CULTIVATING COMPASSION THROUGH DISCUSSION

A Record of Study

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this record of study was to evaluate the ways discussing controversial topics in a social studies classroom impacted the empathy capacity, viewpoint and compassion willingness of students. Four controversial topics were chosen for discussion in three Advanced Placement psychology classes due to their relevance to the course: cultural bias in public schools, causes of poverty, prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system and immigration and altruism. The method used for discussion was the structured academic controversy (SAC) in which students are required to research and discuss an issue from both sides of an issue and seek consensus with those in their discussion group.

This was a mixed-methods study in which five quantitative measures were administered before and after the SAC interventions. First, students were administered the Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (QCAE) at the beginning of the study and again after completing the four structured academic controversies at the conclusion of the spring 2021 semester. Students were also administered an issue inventory before and after each of the four SAC's. Not only did the issue inventory have questions that gauged the students' viewpoint on the topic, but there were also questions about compassion willingness embedded within. Qualitatively, students wrote in reflection journals before and after each discussion to explain their initial thinking on each topic, how it shifted and their willingness to engage the issue in an actionable way. In each journal, students responded to the same set of questions before and after each discussion.

The quantitative data showed statistically significant changes in empathy, viewpoint and compassion willingness. Qualitatively, all students indicated growth in empathy and compassion and experienced remarkable shifts in their viewpoints on each issue.

This study shows the myriad benefits of providing students the opportunity to research and discuss controversial topics from multiple perspectives. It also provides teachers with a model for engaging these topics in the classroom with efficacy while helping them avoid the partisan landmines that are associated with creating a space for controversy in the classroom.

DEDICATION

       I dedicate this record of study to the students who were in my three psychology classes during this study. I am grateful for our time together. You inspired me with hope as I witnessed the acumen and courage you displayed as you researched and discussed topics that are not easy to talk about with grit and grace. While I learned much from listening to your discussions, the most important thing you taught me was that consensus is possible…even now. Thank you.

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Contributors

This work was supervised by a Record of Study committee consisting of Professors Sharon Matthews, Radhika Viruru, Mónica Neshyba, and Shaun Hutchins of the Department of Teaching and Learning and Culture and Professor Fuhui Tong of the Department of Educational Psychology.

Dr. Tari Kinsey assisted with quantitative data entry into Excel for chapter 3 and provided suggestions for analysis.

All other work for the Record of Study was completed by the student independently.

Funding Sources

NOMENCLATURE

SAC   Structured Academic Controversy

QCAE   Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy

CBPS   Cultural Bias in Public Schools

CP   Causes of Poverty

PDCJS   Prejudice and Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System

I & A   Immigration and Altruism

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CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM

The Context

The United States was founded on the idea that "a more perfect union" was possible. That "the people" could perpetually work together to "establish Justice…promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty." However, while all agree that these are worthy pursuits of the state, there has always been sharp disagreement about what they are and how to achieve them. As James Madison (1787) said in *Federalist Number* 10, "as long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed." These differing opinions ignite passions that have "divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good" (Madison, 1787). In other words, faction, or disagreement that leads to partisan politics, can stall the wheels of justice, waylay the general welfare, and limit the blessings of liberty because "the people" in their front yard or in the halls of congress cannot come to a consensus that leads to action for the common good.

The United States has always struggled with partisanship and polemical speech. In 1796, George Washington, in his farewell address, warned the country of the potential danger of political parties to tear the nation asunder (Washington, 1813). While was right about political parties, there are many other avenues for societal division such as race, class, gender and sexuality. Although the U.S. persists in its two-party system, it has increased exponentially in its diversity since the days of Washington. This of course, only increases the number of issues over which people can disagree politically or otherwise. The immigration debate never goes away, but merely changes from generation to generation. In addition to immigration, each era must face

anew the abortion debate, especially considering the rising costs of healthcare and health insurance (McMahon, 2018; Pollitt, 1997; Griffin, 2020). However, students and parents in the 21st century must also think through issues of sexuality and marriage, the injustices that sparked the Black Lives Matter movement, the potential overreach of science in its ability to clone and influence pregnancy, the ever-increasing wage gap between the wealthy and poor, the globalized economy and the ubiquitous nature of technology. These issues need to be discussed amongst students because it better prepares them to be citizens that engage in compassionate action for the common good (Lo & Adams, 2018). It also makes the school environment safer, inclusive and culturally relevant. It is likely that most students have surface-level knowledge about these topics. However, uninformed students on the issues of racism and immigration make it possible that minority students will be harmed emotionally, physically or academically by students or teachers who are unaware of what students from these backgrounds face daily.

