosure in their respective contexts.

"Responsibility to Speak Up"

Broadly, teachers in the study represented the spectrum of Kelly's (1986) framework of stances towards political disclosure, though they also articulated approaches outside of it. Notably, the data do not necessarily support the common-sense idea that teachers who are politically aligned with their school communities are more likely to disclose than those who are ideologically misaligned with their communities. Some misaligned teachers were outspoken, and some aligned teachers felt unwilling to disclose. Importantly, both within and across interviews, teachers would articulate different ideas about disclosure that crossed Kelly's (1986) categories,

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as I explore further below. They did not fit neatly and consistently inside one theoretical box, which reiterates the contextual and shifting nature of pedagogical decision making.

Within Kelly's (1986) Framework

No teachers talked about disclosure in ways consistent with exclusive neutrality, or fully avoiding controversial issues, though some described taking actions that had this effect in order to avoid contentiousness. They dodged topics, especially those at the forefront of news cycles such as immigration, abortion, gun rights, and Confederate monument removal. Some continued to teach these topics, but constrained how the engagement took place by reducing discussion frequency or placing limits on the ways students interacted in discussions. Richard described taking steps that he hoped would prevent being called out for bias:

> It became much more of an exercise in the mechanics of economics as opposed to allowing the students to just have a more freeform, how-do-you-feel-about-this discussion. I think part of that was I was trying to head off some of those inevitable issues. And quite frankly, I did not want to have those students complaining about me to the administration or the press.

By falling back on what he described as a "technocratic" approach to learning economics rather than a normative one as a way to "take some of the heat out of it," he felt he allowed students to learn the course material in a way that he believed he could better control.

Just as none of the teachers identified as avoiding controversy, none said that they were deliberately attempting to convince students to subscribe to a particular position on an issue. Yet a number of them recounted instances when they drew moral lines around acceptable language, behavior, or ideas in ways that they felt revealed something to students. Hannah, in a moderate area of Washington, said she felt it was her "responsibility to speak up and set an example of

what behavior is okay or not," speaking not about classroom conduct but rather about political behavior, referencing the Access Hollywood tape of Trump talking about grabbing women. Her students told her she was being biased after she characterized Trump's behavior as unpresidential.

The vast majority of teachers interviewed described making efforts at neutral impartiality. For most teachers in this study, not revealing personal political beliefs and opinions was an obviously self-evident goal. They described their efforts at maintaining a politically balanced classroom in ways that mapped closely to Kelly's (1986) description of this approach, in which teachers "remain silent about their own views on controversial issues" (p. 122). Though teachers named political neutrality as a pedagogical goal, what they described were politically balanced classrooms, as they conflated balance with neutrality.

For over half of the teachers interviewed, having sufficient political balance to shield their personal beliefs in the classroom meant ensuring representation of both sides of issues. Sometimes that meant playing devil's advocate or articulating the views of the "other side." Sometimes it meant providing materials or multiple sources that would be seen as representing a variety of viewpoints. Three teachers recounted how administrators admonished them or their colleagues for displays that were seen as insufficiently representing both sides. Joshua, in a conservative area of Wisconsin, believed he was reported to administrators because on his classroom podium, he displayed stickers that students had given him, often from past local lawmakers who tended to be Democrats. Hannah described how her district provided schools with signs welcoming and affirming refugees, but that both students and some teachers saw these signs as "unnecessary" or "betray[ing] neutrality."

Teachers who espoused neutral impartiality as an approach to political disclosure sometimes expressed pride that their students were unable to guess their political beliefs. Charlie was pleased whenever he did tell his students his partisan affiliation and they reacted with surprise, as that indicated he had "accomplished my goal of not letting my personal thoughts dictate my instruction." As you will read below, teachers like Bruce saw accusations of bias from students on both sides as an indication of success, but did not, even upon urging, reflect on what messages their political ambiguity sent to students, especially those from marginalized groups.

As many scholars have pointed out, teachers are never truly neutral (Journell, 2011c; Niemi & Niemi, 2007). Nearly half of the teachers felt their students could "ferret out" their political beliefs. To that end, a few described an approach consistent with committed impartiality. Most, however, felt that being neutral was a professional necessity.

Beyond Kelly's (1986) Framework

Yet teachers also talked about disclosure in ways that went beyond traditional definitions, often drawing on their personal experiences rather than speaking strictly to particular social or political issues. When Hannah, an Asian American woman married to someone "from the Middle East," cited examples of times that she disclosed her political beliefs, she included an instance when she answered anti-immigrant rhetoric from students by "owning my identity outside the classroom in order for the students to understand why I can't be neutral all the time." She explained:

> When students talk about, "Oh, we should just bomb the Middle East," or they say stupid things like this and I say, like, "Well, what would you do with my in-laws, the grandparents of my children?" And… that always makes them stop. Like, they don't

know what to say when I say things like that. I would say I feel more like I have to speak up in those circumstances.

Nicole felt she had shared her political beliefs and opinions when she told students about her experiences traveling abroad, interacting with "people of different religions, people of different cultural ideas and values." Susan, profiled below, spoke to this idea as well.

Teachers also added asserting factual authority and rebutting "fake news" to the traditional definition of disclosure. Will, in a slightly liberal area of Virginia, explained the epistemic challenges complicating his ostensibly neutral stance in the classroom:

> Even basic facts were contested, which made it more difficult because people can't even agree on basic facts, and feeling as the teacher that I had to really clarify what was true and what was not but without giving away my political position, my personal views, which is always tricky.

Merely clarifying facts came to feel uncomfortably similar to disclosing his partisan positions. Ryan described how he felt sharing his political beliefs could ground students' thinking against misinformation:

> I do feel like there's a need with so many fake facts floating around and so much anger and hostility, I feel that there's more of a need for me to ground. I'm going to say, "This is where I'm coming from" in a sincere way and tell these kids what I believe. I feel more of a need for that.

Teachers described feeling "it was a duty as a teacher" to assert factual information and teach students to be more critical consumers of media. They also indicated that doing so felt political and partisan. Some said naming which newspapers they read constituted political disclosure. One who felt trepidation about challenging students' unfounded claims in general said he was more

likely to do so in relation to "things in European or world history that are quite clear. For instance, lessons on the Holocaust… and being very clear that that is simply a nonsensical, unsupportable position." Yet recent news stories have demonstrated that there are educators who are not even comfortable characterizing Holocaust denial as nonsensical because doing so would violate their professional duties not to take sides (Marchante, 2019).

"This Year I Didn't"

Teachers also spoke to changes to their ideas about disclosure in the Trump era and across the years in which I collected data. Many said that the political climate "didn't really affect the way that [they] did things." This group included those who felt comfortable sharing their beliefs and those who steadfastly refused to disclose. Some teachers gave contradictory answers, saying they shared less frequently just moments after describing overt disclosure. That teachers articulated different approaches to disclosure in response to different prompts illustrates that disclosing political beliefs is not a fixed professional choice, but is dynamic, shifting, and contextual.

A few teachers described feeling more guarded about what they said in the classroom. Joshua, a teacher in Wisconsin, explained:

> After elections, I've always felt comfortable sharing… This year I didn't. I tried to play it as straight down the road as I could. And most of the time I think I do that. I try to. But it was a little bit scary. Not "scary" isn't the right word [sic]. It was a little bit different this year, for whatever the reason… I didn't feel as comfortable.

As will be developed further in the next subsection, teachers like Joshua experienced chilling factors that made them more fearful of discussing their personal opinions in the classroom.

However, most of the teachers who did feel their approach changed said they were more likely to disclose than they had been before, that the times have "demanded a response" morally. Only one teacher who felt more comfortable sharing attributed that change to having developed greater skill as a teacher and learned how to manage contentiousness. Most who reported sharing more attributed this change to feeling morally compelled. Clarissa and Hannah, in particular, gave voice to this idea that our time presents an ethical imperative for teachers to speak up. Both worried that to remain silent would appear to condone the administration's policies and rhetoric, sending the wrong message to students. Hannah said, "As a teacher, I can't really just let those things stand and say that 'It's fine, and I can be neutral about that.'" Clarissa echoed the idea that there were certain questions about which she could not remain neutral, especially those related to her Latinx students. Whereas most teachers agreed that disclosing who they voted for was absolutely off-limits, Clarissa felt the need to clarify with students that she had not voted for Trump. To her, being a Trump supporter was shorthand that signaled to students more than a simple candidate preference, it communicated values and who she saw herself standing alongside. The way some teachers spoke suggested that they felt silenced by (even their self-imposed) expectations to be neutral. For nearly half of those interviewed, being a teacher in the age of Trump meant feeling compelled to speak out.

"I'm Blowing an Opportunity"

The teachers in this study attributed their positions on disclosure to a number of factors. For one, social studies teachers tend to characterize the professional stance toward political disclosure as necessarily being objective and neutral (Journell, 2016b); for some, this conception of doing the job the "right way" superseded other factors that may have otherwise enticed them to disclose.

Part of this perspective is the idea that a teacher's political disclosure automatically constitutes an effort at indoctrination or an abuse of power. Ryan explained how he understood disclosure affecting his students, "To me, it kind of detracts from my classroom when I do that, when I bring in my own personal views… I think it intimidates and influences students." Adherents of neutral impartiality expressed fear that disclosure would alienate students with differing political views or cause them to shut down and stop learning. Richard felt that *how* he disclosed his political opinions mattered:

> I'm an authority figure. And for better or worse, I'm going to influence them. And when I model that from a point of view of "Let's really engage and dig into this," that's teaching. When I am the authority figure that's like, "Here's how this is," then that becomes either "Let's believe him because we like him" or "He's part of the Deep State and he's trying to program us so let's turn off."

Richard worried that disclosing would cause students to stop listening to him altogether, so striving for political balance was, if nothing else, a mechanism to ensure his students would not wholly write him off. He also rightly suggests that disclosure, when done to coerce and manipulate, is an abuse of power that can lead to student resistance. On the whole, however, the teachers who worried about alienating students tended not to draw distinctions between different forms or methods of political disclosure; they felt that revealing opinions was problematic regardless of the manner in which it was done.

This expectation was both self-imposed and articulated by the teachers' colleagues, administrators, students, and community members. Teachers described reminders from school and district administrators, particularly in the days immediately following the 2016 election, to avoid politics at school. Some described general, school-wide "warnings" not to be like infamous

teachers shamed in news reports for partisan comments, while others recalled being pulled aside after talking about their opinions in the teachers' lounge without students present. Joshua, who found himself less likely to disclose after Trump's election, attributed his hesitance to a visit from his school administrator and a sense that community concerns about bias stemmed from stickers that students brought him, often from local Democratic politicians: "I don't think that I was doing anything wrong, but from the perspective of a parent, at home from a student, they may not necessarily see the same." Others, too, described a chilling factor arising from their sense that parents, administrators, and the community were watching closely. One described how his school's principal was almost singularly focused on public perception of the school and demanded neutrality in the classroom for the primary purpose of ensuring the school was never on the news. Numerous teachers described taking great care to speak carefully, avoiding giving students "too much ammunition" by disclosing something that could be levied against them by administrators or the community. Teachers worried about professional consequences of disclosing—in schools and districts with strong union protections, as well as in right-to-work states.

While teachers identified many factors that they said discouraged disclosure, they also named factors they felt made them more likely to disclose. Some teachers described using disclosure to model political thinking for young people. Clarissa said she would "walk them through my thought process" because they always "think of the world in black and white, so I like to show them how nuanced usually adults will think through the issue." Charlie, who frequently stressed how balanced and objective he was, expanded:

> I can see why some people are like, "you just don't share your position," but if I'm asking kids to have tough conversations and to understand perspective and realize that

> stereotypes… very often are not valid, then for me not to share my personal beliefs? I think I'm blowing an opportunity.

