Facilitating Social Issues Discussions in the Heterogeneous Classroom

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## Abstract

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This dissertation is comprised of three papers, each drawing on a qualitative case study of experienced teachers' social-justice-oriented discussion facilitation practice.

The first paper, entitled "Facilitating Socially Just Discussions in Elite Schools: Practical Wisdom from an Experienced Teacher and Her Students," describes how a teacher at an elite private school, facilitated a socially just classroom discussion of a speech by Malcolm X. I show how she supported her 8th grade Global Studies students to develop "activist ally" perspectives on the social world and to recognize one another – especially students with marginalized identities – as legitimate knowers. Drawing on Nancy's model of wise practice, I conclude with recommendations for educators.

The second paper is entitled "Mr. Crane's Dilemma: From Injustice Threats to Responsive Social Issues Discussions." This conceptual paper uses the case of a teacher's instructional dilemma to accomplish three goals: to identify a vicious cycle that vexes social issues discussions; to surface the limitations of common pedagogical responses; and to propose an alternative approach I call *responsive social issues discussions.* In contrast to the rosy picture of egalitarian classroom discussion sometimes portrayed in democratic education literature, I show how polarization and inequality pose injustice threats in the form of, respectively, motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice. Together, I argue, these produce a vicious cycle of non-expressiblity and non-responsiveness that corrodes democracy. After surfacing Mr. Crane's bad pedagogical options, I propose responsive social issues discussions as a way forward.

The third paper is entitled "Critical Democratic Education in Practice: Experienced Teachers' Adaptive Expertise." While a growing body of democratic education research has expressed a critical turn, research has supplied little information about what educators with social justice commitments actually do as they attempt to enact democratic education in classrooms. This paper reports results of a qualitative case study depicting three experienced teachers' efforts to enact critical democratic education in practice. Data from classroom observations and interviews with teacher-participants show how these teachers aimed to adapt their practice to students' heterogeneous positionalities. I identify several practices teachers enacted, and highlight one, "critical micro-inquiry," as offering particular affordances for critical democratic education in heterogeneous classrooms.

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**PAPER #1**

# Facilitating Socially Just Discussions in Elite Schools: Practical Wisdom from an Experienced Teacher and Her Students


## Abstract

In this chapter, I describe how Nancy, a teacher at an elite private school, facilitated a socially just classroom discussion of a speech by Malcolm X. I show how she supported her 8th grade Global Studies students to develop what Swalwell (2013) has called "activist ally" perspectives on the social world and to recognize one another – especially students with marginalized identities – as legitimate knowers. Drawing on Nancy's model of wise practice, I conclude by offering recommendations for educators. There is no magic wand for resolving power and inequity tensions during classroom discussions in elite schools, and facilitating socially just discussions in such contexts is no easy feat. The Malcolm X discussion in Nancy's classroom offers, not a set of prescriptions, but rather a vision of the possible.

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Paper #1

**Facilitating Socially Just Discussions in Elite Schools:**

**Practical Wisdom from an Experienced Teacher and Her Students**

High-quality discussions are a cornerstone of good education in a democracy, especially education aiming to help build a more socially just world. Paulo Freire (1970) recognized this in his call for "problem-posing education" – education based not on the transmission of received truth but rather on critical co-investigation through dialogue. Liberatory teaching, Freire declared, "rejects communiques and embodies communication" (p. 79). From this view, teachers and students need to discuss how society works and deliberate how to build a better world where all people – especially the oppressed – can thrive. Democratic education researcher Walter Parker (2003) has put the central question for democratic classroom discussion this way: "How can we live together justly, in ways that are mutually satisfying, and which leave our differences… intact and our multiple identities recognized?" (p. 33). Discussing issues that get at this question can prepare young people to participate well in our multicultural but inequitable democracy.

Despite their benefits, facilitating high-quality classroom discussions demands much of teachers – including but not limited to pedagogical training, content knowledge, instructional know-how, emotional intelligence, and time. Therefore, it may come as no surprise that robust classroom discussions are the exception rather than the norm in U.S. American classrooms (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2003). One major dilemma teachers face is that, when we invite our students to discuss the social world, *we cannot know what they will say.* Students may make claims that are factually indefensible, harmful to peers, or both.

These issues are nowhere more pronounced than in elite classrooms, where arguments made by (the many) students with dominant identities can have an outsized impact on the

classroom climate and the safety of (the fewer) students with non-dominant identities. For example, Hess and McAvoy (2015) describe a high school discussion about affirmative action in a mostly-white classroom – a discussion in which the claim "African-Americans don't have to try as hard to get into college" gained traction. This had the effect of perpetuating false conceptions of American race relations and harming Black students and other students of color – who, in such cases, may eventually stop speaking at all.

Of course, such outcomes are not fated. Teachers in elite schools can scaffold social justice discussions to support the well-being of students with non-dominant identities while also helping all students build more informed understandings of the social world. In this chapter, I describe how Nancy, a teacher at an elite private school, accomplished these aims during a class discussion of a speech by Malcolm X. I show how she supported her 8th grade Global Studies students to develop what Swalwell (2013) has called "activist ally" perspectives on the social world and to recognize one another – especially students with marginalized identities – as legitimate knowers. Drawing on Nancy's model of wise practice, I conclude by offering recommendations for educators. There is no magic wand for resolving power and inequity tensions during classroom discussions in elite schools, and facilitating socially just discussions in such contexts is no easy feat. This discussion in Nancy's classroom offers, not a set of prescriptions, but rather a vision of the possible.

**Social Justice Discussions in Elite Schools: Insights from the Research**

I use the phrase "social justice" to refer to the critique and disruption of structural inequity. From this perspective, celebrating the contributions of diverse communities is a necessary but not sufficient condition for education that contributes to social transformation (Banks, 2013; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). Robust social justice education must also support

students in learning how certain groups and individuals benefit systematically from unearned opportunities and help students take steps to disrupt these unjust systems.

For educators in elite schools, social justice education comes with unique challenges. Researchers have documented many ways classroom conversations about injustice can backfire as elites distance themselves from the ways they benefit from others' subjugation. For example, Hytten and Warren (2003) described strategies their white students used to "protect whiteness" and preserve their own sense of moral goodness when learning about structural racism. These strategies included focusing on their own guilt or shame, comparing themselves favorably to more racist friends and family, appealing to the progress society has already made, framing explorations of diversity as opportunities for self-enrichment, expecting non-whites to educate them, dismissing perspectives not aligned with their own experience, and insisting change is futile. In various ways, each of these strategies preserved white supremacy. Notably, the researchers identified these as "discursive" strategies: they were mobilized as part of the discourse during class discussions.

To prevent privileged students from airing false or destructive perspectives like those Hytten and Warren (2003) identified, teachers may avoid engaging their students in substantive discussions altogether (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Hostetler & Neel, 2018), especially when the topic pertains to race or other potentially-sensitive subjects (Lo, 2019). Yet if education is to contribute to realizing the as-yet-unrealized promise of our democracy, young people must have access to frequent, robust classroom discussions about social issues (Hess, 2009; Parker, 2003). In an era when political polarization is on the rise (Pew Research Center, 2017) and support for democracy on the decline (Foa & Mounk, 2017), it is more urgent than ever for young people to learn to participate well in discussions, including dealing fairly with differences of power and

privilege among participants. Not all classroom discussions are socially just, however. In this chapter, I argue that a socially discussion has two dimensions: the discussion is *about* social justice in that it explores inequity and how it can be combatted, and it is *for* social justice in that it disrupts inequity among participants themselves.

### ***Discussions* about *Social Justice***

Classroom discussions are *about* social justice when they engage students in examining how inequity is reproduced and how it may be disrupted. Discussions about social justice support students in making connections to their own communities and lived experiences. They align with Freire's (2000) "problem-posing" education, which engages students and teachers in dialogue about the social conditions of "the here and now." Only by starting from present social conditions, Freire maintained, can students perceive the possibility that conditions might be changed. Indeed, beginning with the here and now of students' lived experience has become a cornerstone of social justice education. What Ladson-Billings (1995) termed "culturally-relevant pedagogy" affirms students' identities and experiences and mobilizes them as assets for learning – a necessary reframing for historically-marginalized students whose cultural backgrounds have long been treated as deficits in school.

When it comes to elites, however, culturally relevant pedagogy and related "resource pedagogies" (Paris, 2012) may not be the best way for privileged students to inquire into the here and now. Rather, they may benefit from what San Pedro (2018) has called "culturally disruptive pedagogy" – teaching that helps students not only to *identify* the present conditions of their social world but also to *complicate and challenge* their received understandings. Otherwise, elites may describe the social world in the limited terms through which they experience it, and their discussion may serve only to reproduce dominance. On the other hand, a social justice

curriculum that focuses too much on oppression and its human and environmental tolls tends to elicit attitudes of pity, guilt, defensiveness, or judgment, perhaps especially among elites. While it is important for privileged students to learn about oppression, their social justice learning should not stop there (Sibbett & Au, 2017). They must also learn about the resources, resilience, and resistance of communities unlike their own, imagine how they can contribute to these communities' struggle for social justice, and practice acting on their ideas.

Research about privileged students illustrates how, even when they profess commitments to social justice, their worldviews can serve to protect the status quo. All students in Swalwell's (2013) study of elite schools in the Midwest claimed to be "justice-oriented," yet the majority expressed perspectives than ran counter to social justice aims. Those Swalwell termed "meritocrats" and "benevolent benefactors" located injustice elsewhere, struggled to connect their own lives with others' suffering, and understood social problems in terms of individual (not collective) responsibility. Meritocrats attributed social ills to bad people making bad decisions and advocated helping worthy individuals become more competitive in the global marketplace. Benevolent benefactors attributed social problems to bad luck and advocated giving to charity and volunteering. A third group of students, whom Swalwell termed "resigned," understood the causes of social problems more deeply but expressed powerlessness to respond. In the end, despite all of these students' professed social justice commitments, their views contradicted these aims: meritocrats' belief in competitiveness and benevolent benefactors' belief in charity reproduced an individualistic worldview that preserves elites' dominance; meanwhile, resigned students' perceived lack of agency offered no possibility for change. For elites to mobilize their privilege in service of building a better world, they must move beyond attitudes that prevent

action to those that create the conditions for informed action. A discussion *about* social justice should help them do this.

Many teachers who engage elites in social justice education will recognize the perspectives Swalwell (2013) describes. Each of these student views – while normally reflecting good intentions – can leave social justice educators feeling stymied. Our transformative aspirations may feel out of reach when our students miss how their own communities benefit from and even perpetuate injustice; when they attribute injustice to marginalized people's bad decisions or bad luck; or when they become overwhelmed and opt out of the struggle for social justice altogether. Even more worrisome is the prospect that, when students in elite schools discuss the social world together, they may amplify one another's worldviews. Perspectives like those Swalwell describes may gain traction to the detriment of students' understanding and humanization. Research shows these concerns are justified (e.g., Beck, 2013; Hostetler & Neel, 2018).

However, teachers of elite students also know that sometimes our students voice perspectives that do support social justice education's aims. When students express what Swalwell (2013) calls "activist ally" perspectives, they demonstrate complex understandings of injustice. They do not locate injustice exclusively "out there," but also explore its reproduction in their own communities. Activist allies look beyond individual responsibility to root causes and structural solutions and express a sense of agency to use their privilege for social transformation; they value listening to and partnering with people from marginalized social groups. In elite schools and classrooms, developing students' activist allyship is a key aim of discussion about social justice. We can assess the success of social justice discussions by the extent to which students develop, maintain, and deepen a lived commitment to being activist allies.

Swalwell (2013) found that students were more likely to express activist ally perspectives when they identified as less privileged by race, class, or both. This finding raises an important question: can activist allyship be taught to privileged students in elite schools, or can it only be learned through the school of hard knocks? The case I will describe – the case of Nancy and her students – suggests privileged students can indeed be taught to think like activist allies. By facilitating a robust, high-quality discussion about social justice, Nancy facilitated her students' activist ally development.

### *Discussions* for *Social Justice*

Social justice discussions are characterized not only by their transformative content but also by the quality of students' interactions. Thus, discussions are *for* social justice when they serve to disrupt inequity in the classroom itself, among discussion participants. Socially just classroom discussions must function as welcoming spaces for students with marginalized identities to participate frequently and freely. This matters even more in elite schools, where most students have privileged race or class identities – but not all of them do.[1] In fact, the challenges of inequity among students are magnified because so many students are white, affluent, or both – so those who are not stick out.[2] Indeed, an underrecognized characteristic of elite schooling is *inequality in the classroom*: when students with varying amounts of race, class, and other forms of privilege learn alongside one another in the same room. Social justice discussions must disrupt such inequality.

[1] For example, some elite schools are racially diverse, like independent schools that make a special effort to recruit students of color. Some elite schools are racially "split," like public schools in affluent districts serving tech hub cities – these cities attract highly educated immigrant workers who send their children to local schools. Some elite schools are predominantly white, but almost none are completely so, and these are schools where it is common for students of color to be "the only one" (or one of just a few) in a class. Meanwhile, because they often offer financial aid, almost all elite schools serve at least some students impacted by poverty.

[2] Students with non-dominant identities (students of color, for example) may struggle at times with feeling invisible (their identities are not seen or understood) and at other times feeling hyper-visible (their identities are extra conspicuous and they may even be asked to speak for their race) (Carter Andrews, 2012).

A major part of disrupting inequality during a discussion entails confronting what philosophers call "epistemic injustice." The term "epistemic" denotes knowledge and knowing, so epistemic injustice – in the words of the scholar who coined the term, Miranda Fricker (2007) – refers to "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (p. 1). When epistemic injustice occurs, speakers with less power and privilege have their knowledge prejudicially discounted by hearers. Building on Fricker's work, Dotson (2011) has identified two ways epistemic injustice can unfold during discussions. In instances of what she calls "testimonial quieting," an audience, due to prejudice, fails to identify a speaker as a credible knower. In instances of "testimonial smothering," a speaker withholds ideas she believes will not be listened to, heard, or understood by her audience. Teachers who facilitate classroom discussions must hold both of these risks in view.

In classroom discussions among participants with unequal power and privilege (that is, most discussions in elite schools), testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering are common. For example, in their study of classroom discussions of controversial political issues, Hess and McAvoy (2015) documented a case where white students preparing for a legislative simulation in a mostly-white classroom told Amanda, a Black student who had carefully researched affirmative action, "we don't want to hear your facts" (p. 104). This is epistemic injustice. Amanda experienced testimonial quieting when her credibility as a knower about affirmative action was discounted by white peers, and testimonial smothering may have followed. That is, after this experience Amanda may have stopped participating in class discussions about race, perceiving that her ideas might not be given credence by peers.

In response to such dilemmas, teachers may supply (or invite students to construct) discussion guidelines such as "listen respectfully," "speak for yourself," "challenge ideas not

people," and "assume good intentions." However, researchers have noted that such guidelines can, paradoxically, serve the interests of elites at the expense of those with marginalized social positions. Italicizing some examples, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) observe:

> *Assuming good intentions* only goes so far when White students repeatedly use terms like "colored people."… How do you challenge a White student's claim that she didn't get a job or a scholarship because of "reverse" racism or sexism when she is *speaking from her own experience*? Does *everyone's opinion matter* when some people's opinion is that reverse racism is a valid concept? (p. 3)

As these examples suggest, some of the most common discussion guidelines are liable to reproduce inequity in the classroom, rather than disrupt it.

For a classroom discussion to be socially just, participants with dominant social positionings must learn to recognize – indeed, in many cases, to defer to – the social knowledge of peers whose life experiences grant them a wider view. Meanwhile, those with non-dominant social positionings may need help recognizing and owning their knowledge. Participants with dominant social positionings also need to be willing to feel uncomfortable, take risks, and be vulnerable. Discussions for social justice are not about privileged people signaling their own virtue, but rather about supporting all participants in coming better to understand and combat injustice (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). In elite schools and classrooms, developing students' capacity to recognize and respond to the lived expertise of students with marginalized social positionings is a key aim of discussions for social justice. We can assess the success of social justice discussions by the extent to which participants – regardless of their own social positionings – elevate the knowledge of minoritized students.

I have been arguing that social justice discussions are both *about* and *for* social justice. In sum, I suggest classroom discussions in elite schools are successfully teaching *about* social justice when they support students in developing a practical understanding of what it means to be an activist ally. Classroom discussions in elite schools are successfully teaching *for* social justice when epistemic injustice is disrupted. In what follows, I will describe a social justice discussion among elite students who, by and large, achieve these aims, and explore how their teacher supported them in doing so.

**A Socially Just Discussion: Practical Wisdom for Teaching**

In Spring 2018, I spent several weeks observing Nancy's[3] 8th grade Global Studies class at Beachview Girls' School (BGS), a small independent middle school for female-identified and gender creative students in a West Coast tech hub city. At the time of my research, Nancy (white) was teaching her 25th year in the classroom, and her 15th year at BGS. She taught both of BGS's two blocks of 7th grade US History and both blocks of 8th grade Global Studies, with about 20 students in each block. Nancy identifies as white and middle-class and she frequently reflects on how her positionalities impact her teaching, her attitudes, and her relationships with students. Although Nancy hesitates to claim the mantle of "social justice educator," I think of her as a skilled social justice teacher insofar as her curriculum centers the voices of historically marginalized social groups and aims to support students in becoming reflective change agents. Classroom discussions are a cornerstone of Nancy's instruction: students regularly participate in simulations, role plays, structured academic controversies, Socratic seminars, and – on the day I will describe – town hall discussions.

[3] Names are pseudonyms. Individuals' self-identified racial identities are supplied in parentheses. In this chapter, I name racial identities (and not other axes of identity) because race was the identity marker most at issue in Malcolm X's speech.

The class session I will describe took place during the second of Nancy's two 8th grade Global Studies blocks. 18 students were present, only two of whom identified as students of color: Sasha (Black) and Christina (mixed race, Black and white). When classrooms have so few students of color and the discussion concerns race, there is a risk that students of color's ideas will be sidelined. Yet, in this discussion much went right: activist ally perspectives were voiced often and with enthusiasm, and the ideas of students of color were centered in various ways.

Nancy's 8th graders had recently begun studying African decolonization. On the day in question, they participated in a town hall discussion[4] of a 1964 speech by Malcolm X, delivered at the founding rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity. X had just returned to the United States from a tour of Africa, during which he had met with several African leaders. In his speech, he applied the insights of African decolonization to the African American civil rights movement. Students began the 80-minute block preparing to discuss the speech: they watched and read key excerpts as a class, then reflected in writing about X's views regarding the path to racial justice, including his famous call for Black liberation "by any means necessary" and his remarks on the role of white allies.

The town hall discussion took the second half of the block. In the balance of this chapter, I highlight instructional moves Nancy made to support her students in a discussion both *about* and *for* social justice. 15 of the 18 students in the room made at least one substantive contribution to the discussion (including both of the two students of color present that day), and most students contributed several times. In the process, they demonstrated what it can mean for

[4] In a "town hall" in Nancy's classroom, students circle up to discuss a text or issue they have studied in advance. Nancy supplies one or more questions to guide their thinking and gives them time to prepare. During the town hall, students make eye contact with Nancy to indicate a desire to speak and she tracks the queue, letting students know when their turn arrives. Nancy participates but the bulk of airtime is given over to students, who are tasked not only with contributing but also with grounding their comments and questions in the text and responding to peers' ideas.

youth in an elite school to engage in a socially just discussion: they showed emerging practical understandings of activist allyship and positioned one another (particularly students of color) as legitimate knowers in the learning community.

### *A Discussion about Social Justice: Teaching for Activist Allyship*

In this section, I highlight three objectives Nancy pursued in order to help her students become activist allies: 1) empathizing with non-dominant perspectives; 2) exploring conceptions of allyship; and 3) proposing concrete local action. For each, I touch on Nancy's underlying philosophy as well as how she enacted it. Because teaching does not begin from a blank slate each day but rather unfolds over time, I highlight her curricular and instructional choices not only during the town hall but also in the weeks preceding. I then describe how Nancy's efforts bore fruit in the discussion, as her students explored how to be good allies in their own school and community and empathized with X's point of view.

**Empathizing.** For Nancy, learning to empathize with others' experiences requires getting to know unfamiliar points of view. She explained: "The more [perspectives students encounter], the more they will spot [injustice] in their own world [and] have empathy… and maybe seek out a different perspective…. There is a huge need for cross-fertilization and for communicating with the Other" (interview, March 20, 2018). As young people become more accustomed to hearing multiple points of view, Nancy suggested, they may begin to seek them out, recognizing how communicating across difference can humanize everyone involved.

In practice, Nancy taught empathy by highlighting diverse points of view over and over. She highlighted the importance of recognizing others' social groups as *internally* diverse: they are humanized as we see that they are far from monolithic. For example, during an earlier unit on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, students watched clips from a documentary film called *Promises*

that examines the conflict from the perspectives of Israeli and Palestinian children. "One reason I like *Promises*," Nancy explained, is "there's not one way an Israeli kid thinks, they're all over the map. There's not one way a Palestinian kid thinks" (interview, March 20, 2018).

In the Malcolm X discussion, Nancy modeled empathizing with unfamiliar perspectives – including, importantly, giving a fair hearing to perspectives elites may find threatening. At the start of class, she had asked students to reflect on X's famous call for racial justice "by any means necessary" and reminded them about Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of nonviolent direct action, which they had studied in 7th grade. She named that these perspectives are "very different" but did not (that I could detect) telegraph an opinion of either as right or wrong. In response, students expressed openness and curiosity about the two leaders' approaches. For example, Jordan (white) compared their competing tactics for racial liberation to competing perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She observed:

> About Dr. King taking the more peaceful route whereas Malcolm X was taking the less peaceful route: it kind of reminded me of, you know, the Palestinian-Israeli thing. Because you know how there was like, you could combine both states or make them two different states? I was just thinking that it's kind of similar, and so we could use this as like a – well, which one worked?