In addition to the fact that students need to discuss controversial topics as citizens, it is important to remember that the United States is a nation that continues to work through the impact of its racist beginnings which were built on the foundation of White Supremacy. Although Thomas Jefferson (U.S., 1776) asserted this was a nation founded on the principles of equality when he wrote *"all men are created equal"* on the Declaration of Independence in 1776, he didn't really mean "all" as the majority of poor white men would remain disenfranchised for several more decades, slavery would remain for nearly another century, the U.S. government would perpetually take more land from Native Americans destroying their way of life by relegating them to reservations and women would not get the right to vote until almost 150 years later. Chief Justice Roger Taney would help clarify what Jefferson meant by "all men are created equal" in the Dred Scott decision (1857) when he wrote in the court's majority opinion that "the

enslaved African race were not intended to be included and formed no part of the people who framed and adopted this declaration." In addition to this, Taney remarked that Black people "had no rights which the White man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit." While there have been civil conflicts and movements to right these wrongs of America, there still exist systemic inequities in health care, home lending practices, policing, incarceration for people of color and a persistent wage gap for minorities and women. There is no question that elements of oppression remain, and these often manifest themselves in the classroom. This means that education in the United States requires a pedagogy that can unveil reality, help students wrestle with this reality and then seek to change it for the "common good."

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provides a helpful guide for using controversial discussion not only to help students engage critical issues that better prepare them for citizenship, but also to create a more culturally responsive classroom and prepare them to engage their world through compassionate action. Freire (1970) states that, "functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can only be done by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 25). Helping students engage in reflection means moving away from the banking method of education where students are passive recipients of static knowledge and moving towards problem-posing education where acts of cognition are foundational. Freire asserts that, "problem posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality…banking education inhibits creativity and domesticates" (Freire, 1970, p. 56). However, students engaging in dialogue about controversial issues is the first step, as students should be moved to act after engaging in acts of cognition

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about a particular problem. This is because "problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 57). Therefore, students are roused to compassionate action "as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, [students] will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (Freire, 1970, p. 54). Thus, the purpose of controversial discussions is both to help prepare students to participate in the republic as citizens and improve the republic itself, by helping it live up to its ideals.

Even though there is so much for our students to think through, talk about, and consider what they should *do* about these issues, the emphasis on standardized testing combined with electronic gaming and social media commanding our student's attention at home and in their free time, it is less likely that they will. Since students engage with one another more via electronics, they also struggle with understanding social cues which can have an influence on their relationship and their ability to show empathy (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). Therefore, it is essential that dialogical learning, where dialogue is foundation to inquiry (Freire, 1970), be a pillar of the 21st century classroom and I hope to make this process more manageable for teachers and students.

National Context

Although having rigorous and thought-provoking political discussion with people one disagrees with is a hallmark of any democratic society, it seems as though Americans are becoming increasingly polarized and are losing their ability to engage in civil political discussion. A national poll of potential U.S. voters during the 2016 election displayed that the bulk of Americans think there is a civility issue in U.S. politics (Popan, 2019). The issue only

seems to have worsened during the Trump presidency as Hill-HarrisX (2020) survey indicated that 90% of Americans think it is important for politicians to be civil with one another which likely indicates a broader trend of incivility that has been exemplified by politicians on both sides of the aisle. A horrifying example that points to this trend is the 2011 shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. In trying to make sense of the event, antagonistic political messaging was pointed to as a potential cause (Popan, 2019). One survey cited by Hwang, Kim, and Huh, (2014, p. 622) showed that a significant majority of the American participants (75%) "believed that incivility has reached crisis levels," and 59% of survey participants "believed that the Internet and social media are now leading and rapidly growing causes of incivility." Recent historical instances in the United States support this concern as cited by Popan (2019) are the internet-based political incivility campaign carried out by the Russians to disrupt the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and the political incivility that was integral to the controversial nomination of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brett Cavanaugh and the resulting pipe-bombings in October 2018, that were likely politically motivated.