He also described himself as "fairly vocal about things I'm passionate for," such as the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club that he advised at his school. Charlie thought that the issues about which he was passionate—those he was comfortable being vocal about—were not political in the sense that his speaking out constituted disclosure, though he was not able to articulate what distinguished them from political, partisan topics about which he felt he needed to be objective. Given methodological constraints, it is impossible to know with certainty what Charlie's teaching looked like during this study. What is clear is that Charlie's avowal that he was "just … genuinely objective" conflicts with this statement that withholding his opinion is "blowing an opportunity." Charlie's thinking illustrates how teachers' approaches to disclosure are complicated and situational, and far less straightforward than is often thought.

Some also attributed their disclosure decisions to the national-level political rhetoric—often mimicked by their students, as seen in chapter four—and policies targeting marginalized people (Journell, 2017; Natanson et al., 2020). Disclosure, then, became part of how they stuck up for students who were the targets of that political bullying. Hannah described 2016-17 as "one of the most challenging years of [her] career," and recalled a discussion that was derailed:

> One kid just piped up and was like, "So how come people can just change their gender whenever they feel like it? Can I just change my birthday and make myself 21 because I feel like I'm 21?" ... I have students in my class who were transitioning. One who had attempted suicide ... I had to step in and be like, "You guys are crossing a line."

Other teachers also wrestled with how the marginalization to which their students were subjected challenged their ideas about not divulging their partisan beliefs. Clarissa said that while not

wanting to be seen as "overly" biased, it was imperative to her to signal to certain groups that she was in their corner. Whereas she said she had been coy about her political beliefs in the past, she felt she "owed" it to her students to be clear with them now. Her disclosure was an important component of building an inclusive classroom climate and relationships with students in ways that it had not been before.

The vitriol, racism, and polarization that animate the current political climate are not fundamentally new or unique to the Trump era, yet these teachers described how the presence of intolerance and hate speech in the classroom confused notions of objectivity and neutrality that have long guided principles of schooling in the United States. Despite the deep-seated nature of White supremacy, Islamophobia, and misogyny in American society, Susan, Hannah, Nicole, and Daniel were all taken aback by brazenly racist, anti-Muslim, and sexist comments from students. When the discussion about 9/11 spun out of control, Daniel recalled, "[I] didn't know what to do, really. I never had that happen. I was kind of dumbfounded." In schools nationwide, the tenor of the discourse felt new to teachers and left them feeling somewhat flatfooted in their responses.

One factor that suffused most teachers' ideas about disclosing in the political climate of the Trump era was fear of the repercussions for being seen as biased. Some worried about being "that teacher" who showed up on the news. Some were concerned about being called in by administrators or being closely watched. Some worried about losing their jobs or physical violence as possible consequences of disclosure. While previous research has attended to the fear that may influence disclosure decisions, this research suggests that teachers today may feel greater threats than has been previously accounted for; as mentioned above, these fears were present for teachers who were in right-to-work states and for those who were certain that their

teachers' union representation was strong and would fight any attempt by a school to reprimand them for disclosing.

As you will recall from the earlier deep dive, Richard's school saw serious contentiousness arise related to the March For Our Lives school walkout movement in the wake of the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida in 2018. Throughout the interview, Richard touched on numerous approaches to disclosure, ranging across Kelly's (1986) framework. He sometimes encouraged students to challenge and question his beliefs, sometimes avoided controversial topics altogether, and at other times prided himself on not revealing his opinions in the classroom. In his situation, avoiding political disclosure was a tool for managing threats; his administrators demanded neutrality for fear of negative publicity, and he strove to appear neutral out of fear he would be "exposed." As someone who identified as slightly liberal in his conservative local context, Richard was not only concerned that saying the wrong thing would mean uncomfortable encounters with families in the local grocery store or would cost him his job; he feared disclosing his political beliefs could result in physical violence.

Zoomed In: Deep Dives

Bruce (North Carolina)

"I've got too big of a platform. I have too big of a bully pulpit to use it in a way that might not be, in my mind, professionally correct."

Bruce taught social studies in North Carolina, in a community that he described as "slightly conservative." It was in a Congressional district that voted in 2016 for Trump by a +20% margin as he won approximately 60% of that district's vote. Bruce's school was located in a suburban area. About 60% of the student body was White, about 20% was Black, and around

10% of students were Hispanic. Just about half of the student body qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch. Bruce described the student body as a

> snapshot of our country. We have high socioeconomic students. We have very low socioeconomic students. We have African American. We have … White [students]. We have the redneck or the country… we have the farmers. We have inner-city kids. We have suburban. We have everything at our school.

Bruce identified as a politically moderate White man. He had been teaching for over twenty years. He participated in interviews in 2017 and 2018.

"It's Not My Job to Preach My Beliefs"

Bruce adhered strictly to neutral impartiality in the classroom. "I don't share my personal opinions on politics," he said. He believed ardently that good teachers kept their political beliefs well shielded, never revealing their partisan preferences in any way. As he articulated it:

> It's not my job to preach my beliefs. It's my job to provide [the students] the information so they can go make their own personal beliefs… I've got too big of a platform. I have too big of a bully pulpit to use it in a way that might not be, in my mind, professionally correct.

In this example, Bruce spoke to a couple of different reasons for neutral impartiality. He subscribed to the idea that disclosure is necessarily preaching beliefs, that it is incompatible with *also* providing students with information to build their own beliefs. With that, he addressed exclusive partiality and the idea that a teacher's role is a platform that can wield tremendous power over impressionable students. Finally, he called into question the professionalism of teachers who do disclose, not drawing a distinction between exclusive partiality and committed impartiality.

He was also adamant that he is successful in withholding his politics from students, that his students were not able to suss out his partisan beliefs. He described how he was able to know that he had avoided disclosing successfully:

> At the end of my class, in my class evaluation, I ask them to put what am I? Am I a Republican or am I a Democrat? Am I a conservative or am I a liberal? If I get 60/40, then I've done my job. I tell them all the time I'm a Republi-crat. I'm a Demo-can.

This commitment to playing it straight down the middle came from his desire not to "shut down a kid from learning because they don't like my political beliefs," he explained. To Bruce, doing his job well meant being so politically amorphous that "when I go from one class, I'm pro-Trump to the next class I'm anti-American because I don't like President Trump."

"That's What I'm Supposed to Do"

As you may recall from the last chapter, Bruce was particularly concerned with ensuring his class was balanced between both sides of every issue he taught. Doing so allowed him to create an open climate and was also part of how he enacted neutral impartiality. He saw a both-sides approach not as particularly confrontational, but rather as grounded in inquiry. "I'm much more wanting to, 'Okay, listen to the other side and let's figure it out.' I'm a social studies teacher, for crying out loud. That's what I'm supposed to do."

Research may have found that teachers constantly disclose their beliefs, whether or not they do so intentionally (Hess, 2009; Niemi & Niemi, 2007), but Bruce felt he took the necessary steps to prevent that kind of inadvertent disclosure. In particular, he felt that the first comment he made on a given issue revealed his true opinion on the matter. Thus, he made sure that the very first time a topic came up in a school year, his first statement came in opposition to whatever comment a student made. Then at the end of the day, he took notes that included what side he

had given voice to first so that the next time that same issue was again a topic of discussion, his first comment would switch sides.

Bruce sought to teach his students argumentation skills, and saw his both-sides approach as part of that goal. As he explained:

> I will always be challenging, or for lack of a better term, going against, what they say so that they understand there is always two sides to everything. I preach the fact that you have to understand the other side for you to completely understand your side.

He did not assume his students could sufficiently respond to one another's policy arguments. In addition, at least initially, he said he had students direct their comments in discussions to him rather than to one another as a way of reducing interpersonal contentiousness. Challenging students' pre-conceived ideas required that he frequently be the one making the arguments on the other side. As he explained:

> I'm constantly going to take the opinion and position that is opposite of you. It's not to be mean and confrontational. It's so that I can show you what the other side is saying. I tell them, "I'll be a large White guy one day, and then I'm an African American female the next day, and I'm a Hispanic 10-year old the next day."

This required, as he said, that he be "a really good actor." He acknowledged that this strategy meant he had to be able to express an opinion he disliked with as much passion as he would have for his genuinely-held beliefs, because he "didn't need to be a preacher" in the classroom. Again, Bruce's framing equates disclosure of beliefs with an attempt at converting students to his beliefs.

He did believe that there were times that it was appropriate for him to divulge his personal beliefs when something was "flat out" wrong. He insisted that those were not political

questions, but ethical ones, such as domestic abuse. "Yeah, you get my personal opinion, but those aren't political. That's more of the moral issues that I think we're required and should be teaching them." I pressed him on this point, saying that the line between moral and political questions is a fuzzy one. What, I asked, constituted a political issue as opposed to an ethical one? How did he make that call? He answered, "The ones I'm talking about, about abusing a child, I've not seen anybody say it's okay to do that. We don't do that." Here, Bruce applied the *epistemic criterion* for determining the controversial nature of an issue to his decisions about political disclosure: he deemed disclosure appropriate in these instances because any contrary view to his would be contrary to reason itself (Journell, 2017). He understood any issue short of that bar, however, to be a political one, even those that other people might reasonably classify as moral, ethical, or off-limits:

> The abortion thing is a big one. Abortion is a huge one, okay, but we get into the discussions of legal, moral, and ethical. Gay rights and gay marriage. Once again, I'm not going to tell them if I approve of gay marriage. I'm not going to tell them if I approve of abortion. Because that's a political thing… But abortion, I'll bring up both sides: pro-choice, pro-life. We discuss it.

Thus, as was the case with Charlie, I was left wondering how students for whom these issues implicated their identities would interpret his neutral impartiality.

Susan (Delaware)

"When you read Howard Zinn, or you read any of these people, they say you have to acknowledge what your bias is in order for people to be able to look at you as a source."

Susan taught social studies in a politically bifurcated, "purple" area of Delaware. She characterized it as "slightly conservative," though it was in a Congressional district in which

approximately 40% of voters voted for Trump in 2016. Her school was suburban, with a student population that was about half White, about a third Black, and about 10% Hispanic. Like Richard's school, NCES did not provide data on free- and reduced-price lunch populations at her school, but did indicate that approximately 20% of the student body was eligible through eligibility for direct certification programs like SNAP.

Susan identified as a very liberal White woman. She had been teaching for fewer than 10 years when the study began, and she participated in all three rounds of interviews (2017, 2018, and 2019).

"Got Heated Very Quickly"

As you have read in earlier chapters of this dissertation, Susan described particular challenges related to teaching gender and the Civil War. She limited the content that students discussed and how they engaged. Understanding her pedagogical choices and sensemaking requires first understanding the context for her teaching.

Susan was very clear that her school saw increased contentiousness during the 2016 presidential election that waned in the years since. The community's political divide reflected in the student body, where their mock presidential election resulted in a tie. Susan said that the day after, Trump supporters chanted in the hallways, Clinton supporters snapped back at them, and "sometimes it got to the point where it was not a fight, but it had the makings of being that." She recalled an incident where a student stole the school's mascot uniform, put it on, and recorded a video to social media with a racist screed against Black students, using the n-word. She had students making substantive arguments in class that women should not be allowed to vote and that chattel slavery was good.

She talked repeatedly about how topics that had been largely innocuous prior to the election took on partisan overtones and became flashpoints in the classroom. She said, "When we would discuss things in class that usually weren't very controversial the issues would become heated very quickly. … I think they were very on edge about any type of discussion." More specifically, she illustrated how the Electoral College went from a mere learning objective to a topic that derailed quickly into "but her emails":

> The students would go from discussing the idea of the Electoral College and … it very quickly erupted into "Well, you're saying this because you liked Hillary Clinton and Hilary Clinton lost the election." … It just diverted very quickly into a debate about them as people, about the email scandal, and all of that kind of periphery information.

In addition to the Electoral College, she felt Andrew Jackson and discussions about the Confederacy became newly partisan topics in her classroom. As described in earlier chapters, she repeatedly reported contentiousness directed at her, as well, as with the student who, as she described it, said "I couldn't tell him that he was wrong because I was a woman." She recounted a parent who approached her at the beginning of the school year to check that she was going to teach her Advanced Placement U.S. History course the "right way." (She also noted that this same parent had, the year prior, pushed back on Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* as an English text.)

