

Don't Let History Repeat Itself: Talking About Current Controversial Issues in the 8th Grade  
Social Studies Classroom

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this paper to those people still facing inequality, oppression, and discrimination today, both in this country and around the world. It is through constructive dialogue between open-minded people of all ages and backgrounds that we can continue to make change toward a more just world.

### **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I want to thank my students for taking part in potentially uncomfortable conversations about local and global issues that surround us today. Talking with each other with facts in hand is educating each other. It is through these talks that we can grow as citizens of this country and of this world. I am grateful to my students for engaging in these discussions. I am also thankful for the support and advice from my peers, teachers, colleagues at my school, and my friends and family who have been there to listen whenever I needed to talk.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this research is determine the effects of discussing controversial social issues with 8th grade students. This study explored what happened when students engaged in structured dialogue about potentially sensitive yet important issues, such as race relations, immigration, civil rights, and other issues discussed in the U.S. Presidential Election of 2016. The findings of this study were positive overall, with many students reporting an increase in social awareness as well as an increase in current event dialogue outside of the classroom. However, there was some negative feedback from concerned parents that constrained certain discussion topics. Furthermore, school administration reviewed potential discussion topics and advised that certain issues be eliminated from discussion. As a result of this research experience, much was taken away in terms of what happens when engaging in this type of discourse and the most effective strategies for doing so.

**Table of Contents**

Question in Context . . . . . 6

Literature Review . . . . . .12

Methodology . . . . . .26

Findings . . . . . .37

Implications . . . . . . 54

Obstacles . . . . . . 57

Emerging Questions . . . . . .60

Conclusion . . . . . .62

References . . . . . .63

Appendix A - Subjectivity . . . . . .66

Appendix B - Implementation . . . . . .68

Appendix C - Pre-Survey . . . . . . 70

Appendix D - Post-Survey . . . . . .72

Appendix E - Socratic Method . . . . . .80

Appendix F - Student Observational Checklist . . . . . . 81

Appendix G - Rubric for “Real Talk” discussions . . . . . . 82

Appendix H - Teaching Point video on diversity and privilege . . . . . 84

### **Question in Context**

What matters most to the majority of middle school-aged students? There are many different answers to this question. Students are concerned with their self-image and how they are perceived by classmates, while also trying to focus on academics, clubs and/or sports. Throw in family life, social interactions, and rapid physical changes and it reveals the amount of thoughts and emotions swirling around in the mind of the average middle school student. Teachers are expected to follow a rigid curriculum and parents have little downtime after school, getting dinner ready and picking up their child from practice. Because of all these factors, many middle school students may not have had the opportunity to talk openly with others about major social issues that matter in the world today. There is also the potential for awkwardness or people taking offense when it comes to discussing these sensitive issues, which can prevent these discussions from even starting. However, teens and pre-teens are just beginning to confront these controversial issues in their everyday lives - in school, in the news, on the Internet, from their families - and they have reached the age where they may start to have questions and opinions about them. If students can learn to talk openly and respectfully about these issues, the issues may begin to matter more to them, and they will be more likely to continue this civil discourse as they age, hopefully effecting positive change.

### **The Classroom and Controversial Issues**

Racism, classism, sexism, discrimination. Poverty, mass incarceration, police brutality. Abortion, the death penalty, slavery. Climate change, education, homophobia, Islamophobia. Religion, war, immigration, politics. These are only a few of the controversial issues, past and present, that may arise in a middle school classroom, especially in but not limited to the social studies realm. Especially with the United States presidential election having taken place in

November of this year (2016) these issues were at the forefront. Rather than simply allowing these questions and discussions to arise sporadically and then reacting (which will still occur), I explicitly modeled for my students how to engage in an open dialogue, simply by modeling respect, listening to each other, and being open to opposing viewpoints. In a word though: empathy. “Put yourself in another person’s shoes.” I emphasize that it is okay to disagree with someone else about these issues, but what is not okay is to disparage the other person merely for having a differing opinion. After creating this atmosphere for open dialogue, I observed and recorded the effects on my students.

Last year in my 7th grade remedial math class (“math lab”), we were working in small groups and an African American girl brought up the new song “Formation” by Beyoncé. The song that had been stirring up some controversy after Beyoncé performed it at the Super Bowl a few days earlier. She asked the other students (predominantly Black, some White and Mixed) if they had seen the half-time show and what their thoughts were. Without allowing for a response from them, she began to voice her opinion on the issue. The other students were not as informed as her so rather than attempting to include everyone in the discussion, I only engaged this student and a couple others in a brief discussion on Beyoncé’s message of Black Power in the song and the stance against police brutality. We touched on the “Black Lives Matter” movement and I allowed the students to express their opinions. “Black Lives Matter” can be defined as a political and social movement originating among African Americans, emphasizing basic human rights and racial equality for black people and campaigning against various forms of racism (dictionary.com, 2016). I consciously kept my own thoughts and opinions out of the conversation and tried to only present the facts that I was aware of, as I did throughout the year when these issues came up. I choose to remain impartial in these discussions because as their



teacher I do not wish to sway their perspectives in any way. I try to present all sides of an issue and model for the students how to dig for the facts, be cognizant of sources, and think critically.

Each time a student raised a controversial issue such as a case of police brutality, I struggled with just how to approach the sensitive topic, how deep to go with it, and how it would affect the students. Because of my own uneasiness and discomfort as a white male teacher, as well as the tension that I felt coming from the students (possibly because they sensed these feelings from me), I kept asking myself if this conversation was appropriate. I worried about getting emails from administration or parents if I continued to guide such discussions. I hope to overcome this trepidation in the coming year by fostering an environment in which everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions, as long as they follow our rules of civil dialogue. Another strategy could be setting up agreements with students beforehand regarding the expectations when discussing these issues.

### **Reality Middle School**

I am a White male teacher, and I am going into my fifth year teaching at Reality Middle School, a relatively demographically diverse school: 46% White, 33% Black, 9% Hispanic, 9% Asian and 3% other. I have taught remedial math the past four years, a class designed for the students who did not reach targeted levels of “Proficiency” or “Advanced Proficiency” on the state tests, instead being labeled “Partially Proficient.” Possibly as a result of the systemic, institutional racism that still exists in America today, the demographics of my classes were noticeably different from those of our school as a whole. A few of my math lab classes were 100% Black or Hispanic with an average class size of approximately 12 students. We have a Black principal and a few Black teachers. This sadly may be representative of a greater issue at large, that is that only 6% of teachers in this country are African American and only 1% are

African American males. This obviously is not representative of the 13% of the country's population that identifies as African American. As was pointed out to me last year by one of those African American teachers during a union interview on teachers' priorities, the lack of representation of Black teachers relative to the Black student population is a real concern. The following excerpt really resonated with me, as I have only spoken with a few of my closer school colleagues about this topic:

...even when we avoid talking about race, we are talking about race; that is, even in our avoidance of the topic we are engaging it. ...I observed teachers regularly talking about students' failure to read without ever mentioning race. Almost all of the struggling students were Black or Latino. It was not until six months into the project that the teachers recognized the salience of race in the students' achievement. At this point, we were able to deal honestly with students' academic issues. (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p.ix)

This stark reality of underperforming minority students is a direct result of the more subtle, yet even more impactful form of racism that faces our society today, that of institutional racism. This form of racism stems back to, among other origins, a broken War on Drugs, a broken criminal justice system, and the interconnecting series of various laws and policies, which keep an entire racial group from moving up in society as a whole. According to a 2013 survey, Blacks are three times more likely to be pulled over than Whites but Whites are up to two times more likely to have drugs on them after being pulled over (Langton & DuRose, 2013). With statistics such as this one, there is undeniable discrimination happening in America and it affects millions.

Many inequities still exist in America today and social inequality is only one of the

important and controversial social issues that may come up in class. Being proactive by providing time to openly discuss controversial issues is a better alternative than passively waiting for these topics to arise then reacting, usually by skirting the issue or redirecting. Students are getting more incoming information from the media than ever before. Responsibility lies with the educators in students' lives to teach them how to engage in civil discourse about these current issues, while also connecting to the past, in efforts to make sure that the harmful parts of history do not repeat themselves. It is through these efforts that I will be able to answer my central research question, which is, "What happens when I discuss controversial social issues with my 8th grade class?" Some subquestions that will arise from trying to answer this main question are as follows: "What are the most effective strategies in achieving productive and engaging dialogue with 8th graders over social justice issues and current events?", "How will this potentially sensitive dialogue affect my regular interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and administration?", "How will I personally react to the feedback, be it positive or negative, that I receive from students, parents, colleagues, and administration?".

## Literature Review

### Tackling Social Issue Dialogue with Civility

A broad range of research has concluded that, although the discussion of controversial social issues in school classrooms may lead to awkwardness and disagreement, it is through this civil discourse that knowledge on topics such as social inequality can spread (McAvoy & Hess, 2014; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Singleton & Linton (Chapter 1), 2006). If these facts regarding current social injustices are dispersed among more of the public, people will hopefully begin to apply this knowledge to effect positive change. Education is the key. As I outlined in the Question in Context chapter, with the United States presidential election having taken place this November 2016 and as we returned to school early September 2016, issues such as racism, poverty, classism, sexism, gun violence, war, climate change and many others were in the headlines even more than a typical year. Many people have labeled this election as one of the most divisive in recent memory, with Republican Donald Trump matched up with Democrat Hillary Clinton, and both sides taking shots at the other throughout the Summer and Fall of 2016. News headlines have been scattered with cases of police brutality against African Americans, class warfare with the wealthiest 1% against the 99%, disagreements over immigration and other issues, and incidents of sexism, with various accusations of all sorts, some accurate some inaccurate, being thrown at both candidates.

In an average year, these issues permeate into middle school class discussions regularly, either directly or indirectly, and with more ubiquitous technology and constant news coverage, these issues will continue to arise. The choice to either stifle or embrace these conversations lies with the educators. I plan to create an atmosphere from day one in which we will acknowledge our differences within society and talk with each other about our differences as well as our

similarities. However, before discussing all of the preceding social issues, I will need to address several systemic disparities facing this country today. Institutional racism still grips communities of Color in each of the fifty states and on many levels, such as in education with the racial achievement gap and teaching gap. Studies have found that roughly 85% of teachers in America are White, while the percentage of students of Color in public schools is increasing (Maxwell, 2014). We discussed the gender pay gap in America today, in which, on average, women earn 79 cents for every dollar earned by men (Institution for Women's Policy Research, 2015). I addressed the wealth gap, in which 1% of the United States population owns roughly 35% of the country's wealth, a similar statistic to what was heard by Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders throughout Spring 2016 (Institute for Policy Studies, 2015). These statistics are facts, backed up with evidence. The reality that these facts are still true today shows how difficult they are to change. However, with education and communication, these injustices can change.