While political dialogue may lack civility via multiple mediums such as newspaper, television and radio shows, online political talk seems to be exacerbating the issue. Online discourse has the potential to damage deliberative discussion as anonymity, a lack of social cues, and the likelihood of belligerent engagement are commonplace (Chen, 2017). This type of dialogue makes it difficult to reach a compromise or consensus and increases the probability that there will be an increase in polarization and intergroup enmity (Hwang et al, 2014). One study conducted by Hwang et al., (2014) showed that uncivil online engagement influenced the perception of those who were exposed to it. In other words, being a witness to emotionally inflamed online discussion makes it seem like the public is more polarized than it really is.

Additionally, the study participants that observed uncivil online discussions had lower

expectations about the possibility of public deliberation being effective in the future and had

reduced belief that consensus could be reached through deliberation. A study by Popan (2019)

showed that when people engage in uncivil discussions, "well-reasoned arguments and rationales

may be disregarded" and "have the potential to impact perceptions of how rational political

groups are viewed" (Popan, 2019, p. 129). While these types of vitriolic discussions are

happening among adults, students are watching and taking their social queues from the

environment that surrounds them, online or otherwise. Based on the examples above social

media has permeated all aspects of life—including school (Hoerr, 2018) and therefore, it is

essential that students learn how to engage in civil dialogue about salient topics.

Even though there is a nation-wide trend in incivility regarding online political

discussions, current research shows they are generally avoided in educational spaces (Hess,

2009). Even though there are proven cognitive and social benefits of giving students the

opportunity to discuss controversial issues and disagree with one another, there are few

classrooms in the U.S. that promote this type of learning and interaction (Hess, 2009; Johnson &

Johnson, 1985). Other than educators being concerned about a discussion getting out of hand or

making parents angry about discussing controversial topics, the most-likely reason this type of

activity being avoided in schools all over the country is the fact that good discussions take the

kind of time that teachers cannot spare due to the pressures of state mandated testing (Avery,

Levy & Simmons, 2014; Preis, 2017). Regardless, many educational researchers assert that it is

of paramount importance to make time for these types of dialogical activities. Popan (2019)

asserted that the mutual exchange of ideas leads to a "more informed and tolerant citizenry, and

better democratic decisions" (Popan, 2019, p. 124). Also, when students have the chance to

discuss controversial topics and disagree with one another they are preparing to participate in democracy by practicing it via discussion. In agreement with Popan, Knecht (2018), emphasized the importance of dialogical pedagogy because students are learning *for and with* democracy.

In addition to practicing civic engagement, preparing students to be citizens in a democracy also requires they learn how to be empathetic. According to Casale, Thomas & Simmons (2018), empathy is critical to a democratic society. This is because in order to come to logical and compassionate conclusions about complicated problems facing the republic, citizens must be able to empathetically access arguments from multiple perspectives on an issue (Johnson & Johnson, 1993). This requires seeking to understand values and rationales, going beyond 'What do they think?' to 'Why do they think that?' Hoerr (2018, p. 86) stated that, "empathy comes from listening and learning about others' situations and feelings in order to understand their perspectives." This not only leads to improved cognitive abilities and perspective taking (Lo, J.C., & Adams, C.I., 2018), but it *ultimately* cultivates a more caring individual. According to Popan (2019), without empathy, citizens often maintain polarized attitudes and struggle to see any legitimacy in the views of those they disagree with as he states, "without sufficient engagement with argument content, it is unlikely that participants in cross-cutting contact will consider the merits of and perceive a rational basis for alternative political views" (Popan, 2019, p. 125). He also contends that when people have positive contact with people that hold opposing views, they are more likely to see the rationale behind the position they hold, and it increases the probability of improving intergroup interaction and understanding in a political setting (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). This is critical to a democracy where it is possible that the candidate you vote for does not win. One must, therefore, be able to give a degree of legitimacy to the candidate they did not vote for (and those that did) for the nation to peacefully exist. At this point

in time, it seems citizens in the United States are intensely polarized and struggling more than ever to give any degree of legitimacy to those they disagree with politically. This does not bode well for the republic.

Personal Context

At school, growth should happen. Children should advance in their knowledge and their ability to do actionable things with the information and experience they have attained. With the English, science, history and math they learn they should be able to solve problems, create art and articulate what they have learned in both written and spoken form. In addition to various methods of applying knowledge, children should also learn and practice interaction with others. We are social beings. We need each other both for belonging and to solve the problems that threaten the world we all share. School provides a unique opportunity for children to grow in both areas. However, children are not the only ones that should be cultivated in the schoolhouse. While we may stop growing physically in our early 20's, personal and professional growth is ongoing throughout life, and therefore the adults that teach students and administer the building should be cultivated as well.