"I Felt Like a Coward"

Every time Susan articulated her thinking about disclosure, what she said was consistent with committed impartiality. Consistent with what Journell (2017) has argued is an ethical stance, Susan said, "I actually come from the school of thought [that] if you don't tell them what

your opinion is and you're saying something, that doesn't give them the opportunity to understand what your bias is." She elaborated:

> I've actually always been pretty open about sharing my views and I explain it to my students when I go over historical bias and interpretation that I'm going to be presenting history to you and no matter how much I try to be unbiased I'm going to be biased. So then I tell them my opinion but then I always make sure to tell them the other opinions that exist out there as well.

In execution, she said that this approach meant for each topic, she gave students multiple sources that represented a variety of viewpoints—though she also clarified that those viewpoints were still "within historical accuracy." With that said, she explained that she did not go out of her way to announce her beliefs, but rather provided her opinion in the context of learning goals. In the 2017 interview, she also added that it was harder for her not to share her opinions but she tried because she felt she was "almost too emotional about it." Related, she felt that since 2016, her definition of disclosure also included the instances when she shared her own personal life experiences as a woman with workplace discrimination and related issues.

She also spoke about numerous instances when she engaged in pedagogic constriction to limit opportunities for contentiousness and reduce the likelihood that she would be in a position to disclose. For example, she recounted reducing the amount of lecture in her class and increasing how much she introduced information to students through reading. Importantly, this instructional choice was not based on her thinking related to whether lecture was the best vehicle for student learning generally. Rather, it was grounded in her sense that if she were to give voice to an argument, some students would discount that argument simply because she had articulated it out loud; thus, reducing lecture was a mechanism for maintaining both student engagement and

her status as a "neutral source." Again, she described this strategy even as she repeatedly expressed an understanding that everyone has an inherent bias.

Throughout the three interviews, Susan described herself in ways consistent with committed partiality: "Here are both sides, but I want to let you know that I have an opinion about this and it's going to shape my narrative." Yet she also offered examples of times when that was not what she did. For one, she constrained the methods students used to discuss, like using a "four corners" structure that limits the viewpoints students argue, restricting how many times students participated, or not even asking students to talk at all and having them write instead.

There were also times that she described fully subscribing to neutral impartiality at the behest of school administrators. In the incident with the stolen mascot uniform and the racist social media rant, Susan said:

> We were told that we weren't allowed to talk about it specifically in the classroom with the students, and I'm not sure whether or not that was a necessarily a good thing or a bad thing. But it meant that we didn't necessarily have to deal with it because they bring it up and I say, "I'm not allowed to talk to you about this in class, but if you'd like to go to guidance, we can talk about it or they can talk to you about it."

She also engaged in pedagogic constriction and backed away from talking about the anti-gun protests with her students:

> The school said the students were not allowed to do the walk out… and the students called the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]. They messed with the wrong kids… The administration was very "make sure you're not talking about it in the classroom," those types of things with the students, which was hard because I'm the sponsor for the

> debate team. And a lot of them were the ones that were organizing it and they wanted my opinion on it. And I kind of felt like a coward a little bit because they were standing up for what they believed in, and I didn't because I didn't want to lose my job and I felt like a bad role model.

Despite being predisposed to committed impartiality, she backed down because she believed that discussing the protests with students would cost her job, as she taught in a politically bifurcated setting where she felt speaking her mind imposed some degree of risk. She felt this risk acutely, even though she was also certain that her union would fully support her academic freedom to disclose should she be disciplined for it.

Summary

In summary, teachers in this study represented a variety of approaches to disclosing their political beliefs and opinions in the classroom. Their words speak to the conditions in U.S. public schools in the Trump era, under which social studies teachers understood what it meant to enact professional standards of neutrality in the classroom, such as epistemic contentiousness and disputes over truth.

They defined disclosure in ways that were consistent with Kelly's (1986) framework and also in ways that went beyond his categories, and often articulated inconsistent, shifting stances. None of them said they avoided controversial issues altogether (exclusive neutrality), though many avoided certain issues or methods. There were also no teachers who said they tried to convince students to adopt their political beliefs (exclusive partiality), though some described actions that had the effect of giving them the final political word on certain issues. A few teachers aligned with committed impartiality and took the position that their opinions would influence their teaching and therefore they should disclose those opinions to students. But most

teachers in this study, as in the broad population of social studies teachers, believed it was ethical to adopt a position of neutral impartiality and never reveal their political beliefs. They also described disclosure in ways for which Kelly (1986) did not account, such as describing their personal experiences, addressing fake news, and changing their approach based on political climate or events.

Teachers also often discussed the idea that being neutral in the classroom was the right thing to do, and understood neutral to mean politically balanced. Yet they also described the need to stand up and speak out. The data in this chapter support the idea that despite being a seemingly straightforward pedagogical choice, teacher political disclosure is in fact complicated, situational, and contextual in important ways.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Discussion and Conclusion

I write this chapter 15 days after George Floyd was murdered. 13 days after streets nationwide began flooding with protests. 11 days ago, Twitter labeled one of Donald Trump's tweets as violating its rules on glorifying violence (though did not take it down) and Facebook decided it was not going to make any gestures at all toward regulating Trump's speech (Isaac & Kang, 2020). Six days ago, the *New York Times* published an opinion piece by U.S. Senator Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, that called for the United States military to use overwhelming force in American cities to quell rebellion as mass protests cry out loud that Black Lives Matter. Today is George Floyd's funeral.

In response to Cotton's op-ed, *Times* reporters and editors tweeted, "Running this puts black people in danger. And other Americans standing up for our humanity and democracy, too." (Gay, 2020). James Bennet, the editor of the editorial page at the *Times* took to Twitter himself to defend publishing the piece. He wrote, "Times Opinion owes it to our readers to show them counter-arguments, particularly those made by people in a position to set policy" (Bennet, 2020a). He continued, "We understand that many readers find Senator Cotton's argument painful, even dangerous. We believe that is one reason it requires public scrutiny and debate" (Bennet, 2020b). (This argument was weakened some days later when it came out that the Times, in fact, solicited the op-ed from Cotton. Two days ago, Bennet resigned from the newspaper.)

Like the *New York Times* and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, social studies teachers in this study grappled with what it means to facilitate discussions of controversial issues, especially issues that both have substantive personal consequence for some (controversial identity issues) and which may generate hostile or intolerant opinions from others. Bennet's reasoning for publishing Cotton's article echoed North Carolina social studies teacher

Bruce's assertion that "the best way to show that your idea is extreme is to let you see other, non-extreme opinions." Yet classrooms, newspapers, and social media platforms can get caught up in both sides-ism and lose sight of the fact that these debates take place within a broader political context with enormous, life-and-death consequences. These debates do not fall within what Castro and Knowles (2017) described as a romanticized civic sphere in which "all are afforded equal access to political participation and all have economic, cultural, social, and political capital necessary to affect change in their political arenas" (p. 304). Teachers, like newspaper editors, mediate discourse and determine the ground on which that discourse takes place. Like Bennet, teachers in this study seemed often to be unaware of the real consequences that unfettered speech could have on students, and seemed to think about classroom discussions as largely abstract, intellectual exercises.

In the previous three chapters, I shared findings related to how teachers have made sense of classroom discussions in the first three years of the Trump administration. In this chapter, I discuss and analyze those findings. I begin with insights into the findings, continue with the study's implications and limitations, and end with suggestions for possible directions that future research can take.

Discussion: "I Can't Just Let Those Things Stand"

The findings in this study demonstrate how the traditional framing for deliberative pedagogies in social studies education—which values universality, neutrality, and objectivity—is inherently flawed and especially unable to meet the heightened polarization, intolerance, inequality, and epistemic crisis of the Trump era. Though contentiousness, hate speech, and oppression are, again, not unique to this time and have always marginalized students, their prominence and potency in the Trump era have foregrounded them in ways that cast a brighter

light on the inadequacy of traditional social studies education to address questions about equity and justice, especially through deliberation. In this time, teachers find themselves grappling with professional norms on the one hand and with the sentiment Hannah expressed when she put her foot down and said, "I can't just let those things stand." My dissertation's findings both reveal some important lessons and raise additional questions about how social studies educators can do more to truly support student learning for all of their students. I explore these lessons learned and questions raised in the sections that follow.

Lessons Learned

This dissertation has some important lessons about how teachers think about teaching controversial issue discussions in the Trump era. Some of these lessons are consistent with findings from other research, some of them build on that work to make new claims about what teachers can and should do to use controversial issues in ways that support and advance equity and justice in social studies classrooms.

Lessons About Neutrality

When Hannah described a discussion that was derailed by transphobia, she perfectly illustrated one of the core lessons from this study and central challenges to social studies teachers today. In it, she said, a student flippantly equated gender transitions to "just chang[ing their] birthday" to be 21 years old. She reflected, "I have students in my class who were transitioning. One who had attempted suicide… I had to step in and be like, 'You guys are crossing a line.'" This incident is a clear and powerful reminder that there simply is no neutral option. Hannah could either allow a transphobic statement to hang in the air being breathed by her transgender students, or she could speak out against it, as she reported doing. But any choice she made would necessarily mean providing a sympathetic touch (Du Bois, 1935) either to the student who made

the comment or the transitioning students who heard it; there was no way for her sympathy to be dispersed evenly and equitably. Social studies teachers have been socialized to enact professional neutrality, but as Dunn et al. (2019) wrote: "teachers… find themselves struggling with issues of professional neutrality in a profession that is, at its core, already not neutral" (p. 465).

However, the data from this study suggest that the conditions in which teachers are making disclosure decisions have only intensified the impulse many of them feel to appear neutral. Their concern that disclosing would indoctrinate their students or alienate them from their school community has not abated. For some, it became more vital than ever to demonstrate political balance in the classroom as they doubled down on these efforts. For others, the illusion of neutrality was gone, and any consequences they feared would arise because they disclosed sat alongside their concerns that *not* disclosing was insufficient to meet the challenges of teaching in this moment. Both Susan and Richard's experiences with the March for Our Lives at their respective schools were laden with fear. Journell (2016c) described how disclosure could be consistent with the Foucauldian notion of *parrhesia* (Foucault, 2001), the willingness to speak the truth in spite of danger or fear. This study provides empirical examples of teachers who did so, while also highlighting the real dangers that teachers perceived. Perhaps Richard could have been parrhesiatic and disclosed his political beliefs. Yet his choice to aim for political balance also seems fairly rational in the face of the violence and lack of administrative support he reported.

These findings also illuminate important considerations about how teachers are thinking about issues as closed or open. Though scholars have frameworks and criteria for making such a determination (e.g., Hess, 2009; Journell, 2017, 2018), these teachers rarely utilized any kind of systematic strategy for qualifying issues as settled or open. Many described leaving anything on

the table—one conducted an entire discussion on moon landing truther-ism. While there is some disagreement among scholars on how to classify gray-area issues around which there is debate, there is general agreement that some issues are, by any measure, patently and obviously closed. This research showed how teachers wrestled with disclosure even as it related to these topics, including the morality of slavery, the Holocaust as historical fact, and whether gender pay gaps exist or are merely the product of "women whining." Though teachers did not frame slavery as an open topic on which reasonable people can disagree, they still reported students' making White supremacist arguments supporting chattel slavery. For these teachers, even this very closed issue demanded the same pedagogical decision-making.

Hess (2009) described how issues "tip" from closed to open and vice versa over time. The topics teachers felt surprised to be debating today all had tipped in the past; while most would see women's suffrage as an issue that is settled, it was hotly contested a century ago (and the suffrage of women of color has remained so in decades since). As I explored in chapter two, when scholars give examples of an issue that "tips," they tend to tip in a justice-oriented direction: the incarceration (Daniels, 2005) of Japanese-Americans during World War II (Hess, 2009) or same-sex marriage (Journell, 2018). This study's data relate to issues that are tipping *away from* justice. Teachers and researchers have largely understood these topics as uncontroversial, but they have clearly taken on political, partisan overtones in the current political climate.