“Think globally, act locally” is not just a cheesy cliché. Rather, it is the mentality that can start the progress toward a more equal world, a world in which currently the richest 1% have more wealth than the bottom 99% (Oxfam, 2016). Starting these complicated yet important conversations in one class, can lead to a school, which can lead to a district and so on. At the very least, some students may walk away with a new outlook on the world and may go on to spread the same ideas for justice. However, in order to get through to my students and have them pursue further education en route to righting some of these wrongs, my 8th graders need to see how these issues matter to them in their own lives right now, not only the future.

In order for learning and retention to occur in general, the material needs to make sense to the learner and it must be meaningful to the learner (Sousa, 2011). Through this dialogue and

sharing of life experiences, I try to guide my students to see how these real life issues relate to their own lives, which may be one of the most challenging components of the overall plan.

Because of this, I systematically tried to show them how these things matter and that they as citizens can help to make the change.

### **Just How to Do it: Discussing Controversial Social Issues in Class - Strategies for Productive Dialogue**

“Courageous conversations” is an apt description for what I continue to pursue this current year, and the book with the same title served as a good starting place for literature relevant to the current research. In Singleton & Linton (2006, p.20), the authors begin by defining the “courageous conversation” and outline three tenants, four agreements, and six conditions that go along with these discussions, as well as using the “Courageous Conversation Compass” as a guide. The authors define this courageous dialogue the following way: “utilizing the agreements, conditions, and compass to engage, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogue about race in order to examine schooling and improve student achievement.” The authors argue that immersing themselves and their students into questions such as, why racial gaps exist and what factors keep them in place, is the only way for “authentic, sustainable transformation of beliefs, expectations, and practices” to occur (p.17).

The four agreements of Courageous Conversation require teachers who participate to do the following: stay engaged despite the reactions of students, to maintain enthusiasm when discussing the topics; to be honest with yourself and to transfer that truth to the students, not filtering the truth for fear of consequence or judgment; rather than only recognizing our similarities, we need to acknowledge our differences and experience the discomfort that will come along with these sensitive conversations; and lastly, we need to expect and accept the fact

that closure on these issues will not occur overnight or even in one academic year, rather it is a slow change, but not our actions are not meaningless (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Thus, a major part of the teacher's role is to try to engage students who refuse to participate, maintain the discussion when it gets uncomfortable, and seemingly most important and possibly most difficult, deepen the discussion to where meaningful comprehension and action can occur.

Engaging students in dialogue not only directed at me as the teacher, but also with each other as students and citizens, is another objective I seek to accomplish with these conversations. McAvoy & Hess (2014) acknowledge that even in higher grades, the opportunity for discourse between students is often absent and they lay out steps for just how a program like this could work. Before just jumping into the issues with the class, throughout the year a suburban high school teacher who was successful with this approach explicitly taught his students about the content and then how to engage in civil discourse, oftentimes playing devil's advocate to draw out stronger reasoning from his students. Therefore, to begin the year, I will need to explain the plans, model the behavior I expect, and scaffold until the students are ready (see introduction to Methods section for plans for Day 1").

Although the age level of the students in the McAvoy & Hess (2014) analysis were high school seniors, I hope to employ similar strategies and simplify other ideas in order to achieve similar results with my 8th graders. The participating teachers began the first 3-4 weeks explicitly modeling rules and expectations for civil discourse, such as articulating one's arguments strongly and clearly and without attacking another classmate for a differing opinion. The idea that it is okay to disagree with someone while still being a colleague or friend is explained and modeled. Three specific modeling strategies that were effective and that I plan to use are as follows: supplying students with a discussion rubric; showing students videos of good

civil discourse; and providing students with starter sentences as a scaffolding technique (e.g. “I agree/disagree with most of what \_\_\_\_\_ has said, but I also think that \_\_\_\_\_.”)

(McAvoy & Hess, 2014).

In small groups, the students in this classroom researched an issue important to them (e.g. censorship) over a few weeks, planned thorough arguments for why they support the side they did (while preparing for counterarguments) then delegated specific roles (e.g. lead speaker) for each member before presenting their “bill” to an assembly ready to vote (McAvoy & Hess, 2014). Moreover, online discussion boards were successfully used by students and assessed by the teacher. The authors observed that through this extensive civil discourse simulation, teachers can assess how well their students learned about the current issues of the day, and more importantly, whether they can effectively engage in civil conversations with others to back up their positions.

Much of the research into civil dialogue in the classroom focuses on the upper grades, mainly the secondary level (Amobi, 2007; McAvoy & Hess, 2014; Singleton & Linton, 2006). Assumptions seem to be that both the students’ knowledge-base and maturity level are not sufficiently developed in the lower and middle grades to engage in higher-level civil discourse on controversial social issues. Even experienced twelfth-grade teachers express some uncertainty and hesitation when approaching this type of discourse, as the teacher in the McAvoy & Hess (2014) analysis explained, “I don’t think kids at the high school level have enough between their ears to practice purposeful deliberation. I think they need to have some stuff in their heads first before they start hollering at each other” (p.48). However, the authors of that analysis and others (Shagoury & Miller Power, 2012) do not rule out the possibility for younger



students to take part in difficult conversations with one another, albeit with effective scaffolding and modeling from the teacher.

In a research-based article about having “grand conversations” with students concerning relevant social issues, the authors propose various techniques that foster open dialogue as well as different settings and activities in which these discussions can occur (Capacity Building Series, 2011). Since there is plenty of research illustrating the importance of oral communication in learning and retention (Sousa, 2011), the need for establishing a positive rapport with students, along with a respectful and open classroom culture, cannot be downplayed. In classrooms centered on this type of “grand conversation” dialogue, “students engage in conversation in order to share, shape, and improve their understanding of a text or a topic or a problem. They engage in conversation in order to move their thinking forward” (Capacity Building Series, 2011; p.1). Blended with the proponents and agreements laid out for the “courageous conversation”, such as maintaining enthusiasm, comfort, and honesty with the issues, effective social justice dialogue in the middle or lower grades is possible as well.

As other advocates for civil discourse emphasize (McAvoy & Hess, 2014; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Singleton & Linton, 2006), the authors here also acknowledge the importance of modeling the expected behavior and dialogue techniques (Capacity Building Series, 2011). Skills and protocols, such as collaborating to explore all possible explanations to expand critical thinking and inquiry, need to be explained and modeled. As noted in McAvoy & Hess (2014), a common obstacle for teachers is holding back the tendency to be the center of attention and instead guide the conversations among students, anticipating unexpected responses and creating prompts when necessary (Capacity Building Series, 2011).

Some of these prompts include the following: monitoring student engagement before, during and after discussions; expect misconceptions and allow for them at first before clarifying; paraphrase certain responses and ask other students to clarify or restate their contributions; play devil's advocate or ask students to elaborate on their positions, to increase critical thinking; use wait time while prompting wider participation and further thinking. Some specific questions for the latter prompts include those such as, "What's the big idea here? ...What connections can you make? ...Tell me more" (p.2). While these prompts are effective scaffolding steps, they also lead to students feeling more comfortable and prepared for these conversations, while increasing the chances for transfer of meaning and student responsibility.

Creating an environment in which students feel comfortable and safe is vital for these social justice conversations to be successful. As explained in the article on the grand conversation, "[Students] are more eager to co-operate when they feel comfortable in their classroom and connected to their teacher and classmates. They are more willing to take risks as learners when they feel safe in their learning environment" (Capacity Building Series, 2011; p.3). Recognizing that there will be differences in opinion and discussing this beforehand is also emphasized again in this piece, a common theme for this type of open dialogue (Capacity Building Series, 2011). In groups, students brainstorm questions such as, "Is it always necessary for people to agree? How can people disagree on an issue while remaining respectful and keeping the conversation going?"

Moreover, the students react to how the teacher presents himself or herself. Therefore, I tried to appear as prepared and comfortable as possible before and during these conversations, getting permission from administration beforehand and notifying parents of the broad scope of our plans. However, this transparency in my plans still did not prevent some backlash from

parents followed by some censorship, despite my good intentions and seemingly open communication. In retrospect, I could have been more transparent and specific with my plans ahead of time.

Some learning goals for the “grand conversation” or social justice dialogue in general include the following: use of effective and respectful dialogue techniques; ability to communicate and participate with one’s own opinion based on the information; acknowledging differences in opinion; understanding of the topic or issue (Capacity Building Series, 2011). Different settings for effective social justice dialogue other than full or small group discussion include the following: inquiry circles, questioning the author, math or literature Congresses, four corners, classical or role-play debates, and think-pair-share activities. General suggestions for engaging in the “grand conversation”, with or without social justice issues, overlap with the ideas from the other articles (McAvoy & Hess, 2014; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Singleton & Linton, 2006) and include the following: listen with an open mind; build on what others say and offer support; ask questions; be respectful and don’t interrupt the speaker; don’t take language personally and be ready to reconsider one’s own perspective after hearing from others (Capacity Building Series, 2011).

### **Racial Awareness for Open, Interracial Dialogue in the Classroom**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2015 Population survey, the Racial/Ethnic demographics of the United States are as follows: 62% White, 12% Black, 18% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 3% Other (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Mass incarceration in America today, the harsh reality that 1 in 3 Black men will be imprisoned at some point in their lives, is also a series of policies and laws designed to keep people of Color essentially unable to achieve upward mobility following prison (Alexander, 2012). Moreover, most of those Black and Hispanic citizens who

went to prison received that sentence as a direct result of the “War on Drugs” that discriminated against people of Color, with laws such as giving higher sentences for crack than cocaine, essentially the same drug but the former of which was more often used by Blacks and the latter more used by Whites. Rather than dumping all of this information on my students at once, a more effective technique seems to be to expose these harsh truths through our class conversations on topics such as racism. Or on other suitable issues, providing students with the initial necessary information (e.g. directions, starting questions) and then having them uncover these truths themselves may make more of an impact and lead to them pursuing these issues on their own. This investment in their own learning is another primary goal of this social justice education and dialogue.

Various sources put forth similar strategies toward achieving constructive social justice education. Sensoy & DiAngelo (2012) lay out their basic tenants of social justice dialogue and then offer planned reactions toward common “Yeah, But...” rebuttals they often hear in response to their efforts for social equity. They define the concept of social justice education with a set of principles including but not limited to the following: acknowledging that we as individuals are also part of social groups and these groups are treated unequally in society; engaging in self-reflection in one’s own socialization and position in society within these groups; and committing to an ongoing process to right the wrongs of social injustice. Based on the preceding principles, someone pursuing social justice practice must be able to do the following three things and then act on them in efforts to make society more just: recognize that discrimination towards the minoritized or oppressed group occurs on both individual and group levels; understand one’s own place within these relations of stratification; and think critically about incoming

information. The authors refer to this combination of principle and action as “critical social justice literacy” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014; p.xviii).