Nancy responded not by taking a side, but by highlighting what proponents of each side believe. "I'm so glad you brought up the Israeli-Palestinian issue," she enthused, continuing:

> Some people feel that if Palestinians had adopted more of the Dr. King nonviolent direct-action strategy, they might've gotten more sympathy among Israelis. Others feel that it's like the JFK quote, "if you make peaceful revolution impossible" – which the Israelis sort of have, the more hardline [ones] – "you make violent revolution inevitable."

By highlighting the thinking of both sides, Nancy avoided tacitly endorsing one or the other. She communicated that both perspectives merit our careful attention.

As a result, although many students advocated a nonviolence-only approach to racial justice, several also empathized with Malcolm X's perspective – despite the fact that elites often perceive his views as threatening (Younge, 2007). Olivia (white) expressed her own and classmates' realization succinctly: "You're being hypocritical if you're violent, but if you're peaceful you're not heard." Students wrestled with this dilemma for the latter half of the discussion. While some advocated nonviolence in all situations, others agreed with Leah (white) that "it depends on the situation." Leah explained that when her brother bullied her when they were younger and "he wouldn't listen and he wouldn't stop," she eventually defended herself by force. Leah and others emphasized that it was understandable, if not necessarily right, that oppressed people might resort to violence. By hesitating to classify nonviolence as right and violence as wrong, these privileged students relinquished displaying their own virtue in favor of trying to better understand X's views. Following Nancy's example, students reacted to a potentially threatening proposal not with defensiveness or judgment, but rather by giving it their serious consideration.

**Conceptualizing allyship.** Allyship also merits students' serious consideration in Nancy's class: she does not leave their understanding to chance, but rather centers the concept of allyship in her curriculum. Yearlong guiding questions for 8$^{th}$ grade Global Studies include: "What should the US's role in the world be?" and relatedly, "How can we be good allies?" Examining allyship among nations, for Nancy, leads to exploring allyship in students' own lives, and vice versa. She explained:

> Something teachers of privileged kids need to be aware of is the whole savior notion. So something to probe would be… if we do go help in human rights situations or with girls' education or whatever – how do we do so in a humble, non-judgmental way that honors and empowers cultures?... What does allyship look like among nations? We talk about it a lot in our lives here: when you have privilege and someone else doesn't… you avoid being a bystander. (interview, March 19, 2018)

Privileged students need models of allyship in their own lives because they face pressure to protect the status quo. She told me: "Whatever the issue is that they want to go after – and hopefully part of it is dismantling oppression – there'll be plenty of their own peer group who would rather not go there" (interview, April 24, 2018).

In practice, Nancy foregrounded models of allyship repeatedly. During the unit on Israel and Palestine, she showed a news clip in which Israeli Jews prevented bulldozers from demolishing Palestinian homes to make way for Israeli settlements in the West Bank, then asked students to reflect on what motivated the Israeli allies in that situation. Later, she explained: "I pre-chose that film clip, knowing allyship is something I wanted to focus on" (interview, April 24, 2018). And when students shared personal experiences or observations of injustice, Nancy asked questions like: "Were there any allies around? What should've happened in that scenario?" (interview, March 20, 2018).

The Malcolm X discussion was no exception, as Nancy focused students' attention on allyship from the outset. Introducing the discussion activity, she told them:

> I would love your thoughts on what white allyship could look like if it's to empower, as [Malcolm X] is envisioning, not just African Americans living here but anyone of African descent anywhere…. What's the best way to be a white ally in this world?

To prepare students to weigh in on this question, Nancy made sure to include X's (1964) ideas about white allies among the excerpts they read.

In response, students explored allyship at length during their discussion, referring several times to X's (1964) remarks on the subject. X had declared:

> Now, if white people want to help, they can help… they can help in the white community, but they can't join…. They can form the White Friends of the Organization of Afro-American Unity and work in the white community on white people and change their attitude toward us. They don't ever need to come among us and change our attitude.

Parker (white) was first to highlight this quotation, observing: "that resonated a lot to me." Lydia (white) noticed how X's argument "switched the perspective around," challenging dominant conceptions that Black people need whites' advice. Jordan (white) made a connection to her life:

> I remember reading a quote… online. It made sense to me. It was like, "this isn't my movement, so why are we all trying to lead this movement that isn't ours?"… For me personally, as a white person, I would take a step back and let [people of color] do their thing and maybe work in my own community.

As Jordan's comment suggests, investigating allyship naturally led students to exploring actions in their own community.

**Acting locally.** To support students in becoming Activist Allies, teachers need not only to help students explore what allyship entails; they must also teach them to identify and take concrete actions – which, especially given the reach of most adolescents' influence,[5] can and should be local. Nancy observed that privileged youth need help developing agency when

[5] Teenage activists like Greta Thunberg, Malala Yusufzai, or survivors of the Parkland school shooting represent powerful role models for young people. That said, the example they set may be unrealistic and potentially demoralizing for most teens, who may misjudge that only widely heard voices can make a difference.

learning about structural injustice because they are otherwise susceptible to debilitating feelings of guilt and hopelessness. “Especially with privileged kids who come from liberal backgrounds, there’s guilt,” she observed. “I think that’s something teachers need to be aware of… and be ready to say ‘we have to engage with the mistakes of the past, we have to own them. But they have to help us progress, not be paralyzed’” (interview, May 1, 2018). She therefore selects materials show how people have used their privilege to fight for social justice:

> When kids learn about a huge issue that seems really daunting, [I emphasize] finding some kernel of agency in that: What can I do? And I think students with privilege have more ways to do that. It’s really important that those kids see they can be agents of positive change…. You learn from examples of other people doing work: mediation kind of work, raising awareness kind of work, seeing each other’s point of view kind of work. (interview, April 24, 2018)

Here Nancy conceptualizes the exercise of agency expansively, in forms ranging from supporting the mediation of conflict to simply learning to understand others’ point of view. By throwing a wide net, she creates the conditions for students to feel success with small actions (e.g., “seeing each other’s point of view”) and prepare to their way up to more challenging and complex ones.

In practice, Nancy cultivated students’ agency by encouraging them to identify racial injustices in their community and school, and by taking seriously their proposals for redress. Early in the discussion, Iris (white) framed racial justice as a local issue, referring to her school’s role in the gentrification of the city’s Angel Hill neighborhood. “What is BGS’s role as a private school in Angel Hill?” she wondered, continuing:

> Also observing that we've done things, like, as a school, for the school shootings and the Women's March, which the majority of us were affected by, but not when Stephon Clark was shot.[6] So I want to hear about your guys' opinions on that. As a school, are we contributing to – or being good allies – as part of the gentrification of Angel Hill and as a predominantly-white, wealthy, female student base?

In the discussion that followed, students returned to this theme several times. A few minutes later, Sasha (Black) shared that she had done a project on gentrification the previous year and "learned that BGS is a big part of it." She also wondered if BGS could participate in Black Lives Matter. Nancy chimed in: "I love that question. And in fact, that'd be a great question for the faculty. We have development time on Friday… and I'm going to mention that you thought of that question." Here she framed students' ideas as worthy of follow-up.[7]

Bolstered by Nancy's enthusiasm for their ideas, many students' reflections on BGS's role in racial justice efforts included a call to action. Gabi (white) observed: "For claiming to be such, like, an inclusive school, we need to do more action – like actually taking action on this topic." Lydia (white) advocated using the school's privilege (its "freedom"):

> I think we are very fortunate as a school to have so much freedom to talk about a topic like [racism]…. Sometimes it's a harsh topic between students and teachers, and not a lot of people feel the freedom that they can stand up and talk about topics that they want to talk about. And so I think that, as a school, because we have so much freedom, we need

[6] Stephon Clark, a 23-year-old Black American man, was shot and killed by Sacramento police in his grandmother's backyard on March 18, 2018, six weeks before the town hall discussion at BGS. The officers reported they believed he was pointing a gun at them, but he was found to be holding a cell phone (Marcolini, Cirillo, & Koettl, 2018).

[7] Nancy did follow up, telling me later: "I was really jazzed. I saw [our Head of School] in the faculty room and I said "oh, this came up in conversation, that we need to have a more active role in weighing in as an institution on the Black Lives Matter movement particularly, and the issue of gentrification – owning that we are part of it."… [The Head of School] was like: 'Yeah, uh-huh. That's going to be hard, but yeah'" (interview, May 1, 2018).

to make sure that we take that and have our voice heard, and that we – as our mission – we stand up and support everybody in our community.

Agreeing with Lydia, students advocated several courses of action during the discussion. These included participating in Black Lives Matter demonstrations and being aware of the pitfalls of "white feminism"; asking teachers to teach future cohorts about BGS's role in gentrification and to teach about racial justice across subject areas (not just in social studies); profiling Black leaders during Black History Month; and renaming the school's "White Affinity" group to clarify that it is not, as Sasha (Black) put it, "a place for white people to go and talk about their struggles." Students developed these proposals collaboratively and at length. Far from expressing resignation or powerlessness, with their teacher's encouragement they exhibited a strong sense of agency to contribute to local racial justice efforts.

***A Discussion for Social Justice: Disrupting Inequity among Participants***

I have been describing how Nancy supported her students to engage skillfully in discussion *about* social justice, nurturing activist ally perspectives that can lead to informed action. I turn now to describe how she supported students in discussion *for* social justice, teaching them to engage in ways that disrupt inequity among participants. Such disruption is especially important in elite schools, I suggest, because students with non-dominant social positions are outnumbered. As Dotson (2011) explained, these students may have their credibility discounted due to hearers' prejudice ("testimonial quieting") or may curtail their participation because they perceive their ideas will not be heard ("testimonial smothering"). Teachers aiming to disrupt these forms of "epistemic injustice" (Fricker, 2007) cannot simply rely on common discussion guidelines like "speak from your own experience" because these often serve the interests of elites. Instead, teachers need to cultivate a culture of intellectual

humility and emotional risk-taking. In this section, I highlight two aspects of classroom culture Nancy cultivated toward these ends: 1) responsiveness to others' ideas, especially those of students of color; and 2) humility and risk-taking, especially among white students.

**Responsiveness.** In her classroom, Nancy consistently aimed to elevate the ideas of students of color, creating a discussion environment in which their ideas are heard, taken up, and responded to by peers and in which students of color participate frequently and freely. Toward these aims, she cultivated a culture of responding to others' ideas. Setting up the speakers' queue at the outset of the town hall, she told students: "This is just to speak, and it can be responding to a question someone brought up or building on a point they did, or it can be one of your takeaways or questions." Inviting students to respond to one another in this way paid off: of the 91 substantive turns of talk in the discussion, students explicitly credited one another's ideas 15 times (e.g., "adding onto Savannah's idea…," "when Gabi was talking she said…," or "like Sasha said…"), and built on or responded to each other's ideas without explicitly crediting one another many more times. In so doing, they exhibited an awareness – uncommon among elites – that knowledge is built collectively and is not the achievement of individuals in isolation (for useful elaborations of "responsive" interaction, see Laden, 2012, 2019).

Nancy also aimed actively to affirm students of color's contributions. "I think as a white teacher of students of color who are in the minority, affirmation is really critical, so they feel comfortable to keep sharing," she told me (interview, March 20, 2018). Affirming students' ideas was not just about comfort, however, but also about activating the collective knowledge resources of the community. Students of color "have a perspective I never have [as a white person]," she explained, "so it's really important" that their voices are heard. On the other hand, Nancy recognizes the risk, especially at predominantly white BGS, of burdening students of

color with the responsibility to educate white peers. “I don’t want these kids to feel obligated to teach the other kids about their experience and why it’s relevant,” she told me.

> But it’s also nice to be the source of knowledge…. I definitely think teachers teaching in privileged situations really need to give kids [of color] talking space, but not rely on them and certainly not over-ask, because that really would be burdensome and painful. (interview, March 20, 2018)

With these reflections, Nancy named a tension common for all teachers who engage their students in social justice discussions, but especially for teachers in elite schools where students of color are often outnumbered. On the one hand, teachers need to ensure that minoritized students’ voices are heard and their perspectives valued; on the other, they need to avoid putting those students on the spot or asking them to speak for their social group.

In practice, Nancy navigated this tension and elevated the ideas of students of color by ensuring that the ideas they volunteered received substantive airtime. By so doing, she disrupted the “testimonial quieting” (Dotson, 2011) that occurs when an audience, due to prejudice, fails to identify a speaker as a credible knower. In the Malcolm X discussion, Christina (mixed race, Black and white), one of only two students of color in the room, proposed expanding the school’s celebration of Black History Month:

> I noticed that in February when it was Black History Month, like, it’s supposed to be a whole month, and it turned into Women's Rights Month. You [white people] have every other month, and Black History Month is specifically February, and I think that's one thing we could change, is keeping the specific month.

A few turns of talk later, Iris (white) credited Christina’s idea: “I like Christina’s suggestion about focusing more on Black History Month,” she said. Then as students were seeming to turn

to another topic, Nancy chimed in: “I wanted to respond just briefly to the Black History Month notion,” she said:

> I have tended to believe that it’s so intertwined yearlong, that to teach it for a month – that feels artificial to me…. It's so tied up with… 8th grade for the year that I have perhaps not highlighted enough that it is Black History Month.

Here Nancy not only explained her approach to teaching Black history, she also admitted culpability for not celebrating the month itself in a more visible way. In other words, she modeled humility and accountability – skills I will explore in the next section.

Once Nancy had weighed in, more students referred to Christina’s idea. Sasha said their art teacher began every class in February by showing them a piece by a Black artist – “so it doesn’t have to be, like, teach a whole long thing.” Alma (white) volunteered an idea to do a similar warm-up at the beginning of Global Studies, highlighting the work of a Black activist. Savannah (white) suggested highlighting Black History Month during schoolwide weekly community meetings. Within the culture of responding to one another’s ideas that Nancy had cultivated, Christina’s call to highlight Black History Month was treated as worthy of the class’s attention.

Recall that Dotson’s (2011) second form of epistemic injustice is “testimonial smothering” – when a speaker withholds ideas she believes will not be listened to or understood by her audience. While Christina spoke only once in this discussion (and her confidence that her ideas would be heard by peers is hard to know), on the other hand Sasha spoke frequently and freely. Indeed, she was the second student to speak the in discussion, responding to Iris’s question about how to be good allies, and (after Iris) she also spoke second-most often. She weighed in three times during a conversation about whether BGS’s “White Affinity” group

should be renamed "White Allies." She offered a suggestion about how to elevate Black History Month. She also suggested the school might hold an afterschool panel of people of color to answer white students' questions about good allyship (part of an exchange I explore further below). Many of her comments elicited specific responses – follow-up questions, affirmations, elaborations – from classmates. Within the culture of responsiveness that Nancy encouraged, Sasha's free and frequent participation suggests confidence that her ideas would be sufficiently heard and understood.

**Encouraging vulnerability.** Nancy also aimed to create a classroom culture of intellectual humility and emotional risk-taking. To do so, she had to be willing to challenge students' received ways of thinking while simultaneously listening generously to their ideas and holding their good intentions in view. She told me:

> Whenever I see a student – I'm going to go ahead and say especially a more privileged student – go down a well-trodden path which is a really well-meaning path, if we're going to progress – I think part of my job, especially in a school committed to anti-bias education with a more privileged group, part of my job is to shake things up a little and pose challenges. When opportunities come up, I tend to take them.

Privileged students do need to be challenged, Nancy affirmed, but creating a safe space for them to rise to that challenge can require a delicate balancing act. She went on: "As a teacher there's got to be some affirmation there…. You never want to just shut a kid down" (interview, May 1, 2018).

In practice, Nancy cultivated a safe space to take risks by framing uncertainty as a learning opportunity. Introducing the Malcolm X town hall, she told students: "I'd love it if there's a question you have, instead of having me come up with the questions for discussions."

Later she elaborated: “I’m going to try not to talk, because you are all so good at this. You’re so wise.” It was clear this was not empty praise: during my weeks in her classroom, Nancy consistently voiced appreciation for students’ smart ideas: “I’m so glad you brought that up,” she might say, or “Ginger just asked such a good question – Ginger, can you say that again?” In these ways, Nancy framed students’ uncertainties as contributions to the learning community – as opportunities for all to conduct meaningful inquiry into topics of shared concern. She told me: “When there’s an opportunity to challenge myself and the students to take a juicy conversation and make it even juicier – I mean, why not?” (interview, May 1, 2018).

Nancy also modeled wrestling with uncertainty herself. While students discussed actions for white allyship, Renata (white) suggested asking people of color for their insights:

> How do we really know… if we don’t talk to people [of color] about how to be allies? So I was wondering if we could do something where people get together and we talk about how to be allies for each other.

Here Nancy faced a decision point: how should she respond? On the one hand, she wanted to affirm this contribution, noting later that Renata “took a risk to say that” and appreciating her important point that:

> [White people] do need to understand…. If we’re in our own little hole and we’re not interacting… how do we know what [people of color] need if we don’t talk to them?... I think there was a genuine recognition that you do need to be informed, and in [Renata’s] mind the best way to be informed is to ask.

On the other hand, Nancy recognized a long history of white people asking people of color to teach them about racism. “I’ve just heard a lot in my own professional development around

privilege that you don't want to put responsibility on people who are already marginalized to educate you," she told me (interview, May 1, 2018).

In the event, Nancy did not stake out a position with certitude. Instead, she responded to Renata's suggestion by describing her own internal tug-of-war:

> There's a tension, isn't there, between wanting – it's a white problem, right? So to expect the answers to come from the nonwhite community is also presumptuous. It's a hard thing. Because you don't want to put people in the spot of having to have the answers for your group. You know what I'm saying? That's putting the responsibility to take care of our problem back on the people of color. Like, that feels funky too. But I completely agree with you… about the need to understand other people's experiences.

By naming the tension she herself wrestled with in that moment, Nancy modeled humble inquiry into questions of power and privilege, making visible that uncertainty is normal and okay.

**Conclusion: Facilitating Socially Just Discussions**

Nancy's model of social justice discussion facilitation may offer rich insights for teachers in elite schools. I will conclude by summarizing key takeaways, with the reminder that Nancy's practice is not meant to represent the final word in wise discussion facilitation with elite students; rather, it may supply inspiration and tools for teachers to apply or adapt to their own contexts.

For a discussion to be socially just, there are two requirements. First, it must help students learn *about* social justice – about inequity and how it can be disrupted. Discussions about social justice need to help students move beyond focusing exclusively on oppression – a focus which, for privileged students, tends to elicit attitudes of pity, guilt, defensiveness, or

judgment. Nancy's practice suggests three aims teachers might center when aiming to facilitate socially just discussions:

1) **Teaching empathy**, especially with unfamiliar perspectives. This requires teachers to model serious consideration of multiple points of view.
2) **Conceptualizing allyship.** This requires explicitly and consistently engaging students in exploring meanings and models of allyship and making sense of what is entailed.
3) **Identifying and taking local action.** Teachers can help students develop a sense of agency by helping them to identify actionable plans and encouraging seeing them through.

Second, discussions *for* social justice need to disrupt inequity among discussion participants. Nancy's practice suggests two additional aims:

4) **Encouraging responsiveness to one another's ideas.** Teachers can be mindful of the risks of marginalized students' ideas not being taken up by peers, or of marginalized students curtailing their participation because they perceive they will not be heard.
5) **Encouraging humility and risk-taking.** Teachers should challenge problematic ideas but do so generously and with understanding, framing uncertainties as opportunities for learning.

Teachers aiming to facilitate socially just discussions would do well to teach and model these skills often.

No discussion among humans can be perfect – let alone a discussion of race among predominantly white middle schoolers at an elite school. That said, a great deal went right when Nancy's 8th graders discussed Malcolm X's speech together. They wrestled with unfamiliar perspectives together, considered allyship and activism seriously and at length, and contributed

to a classroom environment where the ideas of students with marginalized identities – in this case, students of color – were heard and appreciated. This chapter's case study suggests it is indeed possible for educators to nurture the development of activist allies in their classrooms.

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**PAPER #2**

# Mr. Crane's Dilemma:

# From Injustice Threats to Responsive Social Issues Discussions


## Abstract

In this paper, I use the case of an instructional dilemma in Mr. Crane's classroom to accomplish three goals: to identify a vicious cycle that vexes social issues discussions; to surface the limitations of common pedagogical responses; and to propose an alternative approach I call *responsive social issues discussions.* I use a social epistemology framework to conceptualize discussions under non-ideal democratic conditions as socially just only if requirements of expressibility and responsiveness are met. In contrast to the rosy picture of egalitarian classroom discussion sometimes portrayed in the democratic education literature, I show how polarization and inequality pose injustice threats in the form of, respectively, motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice. Together, I argue, these produce a vicious cycle of non-expressiblity and non-responsiveness that corrodes democracy. After surfacing Mr. Crane's bad pedagogical options – silencing students, subjecting students to harm, or avoiding discussions altogether – I draw on depictions of responsiveness from the literatures of asset-based pedagogy and practice-based teacher education to propose responsive social issues discussions as a way forward. Responsive social issues discussions can help conscientious teachers reframe motivated

reasoning and epistemic injustice not as threats but rather as opportunities to disrupt injustice and deepen students' understanding.