These findings also complicate some of the ideas that educators have taken for granted about their role in leading discussions in a politically polarized climate. Teacher political disclosure has typically been defined as whether or not teachers decide to articulate their personal political beliefs and opinions in the classroom (Journell, 2016b). Social studies

educators on the whole tend to approach disclosure from the standpoint of neutral impartiality (Hess, 2009; Journell, 2011a; Kelly, 1986), insisting that keeping their own opinions out of discussions provides students with the space to engage with their peers in a rigorous exchange of ideas, unfettered by the adult's opinions and influence (Kelly, 1986). The teachers in this study are largely consistent with other research on this point, though my findings also emphasize that teachers do not have fixed approaches to political disclosure. Their ideas about disclosing changed as we touched on different discussion topics, contexts, and factors that affected their thinking.

Teachers appeared to use the idea of professional neutrality as a shield; when faced with intolerance in the classroom, they could fall back on the idea that "teachers are supposed to be neutral" and avoid taking sides. While doing so might protect them from having to reveal something of themselves, it could also leave young people without an adult to defend them from incidents of racism, misogyny, or transphobia, as could have been the case if Hannah had not intervened in the situation above. In light of sociopolitical hostility in schools, it is even more critical that teachers think hard about how their pedagogical decisions relating to discussions of controversial identity issues could create conditions for marginalized youth in their classes to be victimized in the course of classroom discussion, especially decisions related to how a topic is framed, whether intolerant views are allowed to stand in the name of free speech in the classroom, and how the teacher discloses.

The teachers I interviewed had given thought to disclosing within the context of discussions of controversial topics they saw as open to debate: abortion, immigration, gay rights, gender, class, religious tolerance, racism, and for whom they cast their votes. But they also said repeatedly that in the current political climate, topics that seemed apolitical in the past—or at

least not especially partisan—had come to feel rife with political overtones and consequences, such as the Electoral College and the field of economics. (Though, to be sure, just because a given topic *seemed* apolitical does not mean it *was*.) When everything feels political, the inadvertent, subtle ways that teachers constantly disclose their beliefs and opinions (Niemi & Niemi, 2007; Stoddard, 2009) are no longer latent but become apparent and plain. Thus disclosure is more than a teacher's statement of political opinion voiced in the context of formal academic discourse. It is not as straightforward as "I tell students what I think" or "I never reveal anything." Today's context makes it clear that we must think more broadly about how teachers signal moral, ethical, and political beliefs, whether intentional or not.

Lessons About Classroom Climate

When the participants described the steps they took to build classrooms that were safe, the decisions they described had the cumulative effect of prioritizing safety as it related to free speech rather than affective safety for marginalized youth. In so doing, I argue, teachers' efforts to create an open classroom climate led to classrooms that were not, in fact, all that open. This happened when teachers held back their opinions on social and political issues due to their fears of being seen as biased or worrying about giving students "too much ammunition" through disclosing a political belief that could then be levied against them. The emphasis over half the teachers in this study placed on maintaining the appearance of political neutrality had the concurrent, perhaps unintended, consequence of protecting free speech before protecting the targets of intolerance. This also happened as teachers across sites—conservative political contexts to liberal ones—took steps to address their sense that conservative students felt their voices were unwelcome in the classroom. When I asked about marginalized voices in their classrooms, teachers like Ryan, Richard, and Charlie (all of whom identified as White men)

talked about conservative students. Richard was less sympathetic to claims of perceived victimhood from his good ol' boys, but still felt the need to bridge their estrangement as he "consider[ed] them capable of great violence." That these teachers were specific about building a safe classroom for conservative student voices but vague about classroom safety for other students had the effect of lending a sympathetic touch to those conservative voices and not to the rest of the classroom.

Secondly, teachers prioritized free speech over the affective safety of marginalized youth through their responses to intolerant comments. Bruce, for instance, saw it as good teaching to have all opinions present in the classroom, and trusted that his abilities and experience as a teacher were sufficient to ensure he would see if a student was upset by what transpired in the classroom. He believed he was skilled enough to understand what was going on with young people in very different social situations than he was, and that he was able to create a room in which he could attend to everyone's socio-emotional well-being equally. This is a tall order. In his class's discussion of 9/11, David took issue with Islamophobic speech when it threatened his ability to control the classroom, but not when it was expressed in tones that were polite, controlled, and still inherently Islamophobic. Again, doing so inevitably places a sympathetic touch somewhere other than on the Muslim student in the classroom, as he intentionally did not make an effort to change students' minds. Five teachers turned to other young people in the class to be the ones to speak up in response to intolerance, in many cases placing the burden on the targets of the intolerance to enforce boundaries on classroom discourse and make themselves safe. Other teachers, like, Susan, made a point to challenge intolerance in private, one-on-one conversations. Doing so may have prevented eruptions in the classroom in the moment and maybe even led to a students' changing their mind. But it also meant that the rest of the class was

not privy to the correction. Neither the targets of intolerance nor classmates who also held the intolerant beliefs got to hear the adult in the room speak out against violations of this kind.

Finally, teachers made decisions about whose socio-emotional well-being they tended to as they decided which topics to teach and how. While scholars have made arguments about different criteria by which teachers should determine if a discussion topic is open or closed (Hess, 2009; Journell, 2017), the participants in this dissertation offered their own rationales for making these determinations. Bruce considered whether he would be labeled "anti-this or prude-that, simply because I'm discussing it." Richard was open to "anything that's appropriate for high schoolers to discuss," drawing the line at "extreme sexuality issues." Charlie took pride in the fact that his class often discussed controversial identity issues, because it meant they were taking on topics that were relevant and real. Again, however, despite repeated prompting, he did not reflect on how heightened contentiousness combined with issues that were impacting his students to result in a safe classroom space for some of his students, but not all.

In the 2019 key informant interviews, I asked teachers to describe their reasoning in determining if an issue should be taught as an open issue or a settled one. I gave them examples from Hess (2009) and Journell (2017): the science on climate change is settled, so should it be taught as an issue with two legitimate sides? Should students discuss both sides of transgender bathroom policies as having two legitimate sides? Does the answer change if there are transgender students in the class? Ryan described attending a professional development seminar focused on teaching controversial issues that addressed controversial identity issues and making this open vs. closed determination. He said that the example provided in the professional development was the Muslim travel ban, and that he was shown different ways to think about which issues were appropriate for the classroom and how to frame them. The session did not

encourage teachers to adopt a particular method but rather gave them frames for thinking about their own contexts, but Ryan said it was one of the most interesting professional development activities in which he had ever participated. However, he also said he had not changed the way he actually made pedagogical decisions about which topics to discuss. So while it was intellectually stimulating and he was familiar with the scholarly arguments when he and I discussed them, he was largely unmoved by them.

To be sure, some teachers did describe taking steps to create spaces intentionally focused on the safety of marginalized youth. Clarissa wanted all of her students to feel comfortable expressing themselves, but she also was unwilling to be open to racism and sexism. She was willing to intervene in order to realize the priority she placed on marginalized youth in her classroom. Many teachers were able to offer an example or two of an instance when they stood up to the sociopolitical hostility in support of marginalized youth. Taken as a whole, however, the findings in this study suggest that the emotional well-being and affective safety was prioritized above free speech only in response to egregious, flagrant violations or literal death threats. These interventions took place when students advocated for chattel slavery, used the n-word, threatened lynchings, dehumanized Indigenous and Latinx people, and mocked transgender people—and, frankly, not even consistently then.

Some scholars have argued that teachers can mitigate intolerance through the establishment of classroom rules and guidelines (Reynolds et al., 2020), but the findings in this dissertation complicate our understanding of this "best practice" as sufficient: teachers certainly reported instances when a student employed hostile or dehumanizing language within the context of discussion and the teacher, in turn, shut down the discussion in order to enforce pre-established guidelines. But they also described numerous instances when students offered

intolerant opinions—that those on public assistance are "welfare queens," for example—as merely one side of the public debate on a given issue. Some teachers chose to reason their way out of these discussions (as did Richard, in whose classroom the example comment was made), while others described rather capacious conceptions of what constituted reasonable political opinions for students to voice on controversial issues. Again, there were exceptions, but on the whole, teachers seemed oblivious to the ways in which their efforts to maximize the openness of their classrooms could have the opposite effect and instead *close* the space to students from marginalized groups. These students might reasonably remain silent and withdraw from the classroom community teachers described working so hard to establish as welcoming. As the classroom became a site in which intolerance was tolerated or even encouraged in the name of discourse, marginalized youth could reasonably understand it as a place that neither tended to their socio-emotional well-being (Sondel et al., 2018) nor provided a them with a sympathetic touch (Du Bois, 1935).

Lessons About Both Sides-ism

One of the most common refrains from teachers throughout this study was an insistence that teaching social studies well-meant teaching "both sides" of the issues. This study calls this assertion into question.

The teachers in this study who emphasized the importance of representing both sides did so with different motivations behind it. Susan felt that showing her students both sides of the topics she taught would allow them then to formulate reasoned opinions on the matter. Ryan felt that it was important to articulate the conservative, "other" side because of the hegemonic status of liberal opinions in his school and local context. Some had administrators who demanded greater emphasis on representing both sides. Though it is important for social studies classrooms

to provide multiple perspectives on issues, the framing of both sides-ism has some flaws, whatever the rationale.

For one, teaching "both sides" implies that the issues being taught have precisely two sides: a pro- and con- position. But there are exceedingly few issues that only have two sides and teaching "both sides" reinforces the idea that most, if not all, do. For example, as I write this dissertation, defunding or abolishing the police has become a significant public debate; those in favor of defunding have significant differences of opinion about the rationale, agenda, process, and even whether the end goal is actually abolishing, demilitarizing, or just trimming budgets for police departments, to say nothing of the many arguments being made against the proposal. To teach the issue as an either/or proposition is to oversimplify substantive differences in public policy in the name of simplicity, and makes the classroom discussion an inauthentic exercise rather than an opportunity for young people to grapple with the messiness of how we learn to live together (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), as deliberative pedagogies are intended to do. Perhaps doing so facilitates classroom management or provides some structure to the discussion, but I argue that such a watered-down classroom discussion will not lend itself to the kind of sophisticated political thinking that controversial issue discussions are intended to foster. In addition, as I touched on in the last section, this impulse to "both sides" can be part of how intolerance makes its way into classroom discussions, particularly of issues that implicate students' identities.

In addition, teaching "both sides" inherently frames the arguments presented as legitimate political opinions. North Carolina social studies teacher Bruce asserted that allowing extremist viewpoints in discussions would inevitably expose them as absurd, but there is little to suggest that that is the case (Garrett et al., 2020). When, in the name of neutrality, teachers like Bruce

refuse to participate in denouncing intolerant arguments, the classroom becomes a platform from which students can voice oppressive viewpoints to a captive audience. Richard described why it was difficult to thread this needle, reflecting that his assertion of intellectual authority could cause some students to respond with, "He's part of the Deep State and he's trying to program us so let's turn off." Conversely, Bruce was relatively unconcerned with whether students would shut down and more concerned with whether they would identify his political opinions through his intervention in a discussion. He was well aware that some opinions being articulated in his classroom were intolerant, but saw his role as disconnected from the work of unveiling them as oppressive. With all of this said, the solution to the perils of both sides-ism is not to throw balance out of the window and only teach one side of the issues. One-sided social studies content is precisely the narrow curricular problem at the heart of the traditional coverage model (Sipress & Voelker, 2011; Woodson, 2015). The question, then, is how to lead controversial issue discussions in ways that attend to multiple viewpoints (not just pro- and con-) while also creating boundaries around viewpoints that allow for a substantive exchange of ideas and protecting the children in the classroom from abusive, violent language.