Preparing for common rebuttals within this social justice dialogue is vital. This equips the teacher to play the role of devil’s advocate, as suggested in the McAvoy & Hess (2014) and Capacity Building Series (2011) articles, as a way to draw out stronger arguments from students, and to simply have the knowledge of all opinions on the issues. For example, I as the teacher could be in the role of devil’s advocate and claim, “oppression is just human nature and there will always be injustice in the world” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). In doing so, I would try to draw the following reactions and questions from my students, “Who is that that is making this claim and what social group is he or she from?” The reason being is that it is usually a person in the dominant group (e.g. white; male; Christian) who claims that there will always be oppression. Furthermore, a more productive way to formulate the “human nature” argument and another reaction I would try to draw would be that, throughout history there has always been people fighting and overcoming injustice. Since analogies and metaphors are great strategies to engage students and increase transfer and retention, I described analogies between past and present during these discussions as well (Sousa, 2011). For example, civil rights activists fought for integration and basic rights in the 1960s. They fought and succeeded to overcome injustices (e.g. discriminatory voting laws). Similarly, people today in movements such as “Black Lives Matter” are fighting to overcome very similar examples of institutional racism.

Acclaimed anti-racist activist and author of the 2007 book *White like me*, Tim Wise defines racism the following way: “a system of inequality perpetuated by practices, policies and procedures that treat people institutional differently on the basis of race... it is just like any other ‘ism’, capitalism, communism, it is a system that perpetuates inequality” (R.E.A.L. talk audio,

minute 40). Wise goes on to argue that some of these practices, policies, and procedures unintentionally perpetuate this system of racism and some intentionally do so. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) define racism as “a systemic relationship of unequal power between White people and people of Color” (p.119). Both definitions, along with many others, contend that racism is an entire institution that reestablishes this state of unequal power, resulting in oppression and discrimination toward people of Color. Racism, classism, sexism, ageism and others are systems of policies that keep the marginalized group oppressed. Explaining what it takes to make change, a quote from Amobi (2007) states, “To be anti-racist is active. To be non-racist is to passively allow racism to continue. To close the achievement gap, we must be aggressively anti-racist” (p.5). Talking about issues such as these with students in class may be difficult but it is necessary to raise our collective social consciousness in efforts for change.

### **Acknowledging but Embracing Differences in Class**

Acknowledging our similarities as human beings while acknowledging our differences is possible. These two actions are not mutually exclusive. Raising social awareness and consciousness is most likely to be achieved through a variety of ways, with conversations being a main strategy, with others being class or community projects. Moreover, another goal of this social dialogue is to learn more about the differences between the people taking part in the dialogue: where they come from and what experiences they can share. In a classroom setting, experiences may be similar but there will also undoubtedly be differences, it is just a matter of digging them out. Embracing our differences through projects, discussion groups, and other examples of collaboration can be a way to unite people of different backgrounds while still acknowledging the social injustices that exist toward some of these groups. Through her research, Picower (2011) found that after novice teachers who engaged in these social justice

discussions with one another as colleagues and confronted them head on, their ability to teach social justice in their classroom improved. This finding supports the notion that collaboration and communication among fellow teachers has positive outcomes for students and student achievement. These results are promising and seem to illustrate that the more opportunities we have to discuss these topics with people across various backgrounds, the more successful these initiatives can be.

Examples of how this type of dialogue can unfold in the younger grades are explained in various research as well (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005). The initiative began when a third grade teacher took advantage of an overheard racial slur, turning the experience into a very successful teachable moment. The teacher conducted a class meeting in which the students “raised issues and questions about their different skin colors, languages, cultures, and family backgrounds” (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005; p.35). After these conversations, the third grade class spent weeks researching their differences using the Internet, magazines, newspapers, trips, and interviews with family members. To conclude the unit, students “cooked, wrote poetry, made self-portraits, and, finally, wrote reports about different aspects of the cultural mosaic they came to value in their classroom community” (p.35). Even if this specific unit was over and ended successfully, the students were now equipped with a foundational knowledge that if coupled with passion and interest in these topics (i.e. sense and meaning), further pursuit and investigations could occur.

During the first weeks of school, after explaining our plans for the year, I acknowledged my place and my privilege as a white, male. However, I made it known that I wish for equality for all, and the clearest path toward that goal lies with those in front of me, the students. Educating each other, particularly the younger population, on these controversial issues and having these difficult conversations is what will effect change.

Literally as I am typing this, the opening to the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics is on the television in the background. I just listened to Maya Angelou's words on a commercial, wisely advising us not to dismiss our differences but also to recognize that we are alike in more ways that we are not. "We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike." Talking openly and respectfully with each other about the issues that divide us will lead us to overcome the things that divide us. Race, as discussed earlier, is socially manufactured, but it still matters. Later in the Olympic opening performance, the Brazilian musician went on to perform and exclaim that we need to break through the barriers of racism and sexism. It is through these "courageous conversations" that this can occur.



### **Methodology**

Despite the many advantages that come with living in the United States, it remains a fact that prejudices and discrimination, via racism, sexism and other forms, still infiltrate our society in the present-day. These systematic and discriminatory policies, practices, and procedures negatively affect millions of people who make up the marginalized groups in America today-- People of Color, women, the older population. These groups undergo mistreatment in varying and different degrees, but the effects are still impactful and long-term. Public knowledge regarding social justice issues such as these, as well as other controversial and current topics - war, gay marriage, mass incarceration, politics - affects social consciousness and election outcomes, which then affects public policy. Increasing the knowledge base about these important issues starts with our families and our teachers talking with the youth. Education is the key to doing away with the injustices that still plague our country today. Regularly having the “courageous conversation” with students about these topics should lead to a heightened awareness of the realities of the world. Just talking openly with each other about the facts should mold a more accepting and open-minded generation of people, which studies have pointed out is already occurring. I think that my 8th graders and I have set up a classroom culture this year that is open and accepting of all, yet one that also includes discussions with people of differing opinions. As a result, I hope to see promising results while diving into my main research question of what happens when we engage in potentially uncomfortable dialogue. However, I did not begin this quest with the naivety that all would be smooth sailing.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

During the first week of school, I administered anonymous surveys via Google Forms regarding student comfort level discussing social issues as well as their current knowledge base

(see Appendix C). The responses to these questions provided me with a gauge regarding students' current level of comfort, experience, and knowledge in talking about these issues. I explained to the students what we will be doing this year (i.e. social justice civil discourse via our debates, "Real Talk" sessions, online forums, etc.) and why it is important and relevant to them. I later administered a very similar post-survey during the last week of November also via Google docs (see Appendix D).

I sent a parent letter home during the first week and updated my website accordingly as well. I started a student journaling rotation of roughly twice a week concerning social issues and/or current events. These journals were used as the warm-up along with something kinesthetic, such as a "Brain Break." Our "Real Talk" sessions are held roughly twice a week as well and usually center off of a current topic from either CNN Student News (e.g. North Carolina protests against police brutality) or from Scholastic News magazine subscription (e.g. popular vote vs. Electoral College). These topics were usually current, from the weekend or the week and related to the curriculum or to world, national, or local affairs. The topic was sometimes chosen by me, sometimes voted on by the class via anonymous popular vote (e.g. heads down, raising hands). Students sometimes brought up these topics sporadically in class at which point we discussed them accordingly. I began with anonymous online questions to ease the students into the conversation, with these issues being potentially sensitive or awkward to discuss. I aimed to minimize those feelings while creating an open environment where critical thinking occurs. I conducted these conversations with my first two periods of 8th grade students, with each period one hour in duration. In my first period class, I have 28 students (18 White, 5 Asian, 3 Indian, 2 Black; 14 Female, 14 Male). In my second period class, I have 27 students (18 White, 5 Black, 3 Indian, 1 Hispanic; 16 Female, 11 Male).

Before holding live in-class discussions on these topics, I explicitly laid out the following rules or guidelines during these discussions and had reminders on the walls: being open-minded to others' perspectives and opinions; remaining civil and kind even with people who have differing viewpoints; not attacking one another but instead engaging in civil discourse; being aware of facts prior to voicing an opinion; acknowledging that it is okay not to know something as long as that is admitted- talking things out is how we learn from each other; being aware of one's feelings and emotions and recognizing that it is okay to feel uncomfortable, as long as we remain respectful and appropriate we can talk about these things and hopefully get more comfortable while becoming more socially conscious, accepting and open-minded. As I wrote in my literature review, there are certain strategies that have proved effective in prior studies and I implemented some of these as well: explaining the expectations to students using a discussion rubric and a student checklist as guides (see Appendix E); showing students videos of good civil discourse or of important teaching points; and providing students with starter sentences as a scaffolding technique (e.g. "I agree/disagree with most of what \_\_\_\_\_ has said, but I also think that \_\_\_\_\_.") (McAvoy & Hess, 2014).

Regarding journaling, these writing sessions took place roughly twice a week, mandatory at the beginning of class and then optional at the end of the period on some days as an option when students complete all mandatory work for the day. Students kept their journals in the classroom if they chose, but most just kept it with their binders. Almost every journal entry consisted of two parts: 1. Responding to a prompt or question from me (e.g. "How do you think a person from the opposite sex and another race could be treated differently than you in certain situations?"; "What do you think about the current U.S. presidential election?") 2. Any topic the student wants. I held students accountable for their journaling by using it as a participation grade

and I only read their journals if they allowed me to. Another use of journals was for students to write in them after the “Real Talk” conversations. Some example prompts are as follows: How did these conversations affect you? What thoughts crossed your mind? How did you feel in general before during after? What did you learn about the issues? What did you learn about yourself?.

I used exit slips as an assessment tool once or twice per week based on the lessons and class discussions, using questions similar to the preceding journal prompts from post-conversation. I also conducted student interviews with four students beginning about one month into school and then again a month later and with the same preceding questions regarding these conversations. I spoke with the students for roughly three to five minutes each on each occasion. We waited until no other student was in the area and used my classroom as the setting, before lunch and directly after second period were dismissed.

On the first day of school, I split half the class and gave one group numbers 1-14 and other group same thing, without talking students found the other person with the same number. After finding the person with the same number, they talked about their summer, expectations for this year, and other things of their choice. I then directed the students to find someone with the number of factor of 24 and discuss one or two of the most awkward or uncomfortable experiences they have ever had in school. Then they would move again and find a new partner (e.g. multiple of 2) and discuss some of the things they see in the news or hear on television, internet or radio. Finally, students quietly returned to their seats and we discussed why we started with this activity.

I questioned the class and had them brainstorm in groups what the purpose of the activity was before revealing my intentions. I told them to focus on the last two sessions particularly,

talking about controversial but important real life issues and then the awkwardness that may come from this. I then explained how this year, we will be engaging in conversations - whole group, small group, partners - about things we are learning in this class, such as slavery, and also about things that still permeate society today, such as racism. Addressing the students, I explained the following: “These issues may be uncomfortable for some of you, as they might be for me, but as long as we are respectful to one another and remain civil even when we disagree, we can learn a lot from each other and all will be okay.”