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Paper #2

**Mr. Crane's Dilemma:**

**From Injustice Threats to Responsive Social Issues Discussions**

Sophomores and juniors in Mr. Crane's[8] History of the Americas class have been studying civil rights movements of the 1960s and have just watched a video depicting Chicano student walkouts. Now they are discussing how protests of the past compare to those today. Alicia, a Hmong-American student and one of few students of color in the class, rarely speaks up, but today she tells classmates about police antagonism toward protestors at a Black Lives Matter protest she attended, then contrasts that with the civility officers showed at her predominantly white school's March for Our Lives. Mr. Crane wonders aloud why police, who often support Second Amendment rights, might be friendlier to protestors at the school's anti-gun march than at an anti-racist demonstration, and Sam, an easy-going white student who often speaks in class, hypothesizes: "the police had a duty to perform." Mr. Crane gestures to the frozen onscreen image of a police officer in the 1960s clubbing a Chicano teen, asking, "didn't those police also have a duty to perform?" Sam replies: "Well, a lot has changed since then." Sam's statement, although likely well-intentioned, discounts Alicia's insinuation of police racism, and his claim – that "a lot has changed" since police used force against protesters of color in the 1960s – is questionable. How can Mr. Crane respond? If he corrects Sam, he may seem biased, compromising students' willingness to explore oppression. If he does not correct him, he validates a problematic claim and may create an unsafe climate for minoritized students. In short, he faces an instructional dilemma.

As Mr. Crane's dilemma suggests, classroom discussions can pose significant facilitation challenges for teachers. Yet the research is clear: such discussions are a necessary component of

[8] Teacher and student names are pseudonyms.

preparing young people for democracy (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2003). Discussions allow students to learn to listen generously, analyze problems together, and engage in collective decision-making. When rigorous classroom discussions become routine, schools may truly become, as Dewey (1938/1997) put it, "laboratories of democracy." However, facilitating high-quality discussions demands much of teachers – including content knowledge, pedagogical know-how, and adequate planning and instructional time. Teachers need to support students both in getting the facts right and in reasoning discursively about those facts, including surfacing and exploring students' misconceptions. Michaels, O'Connor, and Resnick (2008) have observed that "teaching good knowledge using discursive methods is perhaps pedagogy's greatest challenge" (p. 291). No wonder substantive discussions are the exception in American classrooms (Nystrand, Gamoran, & Carbonaro, 2001).

Mr. Crane's dilemma shows how facilitating discussions of *social issues* creates unique pedagogical challenges, especially under conditions of extreme polarization and inequality like in the United States today. This paper highlights two such challenges. The first concerns political polarization and its relationship to *motivated reasoning.* Increasingly well-documented in the democratic education literature (e.g., Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Segall et al., 2018), motivated reasoning occurs when individuals evaluate a view based not on its accuracy but rather on its alignment with their social groups' existing beliefs (Kahan, 2015). Motivated reasoning induces individuals – especially those with social power, and therefore with more to lose – to be unresponsive to others' claims on truth and justice. The second challenge for teachers has not been widely taken up in the classroom discussion research, yet offers real explanatory power: it is *epistemic injustice*, which arises with social inequality. Epistemic injustice occurs when people with dominant positionings prejudicially discount the contributions of those with marginalized

positionings (Fricker, 2007). Epistemic injustice may occur during discussions about any subject but compounds when the issue under discussion is perceived to implicate people in the room: those who claim to be on the receiving end of injustice may be perceived as biased. If motivated reasoning functions to prevent responsiveness to the truth claims of members of marginalized groups, epistemic injustice inhibits ability to be heard in the first place. In social issues discussions – unlike discussions of most other subjects – motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice can produce a vicious cycle wherein privileged participants' poorly warranted claims gain traction while marginalized participants' relevant experiences are sidelined.

Faced with these challenges, conscientious teachers may feel they have no good options: silencing misguided but well-meaning students is undemocratic; allowing students with marginalized positionalities to be subjected to inaccurate and oppressive claims about their social groups is unjust; and both options may cause students to disengage, thwarting learning. I label this conundrum *injustice threat*: a teacher's awareness of the risk of unjust outcomes for students' learning, wellbeing, or both. Although research has prescribed social issues discussions as a necessary component of democratic education, it has supplied little practical guidance for responding to the injustice threats that consistently arise. Without such guidance, teachers' perceptions of looming injustice may provoke them to avoid classroom discussions of social issues altogether (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Hostetler & Neel, 2018). Yet if they do, they abandon their responsibility to prepare students for democratic participation (Journell, 2016).

In conceptual paper, I use the composite figure of Mr. Crane to accomplish three goals: to identify a vicious cycle that vexes classroom discussions of social issues; to critique common pedagogical responses; and to propose an alternative approach I call *responsive social issues discussions.* I frame Mr. Crane's dilemma as a thought experiment which functions as a

normative case study in educational ethics (Levinson & Fay, 2016). Then, I draw on a social epistemology framework to conceptualize discussions under non-ideal conditions as socially just only if the requirements of *expressibility* and *responsiveness* are met (Medina, 2013). In contrast to the rosy picture of egalitarian classroom discussion sometimes portrayed in the democratic education literature, with the help of Mr. Crane I show how polarization and inequality pose injustice threats in the form of, respectively, motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice. Together, these produce a vicious cycle of non-responsiveness and non-expressibility that corrodes democracy. After surfacing Mr. Crane's bad pedagogical options – silencing students, subjecting students to harm, or avoiding discussions altogether – I draw on depictions of responsiveness from the literatures of asset-based pedagogy and practice-based teacher education in order to propose responsive social issues discussions as a way forward. Responsive social issues discussions can help conscientious teachers like Mr. Crane reframe motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice not as threats but rather as opportunities to disrupt injustice and deepen students' understanding.

This paper aims to make several contributions to the literatures of democratic education, teacher education, and their intersections. First, it suggests language for describing a major obstacle to democratic teaching practice: injustice threat, which looms when teachers facilitate social issues discussions among heterogeneously positioned groups of students. In this, I hope to spur further conversation among democratic educators about how teachers can exert influence in guiding a education toward a more just and equitable future. Second, this paper contributes to the growing body of literature on power and positionality in democratic education (e.g., Boler, 2004; Clay & Rubin, 2019; Dabach & Fones, 2016; Lo, 2019), and it encourages scholarly attention to epistemic injustice as a conceptual frame. Third, the paper answers scholarly calls to explore

high-quality democratic teaching practice and to draw out the implications for teacher preparation (e.g., Adler, 2008; Crocco & Livingston, 2017; Sleeter, 2014). Fourth, by framing the practice of facilitating social issues discussions in terms of their similarities to and differences from facilitating classroom discussions of other subject matter, this paper aims to prompt conversation between scholars of democratic education (often located in social studies research and philosophy of education) and scholars of classroom discourse (often located in teaching and teacher education). Each literature's insights may have much to offer the other, as I hope to demonstrate in some small measure here. Finally, the paper focuses on the needs and dilemmas of conscientious teachers – those who take seriously their responsibilities to nurture a more just democracy, and who understand how injustices unfolding in their classrooms can perpetuate oppressive, undemocratic ideas and behaviors that extent far beyond the classroom walls. By so doing, it challenges the notions that either anti-oppressive commitments or a focus on teaching practice alone are enough to support teachers in meeting the challenges of social issues discussions. Teachers also need support in naming what often goes wrong, framing the problem in terms of the demands of a socially just democracy, and implementing an equitable response.

**Framing the Case**

In this paper, Mr. Crane's dilemma supplies practical evidence for my argument. Although "Mr. Crane" is a pseudonym (as are "Alicia" and "Sam"), the teacher and his dilemma are real. Mr. Crane is a white teacher with strong anti-racist commitments, a leader in his school and in local social justice teacher activism. The classroom exchange reported in this paper's opening paragraph was observed as part of a larger qualitative case study exploring how teachers conceptualize and respond to instructional challenges that arise during social issues discussions

among heterogeneous groups of students.[9] In the latter half of this paper, I recruit Mr. Crane for a thought experiment. As Burbules and Warnick (2006) have explained, as a philosophical method of inquiry the thought experiment "takes an imaginary situation, analyzes it, and then gradually modifies one or another element of the situation," in order to "develop insights, vocabularies, values, and perspectives that… become resources for reflection" (p. 498). In this paper's thought experiment, I use Mr. Crane to demonstrate, first, what it looks like for teachers to undertake less skillful approaches to facilitating social issues discussions – including deciding not to facilitate them at all – and then, alternatively, to facilitate responsive social issues discussions.

In iterating between a complex case and conceptual reflections on issues the case makes visible, I undertake what Dewey (1910/2005) called the "double movement of reflection" – whereby reasoners move from practice to theory and back again, from "observed… particular considerations" to "inclusive and far-reaching general meanings" (p. 80). This approach follows Levinson and Fay's (2016) normative case studies of dilemmas in educational justice, answering their call to supply "deeply empirically-informed case-based research" to illuminate practical problems of equity and justice in schools.

The practical problem under examination in this paper is that of facilitating authentically just and democratic social issues discussions in an unjust and increasingly undemocratic society. Ideally, social issues discussions are meant to prepare young people for democratic participation in an egalitarian public sphere, where diverse citizens reason toward agreements that serve the common good. Theorists of deliberative democracy have noted that discussion is democracy's central activity: before we can vote, citizens deliberate how best to address the social problems

[9] After Cohen and Lotan (2014), I call classrooms in which students have unequal social positions "heterogeneous classrooms" – where "heterogeneity" conveys a mix of marginalization and privilege. Compare the concept label "heterogeneity," which denotes difference, to the concept label "diversity," which has come, in many contexts, to connote uniform conditions of marginalization.

we confront (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Yet this liberal democratic ideal has been critiqued for – as Mills (2005) put it – "abstract[ing] away from relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression" (p. 168). Democracy in the United States is not now and never was egalitarian; racism, settler colonialism, and other forms of oppression were baked in from the start (Kendi, 2016; Mills, 1997; Simpson, 2014). When Americans reason together across difference at all – a disappearing phenomenon as American democracy itself decays – hierarchies of power always shape, and usually distort, deliberations.

What, specifically, is distorted? Medina (2013) has elaborated the conditions required to cultivate socially just epistemic interactions among unequally positioned discussers. First, he argued, individuals and social groups must be able to express their perspectives. This is the *expressibility requirement.* When conditions of expressibility are met, social groups are able "to coalesce in a public with expressive capacities, so that they can articulate their shared experiences and perspectives" (p. 9). Expressibility requires that social groups be able to form and able to articulate their experiences, interests, and concerns – conditions systematically less available to members of non-dominant social groups (Young, 1990). If the condition of expressibility is met, Medina (2013) continues, what is expressed must still be taken up and acted upon. This is the *responsiveness requirement*. When conditions of responsiveness are met, a given public's expressions "have the proper uptake by other publics and by society as a whole" (p. 10). Responsiveness requires genuine listening: taking an interest in what others say and interpreting their words with generosity; additionally, responsiveness requires speaking or taking action in response to what has been said. Expressibility and responsiveness together, Medina noted, comprise enacting what Dewey called "the freedom and fullness of communication,"

placing demands on our habits, attitudes, and daily interactions (p. 10) – particularly in how people relate to those whose social positionings afford them less power than their own.

Laden (2019) has elaborated what responsiveness entails by distinguishing it from politeness. While politeness involves an interaction's surface features, such as not insulting others and not treating them rudely, responsiveness makes higher demands. It entails engaging in "shared political activity," Laden wrote, "characterized by… openness and a disposition to cooperate" (p. 1). While politeness can function as a performance by which powerfully positioned people maximize their interests and seek to win arguments, responsiveness involves partnering with less powerful others, being willing to be swayed by their arguments, and being open to sacrificing political advantage to sustain the engagement (see also Allen, 2004; Parker, 2011). Indeed, democracy demands responsiveness if discussants are to reach meaningful agreements. "Breakdowns of… responsiveness," Laden observed, "are to the possibility of genuinely democratic politics, what failure to properly draw a bow across the strings is to genuine violin playing" (p. 29). In this sense, when discussants are unresponsive to one another's claims on truth and justice, the exchange is no discussion at all.

**Social Issues Discussions: Democratic Possibilities, Injustice Threats**

Discussion is a contested concept: while some have defined it minimally, as any exchange of ideas among three or more participants (e.g., Christoph & Nystrand, 2001), others have supplied elaborated definitions that speak to aims, content, methods, and underlying beliefs. In democratic education, Hess (2009) explained that discussions are distinct from other forms of classroom talk such as recitation and lecture, that they consist of dialogue and exchange of information, and that teachers' underlying assumptions about learning matter. Discussions, Hess wrote, are "predicated on the belief that the most powerful ideas can be produced when people

are expressing their ideas on a topic and listening to others express theirs" (p. 14). As Resnick, Asterhan, and Clarke (2015) have put it, high-quality classroom discussions increase cognitive demand. When engaging in productive academic talk, they write, "students do not just chatter" (p. 3); rather, they defend their statements and make truth claims. Classroom discussions can be mobilized to explore a range of subject matter, from "number talks" in mathematics (e.g., Sun, Baldinger, & Humphreys, 2018) to "rigorous science talk" (e.g., Colley & Windschitl, 2016) to "literature circles" in English language arts (e.g., Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999).

*Social issues discussions* are distinguished by their subject matter. They often (but not always) take place in social studies classes like civics or history,[10] and they pertain to problems in the social world in the past, future, or today. In a robust social issues discussion – as in a high-quality classroom discussion about any subject – students make and evaluate claims in response to complex questions, talking not just with the teacher but also with one another for sustained periods (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). However, unlike classroom discussions of other subjects in school, social issues discussions are often contentious (Hess, 2009; Journell, 2016, 2017b). Social issues may be contested at the level of meaning (interpretative questions), value (evaluative questions), action (normative questions), or some combination of these (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2014; Parker, 2006).

Parker (2003) has framed the central normative question for democratic discussion this way: "How can we live together justly, in ways that are mutually satisfying, and which leave our differences… intact and our multiple identities recognized?" (p. 33). To explore such questions, social issues discussions generally exclude elicitation and recitation of answers to factual

[10] In science education, social issues discussions include what Sadler (2004) has called "informal reasoning about socioscientific issues" – that is, classroom dialogue about controversial issues in the sciences, such as climate change or genetic engineering.

questions, but include many other talk-centered instructional methods – including deliberations of controversial issues (Hess, 2009), seminars exploring the values, issues, and ideas in a text (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2014), inquiry lessons (Grant, Swan, & Lee, 2017), simulations and role plays (Wright-Maley, 2015), as well as many impromptu or unstructured discussions about social questions.

Ideally, social issues discussions aim to prepare young people for democratic participation. As I have noted, theorists of deliberative democracy have maintained that discussion is democracy's central activity (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Educational research adopting this deliberative democratic frame has identified schools as necessary sites of political reasoning and framed difference as an asset to deliberation (e.g., Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2003). From this perspective, classroom discussion is an ideal means for students to practice cultivating informed views, supporting claims, weighing competing perspectives, and listening generously to those with whom they disagree. By these means, "mutually beneficial solutions can emerge, promoting common understandings" as students "develop the skills necessary to pursue the common good" (Knowles & Clark, 2018). Empirical research has corroborated such claims, showing that by reasoning together about social issues, young people learn to ground claims in evidence and listen across difference (Parker, 2003). Social issues discussions have been found to build tolerance and make participants more informed (Hess, 2009). They have also been found to support youth development of civic outcomes such as political interest and intention to vote (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). These dispositions, skills, and understandings are indeed crucial to the health of a democracy.

As the case of Mr. Crane and his students suggests, however, such rosy depictions of social issues discussion do not tell the full story. Even as teachers and students pursue, in good

faith, a mutually agreeable account of the common good, ideas that are unwarranted, oppressive, or both often gain traction (e.g., Beck, 2013; Hostetler & Neel, 2018). When Sam implied that police no longer use unwarranted force against protesters of color, there was a risk that his predominantly white classmates would accept his questionable claim. Further, there was a risk that Alicia's testimony, however warranted, would be discounted as biased because it was made by a student of color. Conscientious teachers like Mr. Crane recognize these risks and understand that injustices that unfold in their own classrooms can have oppressive repercussions far beyond school.

Shortly, I will describe two social conditions that vex the ideal picture of classroom social issues discussions. These conditions are political polarization and socioeconomic inequality, and both are the norm in U.S. classrooms.[11] This claim may seem counterintuitive as the United States becomes increasingly segregated by race, class, and political ideology – and so do its schools (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012; Reardon & Owens, 2014). Rising segregation would seem to suggest differences exist mostly *between* schools – for example, School A is made up of poverty-impacted students of color from politically liberal or disengaged families while School B comprises wealthy white students from politically conservative families. But such depictions flatten the persistent differences *within* schools and classrooms. Due to gentrification, urban schools that historically served ethnically diverse, poverty-impacted communities grow ever whiter and more affluent (Pearman, 2019; Posey-Maddox, 2014). And as low-income communities of color are priced out of cities, suburban schools are seeing influxes

[11] As political scientists McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) have suggested, political polarization and economic inequality fuel one another, with immigration as a driving force behind both. Since the mid twentieth century, these researchers have argued, an influx of mostly unskilled immigrants came to fill the bottom rungs of the social ladder in the United States. These immigrants tend to support left-wing redistributive policies that would lessen inequality, but they lack political power (especially given that non-citizens cannot vote). In reaction, those with political power tend to use that power to support right-wing policies that limit redistribution and exacerbate inequality. Polarization and inequality have thus come mutually to reinforce one another.

of students with more diverse backgrounds and needs (Diem et al., 2015). These changes do not happen overnight; while they unfold, students with unequal social positionings and polarized political beliefs meet in school (Parker, 2006, 2010).

I will make a paired argument: that political polarization often leads to motivated reasoning which leads to a breakdown of responsiveness in social issues discussions; and that social inequality often leads to epistemic injustice which leads to a breakdown of expressiblity. Indeed, I will suggest the two work in tandem, mutually reinforcing one another in a vicious cycle which tends to elevate the (often poorly warranted) claims of students with dominant social positionings and simultaneously to dampen the (sometimes better warranted) claims of students with non-dominant social positionings.[12]

Conscientious teachers perceive these risks, which I am calling injustice threats. With injustice threat, what counts is less the "truth" of what is happening than the teacher's perception. There is in such situations – as Steele (1997) put it in his work on stereotype threat – a "threat in the air." When conscientious teachers like Mr. Crane fear their students' understanding, wellbeing, or both are threatened, this fear influences their instructional decisions going forward. Indeed, as I will later argue, injustice threats may prompt teachers to avoid classroom discussions of social issues altogether.

***Polarization and Motivated Reasoning***

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, U.S. politics has increasingly become defined by a vast and growing gap between liberals and conservatives (Pew Research, 2017). Americans polarize not only over questions of opinion ("Should citizens be allowed to carry

[12] It is important to note that people with non-dominant social positionings do not intrinsically possess a more developed critical consciousness about social relations (Dotson, 2011). That said, in this paper I assume that non-dominant positionalities tend to expose individuals to relevant experiences that can help to shed light on unequal social relations. Feminist epistemologists have called this "epistemic privilege" (e.g., Narayan, 1988; Medina, 2013)

concealed handguns?") but also over questions of fact ("Does permitting citizens to carry concealed handguns increase or decrease homicide rates?"). While answers to opinion questions hinge at largely on values, the answers to empirical questions should hinge on evidence. Yet in the so-called "post-truth" era, individuals' responses to empirical questions increasingly cluster in what Kahan (2016) has called "packages of beliefs" tied not to evidence but to social group membership. This is *politically motivated reasoning*. Kahan depicts it thus:

> Where positions on some policy-relevant fact have assumed widespread recognition as a badge of membership within identity-defining affinity groups, individuals can be expected to selectively credit all manner of information in patterns consistent with their respective groups' positions…. The truth-independent goal of 'politically motivated reasoning' is *identity protection*: the formation of beliefs that maintain a person's status in an affinity group. (pp. 2-3)

Politically motivated reasoning is "truth-independent": accuracy is incidental. Motivated reasoners seek out evidence aligned with their social groups' preexisting views (confirmation bias) and dismiss or contest evidence contradicting those views (disconfirmation bias).

Motivated reasoning inheres in social issues discussions. Unlike sensemaking discussions of fractions, the theory of gravity, or *Hamlet*, in discussions about social issues like race, climate change, or reproductive rights, students will tend to be personally and ideologically attached to their existing conceptions – especially as they age and identify more with the social groups to which they belong. Democratic education research has increasingly documented how motivated reasoning influences students' conceptions of the social world (e.g., Bowyer, Kahne, & Middaugh, 2015; Clark, 2018; Garrett, 2020; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Segall et al., 2018). Kahne and Bowyer (2017) administered a large-scale survey of youth ages 15 to 27, asking them to read

a post about economic inequality and tax policy that expressed either a conservative or a liberal perspective and that contained either accurate or inaccurate information. Participants tended to rate a post as "accurate" when it aligned with their prior views, regardless of accuracy. As Kahne and Bowyer observe, this finding "has unambiguously negative implications for democratic deliberation" (p. 7). For example, when students accept and repeat misinformation, they may influence classmates to accept an inaccurate position. Further, students who know peers' claims to be inaccurate may label those peers (and perhaps the peers' entire social groups) as ignorant or unethical, or even come to doubt the possibility of reasonable dialogue altogether.

It is important to note that motivated reasoning originates not only with an individual's political affiliations but also with their complex social positionings. Kahan (2016) explains:

> One might take the view that myriad commitments—including not only political and cultural outlooks but religiosity, ethnicity, gender, region of residence, and so on—figure in politically motivated reasoning on "certain occasions" or to "some extent." Much better, however, would be to recognize that none of these characteristics is the "true" source of the predispositions that inform politically motivated reasoning. All are simply imperfect proxies for an unobserved shared disposition that orients information processing. (p. 11)

In other words, motivated reasoning can arise in association with a range of identities with which an individual might identify – not just from his or her political orientation – and identities may intersect in complex ways to motivate an individual's reasoning in a given context. This matters because, while political affiliations are ostensibly power-neutral, positionalities like race, gender, social class, citizenship status, sexual orientation, ability, and their complex intersections always confer unequal positionings. In other words, motivated reasoners never speak from power-

neutral positions. While most people likely engage in motivated reasoning sometimes, some motivated reasoners consistently have more power than others – and those with the most power may be most motivated to protect it. They may double down on their attachment to ideas associated with their social groups, and – because of their dominant positionality – their claims may have outsized influence peers' thinking.