Lessons About Rationality

Buttressing many of the norms in social studies education previously discussed, such as neutrality, is a baseline assumption of rationality. Kelly's (1986) framework on teacher political disclosure and much of the corresponding literature on disclosure assumes that teachers make controlled, professional, rational choices about when to disclose. The findings in this dissertation suggest that instead, teachers tend think about disclosure in ways that shift constantly in relation to different topics, differently tracked classes, and different relationships they have with students. Disclosure is much more complicated than Kelly's (1986) framework takes into account. In

addition, it is not solely an exchange between students and teachers that stops at the classroom door. Richard is a prime example of this, as his ideas about disclosing his political beliefs were intimately tied to his sense of the dangerous public consequences of being labeled as a liberal and considerably limited protection afforded to him. Disclosure is not a strictly rational, logical decision in the way Kelly's (1986) framework might suggest, but is deeply contextual, especially as the context itself shifts (Hess, 2009; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016).

In addition, the way that the teachers described understanding the role of discussion illustrated that they saw it as a space for rational discourse within a romanticized, equitable civic sphere (Castro & Knowles, 2017). This perspective is reflected in Bruce's assumption that simply airing non-extremist opinions would be sufficient to defeat extremism, or in Charlie's insistence on being genuinely objective. On the whole, teachers seemed to understand classroom discussions of controversial issues largely as abstract exercises in which disparate ideas came together on a level playing field of ideas. As others have argued (Castro & Knowles, 2017; Gibson, 2020), this kind of abstraction does not, in fact, prepare young people to participate in a democracy that is grossly and innately unequal. Teachers' descriptions of the conditions characterizing the schools and classrooms today fly in the face of rationality, yet teachers continue to take it for granted as a core underpinning of deliberative pedagogy.

Questions Raised

In addition to revealing important lessons, the data in this dissertation raise some important questions that I touch on briefly in this section.

Social studies educators are often encouraged to conduct controversial issue discussions about topics that are relevant and present in the lives of students. When a student reacted to the discussion about the constitutionality of Confederate flag bans in schools with a racist display of

his Confederate flag, Charlie felt that discussing racism was *more* important and *more* engaging because of the issue's prominence in the school community. In Susan's experience, on the other hand, when the school's mascot uniform was used in a "racist social media rant," her administrator forbade teachers from talking about the incident in class because it was *too* close. This raises a dilemma, in that proximity can make for unique learning opportunities, but can also bring unique challenges. My dissertation does not provide guidance on how teachers should discern whether an issue is "perfectly close" or "too close." As social studies teachers are encouraged to teach *relevant* controversial issues, how should teachers weigh the significance of that relevance in their contexts? At present, very little guidance, if any, is offered to teachers in such circumstances.

Knowing that research has found an open classroom climate is a critical component of controversial issues done well, it is important for teachers to reconsider their efforts to balance openness and safety. My dissertation makes it abundantly clear that, whether or not it has come up in their classrooms previously, teachers need to anticipate that students may articulate intolerant political opinions in the course of discussions, and that they need to plan proactively for when they would intervene in such circumstances and how they would do so. Such a plan, I would argue, necessitates that teachers plan thoughtfully about the point at which students' language becomes intolerant, their rationale for making that determination, and whether their reasoning sufficiently attends to the perspectives and safety of marginalized students in the classroom. It is also clear that too few teachers have done this kind of planning. By not thinking it out ahead of time, the teachers are left with reactive stances that tend to be based on transgressions of their personal feelings. I contend that drawing the line on intolerant speech cannot be done in ways that are simultaneously equitable, just, and reactive. How can teachers

take intentional steps to provide spaces in which students feel comfortable expressing their views while also ensuring that there are firm boundaries on intolerant views in order to protect children from hate speech and bullying?

Many teachers in this dissertation asserted that conducting discussions of controversial social and political issues in the Trump era required having strong relationships with students. They described front-loading relationship-building at the beginning of the school year in order to build trust that would allow the classroom to pursue discussions about difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998). In their minds, building strong relationships led to trust which in turn led to substantive, rigorous discussions about complicated issues. Conversely, Conrad (2020) studied one teacher's disclosure for critical empathic reasoning, and like Georgia social studies teacher Clarissa, the teacher in her study believed that remaining neutral about controversial identity issues broke down any pre-established trust with students and eroded relationships. So, which is it? Do strong relationships build trust and good discussions? Or do teachers' decisions about creating discussions shape their abilities to build trust and strong relationships? Or—more likely, in my mind—are student-teacher relationships and controversial issue discussions related to one another in more complicated ways than are accounted for in the research so far?

Finally, while this is not a study of historical thinking and historiography, it nevertheless raises questions about epistemology. As reviewed in chapter two, an important part of social studies education scholarship has pushed for the field to go beyond the confines of the traditional narratives in social studies courses in the United States, and to expand who and what is considered a legitimate source of knowledge. Students should absolutely read critically and interrogate the imperialist, White supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal (hooks, 2009) narratives that have long defined social studies teaching and learning in the U.S. This type of skepticism is

qualitatively different from the epistemic contentiousness described in this dissertation. The teachers in this study (particularly the women) described students who—rather than questioning sources, looking for more information, and reading critically—categorically rejected their teachers as legitimate sources of any valid information at all. This rejection came in tandem with illiberal, ideologically-charged contentiousness. My dissertation spotlights epistemic contentiousness, but its data do not point clearly to ways forward.

Implications and Limitations

Implications For Teachers and Teacher Educators

I recently presented my findings on teacher political disclosure to a group of teacher educators. One of the questions I was asked was, "So when you were in the classroom, how did you approach disclosure?" My answer: "Not well!" This research has implications for practice (lessons that I would take back to the classroom myself) and for teacher education (lessons that will inform my own work with pre-service teachers beginning this fall).

I hope that the findings in this dissertation disabuse social studies educators of the idea that it is virtuous or moral to enact neutral impartiality in the classroom. I join Sondel et al. (2018) in their assertion that "it is unacceptable to avoid [controversial] issues or remain neutral especially in times of political trauma" (p. 183). This is by no means to say that the pendulum should swing all the way to exclusive partiality and actual political indoctrination. Rather, I argue that my dissertation echoes Journell (2016b) in his argument that responsible and thoughtful disclosure of political beliefs is, in fact, *more* ethical than asserting a super-human ability to enact neutrality. Bruce insisted he was able to keep his political opinions fully hidden from his students, but other research has found that teachers are not able to do so, that their opinions leak out whether intended or not (Callan, 2011; Journell, 2011b; Myers, 2009; Niemi &

Niemi, 2007). Following Journell's (2016b) argument, because Bruce's students receive political messages from him while he asserts his neutrality and objectivity, they do not have sufficient information to know when he is stating his opinion or when he is providing political facts; they are not able to filter or contextualize his inadvertent disclosures. This underhanded indoctrination is the kind that German civic educators thought much more worrisome than the overt disclosure when they devised the Beutelsbach consensus, for the very reason that it has greater potential to indoctrinate. As a result, the question I believe teachers and teacher educators should ask is not *whether* they should disclose political opinions, but rather *how* and *when* to do so in responsible ways that can support genuine student learning.

Relatedly, teachers' ability to break from the disciplinary norm of neutral impartiality will depend on support to do so from school leadership. Teachers, like Richard and Susan, described school administrators who had overriding concerns about bad publicity that superseded pedagogical goals or who forbade teachers from talking about certain topics with students—presumably because they did not trust teachers. Administrators must instead encourage teachers to adopt a stance of committed impartiality, to conduct thoughtful discussions of controversial social and political issues, and to build classrooms that are characterized by the kind of safe risk-taking that both Woodson and Duncan (2017) and Leonardo and Porter (2010) argued are necessary and productive spaces for learning. This is will likely be a considerable shift for many administrators and will require both teachers and administrators to learn how to take these safe risks, but is supported as necessary by the findings in this study.

A common thread throughout the interviews, across participants and sites, was that teachers were startled by sociopolitical hostility in their classrooms and that they lacked preparation, knowledge, or support to conduct discussions grounded in principles other than

neutrality and objectivity. They were prepared to add new structures to bound discussions, as Susan did when she limited students to their "two cents" or when she taught using the four corners activity that constrained students to only four possible positions they could adopt. They were also comfortable avoiding discussions on difficult topics or choosing certain sources of information that they would provide to students. But they were not prepared to make more substantial changes to their pedagogy in response to changes in the national or local context, or to reimagine controversial issue discussions altogether. This research suggests that teachers need concrete resources and strategies to meet this political moment in the classroom, but it also suggests that part of what teachers need to develop is the ability to adapt to shifting political winds.

Throughout the study, multiple teachers described how some important controversial issues felt uncomfortable, intimidating, or unwieldy for them to bring up in the classroom. In many cases, these teachers did what they could do avoid those issues altogether. Ryan avoided discussions related to social media and race, because they felt too "close" and because he felt ill-equipped to teach about race. Not disclosing by avoiding controversy is what Kelly (1986) called exclusive neutrality, and it was not uncommon on an issue-by-issue basis in this study. Teachers' avoidance of these topics does not mean that they never came up in class, as teachers also described instances when students brought issues to the fore, often in discussions of issues that were only tangentially related. In these situations, teachers described saying, in effect, "That's not what we're doing today," closing the conversation, moving on, and not bringing the topic up again. Though avoidance may be a rational response to discomfort, it does nothing to support student learning. Part of the rationale for teaching controversial issues in the first place is that it provides opportunities for young people to make sense of the world around them, and though

avoidance may feel easier and safer for teachers, it deprives students of that opportunity. For example, in order to ensure teachers do not merely dodge any mention of race and racism because it is a difficult topic to teach, they need to have conversations about race themselves, learn how to facilitate those conversations, build classrooms where risk-taking and mistake-fixing are normalized (Woodson & Duncan, 2017), and have support from administrators. None of that list can be taken for granted in today's K-12 classrooms, professional development, teacher collaborative spaces, or teacher education, but it will be vital for all of them to make spaces for teachers and administrators alike to learn how to talk about controversial identity issues with students as well as amongst themselves.

Teaching controversial social and political issues is difficult. Doing it in a hyper-politicized, hostile national political climate is even more fraught for social studies teachers, especially when the profession defines excellence as neutral and objective. Without question, it is important for teachers to ensure diverse perspectives are represented in their classrooms and that students have the space to voice their opinions. However, at some point, all teachers draw the line somewhere beyond which speech is no longer acceptable. Too often in this study, I talked with teachers who drew a line only in reaction to flagrant threats or because it felt wrong to them. I hope that this study illustrates that it is important for teachers to know where that line is, and that in drawing it, they consider not their own situated feelings, but carefully respond to the marginalized students they teach.

Finally, despite this dissertation's primary focus on classroom discussions of controversial social and political issues as a pedagogical method, it also has some clear implications for preparing teachers for building inclusive classrooms more generally. Creating an inclusive classroom requires more than quick tips, lesson plans to plug in, or cute signs to hang

on the wall; it demands that teachers be attentive to their sympathetic touch. Teachers need to be prepared and supported not only in such social studies methods as those I spoke to in the last paragraph, but also to interrogate the many race-neutral practices that serve to reinforce inequities in classrooms. Many of teachers in this study believed that if they created classrooms characterized by free speech and neutral impartiality, then all of their students would necessarily experience it the same way, and that doing so would allow all of their students to receive the same, quality education. These race-neutral practices do not have this effect—particularly in relation to sociopolitical hostility—but instead make the classroom space openly hostile to marginalized youth, disclosing a sympathetic touch for some students and not others.

If teachers genuinely and sincerely want to lead classrooms that fully attend to the socio-emotional well-being (Sondel et al., 2018) of marginalized youth, they cannot do so with race-neutral, even-handed practices. Partly, teaching with a sympathetic touch (Du Bois, 1935) will require that teachers recognize the value and "enoughness" of Black children (Woodson & Love, 2019) and children from other marginalized groups, and that they take steps to ensure their classroom respects that enoughness. It is vital—but not sufficient—for teachers to see all of their students as human beings who deserve to be protected (McKinney de Royston et al., 2020), to be educated without being subjected to hate speech. If schools are going to provide young people from marginalized groups with a proper education, they will have to ground their work, first and foremost, in humanizing and humane relationships amongst students and teachers. In far too many schools in the U.S., many young people are not treated and valued as full human beings, which is reflected in some of the classrooms in this dissertation.