I explained that we will be conducting weekly “Real Talk” conversations and debates about issues in the news that affect us as citizens. I expressed a form of the following: “We are all different in many ways and we need to acknowledge that society sometimes treats us differently based on these differences. This is called discrimination. Since you had no control over how you were made, do not feel guilty over it, but we all hold prejudices. These prejudices are just thoughts and feelings, but when acted upon this is called discrimination. For example, many people were, and still are, prejudiced against Black people in this country. This is a feeling, a prejudice. When laws, such as segregation, are enacted, these prejudices become discrimination (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).”

I was open with the students and with the parents at Back to School Night and with my letter home that will be talking about sensitive issues this year. However, I advised the students not to be afraid to voice their opinion, I only suggested for them to think about what they will say before they say it, not to hold them back but just so they can put forth their best argument. I advised them to share their own experiences but also try to put themselves in their classmates’ shoes and think about their experiences as well. We are all different but we are all very similar too, more similar than we are different. Race is not genetic, it was invented by society, escalated

in the 1670's during the beginning of slavery in the New World. Still though, I explained to my students that even though you may think, as I do, that everyone should be treated equally, this sadly is just not the reality in today's world, as I wrote about in my literature review section of this paper. However, I emphasized that through our debates and just our daily conversations, we can learn about these issues and share experiences with one another so that we can spread these ideas for change and more equality.

To prepare for our debates, during class discussion I projected examples of expectations and criteria on the front board and then explained (e.g. communicates clearly and offers evidence to support arguments; see Appendix F). We discussed expectations for these discussions and debates with explicit examples. I did not use these checklists or rubrics to assess the students during the discussions and debates because I did not wish to diminish the authenticity of the students' interactions with each other. I did not wish to make them self-conscious about how I was assessing them. Instead, I informally assessed these discussion sessions by monitoring, observing, and asking questions to ensure the students remained on task. I assessed the students' understanding of the content through their written classwork and homework on the topic (when applicable). As I did for the student interviews, I waited until the sessions were over and then wrote down as much pertinent information related to the discussions, debates, and interviews as I could remember. These notes served as useful data for future activities and informed me as to how the students were responding to our conversations on these controversial topics.

We held various small group discussion sessions regarding current events and political issues throughout the first few months as well. For example, I assigned the students to watch at least 15 minutes of the three presidential debates, for which we organized small group then large group discussion sessions the following day. We also watched CNN Student News roughly

twice a week, which consist of ten-minute videos of current national and global news stories.

Following these viewings, we engaged in discussion, either with pairs, small, groups, and/or as a full class. In most cases, students would write reflections in their journals or on exit slips based on their thoughts or feelings with the particular issue, national minimum wage for example, as well as with how they felt the discussion went. For some issues, students would anonymously vote on an issue, for example, whether zoos are ethical, or whether “selfie” ballots should be banned, writing their response on small pieces of paper. I would then read out the responses to the class while three volunteers (who correctly answered relevant trivia questions) would record the responses on the front board, with “Yes”, “No”, and “Other” being the three columns. The real-time results generated productive conversations during and following the tallies.

Alternatively, when we debated certain issues, such as the popular vote vs. the Electoral College in late September 2016 (before it became a news headline once Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College and thus the election), after or instead of tallying votes on the board, students would first debate in small groups before going to the side of the room they favored (e.g. popular vote or Electoral College). They would then select representatives to speak on the group’s behalf and to put forth their strongest arguments.

### **Data Analysis**

I collected both quantitative and qualitative data through my pre-survey and post-survey. The results for the quantitative questions were automatically compiled into descriptive statistics by Google Forms. I analyzed this data, which was presented in the form of bar graphs and percentages, and compared pre and post results. The immediate results from the initial pre-survey allowed me to see where the students were in terms of their comfort, knowledge, and preferences regarding some of the specific issues as well as the overall plan for discussing

current controversial issues. This helped me guide the initial conversations, and then the journal responses, exit slips, and observations over the next three months allowed me to gauge their levels on a more current basis and how we were to proceed. I was also able to analyze how often students spoke with their family and friends (separate questions) about current events and social issues in early September, compared with their percentages in late November. This gave me insights regarding whether these discussions about current events and social justice could be affecting their thoughts and conversations on these topics outside of the classroom, which was one of the main goals of the current research (specifically to increase this dialogue which would increase awareness, and which is what I found).

I coded the qualitative survey responses as well as the journaling and exit slips to identify major feelings and thoughts among my students following each discussion or each topic. When coding the students' exit slips, I went through each pile and pulled out the most common general responses. When coding the students' journal responses, I circled the major running themes and keywords that I saw tending to repeat. Ten a priori themes were created for the data analysis, focusing on the following: degree of comfort when talking about these issues (e.g. comfortable, anxious, nervous), degree of engagement in the conversation or debate (e.g. enjoyed large group debate more, preferred discussing current events), and then the students' opinion on the specific issue (e.g. Columbus Day or "Indigenous Peoples' Day"). Although thoughts and feelings varied from topic to topic, some common responses included the following: the majority of students were mostly comfortable with most topics, most students preferred large-group debates but preferred smaller group sessions when simply discussing the issues (both current and historical), and many of the topics, such as our discussion about Columbus Day, made them sad or angry.

### **Ethics Review**



As I wrote earlier, I notified parents with a letter home regarding how these potentially controversial conversations are part of our current events curriculum and we would be engaging in these talks in the most respectful way possible, explicitly defining the expectations. On September 22, 2016 for Back to School Night at our middle school, I also explained our plans for discussing these social justice issues as well as the presidential election and those issues. To ensure confidentiality and protect the privacy rights of all those involved, I used pseudonyms for the students, schools and towns. I told parents that I am open to any and all questions and concerns from them and I welcome their thoughts and feedback. I also spoke with my administration prior to beginning this program, just to confirm they were on board.

### **Conclusion**

Through these “Real Talk” conversations and class debates, I aimed to help my students become more open-minded, critical thinkers who can empathize with those around them. I hope to see them become more aware of social issues in today’s world and then become more active in learning more about them, while spreading these ideas for social change. If these positive results can be achieved, measured by the different forms of data collection, such as surveys, journals, and interviews, then I will feel like the entire approach and philosophy was a success. However, I do believe that results may come but they may not be rapid, as it may take time for lessons learned to sink in and resonate, as often is the case. The findings of this research have indeed informed me of how I can implement similar programs in the future, providing insights on what should be kept and what should be tweaked. I hope these potentially uncomfortable social discussions prepare my students to become more conscious of themselves and those around them going forward. Moreover, I hope the conversations prepare my students for dialogue and experiences they will undoubtedly face in various settings as they age. Social change may not

occur overnight or even over a few months, but educating the youth through discussions about these issues seems like the best starting point. Furthermore, even though I was in the role of teacher/facilitator, I am always open to learning and I learned a great deal from the students just as they learn from one another and hopefully from me. Just talking with each other about important, impactful issues and sharing different experiences will lead to a more accepting and open-minded population. This is a main objective I still strive to achieve.

### Findings

These past three months of “research” have been exciting and eye-opening in many ways. I put “research” in quotes because although this experience was indeed teacher research, it was so much more than that as well. It was a shared experience between people of similar ages and hometowns but various interests and backgrounds, more similarities though than differences. As the teacher and facilitator of these experiences, looking back, there are activities and actions I would have done differently, such as getting different perspectives before making a decision on a parent email, but there are also activities that went very well and that I would keep the same. Some incidents that occurred and decisions that were made were very frustrating and out of my control, but as a group, we adjusted and kept talking, even if it was not the topic I would have chosen first.

After compiling and analyzing my data, from surveys and exit slips to journals and interviews, there were some big picture takeaways along with some important and meaningful details. Seeking to answer the question, “What happens when I discuss controversial social issues with my 8th grade class?” I came to see that many things happen before, during, and after these conversations occur-- moments of excitement, silence, and/or tension during discussions; various impassioned student and parent feedback; input from colleagues, advice from administration; some second-guessing on my part with planning that spanned from meticulous to “off-the-cuff” and with wide-ranging results-- only to list some of the outcomes.

As expected, there was a wide range of student opinion on both the individual issues themselves as well as the overall social justice dialogue as a whole. The following response from an exit slip earlier in the year really took me aback at first read. It came as a response to our discussions about the CNN Student News of the day and subsequent discussions, having to

do with the Black Lives Matter protests in North Carolina. The directions were to write down how you felt when discussing these issues and any thoughts you have on them. The exit slip, from a female student named Jackie, read as follows, “I don’t think you should talk about cops like that I find it disrespectful. Please don’t share your racial opinion. cops [sic] save our lives, and we shouldn’t show them disrespectful in any way.” Again, I was very surprised after reading this because I had thought I presented the discussion as impartially as possible and with utmost respect toward police officers. There was no other negative feedback from the 54 other students who responded. Other exit slip responses that were more common (and anonymous) included,

- “I feel better about controversial topics because I understand them better.”
- “It was eye opening to watch Charlotte and what is happening in the world.”
- “I felt comfortable talking about these issues and I thought it was appropriate to talk about it. I learned about other perspectives on these [sic] topics.”

In reading these responses, I felt satisfied and pleased that the students overall were seemingly becoming more aware of these social issues and they were becoming more comfortable talking about them. However, the very few negative responses, such as the one described above from Jackie, along with some students writing they preferred less controversial topics to prevent any arguments, still bothered me more than I anticipated.

During my lunch the same day of the “Charlotte protests” exit slip, I went to my own journal and wrote some of the talking points from the lesson, such that the vast majority of police officers are probably good people who dedicate their lives to saving the lives of others. However, just like in any profession there are a small few who may not be trained correctly and make mistakes, and another small (possibly overlapping) minority who may be racist and who

may act with racial bias, turning prejudice into discrimination or worse. Moreover, a mistake from a police officer could result in the death of an innocent person, thus demonstrating the huge responsibility of these citizens and one of the reasons they deserve our respect, along with risking their own lives.

In my discussion with the Jackie the following day regarding her exit slip, I reiterated that I respect police officers and how I myself have close family and friends who are police officers. When I asked her about the exit slip (to which she wrote her name on without specific direction to do so) she replied that the “Black Lives Matter thing really bugs her,” since the exit slip instructions were to respond to our discussions about the CNN Student News of the day and subsequent discussions, having to do with the Black Lives Matter protests in North Carolina. I thanked her for expressing her opinion honestly and respectfully and asked her to continue to do so in the future. After reflecting on this incident and discussing it with the student, especially considering her openness and comfort in writing this and talking about it with me (albeit in private), as well as her use of manners, I came to see it as a symbol for how students, like older citizens, will have clashing viewpoints. Moreover, it was the first tangible example of how outside perspectives (e.g. family members) may sway students’ opinions.