Medina's (2013) "responsiveness requirement" for just epistemic interaction goes unmet when people reason from social group memberships rather than from evidence. By definition, motivated reasoning entails an unwillingness to be swayed, to be open to new information that might change one's mind. When students with dominant social positions (e.g., affluent white students) are attached to dominant ways of seeing the world, they may be unwilling to listen to more accurate accounts of social relations, either in the curriculum or as articulated by peers. To return to this article's opening anecdote, when Sam suggested "a lot has changed" since police used force against protestors of color in the 1960s, his claim may have been influenced by his racial group membership. Sam's lived experience as a white person may have taught him to view police as protectors, yet this was not the first time the class had examined evidence of police brutality against people of color, and moments before Sam made his claim, a classmate of color (Alicia) had attested to witnessing police acting aggressively at a Black Lives Matter protest. Now Sam seemed to discredit this evidence (disconfirmation bias) to affirm that police no longer display undue aggression toward people of color. He may have been motivated not to be swayed by – or even to hear – Alicia's claim or the evidence supporting it. Further, there was a risk that Sam's status as a popular, affluent white male student might influence classmates – especially those with shared social group positionings – to accept his questionable claim.

In such situations, a conscientious teacher like Mr. Crane is apt to worry that motivated reasoning is happening. (To be clear, teachers do not need to know concept labels like "motivated reasoning" or "epistemic injustice" in order to perceive that injustice looms. Many teachers can describe these phenomena even if they cannot name them). Here, Mr. Crane might fear for Alicia's wellbeing and sense of having been heard, extending this concern to other students whose communities have reason to mistrust police. He might worry some students will accept that U.S. law enforcement is no longer influenced by racism. Unwilling either to alienate Sam by pushing back on his claim or to perpetuate harm to Alicia and others by letting Sam's claim stand, Mr. Crane might wrestle with unpleasant feelings of confusion and professional inadequacy. Of course, teachers cannot know what is *really* happening in students' heads. Perhaps Sam's claim had nothing to do with his race. Perhaps he did not mean to dismiss Alicia's claim or to suggest racism is no longer a problem among police. Maybe no students were harmed by or even noticed how Sam responded to Alicia's comment. Yet Mr. Crane knows motivated reasoning happens often enough, so regardless of what is happening in this particular case, Mr. Crane's concerns are not unwarranted.

***Inequality and Epistemic Injustice***

As polarization has increased in the United States, so too has inequality – as expressed and compounded by income, wealth, race, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, language, ability, and other status-laden positionalities. Consequently inequality is the norm in U.S. schools (Reardon & Owens, 2014). Although schools are ever more segregated by race and class, it is not homogeneity but *predominance* that results. This vexes democratic education because evidence suggests teachers increasingly avoid classroom discussions as one social group predominates (Campbell, 2005). Especially in schools where a dominant group is in the majority

– as in a mostly white, affluent school with a small population of students of color and poverty-impacted students – those in the minority stick out, and their conspicuousness can exacerbate threats to their learning, wellbeing, or both. In such schools, students of color may struggle at times with feeling invisible (their racial identity is not seen, appreciated, or understood) and at other times with feeling hyper-visible (their racial identity is conspicuous and they may be asked to speak for their racial group) (Carter Andrews, 2012).[13]

In discussions among unequally positioned participants, a key injustice threat is *epistemic injustice.* Although this concept has not yet been taken up in the literature as motivated reasoning has (for an exception, see Dozono & Taylor, 2020), I suggest epistemic injustice supplies an eloquent account of a perennial discussion problem. As Fricker (2007) has explained, epistemic injustice refers to "a wrong done to someone… in their capacity as a knower" (p. 1). When epistemic injustice occurs, speakers with marginalized social positionings have their knowledge prejudicially discounted by hearers. Dotson (2011) has identified two ways epistemic injustice can unfold in discussions. In what she calls "testimonial quieting," an audience fails to identify a speaker as a credible knower, due to prejudice. In instances of "testimonial smothering," a speaker withholds ideas she believes will not be listened to, heard, or understood by prejudiced hearers. Epistemic injustice harms the speaker's "intellectual courage" (Fricker, 2007) as well as the knowledge resources of the learning community. When marginalized students' accounts of the social world are silenced, valuable knowledge is left out (Parker, 2003). And when epistemic injustice goes unchallenged, it is normalized and held invisible, ensuring future such injustices.

[13] I focus here on racial and class inequity, but of course inequities exist across a whole range of identity axes, any of which can be and often are salient to power dynamics within a classroom. For example, students' sexual orientation or gender expression may impact their perceived credibility among classmates as well as their willingness to speak about gender and sexuality in the first place (e.g., Beck, 2013; Kavanagh, 2016).

Epistemic injustice is often perpetrated despite individuals' good intentions. As Narayan (1988) has argued, when groups of people reason together across difference, "good will is not enough" (p. 34). She continued:

> A simple resolution on the part of individuals or groups that they will try to understand the experiences of more disadvantaged persons or groups, whose oppression they do not share, and a resolve to try and empathize with their interests, although a useful thing to have, is not going to solve or resolve the thousands of problems that are going to crop up in discussion and communication. Too often, even the most resolute possessors of good-will find themselves baffled and angered by failures of communication. (p. 34)

In spite of good intentions, dominant narratives (often guided by motivated reasoning, and not empirically defensible) come to trump counternarratives which might otherwise supply more complex, accurate accounts of the social world. Medina's (2013) "expressibility requirement" for just epistemic interaction fails when the claims of non-dominant social groups are not taken up – or are not even made public in the first place.

Epistemic injustice arises almost inevitably during discussions among unequally positioned participants, regardless not only of intentions but also of the subject matter. However, in social issues discussions the problems of epistemic injustice are compounded by the problems of motivated reasoning, which often unfold simultaneously. As noted earlier, motivated reasoners never speak from power-neutral positions: some reasoners have more power than others, and this imbalance is systematic (Sanders, 1997). While most people likely engage in motivated reasoning at least some of the time, people with dominant social positionings (for example, white, comparatively affluent people) may be super-motivated reasoners because they have more to lose, *and* the phenomenon of epistemic injustice means their arguments are more

likely to gain traction. When participants' identities are implicated in the discussion – in a discussion about racial profiling among racially diverse students, or a discussion about transgender bathroom rights with both cisgender and gender creative students in the room – those with non-dominant positionalities may become hyper-visible while at the same being dismissed as biased (Journell, 2017a). In effect, those most likely to be in the know may be least likely to be heard, and vice versa. More than the sum of their parts, when motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice arise – as they often do – in tandem, injustice threat compounds.

When Sam dismissed Alicia's testimony about witnessing police aggression toward protestors at a Black Lives Matter protests, social positionings may have influenced whose knowledge mattered: a white student discounted the testimony of a student of color. Using Dotson's (2011) framework, we might call this an example of testimonial quieting insofar as Alicia's credibility as a knower about police attitudes toward communities of color was discounted by a white peer. In a vicious cycle, testimonial quieting can produce further injustice in the form of testimonial smothering: after this experience, Alicia might withhold her participation in classroom discussions about race. Yet as a student of color and a participant in a Black Lives Matter demonstration, Alicia was likely better positioned than Sam to speak to law enforcement's relations with protestors of color. Her account was warranted by both her experience and by what the media and researchers have found to be true. When her credible claim was dismissed, there was a risk both of harm to students' understanding of the issue and to minoritized students' capacity to speak and be heard.

As with motivated reasoning, the question of what was *really* happening in this case matters less than Mr. Crane's understanding that epistemic injustice does happen among his

students and could have been happening here. When threats of motivated reasoning, epistemic injustice, or both are in the air, conscientious teachers try to assuage the threat.

## Injustice Threat: Navigating Dangerous Waters

I turn now to describe some key courses of action available to teachers, and to make visible their limitations. Conscientious teachers facing injustice threat may feel they have no good alternatives: silencing students is undemocratic; allowing oppressive claims to go unchallenged and marginalized students to be harmed is unjust; and both are bad for student learning. Democratic education researchers encourage teachers to meet these problems with discussion norms, but – as I will explain – commonly-used norms may reproduce the very power inequities they are meant to disrupt. In social issues discussions among heterogeneous groups of students, student participation and student safety can seem irreconcilable. Perceiving that every course of action in a social issues discussion threatens injustice, conscientious teachers may avoid such discussions altogether. In this section, I use the case of Mr. Crane to demonstrate each option and how it fails to meet the demands of just democratic education.

### *Scylla and Charybdis*

As motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice inevitably arise during social issues discussions among heterogeneously positioned students, Mr. Crane may find himself stymied by injustice threats whichever way he turns. He has a responsibility to support all students in constructing their understanding by reasoning together about the social world, which entails not silencing students even if they make problematic claims. Simultaneously, he has a responsibility to protect marginalized students from being sidelined or exposed to hurtful claims about the social groups to which they belong. Mr. Crane faces a seemingly unnavigable channel, between the Scylla of silencing students and the Charybdis of exposing them to harm (Hess & McAvoy,

2015; Levinson, 2012). Either route is, in its own way, unjust. As Levinson and Fay (2016) observe, "knowing one is committed to social justice, equality, or civil rights is not enough to know what to do in a particular complex case" (p. 5). A conscientious teacher's resulting sense of failure may give rise to feelings of inadequacy, guilt, or shame. In short, in such situations good teachers often feel bad (e.g., Washington & Humphries, 2011). How can they repair their sense of ethical, competent practice?

Democratic educators' most-prescribed remedy may not suffice. To foster a safe climate for classroom discussion, teachers are encouraged to establish discussion norms like "listen respectfully," "speak from your own experience," "challenge ideas not people," "assume good intentions," and so on (e.g., Adams, Bell, and Griffin, 1997; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2001). Yet Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) have depicted how such norms can function paradoxically to serve the interests of elites at the expense of those with marginalized social positions. Italicizing examples of such norms, they write:

> *Assuming good intentions* only goes so far when White students repeatedly use terms like "colored people."… How do you challenge a White student's claim that she didn't get a job or a scholarship because of "reverse" racism or sexism when she is *speaking from her own experience*? Does *everyone's opinion matter* when some people's opinion is that reverse racism is a valid concept? (p. 3)

As these examples suggest, some of the most common discussion guidelines can reproduce oppressive social relations, rather than disrupt them (see also Boler, 2004; Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

Conscientious teachers who rely on discussion norms to promote a safe classroom may see these norms fall short. Mr. Crane may perceive that when Sam and other white students

"speak from their own experience," the relevant experiences of Alicia and classmates of color can wind up being marginalized. In effect, the solution democratic education researchers most often provide – establishing norms for civil discourse – may not fully mitigate injustice threats.

***Avoiding Discussions***

Having done his due diligence in holding students accountable to discussion norms and finding himself repeatedly reaching an instructional impasse like in this article's central anecdote – unwilling either to push back on Sam's claim or to let it stand – Mr. Crane may begin to avoid social issues discussions altogether. Research has extensively documented teachers' tendency to avoid classroom discussions (e.g., Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Hostetler & Neil, 2018; Pace, 2019; Parker, 2003, 2006; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017), especially when discussions pertain to "controversial identity issues" – issues dealing with gender, sexuality, race, or immigration, which often implicate students in the room and can seem too sensitive to broach (Journell, 2017a). For example, Reisman, Enumah, and Jay (2020) have highlighted teachers' tendency to avoid classroom discussions about race "for fear they will trigger 'racialized conflict'" (p. 1).

Deciding social issues discussions are too risky, let us suppose Mr. Crane selects other instructional methods to round out his civil rights unit. He lectures about key issues and events during American civil rights movements. His in-class questions for students have correct answers; for example: "What was the Supreme Court's rationale in the *Brown v. Board* decision?" Students read primary and secondary sources about desegregation and watch a film about the Little Rock Nine. When Mr. Crane wants students to weigh in on a controversial question – "should colleges use race as a factor in admissions?" – he elicits their thinking through individual writing tasks which remain private. To foster civic engagement, Mr. Crane

asks students to conceive a community service project: they decide to paint a mural depicting connections between civil rights activism of the past and today.

Mr. Crane's choice to avoid classroom discussions of social issues accomplishes his aims of not shutting down students and not exposing them to oppressive ideas. Moreover, the instructional methods he uses instead have merit. His lectures and the readings he assigns may help equip students develop informed views – especially if he scaffolds the learning activities to support students' desire to know (Schwartz & Bransford, 1998). Asking students to weigh in on controversial questions in writing is protective: if students make oppressive claims they do so privately, and Mr. Crane can respond without publicly shaming them or exposing anyone to harm. Epistemic injustice is limited because students have few opportunities either to dismiss one another's ideas (testimonial quieting) or to curtail their own contributions (testimonial smothering). Finally, although the mural-painting project may not address the structural causes of civil rights violations (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), it may increase students' interest in social justice and encourage future civic engagement.

Yet if Mr. Crane opts out of social issues discussions, he fails to discharge his responsibility as an educator in a democracy (Journell, 2016). Reflecting on how social issues discussions can reproduce oppressive relations among participants, Parker (2006) has observed that *not* having such discussions creates more problems than it solves:

> To respond by abandoning the project could have perverse effects, achieving a worse dead end…. The discourse of withdrawal strikes me as not merely cautionary but Pyrrhic. In cases of hostile or injurious speech… withdrawal is entirely sensible as a matter of personal safety and dignity. But withdrawal as a general policy will perpetuate cloistering – gated mental and physical communities. (p. 15)

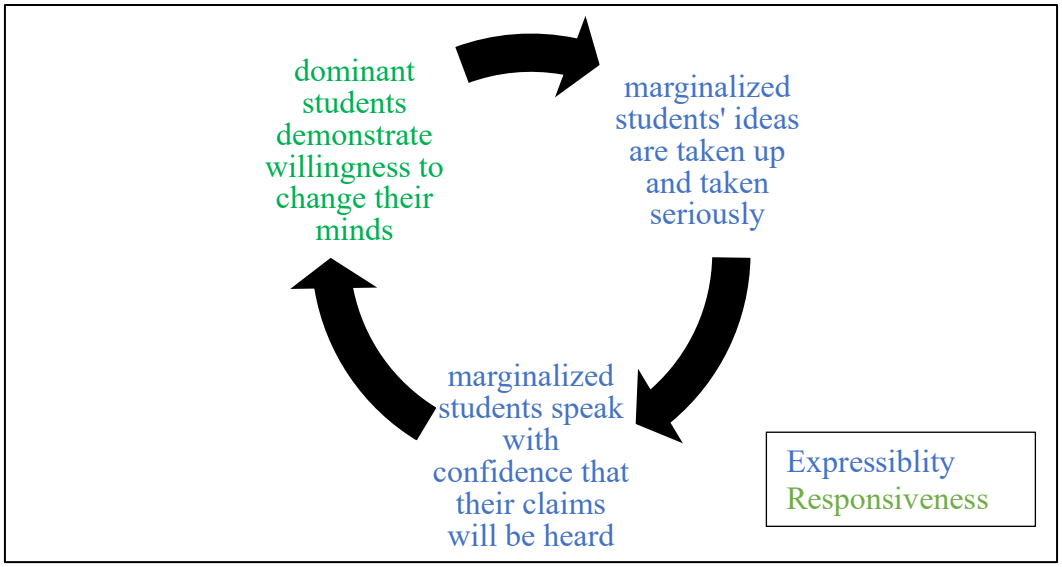
Although discussions do sometimes exacerbate polarization and mistrust, Parker argued, if young people do not learn to reason respectfully across difference such polarization and mistrust will worsen. Stopping a discussion may be an appropriate short-term solution, but systematic discussion avoidance harms students and society.

By avoiding discussions, Mr. Crane also paradoxically fails in his aim of protecting vulnerable students. They may not be exposed to hurtful or untrue views in his classroom, but they certainly will be exposed elsewhere. If he does not engage them in social issues discussions, he leaves them unarmed for such discussions outside the classroom walls. And perhaps students with non-dominant positionalities – students like Alicia – are stronger than he thinks. In one of the biggest studies to date of classroom social issues discussions, Hess and McAvoy (2015) found students with non-dominant social positionings to be less sensitive than their teachers believe. They related an episode in which a conservative Mexican American student, Gabe, overheard fellow Republican students expressing anti-immigrant sentiments during a legislative simulation. He decided to speak in favor of immigration in the simulation, with the effect that his peers, as he put it, "kind of quieted down and they stopped making racial slurs" (p. 103). Gabe told the researchers that the experience taught him confidence in his voice. Reflecting on how students with non-dominant social positionings can feel empowered to speak by participating in social issues discussions, Hess and McAvoy urge teachers to use such discussions to "encourage… vulnerable students to stand up for themselves" (p. 177; see also Applebaum, 2014). I turn now to sketch a method of social issues discussion facilitation that may supply better equip marginalized students to meet and respond to oppressive views in and out of the classroom while also holding privileged students accountable to question such views and come into a position of solidarity with marginalized social groups.

**Responsive Social Issues Discussion**

I turn now to outline an alternate course for teachers, which I call facilitating *responsive social issues discussions*. The aim of such discussions is to propel a virtuous cycle of expressibility and responsiveness: this entails disrupting motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice. In this paper's central case, Mr. Crane needs to create the conditions for students like Alicia to be heard and have their ideas taken up by peers *and* for students like Sam to be willing to change their minds or even to sacrifice their perceived interests to sustain engaged discussion and support all students' learning; in turn, these conditions need to be sufficiently established to empower Alicia and others to continue to share (Figure 1). If students are to learn responsiveness rather than mere politeness – a willingness to change their minds and even sacrifice their advantage in order to sustain engaged discussion (Laden, 2019); and if they are to learn to ensure all students can speak and be heard and to frame their own contributions as responses to peers' ideas (Medina, 2013) – then the first and most important requirement is to learn to listen carefully (Parker, 2010). Indeed, responsiveness depends up on engaged listening: we cannot respond to others' claims on truth and justice if we do not really understand what those claims are. Listening is a

**Figure 1: A Virtuous Cycle of Expressiblity and Responsiveness**



skill that teachers must not only expect from students, but also model consistently so students understand its centrality to a just democracy.

Listening and its close relative, paying attention, are common attributes of two literatures that have supplied elaborated accounts of responsive teaching: asset-based pedagogy and practice-based teacher education. Although these literatures have sometimes been opposed to one another (e.g., Daniels & Varghese, 2019; Philip et al., 2019), I maintain that in tandem they supply a powerful framework for responsive teaching, and for responsive social issues discussion facilitation specifically. Asset-based pedagogies and practice-based teacher education can and should be conceived and implemented in mutually supporting ways (e.g., Dutro & Cartun, 2016; Kavanagh, 2017). Drawing on the insights of both fields, I offer a definition of responsive teaching practice that entails responding not only to students' social positionalities and not only to the substance of their ideas, but also to how these interact. Mr. Crane returns to illustrate how enacting responsive social issues discussions can help conscientious teachers reframe motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice as opportunities to disrupt oppression and deepen students' understanding of the social world.

### *Insights on Responsiveness from Asset-Based Pedagogy*

Asset-based or resource pedagogies (APBs) include culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). While deliberations about these concept labels have added necessary complexity, their similarities outweigh their differences (e.g., Howard & Rodriguez-Sheel, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Collectively, APBs reject deficit thinking about marginalized students and their communities, experiences, and interests. Instead, proponents reframe these as resources to support students' academic success. From an asset-based perspective, the curriculum should

hold up a mirror to students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) and "community cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005), leveraging young people's outside-of-school resources to propel in-school learning. Nasir (2000), for example, demonstrated how African American youth learned increasingly sophisticated mathematical thinking skills by evaluating their own and teammates' basketball statistics.

Advocates of ABP argue there can be no one-size-fits-all approach: they cannot be enacted by making assumptions about students. Rather, teachers must ask questions and then listen carefully to students in order to design responsive curriculum and enact responsive instruction. Indeed, depending on students' positionalities, responsiveness may require not "sustaining" students' cultural ways of knowing but disrupting them. San Pedro (2018) has argued that, for students with dominant social positionings – his example is a white high school student in a Native American literature course – teachers would do better to pursue what he called "culturally disruptive pedagogy" that exposes and interrupts oppression. Research suggests it is possible for privileged subjects to learn to see through relations of dominance (e.g., Case, 2013; San Pedro, 2018; Swalwell, 2013). However, such awareness goes against the grain of privileged people's social conditioning and must therefore be purposefully taught. Only by attending to heterogeneous students' positionalities can teachers discern an appropriate response – sustaining, disruptive, or some combination.

Research into ABP has supplied the necessary insight that students' social positionalities are inextricable from their learning, and indeed – especially when they are learning about social issues – their positionalities may radically influence how they make sense of the subject matter (Journell, 2017a). These insights must be centered in any education that aims to contribute to building a more just democracy. However, asset-based approaches to teaching and learning have

sometimes focused more on holding up a mirror to students' lived experience than on instructional practices that may open windows onto unfamiliar disciplinary content knowledge (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Parker, 2018). Insights from practice-based teacher education offer a counterweight.

