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Difficult discourses: How the distances and contours of identities shape challenging moments in political discussions

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways novice social studies teachers perceived difficult discourses in their classrooms. Specifically, we sought to understand what social studies teachers think is difficult about navigating political discourses, and how they describe the nature of those discourses in order to draw conclusions about why some teachers choose to avoid or engage in political or social issues discussions with students. We used a collective case study and a grounded theory analysis of video recorded class sessions and video guided debriefings with teachers to explore this phenomena. We found that the degree to which teachers thought the discourse to be difficult to navigate was shaped by: emotional safety of students, teacher's own ideologies, and the distances of students' identities from the discourse.

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Introduction

A primary purpose of social studies should be teaching citizenship for life in a democracy (NCSS, 2008). As such, we assume that a key piece of teaching and learning for democratic life is fostering productive political discourse (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Hess, 2009; Parker, 2003). Indeed, American public schooling is intended to cultivate the next generation of the republic, people with a capacity to engage in public life and democratic activism. As students from diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds increasingly populate America's schools; long-standing questions about how to teach social studies for democratic purposes are and ought to be under scrutiny. How, or if, teachers choose to engage students in educative discourse around relevant social and political issues is a vital question for social studies teaching today.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways novice social studies teachers perceived difficult discourses in their classrooms. Specifically, we sought to understand what social studies teachers think is difficult about navigating political discourses, and how they describe the nature of those discourses in order to draw conclusions about why some teachers choose to avoid or engage in political or social issues discussions with students. By difficult discourses we mean discourses produced by classroom interactions related to broader social issues that are relevant and up for public debate (Hess, 2009). We know that this difficulty often leads teachers to avoid discussions of relevant social, political, or economic phenomena (Hostetler, 2012; 2016; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Yet, research suggests that in avoiding difficult discourses, teachers also avoid the discursive practices vital to the fabric of democratic life and fail to foster rich engagement with others to discuss and deliberate on public issues and ideas (Parker, 2003). As a field we know little about the nuance and details of teachers'

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reasons and thresholds for avoiding or engaging in classroom discourses they perceive to be difficult. Here, we explore the ways two, second year social studies teachers' perceived difficulty in classroom discourse. Using interviews, video recordings of classroom interactions, and participant-guided video analysis as primary data, we explored the following research questions:

1. What does the teacher perceive as difficult in classroom discourse?
2. How does the teacher perceive the nature of difficult discourses in her/his classroom?

The findings of this study highlight the ways teachers' perceive relevant political discourses in social studies classrooms, and how their perceptions are influenced by the contours and distances between teachers' and students' life experiences. We argue that the reasons these discussions become increasingly difficult for the teachers in this study was not because of certain topics so much as it was because of the ways identity and life experience were implicated in the discourse.

Literature review

Public education is essential to a healthy democracy (Dewey, 1916/2009) therefore; schools and particularly social studies must be central to the deepening of that democracy. By engaging social studies students in political discussions of relevant social issues, students are positioned as political actors who have the agency to engage in democratic participation and activism (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). To define political we refer to Gutmann's (1987) description of political reasoning as reasoning about policies, social issues, or economic issues that are relevant (i.e. timely and connected to students lived experiences). Gutmann (1987) argued that learning about policies and issues without learning to reason critically about these matters is repressive.

Providing students with opportunities to think through perspectives, consider alternatives, contextualize an issue or problem, propose solutions, and make arguments with support from source materials are examples of opportunities for reasoning are the building blocks of political discourse in a classroom. Political discourses then are made up of relevant social issues that take on a political dimension through their relevance and relation to broader public or societal issues. Political discourses are the material of broader social discourses of power and can foster democratic dispositions (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005) through classroom interactions. Controversial issues, as defined by Hess (2009), could also be a part of political discourse in that controversial issues are at least in part issues up for public debate.

The perspectives outlined above lead to important questions about the extent to which reasoning through political discourse is supported in social studies classrooms in the U.S. Although classroom discussions are a key pedagogical tool in facilitating political discourse in social studies (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), evidence suggests that discussions are rare. For example, Nystrand, Gamoran, and Carbonaro (2001) investigated the frequency and quality of discussion in 48 social studies classrooms, and found no evidence of discussion of relevant social issues in 90% of classrooms in the study. In the remaining 10% of classrooms, discussions lasted 31 s or less among students. Social studies scholars have further documented that teachers avoid or enter hesitantly into discussions and deliberations on political issues (Journell, 2016), controversial issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), and relevant social issues (Martell, 2017; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016), in particular. Building political discourses from issues-based discussions requires that teachers confront and navigate challenging discussions with students, discussions where disagreement and varied perspectives emerge. Journell (2016) argued that a push for unity and agreement in political discussions "...extols these dispositions at the expense of political tolerance, affirmation of diversity, and public deliberation" (p. xx). This suggests that the value of political discussions to democratic community lies in disagreement and alternative perspectives. Journell (2011) noted that teachers tended to avoid discussions that implicated their own political or social identity in the midst of potentially divisive disagreement on political issues.

If political discourses are important, and teachers tend to avoid them, what else is it, we wondered, that might help us understand the tendency to avoid? In an attempt to understand this question more deeply, we asked teachers who claimed they seek out political discourse to point to moments in political discussions that they perceived as difficult to navigate because they experienced dissonance or discomfort. As such, we refer to 'difficult discourses,' not as a construct from the literature but as a construct of each of our participating teachers. At the outset of this study, we situated our questions about difficulty only in relation to controversial, political, or social issues discussions. After further analysis and feedback, we began to consider the ways identity shaped teachers' perceptions of difficulty during discussions of controversial, political, or social issues.

As students interact with each other, discuss, deliberate, and debate relevant social, political, and economic issues they bring to bare their personal experiences, learning and broader societal discourses on the discussion. When this occurs there is the potential for these discourses to become difficult for the teacher to navigate. When classroom discourses become entangled with students' and teachers' identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, ability, class, or immigrant status) they may be difficult to navigate but position teachers to make important choices that shape the discourse, influence student voice, and promote political reasoning just as Gutmann (1987) described.

Scholars have demonstrated the importance of students' identities and lived experiences in classroom interactions (Dee, 2005; Hyland, 2005; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2008), identities that are important mediating factors of participation in political discussions (Clark & Avery, 2016). Beyond the students, teacher identities can also play an important role in

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