Again, I have witnessed a wide range of reactions to the various discussions and debates so far this year. Emotions ranged from discomfort or awkwardness to excitement and even “aha” moments, such as those from Columbus Day, with many students first learning about the atrocities that Christopher Columbus committed against the American Indians (which pushed some states to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day). I am pleased to see that the majority of the student and parent feedback has been positive, with plentiful data from students and from talking with parents in student conferences and at social events. The previous example

detailed one of the few negative reactions that were shared. To demonstrate a viewpoint supporting this social justice dialogue and the conversations about inequalities around the world, in the words of an anonymous student taken from the Google post-survey:

I think that most of us at this age are becoming mature enough to be able to make the right decision and not have things censored for our protection. We need to be able to [sic] experience these things...it is important in today's society and for our future. If we experience these things, we could better ourselves in the future and not make the same mistakes we have in the past.

Regarding student engagement, it was apparent throughout our discussions so far and through reflections (e.g. exit slips, journals), most students seemed engaged but some were not and may have had difficulty relating to the topics or finding interest in them. Among other explanations, this could be a result of mere disinterest or possibly as a result of my delivery. Therefore, another goal of mine came to be to engage these seemingly disinterested students. I tried different approaches such as arranging seats differently, allowing for more students choice, and giving the students the chance to have a say in our discussion topics and activities through a vote. These things did seem to help in bringing more students into the conversation.

Trying to keep the big picture in mind has always been important to me, so I tried to harness that approach to compile three themes that I think the data revealed. Overall, I am content with how the whole plan unfolded. However, I am still somewhat unsure of just how far to go with certain issues with people of this age, but hopefully as I continue these practices for the remainder of the year and beyond, this picture will start to become more clear. After engaging in these discussions, viewing and analyzing the feedback, the three central themes of

the current research that came through were as follows: benefits of social justice dialogue; the issues; and empathy

### **Benefits of Social Justice Dialogue: Awareness and Engagement along with Moments of Tension**

Comparing the results from my pre-survey to my post-survey, both administered via Google forms, there was growth on various measures. Students (N=55) responded to various questions asking them to rate their current levels (e.g. comfort, knowledge etc) on a scale from 1 to 10. Other questions regarding how often students engage in different types of dialogue used a scale of “Never” to “Almost Daily.” Responding to the following question in the pre-survey in September, “Roughly how often do you talk with your family at home or elsewhere about controversial social issues, such as racism, classism and sexism?,” 6% (n=3) reported talking about these things “almost daily” while 25% (n=13) reported discussions once a week (see Figure 1). Responding to the same question in the post-survey in November, 25% (n=12) reported talking about these things “almost daily” while 40% (n=19) reported discussions once a week. This result showed an obvious increase in dialogue outside of the classroom, with family particularly, which is promising and was a goal of the present research as well. Social justice dialogue among friends increased over the three months as well, with percentages of “almost daily” dialogue increasing from 13% to 18% and “once a week” dialogue increasing from 27% to 36% (see Figures 3 and 4). In November’s post survey (N=51), on a scale of 1 (least aware) to 10 (most aware), 39% of respondents (n=20) ranked their current level of awareness of social issues and current events as a “9 out of 10” while only 10% (n=5) ranked their awareness at the beginning of the year as a “9 out of 10” (see Figure 5).

Figure 1. Pre-survey results (early September). Talking with *Family*.

Roughly how often do you talk with your family at home or elsewhere about controversial social issues, such as racism, classism and sexism? (Only check one box)

(53 responses)

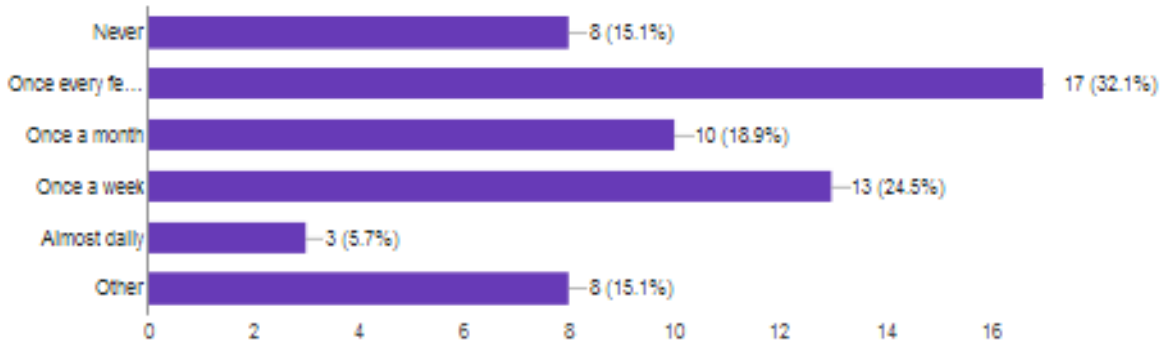


Figure 2. Post-survey results (late November). Talking with *Family*.

Roughly how often do you talk with your family at home or elsewhere about controversial social issues, such as racism, classism and sexism? (Only check one box)

(48 responses)

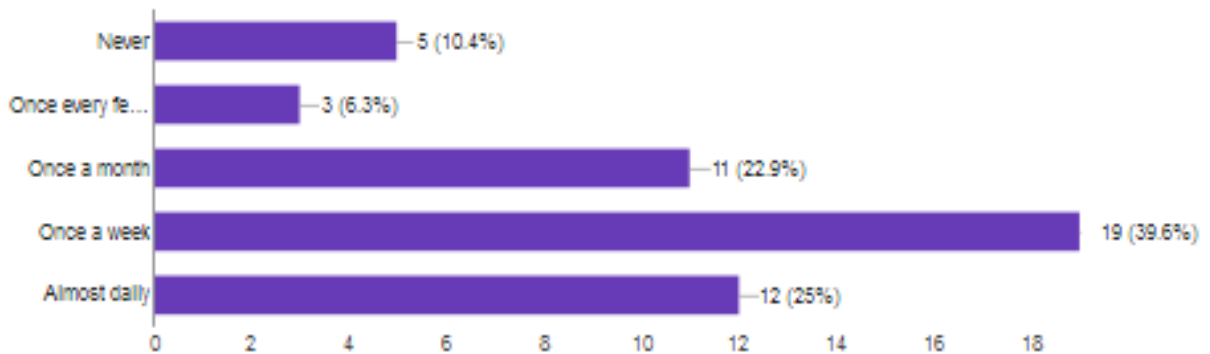




Figure 3. Pre-survey results (early September). Talking with *Friends*.

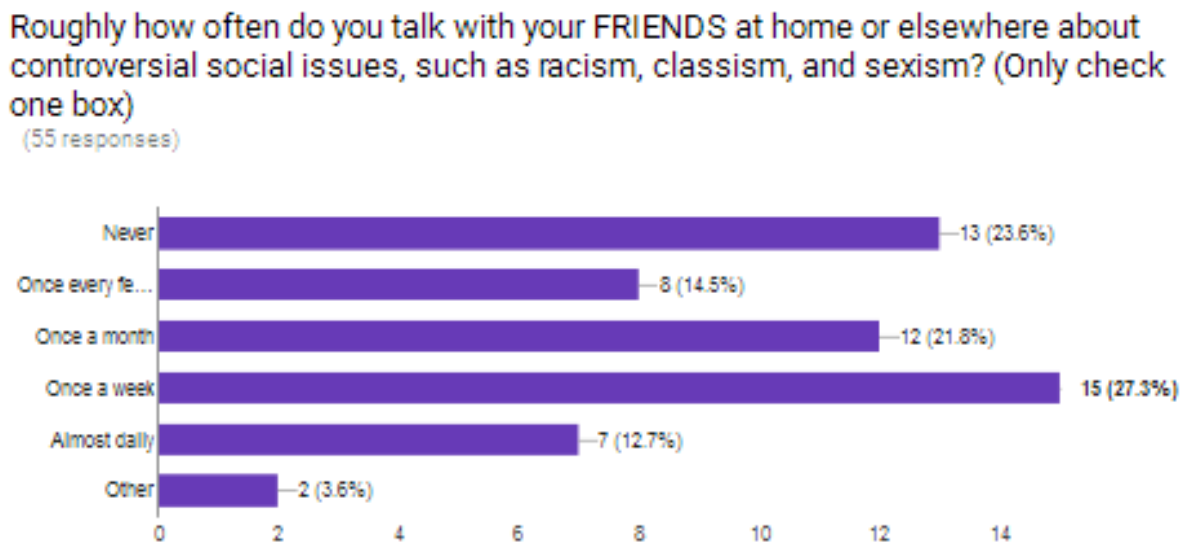


Figure 4. Post-survey results (late November). Talking with *Friends*.

Roughly how often do you talk with your FRIENDS at home or elsewhere about controversial social issues, such as racism, classism and sexism? (Only check one box)

(50 responses)

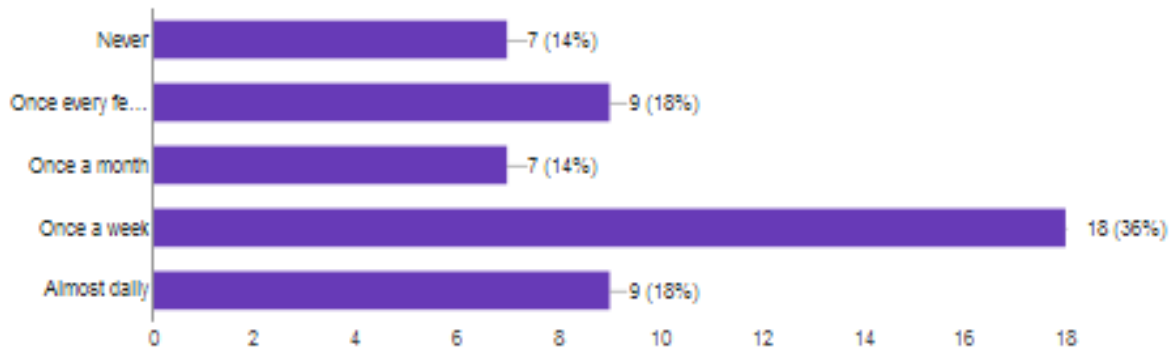
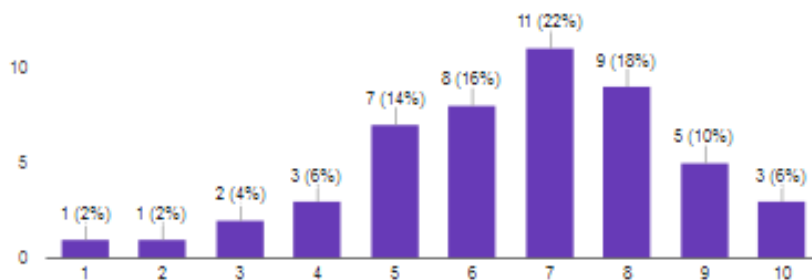


Figure 5. Post-survey: Levels of awareness September (top) vs. November (below)

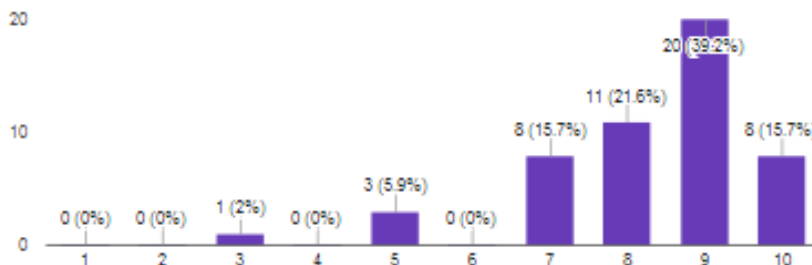
Before this year began, rate your awareness level on social issues and current events.