### *Insights on Responsiveness from Practice-Based Teacher Education*

The current wave of practice-based teacher education (PBTE) emerged in response to concerns that, as Ball and Forzani (2009) put it, "teacher education curriculum… is often centered not on the tasks and activities of teaching but on beliefs and knowledge [and…] orientations and commitments" (p. 497). Contrary to popular belief, proponents of PBTE argue, teachers cannot be adequately prepared for the intricate work of teaching simply by possessing good content knowledge in their subject area or by reflecting on their field experiences or on the values and commitments they learn in foundations courses (e.g., McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013; Zeichner, 2012). As Ball and Forzani (2009) argued:

> A practice-focused curriculum for learning teaching would include significant attention not just to the knowledge demands of teaching but to the actual tasks and activities involved in the work. It would not settle for developing teachers' beliefs and commitments; instead, it would emphasize repeated opportunities for novices to practice carrying out the interactive work of teaching and not just to talk about that work. (p. 503)

Much of the work in PBTE has focused on "high-leverage" or "core" instructional practices that elicit student thinking. For example, Kennedy (2016) grouped the practices teachers should learn in terms of "persistent challenges" (p. 10), including making content comprehensible to diverse learners, enlisting students' participation, and exposing student thinking.

As such aims suggest, PBTE scholarship has consistently focused on how teachers can be responsive to the substance of students' ideas to foster disciplinary understanding (e.g., Kavanagh et al., 2019; Lampert & Graziani, 2009; Thompson et al., 2016). Research on "academically productive talk" (e.g., Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2015) has explored how teachers can orchestrate discussions in which students think out loud about concepts, puzzle through surprising problems, articulate, explain, and reflect on their own reasoning, and frame their contributions as responses to classmates' ideas. Responsive discussion facilitation involves more than simply evaluating what students say; it requires re-voicing contributions, recapping where the conversation has gone, inviting students to say more, asking for agreement, disagreement, or modification of ideas, and engaging students in reflecting on their own learning and participation and on the significance of the conceptions and explanations that have emerged (Leinhart & Steele, 2005; Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2015). As Kavanagh et al. (2019) explain, responsive teaching positions students as "competent sensemakers." Such instruction

> assumes that students will make authentic contributions to how the activity of the classroom unfolds instead of filling in the blanks in a pre-written script created by the teacher…. A teacher's role within lessons is to make instructional decisions that are authentically *in response to* students' ideas and ways of participating. Knowledge is not provided by teachers, but is instead negotiated by teachers and students in collaboration as they engage in uptake and reshaping of each other's ideas (p. 2)

Responsive teaching of this kind is non-intuitive, intricate, and highly demanding, requiring teachers to constantly improvise in response to students' emergent ideas (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2015).

In exploring student' sensemaking, PBTE research has reframed young people's misconceptions not as obstacles to learning but as opportunities. While skilled teachers do sometimes need to correct students' wrong ideas, it is often more productive for students to puzzle through the issue. Michaels, O'Connor, and Resnick (2008) related an episode in which a third-grade teacher and her students have a class discussion about even and odd numbers. They had established that if you can divide a number by two with no remainder, it is even. Now a student, Paulo, argues that 24 is an odd number because it can be divided by three. Rather than rejecting Paulo's claim – "which though wrong is presented with an argument that appears to support it" – the teacher asks if anyone can restate Paulo's argument. A student does. The teacher elicits other opinions, and the class sets the two claims side by side, deliberating for several minutes. During this time, many students construct their own, better informed understanding (pp. 289-291). For students who remain confused in such cases, the process of sensemaking can create what Schwartz and Bransford (1998) called "a time for telling," a point at which students are ready to be given a right answer. As Michaels, O'Connor, and Resnick (2008) explain, an important aspect of orchestrating productive academic talk is discerning when the time has come to tell, versus when students' deliberations are still supporting their learning.

PBTE scholarship has offered the insight that teachers need to listen to and leverage students' sensemaking – perhaps especially their misconceptions – and shape the learning trajectory in response. As Thompson and colleagues (2016) have argued, rigorous instruction "cannot be attained in classrooms where teachers are unresponsive to students' ideas" (p. 1). However, practice-based approaches have sometimes focused overly on opening windows onto unfamiliar disciplinary content knowledge, without holding up a mirror to students' communities and identities and without taking seriously how power and positionality influence what unfolds

(Kavanagh & Danielson, 2019; Philip et al., 2019; Zeichner, 2012). Moreover, PBTE research on democratic education has lagged behind PBTE research in other subject areas, and there has been little scholarly attention to how injustice threats in social issues discussions place unique additional demands on teachers.

### *Bringing Insights about Responsiveness to Bear on Social Issues Discussions*

Asset-based pedagogies and practice-based teacher education overlap, and some scholars have thought about these overlaps carefully (e.g., Kavanagh & Danielson, 2019). That said, each literature centers very different insights about what responsive teaching practice entails. While APB urges teachers to be responsive to students' diverse positionalities and the funds of knowledge they bring into school, PBTE encourages teachers to be responsive to the substance of students' thinking about disciplinary content. Both insights are indispensable, and teachers must enact both forms of responsiveness in social issues discussions. Indeed, I argue that responsive social issues discussions require listening and paying attention not only to students' social positionalities, and not only to the substance of their ideas about the social world, but also to how these interact. Teachers must learn to be responsive to how students' heterogeneous positionalities *shape* their ideas about disciplinary content, especially when social issues are being discussed.

Research highlighting such teaching practice is rare. In one study, Dabach and Fones (2016) described how a teacher of newcomer immigrant youth drew on students' "transnational funds of knowledge" about the political process in their home countries to support them in co-constructing understanding of U.S. elections. In another study, Beck (2018) explored how a student named Jake "presented an identity as open-minded" even as he voiced an unpopular view in a discussion of marriage equality. As an African American student and the class's lone

opponent of same sex marriage, Beck explained, there was a risk that Jake "advocating too vigorously against same-sex marriage could reinforce the stereotype of African Americans as standing in the way of progress" (p. 205). Beck concluded with implications for teachers about "provid[ing] identity cover" for students voicing unpopular views, in part by "suggesting that a student willing to play devil's advocate… is serving the larger community by allowing the group to consider a point of view that they do not hold" (p. 224). Here, Beck highlighted the role of Jake's identity in shaping how classmates perceived his arguments and pointed to how teachers can positively influence such perceptions.

Research like Beck's (2018) raises important questions about the role of misconceptions in social issues discussions. In other subject areas, PBTE has framed students' misconceptions as levers for learning – as when third graders deliberated Paulo's incorrect idea about whether 24 is odd or even, and thereby gained deeper mathematical understanding (Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008). Under what circumstances can teachers facilitating social issues discussions use student misconceptions this way? Indeed, when students deliberate values and ideas in the context of a social issues discussion, what even counts a misconception? In Beck's (2018) paper, when Sam advocated against same-sex marriage he did not advocate empirical untruths and was not, it that sense, incorrect. That said, he was arguing for a point of view that – since *Obergefell v. Hodges*[14] – has been argued by some scholars of democratic education to be "settled" and not open to deliberation (e.g., Journell, 2018). When students engage in productive academic talk about marriage equality or slave rebellions or Second Amendment rights, "correct" and "incorrect" are muddy concepts, and participants enter quickly into political and often deeply personal territory. Teachers must make challenging judgments about which claims may be

[14] In *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), the United States Supreme Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution requires states to license and recognize marriages between two people of the same sex.

"wrong" versus which are merely distasteful. They must discern whether there is, as Hess (2009) asked, "one answer, or… multiple and competing answers" (p. 113).

I want to suggest that the definition of "misconception" in a social issues discussion might hinge on whether a question is "open," i.e. legitimately controversial with multiple warranted perspectives, versus when it is "settled," i.e. it is no longer open to deliberation (Hess, 2009). For example, the question of whether the Electoral College should be abolished is an open question; the question of whether women should have the right to vote is a closed question. Hess and McAvoy (2015) have argued that issues should be taught as open when they are "politically authentic"; that is, if they "have traction in the public sphere, appearing on ballots, in courts, within political platforms, in legislative chambers, and as part of political movements" (pp. 168-169). These authors warned, however, that vocal and ill-informed policymakers "could open up an issue that should remain settled" (p. 169). In the Trump era this warning has been substantiated, as policymakers open for deliberation long-settled ethical issues such as whether white supremacists and their opponents are morally equivalent or whether it is appropriate to separate children from their families as a deterrent to illegal immigration. As unjust and oppressive arguments about such issues have taken hold in the public sphere, political authenticity has become an increasingly problematic criterion for deciding to present an issue as having multiple warranted answers and therefore open to debate.

Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) have supplied a helpful alternative criterion for deciding if an issue is open (appropriate for deliberation) or settled (inappropriate for deliberation). They distinguished between social issues that are disputed among experts and those upon which experts agree. The latter of these – which Zimmerman and Robertson term "expert-public disagreements" – occur when members of the public dispute questions over which

there is consensus among people with knowledge of the issue. For example, while scientists agree that climate change is caused by human activity, the issue is debated in the public sphere. Similarly, while evidence contradicts claims of widespread voter fraud in the United States, members of the public and many policymakers doggedly maintain this view. Teachers can use the criterion of expert consensus to determine whether an otherwise-controversial social issue should be taught as having multiple warranted answers or as having a right answer. In other words, this criterion can help teachers to ascertain when a student view is a "misconception." For example, since experts agree that race has enormous impact on people's life chances (Solomon, Maxwell, & Castro, 2019), the idea that people should be "colorblind" (not see or be responsive to race [Bonilla-Silva, 2003]) is a misconception.

For social issues, the criterion of consensus among knowledgeable people raises the question: "who is knowledgeable?" As the case of human-caused climate change demonstrates, politicians and pundits cannot be assumed to be knowledgeable, but climate change scientists usually can. Indeed, it is often safe to assume that specialists in a field are knowledgeable experts, especially if there is widespread agreement among them. But what of laypeople with firsthand experience of an issue? What kind of firsthand experience counts? Who is knowledgeable about structural racism, for example? Many well-educated white Americans, including those who work in the social sciences and think often about race, hold beliefs that are contradicted both by a preponderance of social science research and by people of color's lived experience (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Sullivan, 2015). To frame the issue as an expert-public disagreement and teach structural racism as a closed issue requires acknowledging that educated white people who think they understand race may not, after all, be knowledgeable. When it

comes to social issues pertaining to power and privilege, the field of knowledgeable people should include people with firsthand experience of structural injustice (Sibbett, 2018).

Especially if we include the knowledge of people from non-dominant social groups, many social issues that are often held to be matters of opinion actually turn out to be expert-public controversies abounding with public misconceptions: the causes of climate change or mass shootings; the ethicality of curtailing immigration or outlawing abortion; the unjust realities of race and gender relations. If knowledgeable people agree about an issue, it is appropriate to acquaint students with this fact, and to expose them to evidence supporting the experts' consensus. Doing so is not indoctrination, as some critics have maintained (e.g., Zimmerman, 2017); rather, it is appropriate preparation for life in a democratic society. In effect, many of the unwarranted, potentially-hurtful, or otherwise problematic claims students make in social issues discussions may be considered misconceptions – and this points a way to responding.

Practice-based teacher education has framed misconceptions as opportunities to deepen students' understanding of the subject matter under discussion, and I think problematic student claims about the social world can in many cases be viewed this way. Just as Paulo's teacher used his misconception regarding whether 24 is an even or an odd number to help students construct sophisticated mathematical understanding, Mr. Crane might use Sam's misconception about how police relate to protestors of color to help students construct more sophisticated understandings of race relations. Paulo's wrong answer was not an occasion for discipline or suppression – not, indeed, a problem at all, but rather a valuable contribution to the group's learning; Sam's claim might be framed similarly, not as a problem to be silenced or disciplined away, but rather as an

opening to learning – an chance to help all students in the class recognize and ultimately critique a commonly-held idea about the social world.[15]

***Mr. Crane's Dilemma Revisited***

In this article's opening anecdote, I implied Mr. Crane had two options: either to push back on Sam's claim or to allow it to stand. As savvy readers may have perceived, this was a false binary. Responsive practice offers teachers a third option: to use a student's problematic claim to launch an inquiry. Rather than simply correcting Sam's claim or letting it stand, then, let us imagine that Mr. Crane directs students' attention to relevant evidence, then asks students to investigate. In response to students' emerging ideas, an inquiry question occurs to Mr. Crane: "To what extent *have* relations between people of color and police changed over the past six decades?" Although he can make informed conjectures, Mr. Crane is also genuinely curious – a sign of a high-quality inquiry (King, Newmann, & Carmichael, 2009).

Sam claimed "a lot has changed" since police used force against protestors of color in the 1960s. Now instead of treating Sam's claim like a wrong answer to be corrected, Mr. Crane says: "I'm hearing competing arguments here." He asks Alicia and Sam each to restate their claim to ensure he and their classmates have understood. Alicia elaborates: she saw police harassing protestors at the Black Lives Matter demonstration, and waving tear gas canisters. Sam holds his ground: "But they didn't hit anyone, unlike the Chicano student walkouts." Mr. Crane elicits a volunteer to summarize the two points of view.

Now Mr. Crane must draw on his professional wisdom to discern whether to elicit students' opinions. Surfacing further misconceptions may propel learning by making poorly

[15] I am indebted to Sarah Kavanagh for the valuable insight that, as she puts it, ""Educators tend to take a policing stance rather than a learning stance when students make undemocratic or oppressive claims" (personal communication, March 30, 2020).

warranted claims available to critique, but doing so may also perpetuate harm, so teachers need to ascertain when to help students gather evidence. Unlike Paulo and his classmates reasoning about odd and even numbers, Sam and Alicia and their classmates do not already have all the information they need to construct more informed understanding. Mr. Crane can choose how to muster such information. If the class has already explored evidence that might illuminate the matter (e.g., a set of news articles about civil rights protests over time, referring to police presence), they can circle back. If he knows of evidence he can access quickly (e.g., an online database of police violence), he might introduce it to the class immediately. Or if Mr. Crane lacks time or materials to initiate an inquiry now, he might plan a follow-up lesson for when he has had time to assemble more resources. Regardless of materials, timing, and duration of the inquiry, Mr. Crane's question for students will be: "how does this evidence complicate your thinking about the extent to which relations between police and communities of color have changed?"

Facilitating social issues discussions in this way serves to sustain the discussion (rather than shut down Sam's idea), and to protect Alicia's and other minoritized students' wellbeing, and to deepen learning. This is because Sam's claim can *both* be taken seriously – it is publicized and made an object of authentic intellectual inquiry – *and* its content can be unpacked and evaluated. Mr. Crane demonstrates his expectation that claims about the social world must account for expert knowledge, including the knowledge of people who have firsthand experience of oppression. Rather than correcting Sam or cutting the discussion short, Mr. Crane can engage in responsive practice in order to elicit deeper, more complex reasoning about police relations with communities of color.

Responsive social issues discussions kickstart a virtuous cycle of expressibility and responsiveness. By taking Sam's idea seriously, Mr. Crane may disarm Sam's and like-minded peers' automatic defensiveness or groupthink – disrupting motivated reasoning. Engaging the whole class in exploring Sam's idea may foster a shared sense of community. As Parker and Hess (2001) observed, "discussion sustains democratic publics." By engaging in collective investigation of a social issue, they continued, "a 'we' is constituted" (p. 287). To the extent that Sam and others conceive of themselves as part of the social group "our class," they may be motivated to reason in ways that accord with the shared values and goals of that community. At the same time, Mr. Crane also takes Alicia's idea seriously and shows that, although Sam's idea will get a hearing, it will not be allowed to stand if unwarranted – in other words, Mr. Crane disrupts the cycle of epistemic injustice in which dominant narratives are allowed to trump the warranted counternarratives of speakers with non-dominant positionalities. He creates a space where counternarratives are centered and legitimized.

**Conclusion: Implications, Limitations, and Contributions**

When teachers like Mr. Crane facilitate social issues discussions with heterogeneous groups of students, they confront injustice threats: the risk that students will be unresponsive to evidence and to the truth claims of their classmates (motivated reasoning), and that students with non-dominant positionalities will have their contributions dismissed – or even decide not to contribute at all (epistemic injustice). Conscientious teachers in such situations may feel they have no way forward: silencing students is undemocratic; allowing oppressive statements to stand is unjust; avoiding discussions entirely is also undemocratic; and all three options impede learning. Learning to facilitate responsive social issues discussions can help teachers "turn paralysis into pedagogy" (Reisman, Enumah, & Jay, 2020, p. 1). Teacher education should

support teachers in learning to be responsive to students' diverse positionalities, to the content of their ideas about social issues, and to the ways these interact.

I have been suggesting that facilitating social issues discussions places unique demands on teachers. While Mr. Crane's pedagogical moves may be similar to Paulo's teacher who was helping her students understand odd and even numbers – both teachers can use misconceptions as opportunities to deepen students' thinking – Mr. Crane has additional responsibilities. Whereas mathematics errors tend to be regular and predictable (Paulo's teacher could learn to anticipate Paulo's error as a routine one), students' ideas about the social world extend in myriad directions and emerge in unpredictable ways. And while students do not typically engage in motivated reasoning about principles of the natural or physical world, in social issues discussions motivated reasoning is the norm. Unequal power relations mean reasoners with dominant social positions may be super-motivated to protect unwarranted and oppressive views, which can exacerbate injustices against minoritized individuals as knowers (epistemic injustice).

The stakes in social issues discussions are high. In most cases, students will not already have all the information they need (and the teacher may not, either) – yet understanding social issues is often urgent. Misunderstandings of social relations can lead to public support for unjust or unfounded policies that affect people's lives. Unwarranted views and injustice perpetrated in Mr. Crane's classroom may have consequences far beyond the classroom walls. Unless expressibility and responsiveness are consistently nurtured, students may learn that dominant beliefs about the social world are accurate and not worth challenging. Students with non-dominant positionalities may learn that their ideas will not be heard and that speaking up is useless – a disastrous outcome when we consider that all successful movements for social justice in the United States have been initiated, fought, and won by people of color, the poor, women,

queer people, immigrants, people with disabilities, and other marginalized communities (Tilly & Wood, 2012).

I want to acknowledge some complications this paper has not investigated. First, I have not explored teachers' positionalities and how these influence their perceptions, relations with students, or practice. These issues are important, and future research should investigate responsive social issues discussion facilitation in relation to teacher positionality. Second, teachers' ability to design curriculum in response to students' emergent ideas depends on the autonomy they are afforded by their school, their district, and the state. In an age of high-stakes testing and accountability, teacher autonomy has eroded, and many educators in the United States have little choice about the curriculum they teach, especially in schools serving poverty-impacted, ethnically diverse communities (Au, 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Third, this paper has focused on classrooms where students bear one another basic goodwill; I have not explored conditions of outright hostility or explicit bigotry. In the Trump Era, questions of how teachers can contend with intergroup aggression are more urgent than ever (Costello, 2016; Rogers et al., 2017). High-quality research is beginning to emerge on this topic (e.g., Kavanagh, 2018), but much more is needed.

Public commitment to justice, equity, and democracy – never fully realized to begin with – is today in precipitous decline (e.g., Foa & Mounk, 2017). If schooling is to contribute to building a more just future, classroom social issues discussions are indisputably necessary. Yet inequality and polarization among participants continually vex such discussions, thwarting their aims. Rather than trusting to ideal depictions of democracy, this paper takes a clear-eyed look at the non-ideal conditions that make social issues discussions difficult for teachers to navigate. I want to conclude by calling on teacher educators to make visible to teachers the ways that

polarization and inequality – and their expressions in motivated reasoning and epistemic injustice – can thwart social issues discussions, and to support teachers in persisting courageously through the difficulties. Learning to facilitate responsive social issues discussions may offer a way forward. Responsiveness is a form of discernment, a form of wise teaching practice: it is about recognizing what is called for in a complex and particular situation and making a wholehearted effort to answer that call.

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## PAPER #3

Critical Democratic Education in Practice: Experienced Teachers' Adaptive Expertise


### Abstract

While a growing body of democratic education research has expressed a critical turn, research has supplied little information about what educators with social justice commitments actually do as they attempt to enact democratic education in their classrooms. This paper reports results of a qualitative case study depicting three experienced teachers' efforts to enact critical democratic education in practice. Drawing on the emerging literature of critical teaching practice, I examine how teachers exercise what Philip et al. (2018) have called "judgment in improvisation" to advance the needs of a just and equitable democracy during classroom discussions of social issues. Data from classroom observations and interviews with teacher-participants show how these teachers aimed to adapt their practice to students' heterogeneous positionalities, and I describe three positionality-related discernments they attempted to exercise. I then zoom in on the challenges of responding to the partial or problematic arguments of students with dominant positionalities (e.g., white, affluent students). I identify several practices that teachers in the study enacted, and I highlight one, which I term "critical micro-inquiry," as offering particular affordances for critical democratic education in heterogeneous classrooms. Along the way, findings are illustrated by five elaborated vignettes of teaching practice.

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## Critical Democratic Education in Practice: Experienced Teachers' Adaptive Expertise

For decades, critical scholars have been calling for education that exposes and disrupts oppressive social relations and contributes to what Fung and Wright (2003) have called "deepening democracy": facilitating active political involvement, forging coalitions to bring about positive social change, devising and implementing policies that ground a healthy society, and ensuring that all people – especially the most vulnerable – can thrive. In the Trump Era, a growing body of democratic education research has expressed a critical turn. Such work has supplied robust frameworks for conceptualizing critical democratic education (e.g., Jaffee, 2016; Obenchain & Pennington, 2015; Wheeler-Bell, 2014) and has produced empirical findings about values and approaches to inform teaching in critical democratic classrooms (e.g., Beck, 2013; Vickery, 2016).