While there are many avenues for teacher growth, I have seen few activities in the classroom that facilitate growth for teachers and students as does a good discussion. As I evaluate discussions, I look for every student to meaningfully participate. This means students are blending what they learned from the content with their own personal experiences and as they participate, they increasingly synthesize the understanding and experiences of other students into their own view. One element of growth that is essential to every teacher is to be increasingly aware of the how they see the world (i.e., their mental set, lens or positionality) and how it influences their pedagogical practice and the way they relate to students. In my experience, a

stimulating discussion facilitates this like nothing else. This requires the teacher to perpetually place themselves in a posture to learn from their students as they teach them. In a productive discussion teachers engage in this reciprocal process and are constantly reflecting about themselves and their practice and learning both *about* and *from* their students. Other than the fact that this teachable attitude lends itself to easy and authentic connections with students, it is also important because the teacher force in the United States is lacking in diversity. Generally, according to various educational data outlets such as the NAEP, 80-82% of teachers in the United States are white. A majority are middle class and female. These numbers do not match the student demographics. This creates a potentially precarious situation where a teacher assumes their students have the same values, cultural touchpoints and perspectives. These types of disconnects can (and often do) lead to disparities in discipline, lesser learning outcomes in students and a breakdown in student-teacher relationships. Therefore, I love using various discussion methods in my classroom.

As a teacher, I have dabbled in discussion methods with a middling amount of success, but with research and continued practice, my ability to facilitate discussions improved. I used activities like philosophical chairs, four corners and simulations where students spoke from the perspective of historical characters. I enjoyed discussions with my students, but I do not think I did them often enough for them to make a lasting impact. When I began teaching at the high school level, my affinity for discussions increased exponentially. Ironically, I began to experiment with Socratic seminars my last year as a middle school teacher. At the high school level, it seemed as though a significant number of humanities teachers implemented Socratic seminars. In the beginning, my Socratic seminars were average at best. I would often have students that did not talk at all, or others that were merely rephrasing what had already been said.

On average, about half the class had a great discussion, while the other half was unpredictable, and I am not sure what they got out of it. Seeing the potential growth that a great discussion could generate; I was determined to find a way to get all students to participate. Following s substantial amounts of research and engaging in a significant amount of trial and error, I found three things that significantly improved my discussions: Have the students discuss in smaller groups (4 to 12), require a substantial amount of preparation before the discussion, and ensure the topic is interesting or relevant (or relate it to something that is). I would later add a post-discussion reflection piece which helped as well. Class discussions improved because students learned a lot in their preparation and even more from one another, because each student's perspective elucidated an unseen element to the other students involved. In addition to learning, students also engaged in a significant amount of higher-level thinking as they were required to think through their position, evaluate the positions of others and simultaneously synthesize parts of their own thinking with fresh perspectives that extended their own reasoning. In addition to these cognitive benefits, my students had the opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills. In a good discussion, careful listening to those who are speaking is essential   as well as asking clarifying questions if an unclear point is made. When students disagree, they must be able to control their emotions and respond in a civil manner while seeking consensus.

Students are not the only beneficiaries of an engaging dialogue (Hand & Levinson, 2012). Teachers must also think through various issues and become conscious of their own biases as they direct students to resources and craft questions and activities to open discussions. They often end up learning more about a topic when they help their students prepare in addition to reflecting what they think about the issue as well. In addition to this, when their students participate in the discussion, teachers learn so much about their students. Students often apply

concepts with personal stories that teachers would not have heard about otherwise. Teachers can observe their student's cognitive abilities as they engage in discourse, which can alert the teacher to student challenges that may be difficult to detect on a written test. Teachers can also learn from their students. Freire (1970) addressed this critical element of education when he contended that, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire, 1970, p. 45). When students research an issue, you do not know what treasure of information they might dig up and share with the class. I have learned many little historical tidbits listening to my students discuss issues. Also, while presenting their point-of-view, a student may see an issue in a way that their teacher has not considered before. Freire (1970) elaborated on the unique power of dialogue to reconcile the teacher-student contradiction as he expressed that "through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers…They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (Freire, 1970, p. 53). Therefore, as I continued to teach in high school, my ability to lead discussions improved and the extent to which these discussions facilitated growth for all those involved, progressed as well. Then, Donald Trump got elected.