I argue that teacher education needs to include supporting teachers to see their sympathetic touch and recognize when it is being unevenly dispersed. As mentioned in chapter

two, having a sympathetic touch for one's students means more than being kind, nice, or even caring. As Du Bois (1935) pointed out, teaching marginalized youth in ways that are truly equitable and sympathetic must be grounded in justice and requires that teachers develop knowledge "not simply of the individual taught, but of his surroundings and background, and the history of his class and group" (p. 328). That means that teachers—regardless of age level or discipline—need coursework in history and sociology of education and racism in the United States, and teacher education courses need to support their development of critical consciousness (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

Finally, this dissertation raises important questions about "best practice" models for controversial issue discussions. In Hess and McAvoy's (2015) study of controversial issues in high school social studies classes, the authors described a set of teachers whose practice they categorized as "Best Practice Discussion" (p. 47). While not necessarily offering a prescriptive structure for exactly what discussions must include, they frame Best Practice Discussion teachers as outstanding practitioners who were able to create contexts in which diverse groups of young people could hold substantive, challenging discussions about controversial topics. They describe these discussions as those in which students are engaged with one another, take ownership over the learning that occurs in the classroom, consider multiple points of view, and value civil discourse (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 52). These were classrooms in which young people and their teachers engaged in discussions and activities aimed at developing students' democratic and academic skills, knowledge, and dispositions through deliberation. Their Best Practice Discussion teachers emphasized the importance of hearing multiple points of view:

> Many of the Best Practice Discussion teachers are, in fact, concerned that the political climate has become "too divisive" and see classroom discussion as a means of

> challenging the pitfalls associated with simplistic thinking. Our findings show that these educators are successful in teaching a habit of open-mindedness, as evidenced by their students' willingness to consider diverse points of view. (Hess & McAvoy, p. 53-4)

Like many of the teachers in this dissertation, these Best Practice Discussion teachers tended to believe that including multiple perspectives on the issues they taught was a critical part of their role as the teacher, including in discussions of many of the same controversial identity issues that complicated climates for teachers in my research.

Hess and McAvoy's (2015) research provides important, thoroughly researched examples of teachers who adeptly conducted difficult discussions of controversial issues with diverse groups of young people. Their model for Best Practice Discussions leaves much space for teachers to adapt these examples to their own practice and context, yet I argue that the data in this dissertation complicate some of their conclusions of what works well in controversial issue discussions.

In particular, their conception of Best Practice Discussion stops short of responding to the particular challenges of this dissertation's central dilemma: how to teach controversial issue discussions in classrooms that are simultaneously safe for marginalized youth and open to diverse political opinions. Their Best Practice Discussion teachers considered this same dilemma, and on this point, it is worth quoting Hess and McAvoy (2015) at length:

> Teaching young people how to talk about highly controversial political issues in a way that is respectful and furthers the aims of the political classroom is itself a challenge. But the problem of sensitive issues is much greater and harder to solve if it is the *content* of the views expressed—and not the language or tone—that is offensive to other students… Imagine a discussion about same sex-marriage in which a student says she believes

> homosexuality is a sin. The gay students in class would likely hear this statement as an indictment of their very personhood…
>
> Comments like those described above are exactly what many teachers fear hearing uttered in their classroom. While they recognize that such views may be part of mainstream political discourse, they do not want students who might be personally offended to have to endure the indignity of hearing such utterances. At the same time, they are not comfortable policing the content of arguments that students make, especially when the way in which a view is voiced is not meant as a personal insult to another student. Many teachers in our study reported both a willingness and a commitment to monitor (and sometimes punish) speech that was framed as a personal attack on another student. But it was less clear to them how to protect students who were vulnerable to the views of other students that did not, in their words, "cross the line." (p. 178)

These paragraphs conclude their discussion of the dilemma that I studied in this dissertation, and it is in these final sentences that the heart of my study begins.

The findings in my research suggest that the conditions in which teachers are working have complicated the thought process that Hess and McAvoy (2015) described above. For example, the teachers I interviewed did not necessarily report a general willingness nor a commitment to monitor speech that targeted another student. The teachers in my study policed speech in instances of flagrant hate speech or death threats. As the national political climate has increased the partisan overtones hanging over so many topics in social studies that had seemed apolitical before the Trump era and as teachers have become increasingly concerned with the repercussions for appearing at all partisan in the classroom, teachers were even less comfortable policing students' arguments. Their prioritization of openness meant, in effect, that they accepted

that some students would, in fact, just have to endure the indignity of dehumanizing comments made as part of their classroom discussions.

In addition, the levels of sociopolitical hostility reported in this study speak to a different kind of national political context than was the case in 2005-2009 when Hess and McAvoy (2015) collected the data in their research. While some students of color in their research reported positive experiences speaking out against intolerant opinions voiced in their classrooms, one Black student in their study had negative experiences in her classroom even though her teacher conducted Best Practice Discussions because her opinions were flatly dismissed in a discussion about affirmative action. None of the examples in Hess and McAvoy's (2015) study rose to the level of hate speech and intolerance that was reported throughout and across my dissertation. Relatedly, the authors suggested that the overly rational basis of deliberation as a democratic practice in schools could be mitigated through the inclusion and valuing of personal testimony (Sanders, 1997); yet as was the case for Nicole's student in Utah in this study, his peers weaponized his personal testimony about his immigration status to bully him. This speaks to the dilemma of relevance: when is an issue too close to home? When is it just close enough to be ideal for classroom deliberation? Who gets to make that decision, and on what basis? Part of Hess and McAvoy's (2015) argument is that young people from marginalized groups can and should capitalize on their peers' offensive comments as opportunities to stand up for themselves, but as teachers describe overt death threats and hate speech in the classroom, marginalized youth are being asked to defend themselves against deeply troubling levels of sociopolitical hostility. I would argue that allowing one's students to be subjected to intolerance as a form of empowerment or as a teaching tool so they can learn to articulate their experiences and opinions

does not sufficiently attend to the humanity of children who already face marginalization and oppression out in the world.

As a result, I argue that teachers need to consider more carefully at what point a student's viewpoint crosses the line and whose perspective must be weighed in determining where that line is. If that line is drawn solely based on the teacher's opinion, then it will almost always be drawn according to a White point of view, as the teaching force is overwhelmingly White. If teachers sincerely want their classrooms to be open to all of their students, they will have to make conscious decisions that bring marginalized youth out of the margins and center them as they consider how to construct the classroom environment. Relatedly, this research shows that teachers need to acknowledge the polarization and potential for intolerance in classroom speech as they think about their role as the teacher when young people are discussing controversial identity issues.

This research does not provide a one-size-fits-all model that teachers can simply implement tomorrow in their classrooms. Rather, it raises questions about current practices and norms, and suggests that teachers should be willing to question their taken-for-granted notions about what works when asking students to deliberate difficult political questions.

Limitations

As is the case for any study, this dissertation is limited in important ways. In conducting interviews remotely with teachers around the United States, I was able to see into different kinds of sociopolitical contexts in ways that would have been untenable for a graduate student otherwise. I was able to speak to teachers in different states, in communities that were rural and urban, in Congressional districts that voted for Trump and for Clinton in 2016. The sample of teachers in this study gave me a high-level look at practices like disclosure that have almost

always been studied previously in much more geographically concentrated research. However, I was only able to see through the eyes of the teachers themselves. I did not conduct observations of classroom discussions, and was fully reliant on the teachers' accounts or self-reports. I also did not interview students to learn how they experienced or felt about the discussions that their teachers recounted. While the focus of this dissertation—teacher sensemaking—means my reliance on interviews was methodologically appropriate, I remain deeply curious about what I would have seen had I observed, and what the students in these teachers' classrooms would have said had I interviewed them. In addition, not having conducted observations or interviewed students made it more difficult to make claims about the ways in which different identities and marginalization played out in these controversial issue discussions. For example, I suspect that Joshua's class exhibited so much empathy and care in their discussion about the opioid crisis at least partly due to the way that particular issue has been raced as affecting rural White communities. There are almost certainly class dynamics influencing how sociopolitical hostility manifested in different kinds of local contexts, but these data are insufficient for me to make substantive claims about how.

This sample is also not a representative one, so I did not make efforts to generalize my results beyond this sample. Though my findings suggest a broad escalation in school-based sociopolitical hostility since the 2016 election, for instance, the broadness in my data does not necessarily mean that it is the case everywhere. Nor did this study illuminate best practices for teachers who sought to conduct discussions in this political climate. It brought up important lessons and questions, but does not present specific tools, resources, or methods that social studies teachers can simply begin implementing on Day One; instead, it presents opportunities for teachers to engage in introspection. In addition, I focused exclusively on social studies

teachers despite the importance of controversial issues in other disciplines (and despite my interviews with some English teachers). Another limitation related to the participant sample is its overwhelming Whiteness, even though is absolutely true that the overall teaching force in the United States is also overwhelmingly White. It would stand to reason, though should absolutely be the subject of study, that teachers who more intimately identified with some of the forms of marginalization that most acutely affected students in discussions might respond differently than the White teachers in this study, as Hannah did, but exploring the influence of teachers' identities on their sensemaking was not the focus of this study. Finally, only about half of the teachers interviewed in 2017 also participated in 2018, including both of the teachers of color in this sample, despite my recruitment efforts.

Directions for Future Research

The questions I studied in this dissertation are ripe for future study, including some of the questions raised in the last section. As I touched on in the previous section, it will be critical for the field of social studies research to study teacher political disclosure from the perspective of young people—especially with an eye focused on marginalized youth. So much of what is written about disclosure comes from the perspective of the teacher (including this study) and supposes what disclosure will do to students. There are too few examples that explore how young people actually understand and take in what happens when their teacher discloses, to say nothing of analyses that attend particularly to marginalized youth.

Another point from the previous section is that future research needs to include classroom observations of discussions. While it was not methodologically appropriate for this study, ethnographic methods can provide important insights to what transpires in the classroom in ways that I could not see in this study. In addition, future studies could employ design-based research

approaches (Bang et al., 2016; Design Based Research Collective, 2003) or a research-practice partnership (Coburn et al., 2013) to support teacher learning and practice while simultaneously creating deeper scholarly knowledge related to the questions at the heart of this study.

This study brings important nuances to the field's understanding of social studies teachers' ideas on disclosure; further empirical and theoretical work has the potential to play a powerful role in how teachers are prepared and supported to engage young people in the work of discussing controversial issues in ways that are grounded in equity, empathy, and justice, and should draw on community-oriented, critical frameworks to do so.

Conclusion

This dissertation highlights important ways that sociopolitical dynamics in the Trump era have revealed latent tensions, complications, and contradictions in conducting classroom discussions of controversial issues. Classrooms in which such discussions take place often rely on traditional, rational norms within the field that do not attend to ways that marginalized youth may be subjected to intolerance. In order to make these discussions both productive and equitable, teachers must be willing to teach controversial issues, even when it is uncomfortable, risky, and requires them to speak the truth despite danger, *parrhesia* (Journell, 2016c). Scholars have argued that in order to teach such uncomfortable topics as race and racism, teachers need to be willing to take risks, be comfortable being uncomfortable, and—importantly—fix the mistakes they make (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Journell, 2016c; Woodson & Duncan, 2017). Controversial issue discussions require teachers attend to the nuances of their local political contexts, and think deeply about their ideas about disclosure. Like Dunn et al. (2019), I contend "that only by anchoring pedagogy to a justice and equity framework can teachers determine how best to respond to contextual pressures and meet the needs of all students given the multiple

forms of oppression our students currently experience" (p. 446). Teachers must have opportunities both to learn such frameworks as well as to grapple with the kinds of challenges that are illuminated in this dissertation if they are to teach with controversial issues in ways that are equitable, productive, and democratic.