Little research has been conducted, however, on what educators with social justice commitments actually *do* as they attempt to enact democratic education in their classrooms (for exceptions, see, e.g., Dabach et al., 2018; Parkhouse, 2018; Parkhouse & Massaro, 2019). Still less common is research that details routines in critical democratic educators' day-to-day instruction – the "repertoires" (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) or "patterns of practice" (Calabrese Barton, Tan, & Birmingham, 2020) critical teachers might leverage during social issues discussion and other democratic instructional activities aiming to disrupt unjust social relations. This research gap may contribute to the scarcity of enacted critical democratic pedagogy in classrooms (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Even when teachers are committed to democratic teaching for social justice, their beliefs may have little impact on their behaviors (Evans, 2006; Kavanagh, 2017). Without models of and experience *doing* critical democratic education, teachers with deep critical commitments may struggle to translate them into action (Wolfe,

2007). For this reason, Barton and Avery (2016) have called for "case studies of teachers who demonstrate a commitment to critical or social justice pedagogy" (p. 42).

This paper responds to that call. Presuming that demonstrating a commitment to critical pedagogy entails not just talking about it but enacting it, I report results of a qualitative case study depicting three experienced teachers' efforts to enact critical democratic education in their classrooms. Drawing on the emerging literature of critical teaching practice (e.g., Calabrese Barton, Tan, & Birmingham, 2020; Kavanagh, 2017; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2019) and using the lens of adaptive expertise (Hatano and Inagaki, 1986), I examine how teachers exercise what Philip et al. (2018) have called "judgment in improvisation" to advance the needs of a just and equitable democracy during classroom discussions of social issues and other democratic instructional activities. Using data drawn from classroom observations and interviews with teacher-participants, I find that teachers aimed to adapt their practice to students' heterogeneous positionalities and describe three positionality-related discernments they attempted to exercise. I then zoom in on the challenges of responding when students with dominant positionalities (e.g., white, affluent students) express partial or problematic claims about social relations. I identify several practices which teachers in the study enacted in such cases, and I highlight one, which I term "critical micro-inquiry," as offering particular affordances for the practice of critical democratic education in heterogeneous classrooms. The findings of this study are not meant to be conclusive, but rather to start a conversation: I therefore present them in the spirit of propositions to be tested by future research. Findings are illustrated by five elaborated vignettes of teaching practice.

## Framing Literature

In this section, I bring into conversation two literatures that have not often cross-pollinated: the literatures of democratic education and of teaching as professional practice – highlighting critical work on issues of power, positionality, and social justice in both literatures. I begin by conceptualizing democratic education and characterizing its growing critical turn. I then describe how research on teaching practice, and particularly on "adaptive expertise" (Hatano and Inagaki, 1986), may offer insights for critical democratic education.

### *Critical Democratic Education*

Democratic education prepares citizens[16] for public life – for decision-making in the public sphere with the aim of crafting policies to serve the common good. Parker (2003) has conceptualized democratic education as that which spurs individuals to move from self-centeredness (which the Greeks called "idiocy") into enacted understanding of people's fundamental interdependence. Drawing on the insights of Martin Luther King, Jr., Alexis de Tocqueville, Jane Addams, and others, Parker demonstrated that "we are free *so that* we can create a community life *so that*, in turn, we can be free" (p. 4). He continued: "One cannot maintain the familial nest without maintaining the public, shared space in which the familial nest is, itself, nested" (p. 5). Instead of ignoring public affairs, citizens should learn through democratic education the skills and dispositions of what Parker called "enlightened political engagement." Citizens thus equipped participate not only by voting but also by contacting public officials, deliberating social problems, and participating in social movements in service of

[16] In this paper, I use the term "citizen" not in the sense of formal legal status (e.g. "she is an American citizen"), but rather as a set of practices that establish one's "full and legitimate belonging" in the public sphere (Yuval-Davis, 2006). That said, it is important to acknowledge that formal citizenship status matters enormously to people's lived experience (Dabach, 2015), and belonging need to be supported by policies that legitimate access to resources and increase capacity to influence public decision-making.

democratic ideals. To practice democratic education in schools, scholars have advocated regular scaffolded classroom discussions of social issues, including issues that are actively controversial in the public sphere (e.g., Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2016, 2017b; Parker, 2003, 2010; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

Democratic education scholarship has sometimes been criticized for idealizing the conditions under which students engage in classroom discussions and other educative democratic activities (e.g., Abdullah, Karpowitz, & Rafael, 2016; Boler, 2004; Knowles & Clark, 2018; Wheeler-Bell, 2014). Ideally, democratic education is meant to prepare young people for democratic participation in an egalitarian public sphere, where diverse citizens reason toward agreements that serve the common good. Yet this ideal has been critiqued for – as Mills (2005) put it – "abstract[ing] away from relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression" (p. 168). Democracy in the United States is not now and never was egalitarian; structural racism, settler colonialism, and other interdependent forms of oppression were baked in from the start (Kendi, 2016; Mills, 1997; Tuck & Yang, 2012). When Americans reason together across difference at all – a diminishing phenomenon – hierarchies of power always shape, and usually distort, deliberations (Sanders, 1997). And yet, as Parkhouse and Massaro (2018) have noted, "citizenship discourses in schools are idealized, silent on persistent social inequities, and detached from the realities of our students" (p. 19).

In response, a growing body of democratic education research has expressed a critical turn.[17] Variously labelled "critical democratic education," "critical citizenship education," or

[17] Although critical democratic education has been gaining traction, the field is not new. Recent literature builds on work in prior decades exploring efforts to build students' critical democratic consciousness through classroom discussion and other activities, including research by Andreotti (2006), Apple and Beane (2007), Banks (1998, 2008), Ellsworth (1989), Engle and Ochoa (1988), Howard (2004), Hursh and Ross (2000), Johnson and Morris (2010), Knight Abowitz and Harnish (2006), Rubin (2007), Silva and Langhout (2011), Wade (2001), and Westheimer and Kahne (2004).

"critical civic education," this research has aimed to counter what Urrieta (2004) called "whitestream pedagogy and curriculum" by engaging students in discussions that do not shy away from American democracy's shortcomings, that explore the root causes of social injustice, and that may contribute to building a more just world. Critical democratic education research has both conceptualized key dimensions and enactments of this work (e.g., Crowley & King, 2018; Jaffee, 2016; Knowles & Clark, 2018; Lo, 2019; Obenchain & Pennington, 2015; Ross, 2017; Sabzalian, 2019; Wheeler-Bell, 2014) and supplied empirical accounts highlighting the values and approaches that should inform teaching (e.g., Beck, 2013; Clay & Rubin, 2019; Dabach et al., 2018; Naseem Rodríguez, 2018; Parkhouse & Massaro, 2019; Vickery, 2016). Proponents of critical democratic education have urged teachers to implement social issues discussions and other democratic instructional activities in ways that disrupt unjust power relations, challenge deficit narratives about students, and center critical counternarratives.

Yet facilitating high-quality social issues discussions is notoriously difficult (Nystrand, Gamoran, & Carbonara, 2001; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017), and polarization and inequality – defining traits of the United States today – exacerbate these difficulties. Polarization increases the likelihood that discussion participants will engage in *motivated reasoning*, which occurs when individuals evaluate a view based not on its accuracy but rather on its alignment with their social groups' existing beliefs (Kahan, 2016). Motivated reasoning induces individuals – especially those with social power, and therefore with more to lose – to be unresponsive to others' claims on truth and justice. Meanwhile, inequality increases the likelihood of *epistemic injustice*. Epistemic injustice occurs when people with dominant positionings prejudicially discount the contributions of those with marginalized positionings (Fricker, 2007). It may occur during discussions about any subject but compounds when the issue under discussion is

perceived to implicate people in the room: for example, those who claim to be on the receiving end of injustice may be perceived as biased (Journell, 2017a). Teachers aiming to facilitate socially just discussions of social issues in their classrooms must therefore be highly skilled at responding to students' unequal positionalities and the beliefs that arise out of those positionalities – especially in heterogeneous classrooms where students with widely diverging levels of power and privilege engage in reasoning and learning together.[18] However, research has supplied little support for teachers in responding when motivated reasoning or epistemic injustice arise – as they very often do – during social issues discussions.[19]

***Critical Teaching Practice***

Over the years, much research on teaching has focused on teachers' knowledge – of the subject matter, of learners and learning, and of ways to teach specific content – and on teachers' beliefs. Acknowledging the importance of this work, researchers interested in the practice of teaching have called also for attention to the skills teachers enact as they mobilize their knowledge and beliefs in day-to-day classroom practice (e.g., Ball & Cohen, 1999; Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Hiebert & Morris, 2012). They have suggested frameworks for conceptualizing "high-leverage practices" or "core practices" in teaching – practices which comprise teachers' routine activities for supporting student learning – activities that allow teachers to address recurring problems of practice in ways that are manageable and reusable across changing contexts (e.g.., Ball & Forzani, 2009; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013).

[18] After Cohen and Lotan (2014), I call classrooms in which students have unequal social positions "heterogeneous classrooms" – where "heterogeneity" conveys a mix of marginalization and privilege. Compare the concept label "heterogeneity" to the concept label "diversity," which is often oversimplified to connote uniform conditions of marginalization.

[19] Democratic educators' most-prescribed remedy may not suffice. To foster a safe climate for classroom discussion, teachers are often encouraged to establish discussion norms like "listen respectfully," "speak from your own experience," "challenge ideas not people," "assume good intentions," and so on (e.g., Adams, Bell, and Griffin, 1997). Yet critical scholars have depicted how such norms can function paradoxically to serve the interests of elites (e.g., Boler, 2004; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014).

Grossman, Hammerness, and McDonald (2009) have proposed a set of shared attributes of such practices:

- Practices that occur with high frequency in teaching;
- Practices that novices can enact in classrooms across different curricula or instructional approaches;
- Practices that novices can actually begin to master
- Practices that allow novices to learn more about students and about teaching
- Practices that preserve the integrity and complexity of teaching; and
- Practices that are research-based and have the potential to improve student achievement. (p. 277)

Practices often identified as "high-leverage" include posing problems, providing explanations, responding to student thinking, and leading class discussions (Ball et al., 2009; Grossman & McDonald, 2008). That said, Kavanagh (2017) has argued that reaching consensus on the particular practices that count as "core" or "high-leverage" is less important than continuing scholarly and professional dialogue about how to conceptualize them in ways that "support practitioner learning of high-quality instruction" (p. 166).

One current debate concerns the extent to which an emphasis on practice may fuction to reproduce oppressive policies and views about teaching. Philip et al. (2018) have argued that framing practices as "core" "make[s] justice peripheral." They criticize core practice work that contrasts practice with improvisation and represents teaching practice as a set of technical prescriptions (e.g., Ball & Forzani, 2009; Lemov, 2010). Such prescriptions suggest practices can and should be standardized across contexts, Philip and colleagues continue. Under a prescriptive approach to teaching practice, if teaching is adapted for the needs of minoritized students at all, it

is done so in ways that situate them as deficient and deviant from a presumed white middle class norm. These authors call upon scholars of teaching practice to "center justice" (p. 10) and advocate exercising "judgment in improvisation" to transform practice, disrupt deficit views of students, and support action for social justice.

Increasingly, research into teaching practice reflects a critical turn. For example, Kavanagh (2017) has advocated "teacher education that is anchored in practice and aimed at issues of identity, power, privilege, and equity" and called for "the specification of justice-oriented teaching practices" (p. 161; see also Calabrese Barton, Tan, & Birmingham, 2020; Dutro & Cartun, 2016; Kavanagh, 2018; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2019). And at least one scholar who previously called for "deliberate and unabashed prescriptiveness" (Ball & Forzani, 2009) may be changing her view. In her presidential address to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Ball (2018) highlighted "discretionary spaces" that arise in teachers' minute-to-minute practice – spaces in which teachers can either reproduce racist and sexist "normalized practices of schooling" or disrupt them. She called on education researchers to support teachers in coming to "see, hear, name, and critique normalized practice" and to develop a "repertoire of different kinds of practices" that can interrupt racist relations between students and teachers in classrooms.

In this paper, I take the view that a focus on practice is necessary if teachers are to enact authentically critical democratic education in their classrooms – that is, to contribute to what Philip et al. (2018) recognized as "education's democratic promise" (p. 4) for addressing structural injustices. However, as these authors and others have observed, critical democratic practice requires teachers not simply to enact prescribed, technical routines, but to improvise and adapt in response to the situated needs of their students, school, and community.

If teaching practice is to support the needs of diverse learners and genuinely contribute to "deepening democracy" (Fung & Wright, 2003), it may require mobilizing what Hatano and Inagaki (1986) called "adaptive expertise." In contrast to "routine expertise," which involves applying a core set of skills and routines with improved fluency, adaptive expertise enables practitioners to "use situation-specific and flexible teaching methods to support diversity in student learning" (Männikkö & Husu, 2019, p. 126; see also Anthony, Hunter, & Hunter, 2015; Fairbanks et al., 2019). Adaptive teachers are able to strategically modify or diverge from their plans in order to better support their students. In the "discretionary spaces" Ball (2018) described, adaptive educators recognize how normalized schooling practices reproduce oppressive social relations, and they seek "something different to do." In other words, they exercise that "judgment in improvisation" that Philip et al. (2018) suggested is so necessary for teaching to contribute to realizing education's democratic promise.

***What is Critical Democratic Teaching Practice?***

Although research into democratic education and research into teachers' professional practice may both be undergoing a needed critical turn, these literatures have yet to inform one another. The research on critical democratic education has explored the positionalities and needs of students as well as teachers' dispositions and values but has not examined how teachers *enact* those dispositions and values *in relation* to students' positionalities. One exception is Parkhouse and Massaro's (2018) investigation of two white U.S. History teachers' approaches to facilitating classroom discussions about social justice issues – one in a racially homogenous classroom of mostly Black students, and one in a racially heterogeneous classroom. The authors found that these teachers adjusted their practice to account for students' racial positionalities as they "craft[ed] a contextually-appropriate approach to curricular incorporation of social issues" (p.

28). Parkhouse and Massaro's findings point to possible "judgments in improvisation" (Philip et al., 2018) which teachers can exercise to enact critical democratic education in classrooms.

If teachers with critical democratic commitments are to fulfill their aims, they need models of and experience in *doing* critical democratic education. As Wolfe (2007) has explained:

> Teachers who are presented with critical concepts… are often engaged in fantasy, and many never consolidate this fantasy with the classroom-based skills to support it.… [They believe] they will create antiracist, anticlassist, antisexist environments, with almost no actual skills to do so…. These teachers often believe it is the theory that is wrong when their attempts at critical pedagogy fail to make the expected differences in the lives of students…. They then abandon any attempts at critical pedagogy and return to… the very traditional methods that critical pedagogy has so decried. (p. 32)

In order for teachers to enact and sustain their commitments to critical democratic education, we need to build knowledge about the practices of attending to power and positionality and of disrupting oppression in a critical democratic classroom. If instructional routines are available that could support teachers in pursuing these aims without having to reinvent the wheel, we need to understand what those routines might be. However, framing critical democratic teaching practice in terms of routines risks reducing this complex practice, fraught with discretionary spaces, to technical prescriptions that reproduce an unjust status quo. We also need, therefore, to understand how teachers can exercise adaptive expertise in critical democratic teaching practice – how they can improvise to disrupt normalized and oppressive social relations in their classrooms and support their students in developing "enlightened political engagement" (Parker, 2003). To build knowledge about critical democratic education in practice, I ask the following questions:

1. When experienced critical democratic teachers exercise adaptive expertise, what are they adapting *to*?
2. What practices do these teachers adapt as they strive to enact critical democratic aims?

I turn now to describe how I collected data to respond to these questions.

## Methods

Data for this paper come from a qualitative case study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) of experienced teachers' social issues discussion facilitation in heterogeneous classrooms. I selected the case study design in response to a need for what Shulman (1986) called "case knowledge" about critical democratic teaching practice – knowledge that can "exemplify, illustrate, and bring alive" theoretical propositions for stakeholders to test, refine, and share.

### *Recruitment and Selection*

A screening survey was sent to several teacher networks. It sought secondary social studies teachers who reported regularly facilitating social-justice-oriented social issues discussions in their classrooms over a period of multiple years, because I hoped to tap into the practical wisdom of teachers who are comfortable facilitating such discussions. I also hoped that selecting experienced educators with strong social justice commitments would illuminate the stickiest challenges teachers face, by minimizing the impacts of inexperience or unconscious bias (though, as the teachers in this study would hurry to point out, not eliminating them).

A range of classroom contexts and student populations might have shed light on teachers' critical democratic teaching practice. For this study, I sought teachers who reported teaching in classrooms where white and middle-class or affluent students predominate, because I conjectured that the facilitation challenges posed by students' heterogeneous and unequal social positionings would be thrown into relief. Research has found that teachers increasingly avoid classroom

discussions as one social group predominates (Campbell, 2005), suggesting that predominance poses particular facilitation challenges for teachers. Especially in schools where a dominant group predominates – as in the mostly white, affluent schools where data for this study were collected – students in the minority stick out, and their conspicuousness can exacerbate threats to their learning, wellbeing, or both. Students of color may struggle at times with feeling invisible (their racial identity is not seen, appreciated, or understood) and at other times with feeling hyper-visible or "spotlighted" (their racial identity is conspicuous and they may be asked to speak for their racial group) (Carter Andrews, 2012).

In this paper, I share findings from focal units in three participants' classrooms. All three teachers – Ms. Wolf, Mr. Jay, and Mr. Crane[20] – are white teachers engaged in good faith efforts at developing their personal and professional self-understanding and their racial critical consciousness. Their efforts to advocate for social justice are visible to the community. For example, Ms. Wolf is part of a task force advocating for an Ethnic Studies requirement in her district and she advises an anti-racist student club at the school; Mr. Jay regularly surfaces to students his struggles to select anti-oppressive curriculum while preserving an open classroom climate; and Mr. Crane is an organizer of a regional social justice conference for teachers and an environmental justice conference for students. All are quick to point out their own growth areas and limitations and strive to remain open and accountable to their communities – especially to those with non-dominant social positionings.

***Participants and Contexts***

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of study participants and their school and classroom contexts. All three schools are located in and around an American tech hub city I am

[20] All names are pseudonyms.

calling "Green City." In this region, liberal political ideology predominates. That said, although the area prides itself on its social consciousness, the reality is not as progressive as it may seem. Neighborhoods and schools remain racially and socioeconomically segregated, inequality is high and rising, and business-friendly policies are often passed with ease while policies to support the most vulnerable members of the community, including a large homeless population, are controversial and often struck down.

**Table 1.** Teacher, School, Class, and Student Characteristics

| **Participant** (years teaching) | **School** | **Class** (#/students) | **Student demographics** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **Ethnicity** | **Family income** | **Non-native English speakers** |
| Ms. Wolf (7) | Mountainside High<br><br>suburban public high school of approximately 1800 students | 12th grade AP Government (29) | 15 white students (52%)<br><br>14 students of color (48%)[21] | 13% eligible for Free & Reduced Meals[22] | 5% English language learners |
| Mr. Jay (11) | Cedargrove Prep<br><br>urban independent middle and upper school of approximately 600 students | 11th grade US History through Current Events (18) | 14 white students (78%)<br><br>4 students of color (22%) [23] | 15% receive financial aid[24] | none |
| Mr. Crane (15) | Bayview High<br><br>urban public high school of approximately 1500 students | 10th-11th grade IB History of the Americas (23) | 17 white students (74%)<br><br>6 students of color (26%) | 25.5% eligible for Free & Reduced Meals[25] | 10% English language learners |

[21] Source: Class-level data obtained through researcher observation. It is not clear that student self-identification would match my visual best guess. I did not attempt to specify the ethnicities of students of color.
[22] Source: School-level data retrieved from state department of education website.
[23] Source: Class-level data supplied by teacher
[24] Source: School-level data supplied by teacher
[25] Source: School-level data retrieved from state department of education website

**Ms. Wolf's AP Government Class at Mountainside High School.** Mountainside is a large suburb of the nearby city of Green City, and like Green City it is a tech hub. Mountainside is an affluent, ethnically diverse community where approximately 40% of residents were born outside of the United States and about 50% identify as people of color. Mountainside School District includes four comprehensive public high schools including Mountainside High, where Ms. Wolf teaches. At the time of this research, Mountainside High served a disproportionately high number of students of color (about 70%) compared to its community. However, in keeping with research that shows correspondence between ability group tracking and racial segregation (e.g., Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2013), Ms. Wolf's 12th grade Advanced Placement (AP) Government class was whiter than the overall school population (about 50% white). Most students of color in the class were of East Asian or South Asian descent, and several students were immigrant non-native English speakers. During data collection, Ms. Wolf was teaching her seventh year. The focal unit for this study explored the influence of special interest groups on U.S. government policy. As a guiding case, the unit centered and historicized the social issue of police violence against communities of color.

**Mr. Jay's US History through Current Events Class at Cedargrove Prep.** Cedargrove Prep is located in a quiet, affluent neighborhood of Green City, adjacent to a forest, a park, and a community pea patch. Like many independent schools, Cedargrove serves a predominantly wealthy, white student population but aims to recruit and support a diverse student body. Mr. Jay's class, with about 20% students of color, mirrored the racial demographics of the school's overall student population. Although some students were bilingual or multilingual, all spoke English as a first language. At the time of this research, Mr. Jay was in his eleventh year in the classroom. Mr. Jay's 11th grade US History through Current Events was

a course he had developed two years prior, one of several social studies electives available to juniors. The focal unit for this study revolved around the essential guiding question "Is the United States experiencing in a new Gilded Age?"