(50 responses)



Right now, rate your awareness level on social issues and current events.

(51 responses)



Responding to the following question in the post-survey in September, “Roughly how often do you talk with your family at home or elsewhere about general current events?,” 45% (n=22) of respondents reported “almost daily.” This shows that nearly half of the students discuss current events with their families nearly on a daily basis. With many current events in the present day related to social justice issues, this dialogue between family members will hopefully increase awareness. With the emphasis on empathy, gathering the facts, and looking at all sides to an issue, I am hopeful these 8th graders can bring strong, self-generated arguments and questions to the table. Just as promising as the previous statistic is the fact that 37% (n=19) of respondents reported “almost daily” conversations with friends regarding current events while

35% (n=18) reported discussions “once a week.” This shows that these 8th graders spark the conversations with each other as well and may even be the ones starting the conversations at home. This could be a question for future research, that is, who is the one starting the conversation and how long does it usually last.

**The Issues: If there is a line, where is it? (parent and administration feedback)**

Although many of our discussions and debates went smoothly, others were not as open and fluid as I would have liked, but I was not completely surprised either. An example of this is the North Carolina protests against police brutality and organized by the Black Lives Matter movement. Some students were more comfortable speaking than others and most preferred talking in smaller groups for these more sensitive issues. I remained impartial as possible, voicing both sides to issues and trying to present the facts as clearly as I could. With the discussion of Black Lives Matter, I did see some of the few students of Color in my class seeming somewhat self-conscious, avoiding eye-contact or appearing tense, while others openly expressed their opinion. A student openly voiced her support for Colin Kaepernick along with police officers, citing one example. Regarding this topic, we discussed the Black Lives Matter movement in the context of their support for Colin Kaepernick, an NFL quarterback who stirred controversy by kneeling for the national anthem to peacefully show his support of civil rights for African Americans in this country. Moreover, as with the preceding controversy, other issues were also shut down before we even had the opportunity to debate openly and respectfully about them.

Based on my experience this Fall, when engaging in social justice dialogue with classes in the future I will expect certain topics to be censored or shut down by administration prior to even engaging in the discussion. Even after getting permission first, I should expect some parent

backlash in some cases over the sensitivity or appropriateness of a certain issue, in the form of emails, phone calls, and parent meetings, which may lead to administration again putting a stop to the dialogue. In writing all these possibilities, I am not passing judgment here, but rather just stating what could possibly occur, and what did actually occur with my current research and my experiences over the last three months.

I should expect some awkwardness and discomfort from students at times, and I should expect them to voice their concerns over it as well. I should expect differing opinions from my students, and I should be prepared to mediate certain conversations appropriately. Despite these seemingly negative results, in my opinion and based on my experience, the overall benefits of lessons learned in social justice, current events, and most importantly, sheer empathy, that are derived from these conversations certainly outweigh the drawbacks. In my opinion, the rewards outweigh the risks.

While interviewing a male student about his opinions on the class discussions, he voiced his argument for the students to be able to choose which side they were on with regards to these controversial issues and argued that as 8th graders they are old enough and mature enough to handle it. When I asked him what he thought about this scenario having the possibility to make people feel uncomfortable, he defended his stance further, "I think it should be kinda open, like a court, and at our age a lot of things do [make people feel uncomfortable]. It shouldn't matter because it's our opinion. I think it could definitely be controversial but it should." As I was listening to him voice his preferences, I agreed with a lot of what he said. I think 8th graders can have healthy, respectful conversations or disagreements with each other without any harm ensuing on either party. As long as we follow the guidelines of respect and fact-checking, it is possible for peers and even friends to have civil disagreements without taking the words

personally. Although I agreed with what this particular student was saying, I could not help but think that some of the specific issues he wanted to discuss we were most likely not going to get into. For example, this boy and a majority of the other boys in the class selected “gun control” as the major election issue they wanted to discuss and debate, a topic we discussed in small groups following one of the presidential debates but did not delve into further and was shut down only a few days before.

Before I had the chance to plan anything specific, certain issues were shut down by administration for reasons such as fear of parent complaints and more harm coming from these discussions than good. Some of these censored issues included “gun control” and peaceful protests against “The Star-Spangled Banner”, the United States national anthem. Regarding the other issue of the national anthem protests, despite this issue being on the front cover of the Scholastic magazine that the school supplies (which is actually really beside the point), administration sent a mass email to all of the Social Studies teachers in the school advising us not to use this lesson or discuss its contents in class. This email came as a result of parent complaints (email, meeting, and phone call from parents of one student) passionately voicing his and her concern. When I proposed giving their student an alternate assignment they still would not agree because they claimed a discussion or debate on this issue (even if I assigned groups) was “divisive” and would only lead to “more hate, more division, more racism.” When I countered with questions such as, “Isn't it important to talk about these [potentially controversial] issues in a civil matter and teach our children how to talk respectfully with one another about these issues?”, the parent responded that, “Yes it is, but this issue is just too raw and current.” I asked, “Is anyone getting hurt here?,” to which he answered with a question, “Say you get

positive reactions from most of your students but you negatively affect just one student, was it worth it?"

In response to this question, I was thinking that the only real risk is feeling uncomfortable, awkward, or offended and if this is the only risk then yes it is worth it. If one person is uncomfortable, he or she has learned about and empathized with just a small part of what people who have faced discrimination go through, with what people of Color have been going through for the last three centuries. I brought up several examples of peaceful protests from the past, such as Muhammad Ali protesting the Vietnam War and Jackie Robinson not standing for the national anthem, and connected it to Colin Kaepernick's stance, again asking whether anyone was hurt during these protests or from the dialogue following them. The parent responded that he thinks this issue should be reserved for college courses if any at all and said he thinks the issue should actually be ignored. I asked him if he thinks racism still exists today to which he said yes, but he blames it on the media and people labeling groups and pitting groups against one another, such as African Americans versus police. I then asked him how we can change oppression and inequality in society without talking about it. He replied that he thinks it contributes to a toxic society and does not want his children to be a part of it, saying he planned to pursue this issue with administration and strongly encouraged me to reconsider the following day's debate on the national anthem protests.

I told him I would think about it but that it was just too late of notice to drastically change all the plans. I received an email later that night from an administrator advising me to please change the debate topic. I spoke with several colleagues and my adviser in subsequent weeks, all of whom agreed that the discussion and debate sounded engaging and healthy. In a conversation with another teacher, she put it well: "Who is anyone to say that an entire group of people

should be 'ignored'? Okay, that is your opinion that it might spew more negativity, but a whole group of people think otherwise [in that we should be having this conversation]. These millions of people should just be ignored?" How is positive change supposed to occur without constructive dialogue? And as another colleague put it, these students will be of voting age within four years and now is the time to begin engaging in dialogue about real issues that are affecting society members. If a goal of us as educators is to prepare our students to become productive members of society, then we should prepare them to what they will be facing in society in four short years, such as voting and possibly even serving in our military.

As a result of this incident, coupled with high-media coverage involving police and African Americans during the Fall of 2016, our administration advised us to refrain from discussing certain issues, such as another article in *Scholastic* magazine concerning police brutality, and requested we come to him before engaging in any borderline issues. In effect, this limited the degree to which we could talk about certain issues. However, as a class we did debate and discuss various election issues, such as the Electoral College and immigration. The class did share their opinions in a respectful manner on these issues as well as others and did a good job connecting back to the historical content as well.

### **Empathy: Acknowledging and Embracing Differences**

This final theme could be a theme for my entire research plan and my entire year as a whole so far. My parents raised my brothers and me to follow the old Native American proverb of not judging someone until you have walked a mile in his moccasins. This definition of 'empathy' has been paraphrased to "put yourself in someone else's shoes", and is a running theme for my classes this year as we have tried to understand where various people of various backgrounds are coming from. In discussing many of these current national and global issues,



we have tried to put ourselves in the shoes of the people going through certain hardships. For example, when discussing the Syrian refugee crisis and the civil war going on in Syria right now, I tried to create an atmosphere of empathy, having the students imagine what it would be like to live every day in a war-torn nation, then connecting it back to the American Civil War and what our own country went through. This idea of empathy was central to many other group discussions as well, such as what the people protesting in North Carolina were protesting for, that being civil rights for people of Color. I tried to get the students to understand that unfortunately in today's society, people are treated differently based on their appearances or ways of life. Students watched a short cartoon video on empathy and privilege for homework then responded to questions online via Google Classroom (see Appendix H). For the most part, students constructed thoughtful and empathetic responses to the video. When asked about the lessons learned from this video, a student responded, "The meaning of the video in terms of the relationship between the snail and the caterpillar is like people who are different in many ways but still are still unified as friends...despite these differences. Like the caterpillar and snail we all have to be aware of others differences and respect them and it'll end up helping everyone." When asked about a time when he or she experienced unfair treatment for something beyond their control, another student added the following, "Once I was told to write something on the board in class and my friend had to also. My friend was taller so she had no problem writing what she had to write on the board, so when I said I couldn't write my thing down she didn't understand why. I had to explain to her that i was too short for my arm to reach the board. This made me feel smaller than I already was because I felt embarrassed and frustrated because I was shorter." Assigning this video and reflection in the beginning of the year effectively set the foundation for a running theme in our class and in our discussions on social justice issues, that

being the act of empathizing with others, especially those who have different obstacles facing them. Reading the students' responses, and listening to the students' in-class dialogue, including a group voicing their support for accepting Syrian refugees after imagining what their lives must be like, empathy remained a central theme. When discussing the popular vote and Electoral College, those supporting the popular vote reasoned how they would feel like the election was unfair if they won the popular vote but lost the election as a result of the Electoral College.

