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## Collective action for social justice: An exploration into preservice social studies teachers' conceptions of discussion as a tool for equity

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### ABSTRACT

An extensive body of research details the lack of discussion and collaboration occurring in K12 classrooms in the United States. This study seeks to examine this issue by exploring the associations preservice social studies teachers make between the underlying principles of democratic education and the use of discussion in the social studies classroom. The present qualitative multi-case study uses a collection of field-based data and university coursework to examine how six preservice social studies teachers at a large southeastern university conceptualize and value discussion as a pedagogical approach. Findings suggest that preservice social studies teachers do see value in the use of discussion and associate it with broad themes of democratic education. However, because their understandings of democratic education are often vague and unclear, the associations being made often do not reflect the work being conducted within academia in regards to social justice.

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### Introduction

Schools in the United States have long been charged with the responsibility to develop individuals capable of entering a pluralist society as informed and engaged citizens (Barton, 2012; Dinkelman, 1999; Kubow, 1997; Levstik & Tyson, 2010). Though the means for developing such citizens is often the subject of intense debate, teachers, scholars, and policymakers alike acknowledge the use of discussion in the classroom as a critical component to a student's education and their development into "good" citizens (Adler, 2008; Preskill, 1997; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In this sense, scholars often argue that the use of discussion in the classroom has the potential to help students recognize how knowledge is constructed and narratives can be marginalized (Banks, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2003), engage students in discussions on current events and issues (Hess, 2004b 2009; Lin, Lawrence & Snow, 2015 Macedo, 2004; Zorwick & Wade, 2016), lead students to understand and empathize with one another (Gutmann, 1987; Parker, 2003), and help schools foster a more educated and informed citizenry (Flynn, 2009; Parker, 2003).

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## Theoretical framework

Though there rarely exists a unanimous consensus within the field of education, the aim of developing reform-oriented citizens capable of contributing to society has almost always served as a foundation for the field. From Thomas Jefferson's (1779) writings on the development of an educated citizenry to avoid a tyrannical government to Dewey's (1916) association between a functional democracy and a well-developed school system, the question has never been whether schools should seek to develop educated and rational citizens, but, rather, *how* to develop them (Evans, 2004). And though this question is frequently the basis for disagreement in the field, scholars, policymakers, and teachers alike seem to recognize the inherent value for using discussion to prepare students to become citizens. Both historical and contemporary literature in the field of education, therefore, advocates for the use of discussion as a pedagogical approach and notes how its effective use can lead to students having the capability of entering the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) as participatory citizens engaged in a continuous discourse and 'collective action' on an array of issues (Hess, 2009).

This notion of "collective action" has been part of educational and political theory for over a century. Dewey (1916), for instance, described an ideal democracy as a form of "associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" where all individuals contribute to the public life for the growth of society (p. 175). More recently, Brookfield and Preskill (1999) describe an ideal public sphere as a context where growth expands beyond the individual to a collective, societal level. In such an environment where there is a continuous discourse about contemporary issues, "a collective wisdom emerges that would have been impossible for any of the participants to achieve on their own" (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999, p. 3). In order for such society to exist, however, citizens must learn to participate in such conversation. Scholars, thus, have described discussion as "an indispensable part of democratic education" as it helps students to better understand both their role in society and the most effective means for contributing to a collective body of individuals seeking to reform society (Preskill, 1997, p. 342).

Despite scholars and policymakers consistently advocating for the incorporation of student-centered discussion into the K12 classroom, the use of discussion as an instructional approach in the classroom remains a rare occurrence (Chandler & Ehrlich, 2016; Flynn, 2009; Nystrand, Gamoran, & Carbonaro, 1998). Classrooms are often reliant on more traditional forms of pedagogy including teacher-centered lecture, students reading from textbooks, and individual completion of standard-based worksheets (Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith, & Thiede, 2000; Knowles & Theobald, 2013; Russell III, 2010). Such forms of pedagogy are concerning for a variety of reasons. Most notably, more teacher-centered forms of pedagogy may teach students that their voice does not matter, the knowledge they are presented with is concrete, and the diverse views in the classroom are not as important as those of the educator (Banks, 2001; Hess, 2004).

This study seeks to address this issue by exploring how preservice social studies teachers conceptualize and value the use of discussion in the social studies. Specifically, the study attempts to examine the extent to which preservice social studies teachers working toward teaching licensure internalize the underlying principles of democratic education and associate the use of discussion as a means for achieving such aims. With regards to the underlying principles of democratic education, the study draws its underlying definition from the work of Gutmann (1987) who describes an ideal democratic education thusly:

A democratic state is therefore committed to allocating educational authority in such a way as to provide its members with an education adequate to participating in democratic politics, to choosing among (a limited range of) good lives, and to sharing in the several subcommunities, such as families, that impart identity to the lives of its citizens. (p. 42).

Further, the essay seeks to focus on the extent to which democratic education was connected with education grounded in social justice, which will be grounded in Banks's (2004) definition:

...[Acquiring] of the skills and abilities to identify the creators of knowledge and their interests, to uncover the assumptions of knowledge, to view knowledge from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives, and to use knowledge to guide action that will create a humane and just world. (p. 291).

Because of academia's frequently evolving definitions of critical terms, Banks's description was chosen as it provided a broad – yet effective – overview of social justice within the context of the traditional K12 classroom.

It is the hope that the findings of this study will help to explain why student-centered discussion is so rarely practiced in the K12 classroom. With a better understanding of how aspiring social studies teachers understand discussion as a pedagogical practice and situate it within the broad themes of education, teacher educators can better tailor their programs to encourage discursive methods of teaching.

## Literature review

In the past four decades, the field of education has taken notice of the need to better understand the perspectives of preservice teachers and – more broadly – teacher preparation (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Because of this, scholars in the field have produced an array of empirical research on effective teacher education and the aim of developing teachers who are autonomous decision-makers who understand the broad aims of education (Adler, 2008). These studies have sought to

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