**Mr. Crane's IB History of the Americas Class at Bayview High School.** Bayview High is one of ten comprehensive public high schools in Green City and is located on the predominantly white side of town. The school is more ethnically diverse than the surrounding community, however, serving a student population made up of nearly 50% students of color. About 10% of students in the school are non-native English speakers. Like Ms. Wolf's AP Government class, Mr. Crane's International Baccalaureate (IB) History of the Americas course exhibited within-school segregation, with only about 20% students of color. At least three students spoke a language other than English at home. At the time of this research, Mr. Crane was in his fifteenth year in the classroom. In Mr. Crane's class, the focal unit focused on the Black and Chicano civil rights movements in the United States in the 1960s and 70s.

### *Data Sources and Analysis*

Between March and June of 2018, I observed the focal class in each teacher's classrooms for two to four days per week for about three weeks during one unit in which the curriculum centered the perspectives of marginalized social groups and classroom discussion featured as a main method of instruction. I conducted formal observations of each session during which the teacher planned for students to engage in dialogue with one another about social issues (average eight days of instruction per participant). I video-recorded these lessons and took detailed field notes focusing on student-to-student talk that occurred while the teacher was tuning in (i.e., during large group discussions or in small groups with the teacher listening or participating).

Immediately after each observation, the teacher and I selected a "critical incident" (Tripp, 2011) – if one occurred – that demonstrated what the teacher viewed as a perplexing or perennial challenge of facilitating justice-oriented social issues discussions with heterogeneous groups of students. The teacher then reflected on the incident in an audio-recorded 30-45 minute semi-structured follow-up interview (usually the same day). I used my field notes and the video-recordings of the critical incident to stimulate the teacher's recall and help them make their tacit practical knowledge explicit (Barton, 2015). In each interview, I asked about what made the incident perplexing or perennial, what the teacher took to be going on during the incident, his/her instructional response, and reflections on the response's strengths and limitations. I collected data on four to six critical incidents per participant.

Data analysis began simultaneously with data collection. After each data gathering episode, I audio-recorded analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) highlighting what caught my attention, documenting wonderings, and identifying emerging patterns, connections, and insights. Then, using MaxQDA, I conducted line-by-line open coding, identifying common themes and iteratively refining the code system for comprehensiveness and parsimony. During the next, focused coding phase, I iteratively revised the coding scheme, developing both inductive codes derived from the data and deductive codes drawn from relevant literatures. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) have compared this method of "retroductive coding" to "a carpenter alternatively changing the shape of a door and then the shape of a door frame to obtain a better fit" (p. 173). Once codes I settled on a coding system that seemed to fit the data and coding had reached saturation, I composed memos to connect, elaborate on, and make claims about frequently appearing or intriguing codes and their corresponding data. These memos formed the basis of the findings section to which I now turn.

## Findings

Findings in this paper are organized by its two research questions:

1. When experienced critical democratic teachers exercise adaptive expertise, what are they adapting *to*?
2. What practices do these teachers adapt as they strive to enact critical democratic aims?

My claims along the way are illustrated by five vignettes – one from Mr. Jay's classroom and two each from Ms. Wolf's and Mr. Crane's classrooms – each depicting a critical incident that unfolded during a discussion of a social issue. I refer to several other critical incidents in passing. The first three vignettes illustrate how teachers in the study exercised discernment regarding *students' positionalities*. The fourth illustrates findings about how teachers adapted practice to their students' positionalities and needs.

### *Aims Mediating Critical Democratic Educators' Adaptive Expertise*

In this section, I outline findings about the mediating factors that teachers in this study reported adapting their practice *to*. Although teachers also adapted to other factors, such as time constraints and AP and IB curriculum mandates, I focus on mediating factors pertaining to students' positionalities, which emerged as central to the practice of critical democratic education in these teachers' heterogeneous classrooms. I frame findings about the factors mediating teachers' adaptive practice in terms of what I term "discernments." When teachers face a decision point (what Ball [2018] called a "discretionary space") in their minute-to-minute instructional practice, what I am calling "discernments" refer to the factors they must weigh and the values they must balance (or sometimes choose among). Findings are framed in terms of three discernments about student positionality:

- How can teachers elevate non-dominant students' claims without spotlighting?

- How can teachers challenge dominant students' claims without shaming?
- Which students are which, and when?

Drawing on vignettes of teachers' practice, I describe findings pertaining to each discernment. I take the above three discernments in reverse order, because teachers need to make sense of students' positionalities in a given context prior to exercising discernment about how to adapt their practice to particular students' needs.

**Understanding Students' Positionalities.** As teachers in this study attempted to adapt their practice to meet the needs of heterogeneously positioned students, a primary discernment involved simply making sense of students' positionalities. As I will shortly explain, these teachers often aimed to adapt instruction for marginalized students in ways that differed from how they adapted instruction for privileged students – and yet discerning which students needed which adaptations in which contexts was far from straightforward. In the heterogeneous classrooms featured in this paper, it could be difficult to tell which students were experiencing marginalization, privilege, or both in a given moment. The following vignette from Ms. Wolf's AP Government class illustrates the point.

*During the class's investigation of police violence against communities of color, Ms. Wolf reported hearing student claims she characterized as "pull yourself up by your bootstraps." In response, she decided to facilitate a Socratic seminar on a text that might, as she put it, "reinforce that there are systemic things at issue." She selected a reading challenging the myth of meritocracy,[26] provided time for students to read it in class, then opened the discussion by asking for their impressions. Arjuna, a student of South Asian heritage, disagreed with the*

[26] "Oprah, Obama, and Cosby Say Black Should Just Work Harder, Isn't that Right? The Myth of Meritocracy," by Paula Ionede, is an article in a reader entitled *Getting Real about Race: Hoodies, Mascots, Model Minorities, and Other Conversations*, edited by Stephanie M. McClure and Cherise A. Harris (2014).

*article's central claim that meritocracy is a racist myth. "Maybe there is some truth" to the idea that impoverished Americans of color need to work harder, he began, then continued:*

> *For most Fortune 500 companies, most of their hiring is white but a large part is Asian. People who immigrate here are probably just as impoverished as minorities in this country when they come here, but most Fortune 500 companies hire these types of people, so I don't see how that difference could be so impactful. If they both come from the same situation, how are Asians getting hired a lot more than other minorities?*

*Ms. Wolf paused, then responded by questioning and complicating Arjuna's account. "How many people who are immigrants do you know?" she asked him.*

> *We often talk about immigrants as one group, but in reality there are lots of different groups. You have people coming over with just the clothes on their back and other who can afford to buy expensive cars at eighteen. Think about the immigrants at our school.*

*Now Ms. Wolf redirected the class's attention to the text. She read out loud two paragraphs challenging the idea that historically oppressed communities can change their conditions through hard work. Then she asked students to turn and talk with a neighbor: "What is the author trying to argue?" After a few minutes she reconvened the class and asked for a volunteer to summarize the author's argument. Clayton, an Asian immigrant student, began summarizing the author's claims. The class did not explicitly return to Arjuna's argument (video-recorded observation and field notes, April 5, 2018).*

In this critical incident, Arjuna made the unwarranted claim that Asian immigrants who work for profitable corporations are "probably… impoverished" but manage nonetheless to be hired into high-wage jobs. He wrongly suggested that Americans of color who are impacted by poverty "come from the same situation" as affluent, well-educated Asian immigrants and can

have the same experience of being hired into high-wage jobs. Reflecting on this incident afterward, Ms. Wolf described her difficulty discerning how to position students like Arjuna in such moments. On one hand, she recognized that he "has very dark skin… and I'm sure he experiences microaggressions and a certain level of discrimination." On the other hand, she noted that he "has a lot of privilege" associated with his social class (interview, April 5, 2018). She wondered, should Arjuna and other affluent students of color be treated as having dominant positionalities, or non-dominant ones, or both, and under what circumstances?

About half of Ms. Wolf's students were of East Asian or South Asian descent, many of them immigrants or the children of immigrants who moved to the United States to work in the tech sector or other high-paying jobs. Ms. Wolf remarked that these students often experience a complex mixture of privilege and marginalization and struggled to see their own experience reflected in anti-racist curriculum. "We have a lot of Asian students with a lot of privilege," she told me. "They don't really understand where they fit into the conversation about race in our country." In her classroom's focal unit, for example, she observed: "They don't understand where they fit into the conversation about police brutality. It's so black and white" (interview, April 20, 2018). On one hand, Ms. Wolf found her students of Asian descent to be responsive to conversations about microaggressions – "like a B being an 'Asian fail'" – but on the other hand they seemed not to identify with curriculum that explored historicized injustices against Asian people in the United States. Ms. Wolf explained:

> The Asian community here, especially because so many of them are more recent immigrants, don't have a body of collective memory from grandparents. There's not that more common lived experience that African Americans and Latinos have. Our Chinese students… don't remember Chinese Exclusion…. I had a Japanese-American student say,

> "my grandparents were in the internment camps and they got over it, why can't Black people get over slavery?" (interview, March 20, 2018)

In trying to make sense of her students' positionalities, one difficulty for Ms. Wolf related to how students' positionalities change and shift relative to the content of the curriculum and to their peers. When discussing wealth inequality, a student like Arjuna might occupy a dominant positionality; when discussing anti-immigrant sentiment, he might occupy a marginalized positionality – or rather, both would be true in both cases but Ms. Wolf would need to decide which to prioritize in deciding how to respond to his contributions. In addition, students might be positioned by their peers (or the teacher) in ways they would not position themselves, and in many cases students' positionalities might be invisible. Yet teachers needed to place their students, at least temporarily, in order to discern how to respond to their comments in class.

**Teaching Marginalized Students: Elevating without Spotlighting.** The experienced critical educators in this study adapted instruction to students' heterogeneous positionalities. Given the predominance of affluence, whiteness, and other forms of privilege in their classrooms, these teachers needed to exercise careful discernment about how to meet the needs of students from historically marginalized social groups. On one hand, these students' positionalities often gave them insights into the realities of social relations which their more privileged peers did not possess.[27] On the other hand, the teachers in the study were mindful of not making their minoritized students "hypervisible" (Carter Andrews, 2012) or asking them to

[27] People with non-dominant social positionings do not intrinsically possess a more developed critical consciousness about social relations (Dotson, 2011). That said, in this paper I assume that non-dominant positionalities tend to expose individuals to relevant experiences that can help to shed light on unequal social relations. Feminist epistemologists have called this increased capacity for perspective on the social world "epistemic privilege" (e.g., Narayan, 1988; Medina, 2013).

speak for their social group(s). The next vignette, from Mr. Crane's IB History of the Americas class, illustrates.

*The whole class was discussing about the "English-only" movement in schools in the 1980s and 90s when Mr. Crane posed the question: "Why did some people believe that students should not be learning Spanish in school?" Houston, a white student, conjectured: "maybe people with harsher views on it would want to be less accommodating." Mr. Crane responded: "'This is America, we speak English here,' that was definitely part of the discussion." Now Alicia, a Cambodian-American student, shared her personal experience, followed by Halima, a Somali-American student.*

*Alicia:* *I've heard that comment when I openly speak Khmer with my mom. "This is America, you should speak English here," even though we both have our citizenship here. It's about keeping up with American culture, as opposed to your own culture.*

*Mr. Crane:* *There's schools today where kids are told… "don't speak your home language," whether it's Spanish or Chinese or Vietnamese…. Have you felt that pressure in school? You don't have to answer that if you don't want, but –*

*Alicia:* *My mom tells me to speak Khmer at home. Growing up she was like "You're going to learn English at school anyways so I'm teaching you Khmer." Nobody told me personally, at least not at school. Outside of school, yes.*

*Halima:* *I've definitely been told to speak English in school, when sitting next to someone who spoke Somali. In the moment it felt like I have to say sorry for speaking my own language.*

*Mr. Crane:* *In school?*

*Halima:* *Yeah, just like last year.*

*Mr. Crane:* *Do you have any thoughts on why that reaction occurs today?*

*Halima:* *When people hear you speaking a language that they don't know what you're saying, they think those people are saying mean things …. If you don't know the language, you're probably going to think the worst of what they're saying.*

*In this incident Mr. Crane's response to Alicia's and Halima's testimonies was to ask follow-up questions that framed their knowledge as valuable – affirming the content of their claims and eliciting elaboration. Halima had rarely spoken up in class until this session (field notes and interview, June 8, 2018).*

In this vignette, Mr. Crane aimed to exercise discernment about how to elevate Alicia and Halima's knowledge and affirm their testimonies without putting them on the spot, especially given that few others in the room were positioned to speak from experience about the topic. This push-and-pull between elevating and non-spotlighting was evident when Mr. Crane asked, "Have you felt that pressure [to speak English only] in school?" and then followed with: "You don't have to answer that if you don't want to." Reflecting on the exchange afterward, and especially on Halima's rare but important participation, Mr. Crane reflected:

> I remember feeling in that moment, like, "how far should I push?" I've been waiting for [Halima] to open up like this for all year, and… I don't want her to feel exposed and

> uncomfortable, but I felt like we had a pretty good atmosphere in the room at that moment. That's why I asked her… those follow-up questions, and she seemed willing and maybe even eager to share her experience. I think that's really important that she initiated that. You know the classic example of a teacher calling on the black kid in class to talk about African-American history…. I've always intentionally avoided that scenario. (interview, June 8, 2018)

Mr. Crane was wary of putting Halima on the spot – but in this case, by asking her for her thoughts on why teachers might tell young people to speak English at school, he positioned her as a bearer of relevant expertise.

Centering the knowledge of students with non-dominant positionalities was important to all of the teachers in the study, partly out of recognition for how these students' experiences and perspectives are often sidelined in school. These teachers also appreciated the epistemic assets – the knowledge resources and dispositions – such students often brought to the class community. "There's plenty of students in this school who… understand what it's like to work in pretty terrible conditions," Mr. Crane reflected about Bayside High, "whether that's on a farm or a factory or a fast food restaurant…. I think maybe they have more ability to empathize, just having more contact with poverty and working-class realities" (interview, June 6, 2018).

**Teaching Privileged Students: Challenging without Shaming.** Teachers in this study also needed to exercise discernment about how to challenge dominant claims about the social world without shaming students who expressed them. On one hand, many students' privileged positionalities in these heterogeneous classrooms often led them to make claims that were unwarranted, oppressive, or both. On the other hand, teachers were mindful of not adopting a disciplining or shaming stance toward those students. Instead, they aimed to adapt their teaching

practice in ways that would support students who made problematic claims in remaining engaged and open to building more complicated and even anti-oppressive, stances. The following vignette from Mr. Jay's US History through Current Events class will illustrate.

*Students were engaging in a weekly small-group discussion of current events – including, on this occasion, the 2018 midterm elections – and Mr. Jay circulated the room listening in. He arrived at a group that included two white girls, Hayley and Addie, both of whom were, Mr. Jay reported, "devastated and disillusioned" when Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 presidential election. The third member of the group was Lucas, a white boy whom Mr. Jay described as having "a sort of charming oafish quality to him." Mr. Jay observed that Lucas "can kind of bumble around things." As Mr. Jay passed, Lucas asked a question about the next presidential election.*

| | |
|---|---|
| *Lucas:* | *Mr. Jay, could Obama run for president again?* |
| *Mr. Jay:* | *No, because we have a two-term limit for U.S. President and he's served the two terms already. But Michelle could run! [Begins turning away].* |
| *Lucas [to his group]:* | *Dude, what if Michelle won and then they were like, "actually, Obama's president again!"* |
| *Hayley:* | *Wait, are you saying that Michelle wouldn't be a good president?* |
| *Addie:* | *You know that women are allowed to be president, right?* |

*When Lucas suggested here that Michelle Obama's election as President of the United States might make Barack Obama the de facto president, Hayley and Addie were visibly taken aback. Mr. Jay reported afterwards feeling unsure if Lucas had been joking or expressing a confused view reflecting what Mr. Jay called "unconscious sexism," but Hayley and Addie's reaction*

*suggested they read him as serious. As they began taking Lucas to task, Mr. Jay raised his eyebrows at Addie, then opted to leave them to it (field notes and interview, May 9, 2018).*

After this incident, Mr. Jay explained the factors mediating his instructional practice. On one hand, he did not want to shame Lucas so he left the intervention to classmates: "I was intentionally trying not to insert myself into the conversation because it just felt like that kid is like embarrassed a lot and I think he knows his shortcomings and, like, he's not that strong at school." On the other hand, Mr. Jay worried about communicating that Lucas's sexist comment did not matter or was not the teacher's (or men's) responsibility to respond to. "I would hope it didn't seem like I was saying only a girl could call out a sexist comment in that way," Mr. Jay reflected. "I gave him a look, [and] I hope the girls knew I had their back in calling him out" (interview, May 9, 2018).

A primary aim for teachers in the study was avoiding shaming their students or adopting a disciplinary stance in response to remarks that reflected well-intentioned, if incomplete, understandings of social relations. Ms. Wolf reflected on why it is important to protect privileged students' sense of competence and basic goodness. "I've seen conservative kids shut down and they're the people that need to engage this conversation," she told me.

> So I bend over backwards a little bit to make sure that they at least have a positive experience, or at least have a not-negative experience – *uncomfortable* for sure, but not negative…. So the next time they hear… "Black lives matter" they'll be like "Oh, I have thought about this before critically," and be able to engage. (interview, March 20, 2018)

Ms. Wolf emphasized the importance of "keep[ing] kids who don't want to engage still engaged," particularly given that they might not be exposed to social justice perspectives elsewhere. Mr. Jay expressed a similar view about the importance of not alienating students who

might struggle with critical content: "I think about… especially conservative white boys honestly being so nervous about saying the wrong thing that they just kind of shut down and don't engage in important conversations" (interview, May 9, 2018).

Even as teachers in the study aimed to enact practices that did not shame or alienate privileged students, they also prioritized challenging dominant narratives about the social world, aiming to expose students to critical counternarratives in ways that would genuinely resonate. They sometimes struggled with their critical curriculum often either falling flat or simply not being taken up or understood by their predominantly privileged students. The next vignette, from Ms. Wolf's AP Government class, illustrates.

*Students had been asked to adopt the perspective of special interest groups offering "pitches" to seek government funding for an imagined organization aiming to mitigate the effects of poverty and police violence on communities of color. A white student, Alyssa, pitched an organization she called "Youth Ladder," designed to connect poverty-impacted youth of color with job training. In her presentation, Alyssa explained to classmates:*

> *Instead of giving resources for kids to maintain where they are in life, we want them to have a place to get out of where they are and improve their futures…. [Youth Ladder will] provide guidance in what they should do in their lives so they don't go down the wrong path. (field notes, March 29, 2018)*

*Alyssa's presentation, while well intentioned, expressed a deficit view of youth and communities of color. Due to time constraints, Ms. Wolf did not offer comment on students' presentations that day. In the interview that followed, Ms. Wolf shared that she had conferenced with Alyssa before this class session about her organization and its pitch.*

> *I specifically said "listen, I love the idea of it, and also I'm concerned – when you use the metaphor of a ladder, it seems like you want them to escape from their community. How can you encourage them to build and enhance and not leave their community but to build a better community environment?" And she was like "oh yeah, that's not what I meant," and then… she didn't change it. (interview, April 2, 2018)*

As this incident illustrates, even when teachers worked to challenge students' dominant ways of thinking, their efforts were not always successful. Here Alyssa either missed Ms. Wolf's point or was unable to act on it. If teachers were uncomfortable with adopting a shaming or disciplinary stance toward partial or problematic student thinking like Alyssa's or Lucas's, alternative practices could be hard to identify.

***Adaptive Practices of Critical Democratic Educators***

I now zoom in on practices teachers use as they discern how to challenge dominant views without shaming students. I briefly identify three practices that the experienced critical democratic educators in this study enacted as they adapted to students' positionalities during social issues discussions in their classrooms – particularly when contending with student claims that were unwarranted, partial, or oppressive. These practices are *pushing back*, *letting peers handle it*, and *looping back later*, and as I describe them, I refer to the earlier vignettes. I offer one more vignette from Mr. Crane's classroom, before elaborating a fourth practice teachers in the study enacted – a practice I am terming *critical micro-inquiry*. I "decompose" this practice (Grossman et al., 2009) into three constituent parts: clarifying student thinking, adding critical counterevidence, and asking questions to push student thinking. Finally, I make an argument about the affordances of critical micro-inquiry for responding to the discernments teachers in the study were trying to enact.

**Pushing Back.** When teachers in the study pushed back on partial or problematic student ideas, they directly challenged those ideas, going so far as to tell students they were wrong. Ms. Wolf, Mr. Jay, and Mr. Crane each identified times and places when they deemed it appropriate to directly challenge students' claims in this way, although they preferred other responses and I rarely saw them enacting pushback in practice. Mr. Crane described challenging student claims only when they were "offensive or… way off base" and trying to adopt an affirming stance whenever possible (interview, June 8, 2018). Similarly, Mr. Jay observed: "the worst thing a student can do in my class is really mistreat another student, like be rude or exclusionary or any kind of -ism," in which cases he explained that he pushes back by "really call[ing] those out" (interview, May 9, 2018). Ms. Wolf reported using what she called "gentle pushback" when Alyssa pitched a community organization that assumed a deficit view of youth of color and their communities – noting, however, that this strategy did not seem to influence the pitch Alyssa presented. Unless their students had demonstrated overt hostility, teachers were ambivalent about this practice. This stood to reason given their commitments to avoid shaming. When teachers pushed back on the student's idea by pointing out its problematic nature, this approach had the benefit of demonstrating that unwarranted or harmful ideas would not go unanswered, but also risked shaming the student or even inadvertently inducing students to fortify unwarranted positions.