Navigating the New Normal

The election of Donald Trump provided a greater opportunity and sense of urgency to provide a platform for students to engage in controversial discussions. When Trump was running for president, I didn't think there was any chance he would get elected. Then he did. I will never forget dropping my son off at school the day after the election, and I saw a crowd of about 30 kids outside chanting "build that wall!" It didn't feel real, but it was. The results of his election immediately crashed through the door of my classroom as it was all my students wanted to talk

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about. If Trump's campaign was bad in the way it flared up the worst impulses in the United States, his presidency was/has been worse...white supremacist rallies, Muslim travel bans, children being separated from their parents at the border, catering to authoritarian leaders, trade wars, and the collapse of sensible foreign policy to name a few. How will schools manage this new normal? I tried to facilitate experiences that might cultivate empathy in my students. I hoped they would serve as a counter to the "othering" that the administration was so intensely doing with migrants, Muslims and others. This "othering" was not only an increasing phenomenon in the nation, but in my school as well and its potential to harm students and reduce learning outcome was substantial.

Many students of color approached me and informed me that the high school I taught at was "an exhausting place" to go to school and that Trump's presidency had only made it worse. As a world history teacher, we study various world religions. After Trump put forth his first Muslim ban amid the Syrian refugee crisis, I wanted to give my students the opportunity to understand what was happening from someone else's point-of-view. I contacted a local mosque and arranged an optional student tour that would take place on a Saturday. The mosque was going to cook a traditional middle eastern meal and feed us, while giving us an historical presentation on Islam, explain why Muslims migrate and have a question-and-answer session with my students. Even though the experience was not required, one of my student's parents was outraged. He called my principal and threatened to call the local news. I had to cancel the tour with the mosque. This parent later told me that I was "normalizing terrorism" with experiences like this and that there was "nothing to appreciate" about Islam. When parents hold these types of views, is it any wonder that some students treat others the way they do?

While I eventually reworked the religious experience assignment to give my students more options, I knew that I had to use something else to help my students grow in their capacity to show empathy. I started to have my students read multicultural historical fiction in addition to their non-fiction readings for class. We would discuss these books and try to empathetically step into the perspective of some of the characters. This seemed to help my students grow in empathy as Louie (2009) said it would after conducting research with this type of activity. I also began to take what I had been learning about how to lead great discussions and combine it with controversial topics in psychology (ie Are standardized tests culturally biased? Is poverty caused more by people's situation or disposition?). I would assign my students a position, they would research the position, create an artifact for the discussion and engage in small group discussions (groups of four) about the issue with people who had been assigned the other side. Students who were assigned a position they disagreed with often experienced cognitive dissonance when they researched the issue. In addition to this, in the discussion students were given the opportunity to see the issue from multiple points-of view. I then came across the Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) discussion strategy and have been using that a lot. My hope was that these opportunities to research both sides of controversial topics, discuss them and seek consensus with other students would increase their empathy. But to what extent? And to what extent did the increase in empathy increase their willingness to engage in acts of compassion and kindness? This is ultimately why I chose my ROS topic. The world, the media and even sometimes the home, serve to polarize students and only expose them to ideas that support their existing beliefs. However, the classroom can be a place where students are exposed to the marketplace of ideas and perspectives and provide a safe space in which they can wrestle with them as they consider what *they think*. School can also help students develop the necessary competencies to disagree

with someone civilly and live more compassionately as they grow in empathy. This is what I hope to accomplish with my ROS.

Situational Context

A Town of Diminutive Diversity

When compared to the population of the United States and the State of Texas, Stonewall, Texas is not a place that is known for its diversity. According to Data USA (2017), of the more than 90,000 people that live in Stonewall, the vast majority are White as shown below.

Stonewall demographics 2017

- 72% White
- 17% Hispanic or Latino
- 6% Black or African American
- 2.50% Asian