This consistent emphasis on empathy also helped students understand each other's differing perspectives a lot better. Students were able to effectively engage in civil disagreements without become agitated or offended. In a small group discussion on gun control (early in the year before this discussion topic was shut down by administration), two male students disagreed but saw each other's perspectives, with one supporting a ban on assault weapons, arguing that these weapons should be reserved for the military and the other reasoning that these weapons are okay as long as the background checks and licensing requirements are improved. An exit slip from that day's activity on the election issues echoed many other responses and made me feel good seeing that the students were not only engaging in "real talk" about real issues, but they were doing so respectfully. In neat handwriting on the small piece of index card, the card read, "Our discussion about the election was very thorough [sic], I felt that everybody respected everyone's opinion in the class conversation."

### **Implications**

After completing this research project, I came away with many different ideas and considerations for the future. As I briefly outlined in the Findings section of this paper, I will make some adjustments to planning and implementing these discussions on social justice issues, such as more explicitly informing parents, possibly with weekly email updates. Despite sending home parent letters with information regarding our current events curriculum as well as informing parents at Back to School night, I could still be more current and informative in relaying home our classroom discussion topics. However, even after informing families, I will still expect some backlash from parents and some censorship from administration, and depending on the issue and my priorities in leading a discussion about it, I myself will engage in respectful arguments with parents and administration, voicing my reasoning that the benefits of respectful debate about controversial issues. As argued by Shagoury & Miller Power (2012), middle-school and even elementary students can effectively debate these real life issues to an extent and with the proper modeling and scaffolding. Therefore, I plan to continue to model appropriate discussion formats and interactions, through rubrics with expected criteria as well as with starter-sentences such as, “I see what you mean when you say \_\_\_\_\_, but I just think \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_” (McAvoy & Hess, 2014).

In reflecting on this research, I came to a realization. A large part of this experience was just that, experience. I thought back to my first full-on experience teaching during my student-teaching experience at the end of receiving my undergraduate degree in Education. It was through teaching a group of students and just diving into the profession without another teacher really leading or sharing the direction. I can compare my student teaching experience to the current experience discussing social justice issues in a structured environment, fostering such

skills as critical thinking and empathy. I learned so much more about myself as a teacher and about the teaching profession as a whole through my student teaching experience than all of my Education courses combined, and this is not to say my professors or courses were inadequate because I did indeed learn from them. However, I think that experiencing the true act of teaching itself, making mistakes and learning from them, prepared me most for leading my own classroom. Similarly, I think that I could have read all the literature available on social justice dialogue, but until I was able to lead these discussions myself was I able to fully see what worked and could be used again, and what did not work and needed to be adjusted.

Before this experience, I had engaged in discussions about social justice issues in some of my classes, but these discussions took place in the “math lab” setting and only arose when students brought up a certain news headline in conversation. It was through these spur-of-the-moment discussions though that I saw real passion in students’ faces and heard it in their voices. From these observations along with my interest in current events and social justice issues, I aspired to take a proactive and more structured approach to discussing these issues this year with my 8th graders. Rather than waiting for the issues to arise sporadically, as they undoubtedly would have especially with the U.S. presidential election of 2016, I explicitly planned and implemented structured discussions and debates similar to those I researched beforehand (McAvoy & Hess, 2014; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), but also let some discussions go where they went. I was content to lead the full discussion many times but I was also pleased to see the students lead their small group sessions as well as the full class sessions at times, respectfully talking and debating with one another as I was only in the background to guide the conversation when necessary. Again though, it was through this experience that I was able to find these things out for myself. I read about how these experiences occurred for other educators but I really

developed meaning in what I was reading when I experienced it myself. Just like a student who applies a math concept to her own life or sees a news article on the Internet about a topic from science class, true learning occurs when people make sense and find meaning in a topic, with the latter being more important (Sousa, 2011). Through my research, I feel that I have achieved this goal. I am confident that I have approached and answered my research question to the best of my ability.

I have come to see what happens when I engage in “real talk” with my 8th grade students. I plan to continue this dialogue in the coming months as well as the coming years, reflecting on my progress and learning from my mistakes. This experience was exciting, challenging, and rewarding. I learned a great deal from my students and based on their feedback and my observations, I am confident they were challenged and engaged in the process. I hope my students continue to learn from each other and that we can all be more productive, empathetic members of society as a result of this dialogue.

### **Obstacles**

The obstacles of the current research were challenging yet also educational. As I touched on in previous chapters of this paper, there were various obstacles both inside and outside of the classroom that I felt obligated to face, to an extent. In looking back, from these experiences I learned a lot about my students, their parents, our school's administration, my colleagues, and me. From awkwardness and tension inside the classroom, to parent complaints and discussion censorship outside the classroom, I tried to deal with these roadblocks accordingly, sometimes taking an alternate route and sometimes trying to fix the roadblock itself. Regarding the tension in classroom discussions, I reasoned that the only way to become more comfortable in talking about these issues was to model effective dialogue techniques and continue talking.

We used small group and large group settings and agreed that there will be cases when we disagree. However, as long as we remain respectful and empathetic, we can learn from each other and learn more about the issues. Regarding parent backlash, I fought as hard as possible, albeit respectfully, and calmly explained my perspectives. However, when the direction came from my administrator to change the discussion topic, rather than continue fighting back, I took an alternate route and chose a different discussion topic. In retrospect, I may have waited to talk things out with my adviser, who supported the original discussion activities on the national anthem protests, and hear her advice on the matter. All in all though, although we did not get to discuss that specific issue as fully as I had planned, the dialogue continued.

Another related hurdle I had difficulty getting over was determining how deep to go with certain issues and how far to push the dialogue. Even though I received tenure this year and despite discussing our positive intentions with these discussions, there was a slight fear in the back of my mind of the potential consequences for discussing an issue for which a student might

find offensive. I personally felt that I began the year with confidence when discussing these topics with my students. Looking back, my calmness in talking about these controversial issues only improved as I came to know my students better and they became more comfortable with me and with each other. However, there were periods of apprehension on my part at times, especially after the episode of parent backlash followed by censorship from administration regarding the national anthem protests. I was oftentimes self-conscious of receiving a parent email or disciplinary action if a student misinterpreted our discussion on a controversial issue. I tried my best to overcome these feelings and I think I was successful in doing so. In order to prevent any misinterpretation, I tried to be as straightforward and as impartial as possible with these issues. At times, I played the role devil's advocate to draw deeper thinking, but in a way that was more obvious, saying things like, "What would you say to someone who thinks differently here, for example that \_\_\_\_\_."

Since this research was only conducted with a certain demographic, two 8th grade Social Studies classes of 55 students combined, the findings cannot be easily extrapolated to a wider population. I would be interested to see how these discussion strategies and debate topics would play out with different groups of students with different backgrounds and interests. I would predict there to be many similarities but also some differences as well. Despite the small sample size, a lot was learned through this experience and I plan to continue learning from my students as I push them to continue learning from each other.

### **Emerging Questions**

Continuing where I left off at the end of the “Obstacles” chapter of this paper (above), I am curious to see what would happen if and when I implement these same strategies for social justice dialogue with a different group of students. I find myself thinking back to where my main interest in this whole research topic originated, with my “math lab” students discussing controversial news headlines and doing so without any filter. This blunt and straight-forward dialogue, or “real talk”, seemed to stir something up in a few of my students from last year who otherwise were not as easily motivated. I wanted to know whether I could grow this interest in real life issues into a lifelong passion or at least provide something that could open their eyes to the realities of the world. A little knowledge can go a long way. If our dialogue lights just a small fire, that fire can grow into a motivation to change things or even help determine a career choice.

Another emerging question concerns the best approaches to take if and when certain discussion topics get shut down in the future, by parents, administration, or otherwise. This is obviously a case-by-case issue but I will need to be prepared and I will need to know exactly where I stand on holding the discussion before I argue for it. How hard will I fight back? How easily will I give in? More to the point of the discussions themselves, I would like to invite community members into the process in the future somehow. Whether it be through classroom visits or online postings, I think having the knowledge of outside individuals could add a new dynamic to the activities. What are the best strategies for including these community members in our discussion and how will the students react? For example, I was considering inviting the school police officer into our classroom to hold a Question and Answer session. I think this would be a valuable and memorable learning experience for all members involved.



### **Conclusion**

“Remember the big picture.” This is another major theme of our class this year. Focusing on the forest before the trees allows us to remain empathetic and aware of each other’s differences as well as our similarities. To paraphrase Maya Angelou, we as human beings are more alike than we are different. With that wise message in mind, it remains vital for us to engage in dialogue that matters. Talking about issues that affect millions is the only way to solve the problems that affect millions. With many of these 8th graders turning 18 years of age in only a few short years, now is the time to really begin diving into the social justice issues that still plague society today. We are making progress toward equality as a species but there is still a pretty long ways to go. It is through respectful, open, and systematic dialogue about potentially controversial issues that we can begin to make change. The students discussing these issues in schools today will be the ones leading companies, schools and the country tomorrow, working with a more interconnected world than ever before. The time is now.

### References

- Alexander, Michelle. (2014). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: the New Press.
- Amobi, Funmi. (2007). The message or the messenger: Reflection on the volatility of evoking novice teachers' courageous conversations on race. Arizona: Multicultural Education. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ762415>
- Black Lives Matter. (2016). In *www.dictionary.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/black-lives-matter?s=t>
- Capacity Building Series. (2011). *Grand conversations in the junior class: Supporting the dialogue that moves thinking*. Ontario Ministry of Education. Retrieved from [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/Capacity Building Series\\_Grand\\_Conversations\\_Junior.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/Capacity_Building_Series_Grand_Conversations_Junior.pdf)
- Elliott, Jane. Blue Eye/ Brown Eye Experiment. [possibly to be used in final product]
- Falk, Beverly & Blumenreich, Megan. (2005). *The power of questions: A guide to teacher and student research*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Institute for Policy Studies. (2015). Facts and figures in 99 to 1. Retrieved from <http://inequality.org/99to1/facts-figures/>
- Institution for Women's Policy Research. (2015). Pay equity & discrimination. Washington D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.iwpr.org/initiatives/pay-equity-and-discrimination>
- Langton, Lynn & DeRose, Matthew. (2013). Police Behavior during Traffic and Street Stops, 2011. US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Maxwell, Lesli A. (2014). U.S. School Enrollment Hits Majority-Minority Milestone.

Education Week. Retrieved from

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/08/20/01demographics.h34.html>

McAvoy, Paula & Hess, Diana. (2014). Debates and conversations: From the ground up.

Educational Leadership. Retrieved from [http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov14/vol72/num03/Debates-and-Conversations@-From-the-Ground-](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov14/vol72/num03/Debates-and-Conversations@-From-the-Ground-Up.aspx)

[Up.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov14/vol72/num03/Debates-and-Conversations@-From-the-Ground-Up.aspx).