**Letting Other Students Respond.** When teachers in the study let their students respond, they refrained from weighing in on a student's partial or problematic claim in hopes that the students' classmates would take this on. Sam suggested to classmates that the election of Michelle Obama would effectively restore Barack Obama to the U.S. Presidency, and Mr. Jay opted to let Sam's peers respond rather than get involved himself, despite feeling some

frustration at hearing a student make this claim. He explained: "This was one of those cases where I was like, 'the kids, they've got it and I don't need to step in,' but then I wanted to be like 'Come on, what? We just did a women's rights unit!" When I asked Mr. Jay why he left the response to Sam's groupmates, he explained that they seemed to have it under control. "Hayley and Addie basically corrected him, so I felt like I didn't have to…. I didn't want to steal their thunder. Often they can phrase it better than I can" (interview, May 9, 2018).

One day while her students were discussing the Black Lives Matter movement in small groups, Ms. Wolf overheard a white student, Caitlyn, making the claim that "all lives matter," and waited to see if the students' neighbors would respond. "Oftentimes when stuff like that comes up I wait to see if that's a conversation that will be had among students," she told me. "The student next to her… is more kind of openminded. I was waiting to see if that would be something he would bring up, but he didn't" (interview, March 20, 2018). Ms. Wolf therefore decided to loop back to the issue when the full class reconvened a few minutes later. When teachers held back in this way and let the student's peers respond, they empowered their students to engage in authentic public discourse, but also ran the risk that the student's peers might not respond or might not do so skillfully.

**Looping Back.** Ms. Wolf's Socratic seminar about the myth of meritocracy was an example of looping back at a later time. She reported hearing student claims about communities of color which she characterized as "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" and introduced a text to challenge her students' meritocratic thinking (interview, April 5, 2018). In this case, a few days had passed before she could prepare the Socratic seminar and fit it into her unit plan. On the other hand, when a student named Caitlyn argued that "all lives matter" during a small-group discussion about the Black Lives Matter movement, Ms. Wolf opted not to intervene in hopes

that Caitlin's neighbors would respond. However, her hope was not borne out, and Ms. Wolf had the flexibility in class that day to loop back to the subject later in the period. She called this "mak[ing] an opportunity" without naming any particular student. When the group reconvened, Ms. Wolf named that some people have embraced the "all lives matter" argument and asked for volunteers to summarize the claim and then respond. Only a few minutes remained, however, and the discussion did not get to why the "all lives matter" response to Black Lives Matter is problematic. Similarly, on one occasion Mr. Crane made a plan to loop back to school segregation in students' own city and state – "a mental note to come back to this later" – but ultimately was not able to find time in the curriculum to do so. When teachers planned to loop back later, they hoped to introduce new levers to shift students' thinking, but were not always able to fit the envisioned curriculum into their plans.

**Critical Micro-Inquiry: A More Promising Practice.** When teachers in this study practiced part or all of what I will call "critical micro-inquiry," they enacted the following moves (often, but not always, in this order): 1) clarifying student thinking; 2) adding critical counterevidence; and 3) asking questions to push student thinking. A final vignette from Mr. Crane's IB History of the Americas class illustrates.

*To provide context for their unit on the Black and Latino civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s, students in Mr. Crane's were engaging in a jigsaw analysis of primary source documents about housing segregation in the United States. Students had been assigned one of several documents and convened in "expert groups" to ensure they understood the document they were exploring, then shuffled into jigsaw groups made up of one student-expert on each document. Mr. Crane circulated, listening in on experts' informal presentations to their groups about their documents. In one group, a white student named Sam was showing what he described*

*as "a map of where segregation was required, optional, or prohibited." He went on: "So the trend was that the Deep South was required, and as you kind of got more north it was either optional or prohibited." Then he added that in their own state, segregation "was prohibited, if you're worried."*

*Mr. Crane had hoped that by this point in the discussion, based on other documents in the set pertaining to redlining and housing covenants, students would have noticed that even in states where segregation was supposedly prohibited (including their own state), de facto segregation was common. Sam's group did not seem to have made this connection. Mr. Crane tried asking clarifying questions to push their thinking:*

*Mr. Crane:* *What specifically was prohibited?*

*Sam:* *Segregation.*

*Mr. Crane:* *And what year?*

*Sam:* *Uhhhh [examining document]. 1954.*

*Mr. Crane:* *Do you think that's accurate?*

*Sam:* *I bet 1954 is accurate, but it's still not good because that's like pretty recent.*

*Now Mr. Crane opted to provide direct explanation, highlighting counterevidence that would challenge Sam's claim that segregation was prohibited in the state after 1954, and finishing with a follow-up question to guide future inquiry.*

*Mr. Crane:* *If you actually look at the documents on some of our city's housing laws, for example the ability of people to purchase or rent homes in different neighborhoods, redlining was still in effect. It wasn't prohibited here until the late 1960s. So that would be an*

*interesting follow-up question, is to look at those cities where segregation was prohibited, and see to what extent was that actually the case, right?*

*Sam:* *Because did it kind of go under the government's watch? And the government might not have enforced it.*

*Here Sam's response – that "the government might not have enforced" segregation – seemed to suggest he was beginning to understand the larger picture. The class was out of time, and Mr. Crane later reported that he "made a mental note to come back to this later," speculating about additional primary source documents he might ask students to explore (video-recorded observation and interview, May 8, 2018).*

On this day, after finding himself enacting this response to Sam's idea, Mr. Crane dubbed the practice "micro-inquiry." His concept label referred to the classic instructional sequence called "inquiry" – which comprises identifying a compelling question about the social world, making initial hypotheses, then engaging in an iterative cycle of adding evidence and revising hypotheses until complex and well-warranted explanations are reached (National Council for the Social Studies, 2015; Parker, 2012). However, whereas an inquiry lesson is typically planned in advance and may unfold over a class session or even an entire unit, the micro-inquiry as teachers in this study enacted it is an impromptu instructional strategy that arises in response to emergent , often partial or problematic student thinking and may last only a few minutes. Micro-inquiry becomes *critical* when teachers use counternarratives and other critical evidence to complicate normalized, dominant claims about the social world and pose questions that push students to build more sophisticated critical understandings. While teachers in the study often used parts or all of the critical micro-inquiry routine in response to student ideas that expressed dominant

perspectives, they tended to describe their moves as a stroke of inspiration rather than a planned strategy.

**Table 2: Mr. Crane Enacts a Critical Micro-Inquiry**

| Speaker | Utterance | Teaching Move |
|---|---|---|
| Mr. Crane | What specifically was prohibited? | Clarifying/comprehension question |
| Sam | Segregation. | |
| Mr. Crane | And what year? | Clarifying/comprehension question |
| Sam | Uhhhh [examining document]. 1954. | |
| Mr. Crane | Do you think that's accurate? | Clarifying question |
| Sam | I bet 1954 is accurate, but it's still not good because that's like pretty recent. | |
| Mr. Crane | If you actually look at the documents on some of our city's housing laws, for example the ability of people to purchase or rent homes in different neighborhoods, redlining was still in effect. It wasn't prohibited here until the late 1960s. So that would be an interesting follow-up question, is to look at those cities where segregation was prohibited, and see to what extent was that actually the case, right? | Adding critical counterevidence<br><br>Question to push student thinking |
| Sam | Because did it kind of go under the government's watch? And the government might not have enforced it. | |

Next, I unpack the three parts of a critical micro-inquiry, illustrating them with the vignette from Mr. Crane's class (for an overview, see Table 2) as well as with data from other critical incidents in all three teachers' classrooms. Teachers' enactments of critical micro-inquiry, in part or in full, demonstrated their acquired practical wisdom for democratic teaching. That said, the teachers in this study did not always enact critical democratic teaching practice to their own satisfaction, and each expressed the aspiration to more consistently and skillfully enact the practices of clarifying student thinking, adding critical counterevidence, and posing questions

to push student thinking. Even for these experienced critical educators, critical micro-inquiry was often more aspirational than realized. Making the parts of critical micro-inquiry visible here represents a step toward making them available for teachers to consciously cultivate in their classrooms.

***Clarifying Student Thinking.*** When he overheard Sam expressing an incomplete understanding of segregation in their state after 1954, Mr. Crane began by asking clarifying questions. He asked two questions to clarify Sam's comprehension level – "What was prohibited?" and "What year?" – before then asking a clarifying question about Sam's interpretation of the document. "Do you think that's accurate?" he asked Sam, who responded that he thought it was. Sam's response confirmed Mr. Crane's suspicion that he had missed that how his own document conflicted with other documents in the set detailing housing segregation in the state after 1954. Reflecting afterward, Mr. Crane considered that he could have sought even more clarification: "I wish I would have asked him to clarify that comment," he said (interview, May 8, 2018). Discussing other critical incidents that occurred in his class, Mr. Crane often reflected on what he framed as missed opportunities to ask students clarifying questions. On another occasion Sam had claimed during a full-class discussion that "a lot has changed" since police used force against protestors of color in the 1960s. Later Mr. Crane wondered, "In the age of Ferguson and so much coverage not just of police violence toward individuals, but police violence in demonstrations, how can one have that perception?" He described wishing he had asked Sam for clarification in that moment. Gaining clarity on a Sam's thinking, he conjectured, might have helped him decide how to proceed (interview, June 7, 2018).

Ms. Wolf often reflected on the value of asking clarifying questions to ensure she understood her students' thinking before responding. She explained:

> That's something that I do pretty often, asking follow-up questions to better understand. My favorite follow-up question is "tell me more about that."… You ask kids to expand on their thinking and you get a better feel for what they're saying, especially if it's going from one sentence to a paragraph of context. (interview, March 29, 2018)

When Ms. Crane asked her students to reflect on the "All Lives Matter" response to the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, Arjuna made an argument that confused her. He told the class: "All Lives Matter isn't about diluting Black Lives Matter, it's about including other nondominant social groups in this movement…. It's about ethnic minorities speaking out against injustice." Ms. Wolf paused, then responded: "When somebody says 'yes, but all lives matter,'… every time I've heard someone say that it's typically a white person…. Tell me more about that." Later Ms. Wolf reflected that her aim in questioning Arjuna here was to "clarify where he was coming from." She continued:

> I wanted to see if that was how it was discussed in his community of non-white people, or if it was also his experience that it was mostly white people, and he came back with that. Because that would've framed how I understood [him].

Based on Arjuna's elaboration in response to her clarifying question – he explained his view that the All Lives Matter movement is "about fighting injustice in general" and referred to the needs of several different minoritized ethnic groups – Ms. Wolf later conjectured that Arjuna misinterpreted how the claim that "all lives matter" has "been used to undermine" the Black Lives Matter movement. She described her aim in that conversation as, if nothing else, "isolating the misconception" so she could decide what to do or say next (interview, March 29, 2018).

***Adding Critical Counterevidence.*** To return to our most recent vignette, after he asked Sam clarifying questions and ascertained that Sam had missed a key conflict among the

documents, Mr. Crane added critical counterevidence that challenged Sam's interpretation. In that case, he referred the group back to other documents in the set, noting how they showed redlining continuing up through the late 1960s, well past the 1954 date Sam had specified. Here he was able to point students' attention to critical counterevidence that was already close to hand – in the document set they had in front of them. In another lesson, he might have needed to look further afield, or set students looking – a point to which I will return in the discussion section.

Teachers in this study often used counternarratives to center the perspectives of non-dominant social groups and counter normalized, oppressive accounts of social relations. They sought to relocate sources of authority from themselves and the (often white, wealthy, and powerful) people students perceived as experts, to minoritized communities and participants in grassroots social movements. When Mr. Crane's students studied the United Farm Workers movement, he showed a short film called *Viva la Causa*, featuring footage of strikes during the United Farm Workers movement and interviews with activists who had been involved.

> There were so many things… that could and should spark some interest. It was dramatic, it was powerful in so many ways, so I don't have to do that all by myself.… I don't want it all coming from me. I want them to hear from the people who engaged in these movements.

Although he did not do this during data collection, Mr. Crane often brought speakers to talk to his classes. He mused about bringing someone to share about farmworkers' issues today: "I could easily bring a speaker into class to talk to them," he told me. "There's so much distance between where the students are in their lives and what we're learning… we need some bridges to help them connect (interview, June 6, 2018). Introducing students to critical counternarratives throughout the unit supplied teachers with evidence to refer to when students made claims that

reflected partial understandings. They could remind students of what they had heard, seen, or read, and then ask follow-up questions to help them deepen their understanding.

***Asking Questions to Push Student Thinking.*** To return to our most recent vignette, after Mr. Crane added critical counterevidence that challenged Sam's claim about segregation ending in 1954, he posed a question to push students' thinking: "That would be an interesting follow-up question, is to look at those cities where segregation was prohibited, and see to what extent was that actually the case?" Here Mr. Crane made visible the documents' conflicting accounts and invited students to compare them, although in this critical incident, the question remained hypothetical because the period would soon end.

Both Ms. Wolf and Mr. Crane emphasized the importance of asking questions to push students' thinking. Ms. Wolf described this as "asking questions as opposed to correcting." She described adding evidence that complicated students' claims and then posing a follow-up question: "I just offer something and then [I'm] like 'what do you think about that?" In Ms. Wolf's class, when Arjuna claimed that Americans of color who face poverty and mass incarceration "come from the same situation" as highly educated, affluent immigrants from South and East Asia, Ms. Wolf added critical counterevidence, directing students' attention back to a relevant passage in the text they had been discussing. Then she also asked a question to push students' thinking: "What is the author trying to argue?" Students discussed their responses to this question for several minutes, although they did not return directly to Arjuna's original claim.

In interviews, Mr. Crane often speculated about questions he might pose to students. While exploring the farmworkers' movement with students, he suggested the question: "To what extent have working conditions for migrant farmworkers improved since the national grape boycott in the late 1960s?" (interview, June 6, 2018). On another occasion, students were

discussing police responses to political demonstrations, using the example the integration of Little Rock High School, and he noted to himself that he might ask: "What was the duty of the police? Was it to keep high school students who are peacefully protesting from getting to the street? Or something else?" (interview, June 7, 2018).

As Mr. Crane's notes to self suggest, teachers in the study did not always muster questions to push students' thinking on the spot – nor did they always produce critical counterevidence that might challenge students' received understandings. Opportunities for critical micro-inquiries were emergent rather than planned, and time constraints, teachers' content knowledge, and their general capacity to think on their feet in the midst of a busy classroom may have influenced their ability to enact this routine. They did not plan for critical micro-inquiry; they were not explicitly aware of what they were doing. As Mr. Crane reflected while we were discussing his instructional intervention with Sam, "I can't stay I was consciously thinking about a step by step sequence there…. [It was] totally subconscious" (interview, May 8, 2018). Later, he told me that the moves of critical micro-inquiry "just kind of happen by accident" (interview, June 7, 2018). Asking clarifying questions, adding critical counterevidence, and posing questions to push students' thinking appeared to be part of these teachers' repertoires of tacit professional know-how. That said, they appreciated when they enacted these instructional moves and aspired to enact them more deliberately. "I want to be the teacher who just asks questions in that moment," Mr. Crane told me. "Maybe with new information as needed to propel the students' thinking forward…. That's what I aspire to do" (interview, May 8, 2018).

**Discussion**

Let me summarize this study's findings. As I have explained, these three experienced critical educators – Ms. Wolf, Mr. Jay, and Mr. Crane – aimed to adapt their teaching practice to

respond to their student's heterogeneous positionalities by exercising the following three discernments:

- How can I elevate non-dominant students' claims without spotlighting?
- How can I challenge dominant students' claims without shaming?
- Which students are which, and when?

After outlining and illustrating these discernments with vignettes from teachers' classrooms, I zoomed in on practices for responding to dominant student's problematic claims about the social world. The teachers in this study sometimes pushed back on students' claims, or let other students respond, or modified their curriculum to loop back to the issue later, but these practices had limitations that left teachers ambivalent. In contrast, they aspired to more fully enact the practices of critical micro-inquiry, which in the preceding section I broke down into the constituent parts of clarifying student thinking, adding critical counter-evidence, and posing questions to push students' thinking. I turn now to make visible what makes critical micro-inquiry ambitious for teachers to enact. Then I argue that, nonetheless, critical micro-inquiry should be cultivated in order to help teachers challenge dominant students' claims without shaming and to elevate non-dominant students' claims without spotlighting.

***Critical Micro-inquiry: Discernments, Affordances, Implications***

Critical micro-inquiry is a demanding practice to enact. While education research frequently urges teachers to attend to students' thinking, center evidence (and among critical education scholars, evidence that challenges dominant, received understandings), and use questioning to propel students' thinking, these moves are easier to prescribe than to enact – especially to enact unexpectedly, in response to emergent and sometimes troubling moments. Teachers in this study had years of experience in the classroom and strove to enact their

commitments to socially just democratic education – yet critical micro-inquiry was challenging for them to enact consistently. The practice places great demands on teachers, including several discernments at each stage which I want to make visible now.

In a social issues discussion, when a student makes a problematic, partial, oppressive, or baffling claim within earshot of heterogeneously-positioned classmates, teachers need to discern how the student is positioned relative to the content as well as how his or her peers are positioned, in order to decide how to respond. The critical democratic educators in this study favored different pedagogical approaches for marginalized versus privileged students, but which students were which in a given context was not always clear – nor was it always evident whether students' positionalities were shaping their thinking in a given instance, and if so, to what extent. To ascertain how best to support their students, critical democratic educators must try to make sense of students' positionalities and how they may be shaping their thinking in a given case.

When a student has made a partial or problematic claim, the teacher needs to exercise discernment in clarifying their understanding of the student's idea. She needs to discern what she thinks the student is saying, what questions to ask to clarify that understanding, and when she has enough information to understand clearly what has been said. Not only that, but she needs to discern whether the students' classmates have understood.

When teachers add critical counterevidence, a number of discernments are required. At what point should the teacher transition from asking clarifying questions to adding evidence? What evidence should be mustered? How should evidence be surfaced or located? Should the teacher present the evidence, or should students be asked to find it themselves? Where is critical counterevidence to be found, given that anti-oppressive materials about social issues are not always easy to locate? How much time should be spent, by the teacher or students or both,

locating counterevidence that challenges the claim on the table? Should students find and examine evidence individually, in small groups, as a whole group? Should students who did not hear the original student claim be involved in the inquiry? Should teachers share their personal experiences or disclose their own views? When enacting critical micro-inquiry in the moment, teachers must decide on these and any number of other design and enactment questions, tailoring their decisions to institutional constraints as well as to their particular students and community.

When teachers pose questions to push student thinking, more discernments arise about what questions to pose and how broadly to frame them. While Ms. Wolf often framed questions in broad terms, adding critical counterevidence and then essentially asking, "What do you think about that?" Mr. Crane identified very specific questions to ask in response to the content of students' emerging ideas and his objectives for their learning – for example, "To what extent have working conditions for migrant farmworkers improved since the 1960s?" Discerning what questions to ask – and prior to that, what counterevidence or counternarratives to highlight – requires teachers to possess significant content knowledge.

Given the many discernments teachers need to exercise during an unfolding critical micro-inquiry, they may be difficult to enact – let alone to use routinely. That said, I want to argue that critical micro-inquiry offers real promise for supporting teachers in adapting to students' heterogenous positionalities during social issues discussion. It allows teachers to challenge dominant perspectives without shaming students, while centering and affirming counternarratives and the knowledge of students with non-dominant positionalities in the room. Enacting critical micro-inquiry in part or in full helped teachers in this study sustain discussions without directly challenging or disagreeing with students' ideas. It allowed them to position students as competent and to take their claims seriously – publicizing them and making them an

object of authentic intellectual inquiry – while also ensuring that problematic claims would be unpacked and evaluated.

I suggest that as students engage in examining critical counternarratives and deliberating questions posed to push their thinking, the knowledge of students with non-dominant positionalities may be elevated. To the extent that minoritized students' experiential knowledge connects to the evidence being explored, their expertise is made visible. This happened when Mr. Crane engaged students in exploring "English-only" policies in schools and Alicia and Halima shared their personal experiences. Mr. Crane positioned Halima as an expert when he asked her to conjecture about why people might tell her and others to speak English at school, and she offered an insightful analysis about people's fear of what they do not understand.

**Conclusion**

Despite the challenges of routinely and skillfully enacting critical micro-inquiry, the attempt is worthwhile. Researchers and teacher educators interested in supporting teachers in enacting robust critical democratic education in their classrooms might begin by helping teachers learn to enact critical micro-inquiry, including exercising the many discernments required along the way, and by supplying them with ample opportunities to rehearse and reflect on this and other practices of critical democratic education. What those other practices might be, and how critical micro-inquiry might need to be refined or reconceptualized to meet the demands of socially just education in a democracy, are important directions for future research. Also, this study did not examine the impact of teachers' practices on students' learning or wellbeing. This is another important research avenue as scholars of critical democratic education turn toward teaching practice.

Research on democratic education needs to move beyond assuming ideal, egalitarian conditions (Knowles & Clark, 2018). Critical democratic education supplies a needed antidote, but more research is needed about the minute-to-minute practice of teaching that fulfills – or even aspires to fulfill critical democratic teaching aims. Highlighting tough, persistent problems like those the experienced teachers in this study confronted might help make the case for turning toward practice in critical democratic education, spurring scholars and teacher educators to explore what can help teachers (veteran and novice alike) address the challenges that most deeply vex their practice. As teachers in this study made clear, adopting a shaming or disciplining stance toward students who make problematic claims fails to serve the needs of socially transformative learning. Based on these teachers' professional wisdom and practical know-how, I have proposed critical micro-inquiry as one practice teachers can enact that may more fully meet the demands of critical democratic education in a polarized and unequal society. Demonstrating a commitment to critical pedagogy entails not just talking about it but enacting it. This study has supplied depictions of teachers enacting "judgment in improvisation" (Philip et al., 2018) to advance the needs of a more just and equitable democracy.

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