To their credit, the teachers in this study consistently articulated commitments to all of their students, but were too often unable even to recognize that their sympathetic touch was capable of being unevenly dispersed or that they were not necessarily attending to all students' socio-emotional well-being simultaneously. Etymologically, empathy comes from the German *einfuhlung*, meaning "feeling into" (Sheck, 2016). Even when prompted, it appeared that many teachers in this study remained unable or unwilling to *feel into* the experiences of students from marginalized groups, those who were the targets of the intolerance teachers observed in their schools.

Many of them, like Charlie, a veteran of over 10 years in the classroom whose discussions were in many ways consistent with what Hess and McAvoy (2015) called Best Practice Discussions, simply did not see that their capaciously open classroom climates had the effect of shutting their marginalized students out. How, then, can we help teachers understand that politics is not abstract in students' lives? How can we help teachers be more aware of the interplay between all of the many social factors shaping interactions in the room before them? How can we prepare teachers to make these decisions intentionally and thoughtfully rather than reactively? How can we prepare them to exercise professional judgment around disclosure in ways that support student learning and are not grounded in false assumptions about what happens when they reveal their personal opinions and beliefs? When teachers aim for free speech, whose voices are being elevated? At what cost, and at whose expense, are all voices heard? Can a

political classroom be safe for all opinions and all students at the same time? As McKinney de Royston et al. (2020) asked, what do we mean by safe? Which spaces are safe? And for whom is a place safe? Answers to these questions will be vital in supporting teachers to make classrooms safe learning environments for all students.

Appendix A

Learning as it Relates to Social and Political Life in the U.S. Survey Protocol (Rogers et al., 2017)

I. INTRODUCTION AND INVITATION

Thank you for taking this survey. We are interested in learning about how the experience of teaching and learning in high schools relates to social and political life in the United States. This survey asks you a set of questions about your classroom and your school. We also ask questions pertaining to your educational background, opportunities for professional development, and your beliefs about civic education and civic life. All survey responses will be confidential. We will not report information about any individual teacher or any individual school. The survey takes 10-15 minutes to complete. When you complete the survey, you will receive at least a $10 Amazon gift card. The 100th teacher, the 500th teacher, and the 1000th teacher who completes the survey will receive a $250 Amazon card. You must finish and submit your survey to receive a gift card. If you have any questions about the survey, please contact UCLA Professor John Rogers, Ph.D. (rogers@gseis.ucla.edu). If you would like further details about the study, please click on the "Learning as it Relates to Social and Political Life in the U.S." Information Sheet.

If you agree to take the survey, please choose 'Continue.' If you are not interested in taking the survey, please choose 'No thanks.'

- Continue
- No thanks

II. PRELIMINARY QUALIFYING QUESTIONS

Before we begin, we need to ask you some preliminary questions to determine your eligibility to participate in this survey.

Q4. Do you still work at [school]?

- Yes
- No

Q5. In which subject area do you teach the majority of your classes? Please choose only one response.

- English Language Arts
- History/ Social Science
- Math
- Science
- Other (i.e. Physical Education, Art, Foreign Language, Electives)

III. CLASSROOM DISCUSSION IN PARTICULAR CLASS

For next set of questions, please focus on a social studies/English/math class that you usually teach after lunch. (If you do not teach such a class after lunch, focus on the social studies/English/math class you teach right before lunch.)

Q7. Most students in this target class are in what grade in school?

- 9th
- 10th
- 11th
- 12th
- This class enrolls students across many different grades.

Q8. Which of the following best describes the academic achievement of the students in this target class relative to other students in the school?

- Low
- Average or heterogeneous (with multiple achievement levels)
- High

Q9. During this semester, how *often* have you facilitated discussions about social and political issues in this target class? (Never, Once or twice, Monthly, Weekly, Few times a week, daily)

- Never
- Once or twice
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Few times a week
- Daily

With this same target class this semester, how *often* did you facilitate discussions about the following topics or policy proposals that have been in the news? (Never, Once or twice, Monthly, Weekly, Few times a week, Daily)

a) The deportation of undocumented immigrants
b) Building a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border
c) Presidential executive order restricting travel from 6 primarily Muslim countries
d) Repeal and/or reform of the Affordable Care Act (or "Obamacare")
e) Deregulation of environmental protections
f) Russian influence on the U.S. election
g) Addressing the threat to America's security posed by ISIS
h) U.S. trade agreements
i) Bringing back decent paying jobs to the U.S.
j) Economic inequality (disparities in income and wealth)
k) The status and well-being of girls and women
l) The rights and well-being of LGBTQ youth and adults
m) Racial bias in policing
n) Racial bias in school discipline
o) The civil liberties of minority groups in a democracy
p) The role of a free press in a democracy
q) The role of non-violent protest in a democracy

Q11. [For teachers who report teaching at least once about "A"] You indicated that in your target class this semester, you addressed the topic of the proposed "deportation of undocumented immigrants." In class discussions on this topic, did students… (Yes/No)

- Analyze texts and/or statistics?
- Consider the importance of supporting opinions with evidence?
- Examine multiple sources or perspectives?
- Explore the trustworthiness of information from different sources?
- Share personal experiences related to the topic?

Q52. Did you ever share your personal opinions about the proposed deportation of undocumented immigrants with your class?

- Yes
- No

Q13. [For teachers who report teaching at least once about "I"] You indicated that in your target class this semester, you addressed the topic of economic inequality. In class session(s) on this topic, did students… (Yes/No)

- Analyze texts and/or statistics?
- Consider the importance of supporting opinions with evidence?
- Examine multiple sources or perspectives?
- Explore the trustworthiness of information from different sources?
- Share personal experiences related to the topic?

Q54. Did you ever share your personal opinions about economic inequality with your class?

- Yes
- No

Q14. [For teachers who report teaching at least once about "N, O, or P"] You indicated that in your target class this semester, you addressed the topic[s] of a) the civil liberties of minority groups in a democracy, b) the role of a free press in a democracy, and/or c) the role of non-violent protest in a democracy. In class discussions on any of these topics, did students… (Yes/No)

- Analyze texts and/or statistics?
- Consider the importance of supporting opinions with evidence?
- Examine multiple sources or perspectives?
- Explore the trustworthiness of information from different sources?
- Share personal experiences related to the topic?

Q53. Did you ever share your personal opinions about civil liberties, the role of the free press, or the role of non-violent protest with your class?

- Yes
- No

Q15. It is common for teachers to experience challenges when leading class discussions, particularly when some of the issues may be viewed as controversial. For each challenge listed below, please let us know if it occurred this year when you had discussions in your target class, and, if so, whether it occurred less or more than last year.

	No, it never occurred this year.	Yes, but less than last year	Yes, about the same as last year	Yes, a little more than last year	Yes, far more than last year
Some students regularly introduced unfounded claims from unreliable media sources.					
Some students made derogatory remarks about particular groups of people.					
Some students became increasingly contentious and disrespectful of one another over the course of the discussion.					
Some students responded negatively to the discussions and became increasingly silent and disengaged.					

Q16. The ways that teachers address social and political issues are often influenced by their colleagues, parents and/or community members, and school leaders. For each item below, please report if it occurred this year, and, if so, whether it occurred less or more than last year.

	No, it never occurred this year.	Yes, but less than last year	Yes, about the same as last year	Yes, a little more than last year	Yes, far more than last year
Teachers at my school discouraged me from addressing certain social or political issues during class discussion.					
Parents or community members discouraged me from					

addressing certain social or political issues during class discussion.					
My school leadership discouraged me from addressing certain social or political issues during class discussion.					
My school leadership provided guidance and support on how to promote respectful and civil dialogue in my classes.					
My school leadership provided guidance and support on how to encourage students to examine diverse perspectives and analyze the truthfulness of information sources.					

IV. Concerns with student well-being and the well-being of families

There have been media reports that some young people this year have been affected by political rhetoric and policy proposals.

Q19. About what proportion of students in your target class have expressed to you that they are concerned about their well-being or the well-being of their family due to political rhetoric or changing political conditions on the following topics:

	None	1/25	1/10	1/3	1/2	Most
Deportation of undocumented immigrants						
President's executive order restricting travel from 6 primarily Muslim countries						
Limiting rights of LGBTQ youth						
Reform and/or Repeal of the Affordable Care Act (or "Obamacare")						
Deregulation of environmental protections						

Q21. You indicated that some of your students have expressed concern about their well-being or the well-being of their family in relation to [List based on responses to above] How frequently have the effects from any of these topics made it difficult for students to focus in class or caused students to miss class altogether?

- Never
- Once or twice
- Once per month
- Once per week
- A few times a week
- Daily
- I don't know

Q55. From your ongoing observation of your target class, what proportion of students are experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety this year compared to last year?

- Fewer students this year than last year
- About the same number as last year
- More students this year than last year

V. CAMPUS CLIMATE

We are interested in whether and how national politics has influenced the climate at your school.

Q23. Comparing this year to previous years, …

Are relationships among student groups…

- More civil and amicable
- About the same
- More polarized and contentious

Are relationships among faculty members…

- More civil and amicable
- About the same
- More polarized and contentious

Are relationships between educators and parents or community groups…

- More civil and amicable
- About the same
- More polarized and contentious

Q24. Comparing this year to previous years, are there (fewer, about the same, or more) students participating in…

- Extracurricular groups or clubs that encourage acts of kindness, community building, and bridge building across lines of difference?
- Extracurricular groups or clubs that encourage youth to speak out on civic and political issues?

- Civic and political protests in the school or broader community?

Q25. Comparing this year to previous years, are there (fewer, about the same, or more) teachers at your school participating in…

- Acts of kindness, community building and bridge building across lines of difference?
- Debates at school or in the community on civic and political issues?
- Civic and political protests in the school or broader community?

Q26. This year, has district or school leadership… (Yes/No)

- Issued public statements about the importance of civil exchange and understanding across lines of difference?
- Punished students who participated in civic and/or political protests?
- Encouraged students who participated in civic and/or political protests?
- Provided educators with guidance and support on how to encourage civil exchange and understanding across lines of difference?

Q27. Since the November election, there have been reports in the media about increased bullying in some U.S. schools.

Compared to past years, has the level of bullying at your school …

- Decreased
- Remained the same
- Increased

[If "C" Increased]

Q30. Have students at your school been bullied this year because of their

- Gender
- Sexual Orientation
- Religion
- Race
- Immigrant status
- Disability
- Political beliefs

Q56. Which of the following groups have been bullied because of their political beliefs?

- only students viewed as liberal
- only students viewed as conservative
- both students viewed as liberal and students viewed as conservative

Q32. Has your district or school leadership…

- Issued statements about the importance of addressing bullying?
- Moved quickly to punish students who engage in bullying?
- Created opportunities for students to talk about bullying and how to address it?
- Provided professional development for educators on how to address bullying?

Teaching in public high schools can be a stressful job.

Q33. Compared to last year, has the level of stress associated with your work…
- Decreased
- Remained the same
- Increased somewhat
- Increased substantially.

[If increased somewhat or increased substantially]
Q35. Is the cause of the increase primarily due to changes in the social and political environment and their effects on learners and schools?
- Yes
- No

VI. IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF LEARNERS

Many educators and elected officials around the country are talking about strategies for improving school climate and the well-being of students.

Q36. Please indicate whether you Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, or Strongly Agree with each of the statements below.
- My school leadership should provide more guidance, support, and professional development opportunities on how to promote civil exchange and greater understanding across lines of difference.
- National, state, and local leaders should encourage and model civil exchange and greater understanding across lines of difference.
- My school should provide more social welfare and mental health supports for students.
- National and state leaders should work to alleviate the underlying factors that create stress and anxiety for young people and their families.
- My school should provide more extracurricular activities that support young people to build understanding across lines of difference.
- My school should provide more extracurricular activities that encourage young people to share their political and social concerns with community leaders and elected officials.
- My school should provide more opportunities for students to register to vote and learn about government elections.