Oxfam. (2016). Oxfam says wealth of richest 1% is equal to the other 99%. Retrieved from

<http://www.bbc.com/news/business-35339475>

Picower, Bree. (2011). Learning to teach and teaching to learn: Supporting the development of new social justice educators. Teacher Education Quarterly: Caddo Gap Press.

R.E.A.L. talk [audio]. (2015) R.E.A.L. Talk - Undoing Racism in America's Cities. U.S.: National League of Cities.

Sensoy, Ozlem & DiAngelo, Robin. (2012). *Is everyone really equal?: An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Shagoury, Ruth & Miller Power, Brenda. (2012). *Living the question: A guide for teacher-researchers*. United States: Stenhouse Publishers.

Singleton, Glenn & Linton, Curtis. (2006). *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Sousa, D. A. (2011). *How the brain learns*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2015). Retrieved from <http://kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-raceethnicity/>

Wise, Tim. (2007) *White like me*. U.S.: Soft Skull Press.

### **Appendix A: Subjectivity**

To me, subjectivity refers to how one person might interpret something one way while another person views that same thing an entirely different way. Maybe that other person only perceives it slightly differently. The point is, something that is subjective is based on feelings and opinions whereas objectivity is based on clear facts and impartiality. The irony of this discussion and the present research is that while I tried to remain objective and impartial when guiding these discussions, my reflections and the whole study itself could be based in subjectivity and differing opinions. For example, I second-guessed myself at times about certain discussion topic possibilities and found myself ruminating about how a certain discussion session went.

This rumination and over-analysis was even more pronounced after receiving the feedback from irritated parents regarding a particular debate topic. In retrospect, this episode demonstrated the subjectivity of the current research quite well. While one particular parent felt the issue of peaceful protest of the national anthem was “divisive and should be ignored”, I viewed the same issue as a valuable opportunity to engage students in civil discourse on an important topic. It was the same issue being discussed, and there were pros and cons to the argument ready to be dissected through discussion and analysis. However, some people did not even think the discussion should be held, despite the issues behind this topic, civil rights for people of Color for example, affecting the lives of millions. Although I considered the many potential outcomes before engaging in a discussion with students, when actually discussing these topics I tried to appear as confident, calm, and impartial as possible and I think I was successful in doing so.

My subjectivity shined through at various points of this research, but I tried to hold it back as much as possible for those two hours per day that I was with my 8th grade Social Studies students. I did not want to sway my students opinions by projecting my own perspectives on them. Although we discussed the difference between fact and opinion early on in the year and analyzed examples, these remain difficult to separate sometimes, especially when a person's opinion is persuasive. We focused on deciphering between fact and opinion throughout this research. We emphasized how we should use facts and evidence to back up our opinions, thus shaping our own arguments rather than just repeating those of people are us, such as family members.

### **Appendix B: Implementation**

In retrospect, I am glad that I chose this research topic to explore. Controversial social issues matter in the world today. They are controversial because people have strong, oftentimes opposing viewpoints on them. People hold these viewpoints because the issues being discussed matter to them. Regardless of one's opinion, to which everyone is entitled to, we are not entitled to facts. Providing students with the opportunity to engage in real dialogue about these issues as they are coming of age will only serve to benefit them as individuals and society as a whole in the long run.

My interest into this research originated with genuine passion and curiosity, and those motivators stayed with me throughout the process. After the episode of administration limiting some of the current event content the middle school Social Studies teachers could discuss, the topic of discussing controversial issues in class was floating around the school for a couple weeks. Therefore, I have already begun sharing my experiences and my findings with colleagues in my department, if not explicitly mentioning my specific research project, certainly explaining what I have been doing in my classes. From the discussions with various other 6th, 7th, and 8th grade teachers, they were shocked to hear that the issue of the national anthem protests was censored, especially with it being on the front cover of the *Junior Scholastic* magazine that the school district subscribes to and supplies us with. All stemming from the complaint of one student's parents came the censorship of a set of issues across the whole school.

As a segue from this disappointing episode, members of the community did get involved here, despite in a non-supportive way. A major goal of mine from here forward is to not only engage the students in this dialogue, but to brainstorm with other teachers about how we can get community members involved in these activities and possibly even bring these discussions to

them. One example that is currently underway is inviting our school police officer in for a “Question and Answer” session about how it is to be a police officer in these turbulent times and what it is like to help defend the U.S. Constitution. Another plan of mine is to propose a “Debate Club” for next year in which students will be able to select debate topics from a list, prepare their arguments, and engage in respectful and structured debate with one another. This opportunity for continued public speaking is undoubtedly beneficial and worthwhile. The critical thinking necessary to formulate arguments will prepare students for a future engaging in civil discourse while improving everyday communication skills.

### Appendix C - Pre-Survey questions

1. Rank your comfort level right now in talking about controversial social issues such as racism and sexism in the following settings. 1= least comfortable, 10= most comfortable
  - a. In class aloud and openly with the teacher and peers
  - b. In class but in small groups with peers as the teacher walks around and monitors
  - c. In class but in pairs
  - d. Online anonymously, such as on Polleverywhere.com
  - e. Online but in a discussion board with real names
  
2. We are going to be talking about these issues (e.g. racism, sexism, classism, other systematic discrimination; gun violence, homophobia, Islamophobia, war etc.) in class this year as a part of our current events curriculum. Rank the following example issues in terms of your comfort level in talking about them. 1= least comfortable, 10= most comfortable
  - a. Racism
  - b. Sexism
  - c. Classism
  - d. Homophobia
  - e. Anti-Religious
  
3. Now rank the following example issues in terms of your knowledge about them in the present-day United States. 1= least knowledgeable, 10= extremely knowledgeable
  - a. Racism
  - b. Sexism
  - c. Classism
  - d. Homophobia
  - e. Anti-Religious
  
4. How closely do you follow current events on the global level? Scale of 1-5: 1= not at all, 5= very much
  
5. How closely do you follow current events on the national level?
  
6. How closely do you follow current events on the local level?
  - a. Rank the following news sources in order of where you yourself get your news on current events: internet, television, newspaper, magazine, radio,
  
7. Have you ever witnessed examples of the following forms of discrimination or phobia? 1= never 2= sometimes 3= often 4= very often



- a. Racism
- b. Sexism
- c. Classism
- d. Homophobia
- e. Anti-Religious

8. Have you ever experienced the following forms of discrimination or phobia yourself? 1= never 2= sometimes 3= often 4= very often

- f. Racism
- g. Sexism
- h. Classism
- i. Homophobia
- j. Anti-Religious

9. Roughly how often do you talk with your family at home or elsewhere about controversial social issues, such as racism, classism and sexism? 1=Never, 2=once every few months, 3= once a month, 4= once a week, 5= almost daily or daily

10. Roughly how often do you talk with your friends about controversial social issues, such as racism, classism and sexism? 1=Never, 2=once every few months, 3= once a month, 4= once a week, 5= almost daily or daily









If you could choose the issues we debated or discussed in class (current events or historical), what would they be? List your specific ideas below and elaborate on anything you wish:

Your answer

---

How would you suggest that we hold debates in class? (i.e. what format, time length, setting etc.)

Your answer

Rank how much you enjoy watching CNN Student News.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do not enjoy at all           Most enjoy

Rank how much you enjoy talking about CNN Student News after watching an episode.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do not enjoy at all           Most enjoy

Rank how much you learn from watching and talking about CNN Student News.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not much at all           Learn a ton of new things

What other activities/assignments would you suggest we do in relation to CNN Student News, NewsELA, and current events?

Your answer

---

If you could choose, how many times would we watch CNN Student News in class during the week?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Roughly how often do you talk with your family at home or elsewhere about controversial social issues, such as racism, classism and sexism? (Only check one box)

- Never
- Once every few months
- Once a month
- Once a week
- Almost daily

Roughly how often do you talk with your FRIENDS at home or elsewhere about controversial social issues, such as racism, classism and sexism? (Only check one box)

- Never
- Once every few months
- Once a month
- Once a week
- Almost daily

Roughly how often do you talk with your FRIENDS at home or elsewhere about general current events? (Only check one box)

- Never
- Once every few monthss
- Once a month
- Once a week
- Almost daily

How did you feel overall during our discussion and debates in class about controversial social issues? Include any emotions you were feeling or thoughts you were thinking during class so far this year.

Your answer

If you could provide any suggestions for things we can add or change to our class discussions, debates, routines, and/or activities, what would they be?

Your answer

---

Before this year began, rate your awareness level on social issues and current events.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Least aware           Most aware

Right now, rate your awareness level on social issues and current events.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Right now, rate your awareness level on social issues and current events.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Least aware           Most aware

What are some things you think we can do as a class (e.g. activities, discussions, debates, assignments) as the year progresses to keep increasing our awareness of current social issues? On a local, national, and/or global level.

Your answer



**Appendix E - Rubric for Socratic Method**

<https://dirindin-wiki.wikispaces.com/file/view/Socratic%20Seminar%20rubric.pdf/142052367/Socratic%20Seminar%20rubric.pdf>

### **Appendix F - Student Observational Checklist**

<https://dirindin-wiki.wikispaces.com/file/view/Socratic%20seminar%20student%20observation%20form%20sample.pdf/142058247/Socratic%20seminar%20student%20observation%20form%20sample.pdf>

**Appendix G - Rubric for “Real Talk” discussions**(adapted from <https://dirindin-wiki.wikispaces.com/Rubrics>)

Advanced	Regularly contributes discussion	Comments
(4)	Demonstrates evidence of understanding key concepts Provides sources for support of opinions Gives constructive feedback to the work of others Responds readily to questions and/or comments from others Stimulates discussions Readily offers new interpretations and/or varied perspectives of discussion material Ideas are expressed clearly	
Proficient	Contributes to discussion Shows evidence of understanding most major concepts Offers an occasional divergent viewpoint or challenge Usually includes support for opinions Effective communication of ideas	
(3)		
Partially Proficient	Occasionally adds to discussion Has some understanding of concepts Offers very little support for opinions Expression is unclear Very few ideas are expressed Requires prompting for contributions	
(2)		
Unsatisfactory	Minimal participation in discussion Demonstrates little or no understanding of material Only opinions are cited with no support from other sources Does not respond to prompting	
(1)		

**Appendix H - Teaching Point video on diversity and privilege**

[http://www.mindful.org/3-ways-talk-kids-diversity/?utm\\_source=Mindful+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=d8f89f7321-MF\\_Top\\_Stories\\_Aug\\_9\\_2016&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_6d03e8c02c-d8f89f7321-20993073&mc\\_cid=d8f89f7321&mc\\_eid=aab26ecbbb](http://www.mindful.org/3-ways-talk-kids-diversity/?utm_source=Mindful+Newsletter&utm_campaign=d8f89f7321-MF_Top_Stories_Aug_9_2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6d03e8c02c-d8f89f7321-20993073&mc_cid=d8f89f7321&mc_eid=aab26ecbbb)