VII. CIVIC PRACTICES AND BELIEFS OF TEACHERS

Now we would like to ask you a few questions about your own civic practices, understandings, and beliefs.

Q38. In the last month, how often have you…? (Never, About once a month, Weekly, A few times a week, Daily)
- Followed news by reading a newspaper or news magazine, watching national news on TV, listening to news on the radio, or reading news online?
- Talked about politics or government with your family and friends?

- Talked about politics or government with colleagues at school?
- Participated in an organization that tries to make a difference in your community or the broader society?

Q40. Would you characterize yourself as …
- Very liberal
- Somewhat liberal
- Moderate
- Somewhat conservative
- Very Conservative

Q41. How would you generally characterize the school community in which you teach?
- Very liberal
- Somewhat liberal
- Moderate
- Somewhat conservative
- Very Conservative

VIII. GENERAL BACKGROUND ON TEACHERS

Q42. For how many years have you been teaching?
- 1–3 years
- 4–6 years
- 7–10 years
- 11–20 years
- More than 20 years

Q43. What is your gender?
- Male
- Female
- Other

Q44. What is your race?
- White/Caucasian
- African American
- Hispanic
- Asian
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- Other

Q57. OPTIONAL FREE WRITE
We have asked a number of questions about whether and how your classroom and school climate has changed this year as a result of changes in national politics. Please use this space to share any further thoughts you have on this topic.

IX. INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW

Q45. We are planning to conduct follow-up interviews with some teachers who fill out this survey. During these interviews you will be invited to talk about your survey answers in greater depth. Teachers who participate in the follow-up video-chat or phone interview will receive an additional $25 Amazon Gift Card. Would you be willing to participate in such a follow-up interview? Completing this survey does not in any way obligate you to participate in the interview.

- Yes, you can contact me for a video-chat or phone interview.
- No, please do not contact me.

Appendix B

Learning as it Relates to Social and Political Life in the U.S. Interview Protocol (Rogers et al., 2017)

1. OPEN-ENDED: Let me start with a couple sentences you wrote in our survey. Can you tell us a little more about this?
2. STRESS: Some teachers have told us that this past year was more stressful than previous years for their students. Did your students experience heightened stress this year?
    a. If yes
        i. In what ways?
        ii. Were there broader or long-lasting effects from this increased stress?
        iii. What do you see as the cause of this heightened stress?
    b. If no:
        i. What factors about your school might explain why stress has not increased?
3. CONCERNS W/ STUDENT WELL-BEING: Some teachers have told us that their students expressed concerns to them about their well-being or the well-being of their families due to either threats of deportation, the Travel Ban for several Muslim majority countries, or threats to LGBTQ rights. Did any of your students express such concerns?
    a. If yes:
        i. Can you please describe a particularly memorable example?
        ii. How did you respond?
        iii. :If description of memorable experience is short: Is there another example of students expressing concern about a different kind of threat that you can share?
4. CAMPUS CLIMATE: Some teachers have told us that their campus climate has gotten worse over the last year—that there is more conflict, more polarization, more incivility. Was that the case at your school?
    a. If yes: Can you please describe one example of when this happened?
    b. If no: What factors about your school might explain why it has remained civil?
5. CLASS DISCUSSIONS: Some teachers have told us that classroom discussions have become more contentious or polarized or characterized by incivility this year. Was that the case for you?
    a. If yes: Can you please describe a particularly memorable example of this?
    b. If no: Are there steps that you or the school has taken to promote productive dialogue? Can you describe them?
6. TEACHER DISCLOSURE DURING DISCUSSIONS: Some teachers have told us that they were more likely this year to share their personal opinions during class discussions about social and political issues. Other teachers said that they were less likely this year to share their personal opinions on social and political issues. What has been your experience?
    a. If any mention of sharing: Were you more likely to share on some issues than others? If so which ones and why?

7. LIMITING SPEECH: In the course of this past school year, has anyone in your school or broader community tried to limit what you say and do? If so, can you give me an example?
    a. If yes: Can you please describe an example of this?
    b. If no: Have you spoken out at your school this year about issues you care about? Can you please describe an example of this?
8. TIMELINE OF IMPACT: Some teachers have told us that the climate at their school has improved since the election. Other teachers have told us that their school climate has deteriorated in the months since the election. What has been the experience at your school?
9. PRODUCTIVE LEADERSHIP: We have heard examples from other teachers of ways that school leaders have responded to similar problems in productive ways. Has this happened at your school?
    a. If yes: Can you describe what they have done?
    b. If no: How would you describe the efforts of your school leaders to respond to the challenges that have emerged this past year?
10. ENGAGED STUDENTS: Some teachers have reported that they saw an increase this year in students being more politically interested and engaged. Have you seen this?
    a. If yes: Can you give me an example?
11. EMPATHY AND BRIDGEBUILDING: Some teachers have reported that they have seen more students expressing concern for others and seeking to build bridges across difference? Have you seen this? If so can you give me an example?
    a. If yes: Can you give me an example?
12. EDUCATORS' IDENTITY: Has the way you think about your role as an educator changed this year, and if so how?

Appendix C

Summer 2018 Interview Protocol

My first few questions are about school and classroom climate.

1. Can you tell me about any goals you have related to classroom climate or culture?
2. How would you describe the *kind* of classroom you're trying to create?
3. What steps do you take to create the kind of classroom you're describing?

My next set of questions is about discussions in your classroom.

4. How often would you say your classes have discussions about social or political issues?
5. How would you describe your instructional goals for students when you have discussions about social or political issues?
6. Can you walk me through an example of a discussion that took place in your classroom when you planned in advance for students to engage current social or political issues?
    a. How did you ask students to prepare for this discussion?
    b. How did you prepare?
    c. Were there certain groups of students in your class that you anticipated reacting to this topic in different ways? How was that similar to or different from what you might anticipate for other discussions?
    d. What challenges arose for you and/or students in having a productive discussion?
    e. When you planned for this discussion or others similar to it, do you think about how different groups within or outside of your school will perceive it? What do you do about that?
7. Can you tell me about a time when students brought social or political issues to the fore in a discussion when you didn't plan for it in advance?
    a. What kinds of challenges did you encounter?
    b. Were there different groups of students that did react in different ways?
    c. How did you respond?
8. I'm going to read you a quote from a teacher. I'm wondering if you can tell me what your experience has been in relation to this idea: "It's really hard to balance trying to keep a classroom that's safe for all perspectives and that's welcoming of all perspectives with trying to push back against some of the more extreme perspectives that we're hearing now."
9. This year did your students make unfounded claims in class based on unreliable media sources? Did students reject the validity of information or media sources that you presented in class?
    a. If so, how did you respond?
10. Do you have opportunities at your school to discuss these sorts of instructional challenges with your colleagues? How would you say your practice fits in with what your colleagues do in their classrooms?

My last few questions are related to questions we asked in last summer's interviews.

11. Last year we asked if you felt that anyone in your school or community had tried to limit what you say and do. I'm wondering if that happened this year, especially related to discussions?
12. We also asked if your classroom discussions had become more contentious or polarized. Can you describe your experience this year?

13. We also asked if you had found yourself more or less likely to share your personal political opinions during class discussions. Some teachers were more likely to do so while others were less so. What's your experience been this year?

Appendix D

Winter 2018-19 Interview Protocol

1. This fall, did you teach lessons or units related to the midterm elections?
    a. Why did/didn't you bring the election into your classroom?
    b. If yes:
        i. How frequently?
        ii. Can you tell me about these lessons generally?
        iii. Why did you choose to teach it this way?
2. Did your school hold mock elections, voter registration drives, or other programming to engage students with the election?
    a. If yes:
        i. Can you tell me what that looked like?
        ii. How did different groups of students and/or adults respond to these activities?
    b. If no:
        i. Was there any discussion within the school community about whether or not to do so?
        ii. What rationale was offered for not holding these kinds of activities in school?
3. Did your school leadership have discussions with you about the importance of neutrality in the classroom? Can you tell me about that?
4. Over the summer, we discussed your goals related to classroom culture. Can you tell me what the climate has looked like in your classroom so far this year?
    a. Have your goals changed?
    b. Can you describe any lessons or pedagogical strategies you've used this semester to create that kind of classroom culture?
    c. Has your classroom, school, and/or community experienced changes in contentiousness or hostility around the midterm elections that affected your classroom culture?
    d. Can you think of a lesson you've taught this semester in which you aimed to encourage a civil exchange of ideas between groups of students who differ?
    e. Have there been instances when encouraging this kind of classroom climate has been particularly challenging this semester?
5. Over the summer, we also discussed your goals related to classroom discussions. Can you tell me what that's looked like this year, especially any discussions that may have touched on issues connected to the midterm elections and/or the Trump presidency?
    a. Is there a particular example of a discussion that you can walk me through?
    b. How do you decide which topics to cover in discussions of controversial social or political issues? Are there certain topics that are either off-limits in your mind or just not up for debate (e.g., some scholars have said climate change shouldn't be up for debate but not all agree)?
    c. Was there a time when you weren't planning to discuss the election but it came up in the course of a discussion?

6. Over the summer, we heard from teachers who struggled with discussions in which students or a group of students in their class were personally or politically vulnerable with regards to a discussion topic (e.g., immigration, racism). Have you had situations like this in your class this fall?
    a. What topic or topics had this kind of effect in your classroom, and for which groups of students?
    b. How did you handle it?
7. Over the summer, we heard from many teachers that classroom discussions of controversial social or political issues are difficult in this climate. Do you feel that's the case for you?
    a. Why or why not?
    b. Do classroom discussions of controversial current events ever interfere with your ability to meet your culture/climate goals? If so, how? What do you do?
    c. During the 2018 midterm elections, did you share your political beliefs or opinions with your students?
        i. Why/why not?
        ii. If yes: what did that look like or sound like?
8. Can you tell me about a lesson you've taught so far this year that related to current social or political issues in which students or a group of students challenged the validity of facts or information you presented to the class?
9. How do you know if a discussion in your classroom is productive/good/quality?
10. I'd like you to think about times when discussions became uncomfortable in your class: one when discomfort was productive, and another time when the discomfort was not productive.
    a. Can you describe those situations?
    b. What was the difference between these situations? What made one productive and one not?
    c. How do you handle these situations in your classroom?
    d. How do you make sure these situations meet your classroom climate goals?

Appendix E
English Teacher Sample

Name	Political self-identification	Sex	Race	State	Community political identification	2016 Trump vote	% White	% FRL	Interviewed in…		
Lily	Very liberal	F	White	AZ	Slightly conservative	35%	10%	70%	2017		
Julia	Slightly liberal	F	White	CA	Very liberal	5%	40%	20%	2017	2018	
Jennifer	Very liberal	F	White	GA	Moderate	50%	20%	60%	2017		
Amanda	Very conservative	F	White	IL	Very liberal	15%	0%	20%	2017		
Louis	Slightly liberal	M	White	MA	Slightly liberal	40%	80%	*	2017		
Carrie	Very liberal	F	White	MI	Very conservative	50%	90%	20%	2017	2018	
Delia	Very liberal	F	Latina	MO	Slightly conservative	20%	30%	100%	2017	2018	2019
Jeff	Slightly liberal	M	White	NE	Slightly conservative	75%	10%	80%	2017	2018	
Astrid	Very liberal	F	White	NY	Moderate	40%	70%	50%	2017		
Michael	Slightly liberal	M	White	NY	Slightly liberal	55%	20%	90%	2017	2018	
Aaron	Slightly liberal	M	White	OH	Slightly liberal	15%	60%	10%	2017	2018	
Jane	Very liberal	F	White	OR	Very liberal	25%	70%	10%	2017		
Jasmin	Very liberal	F	White	OR	Very liberal	25%	70%	10%	2017		
Carl	Very liberal	M	White	SC	Very conservative	55%	50%	40%	2017	2018	2019
Jimmy	Moderate	M	White	UT	Slightly liberal	45%	60%	40%	2017	2018	
Stacy	Moderate	F	White	WY	Slightly conservative	70%	80%	30%	2017	2018	

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