■ White   ■ Hispanic or Latino   ■ Black or African American   ■ Asian
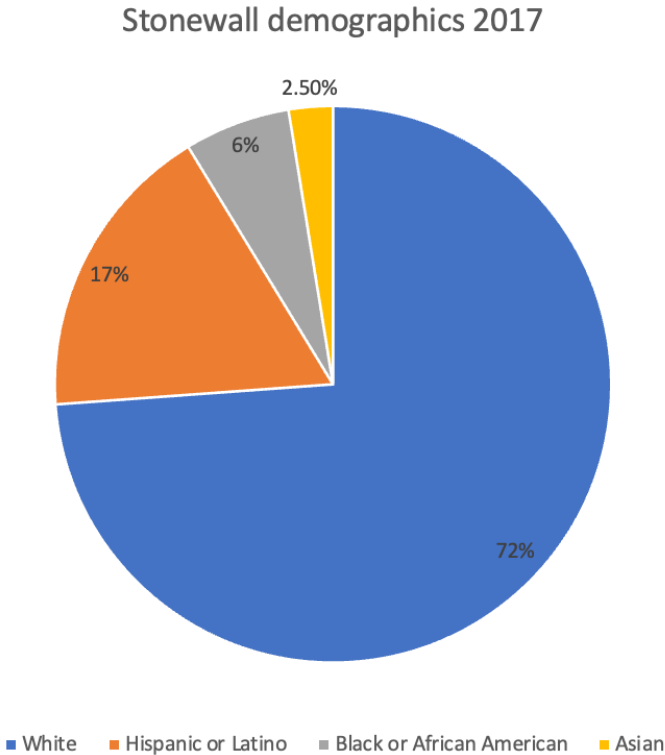
Figure 1.1

This makes Stonewall more white and less Black and Asian, when compared to the rest of the nation. According to the Census Bureau (2018), even though White people remain the majority in the United States, there is a greater amount of diversity as displayed below.

United States demographics 2018
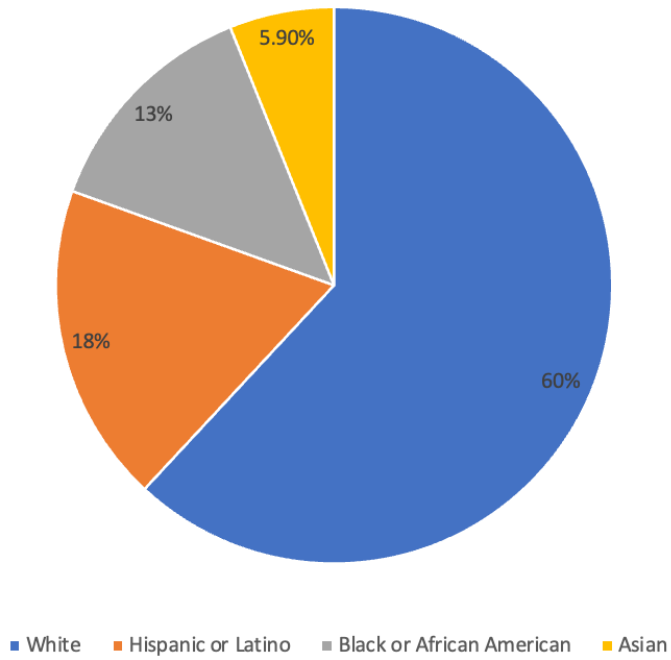
Figure 1.2

Not surprisingly, Stonewall schools have fewer students of color than the rest of the country as well. According to NCES, the national student enrollment numbers in 2017 show even more diversity as shown below.

National student enrollment 2017
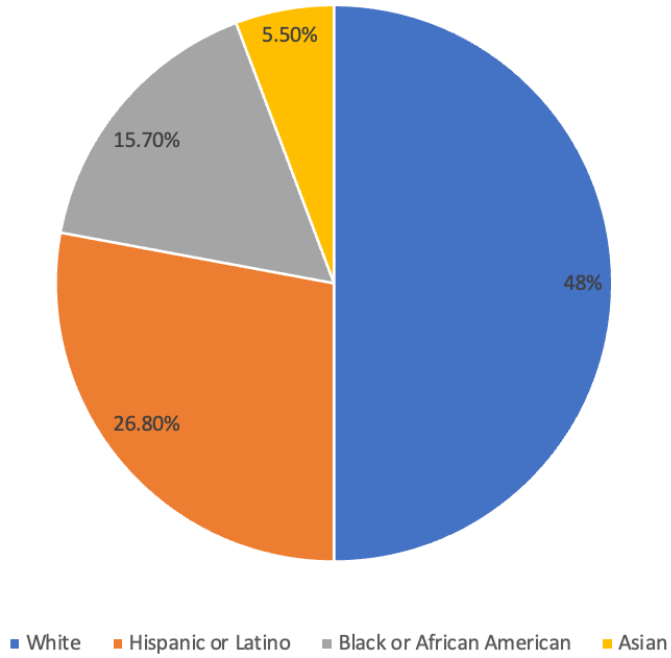
Figure 1.3

During this time period, the student demographics for Texas according to TEA, did not reflect the national student population as White students did not account for the ethnic majority as can be seen below.

Texas student enrollment 2017
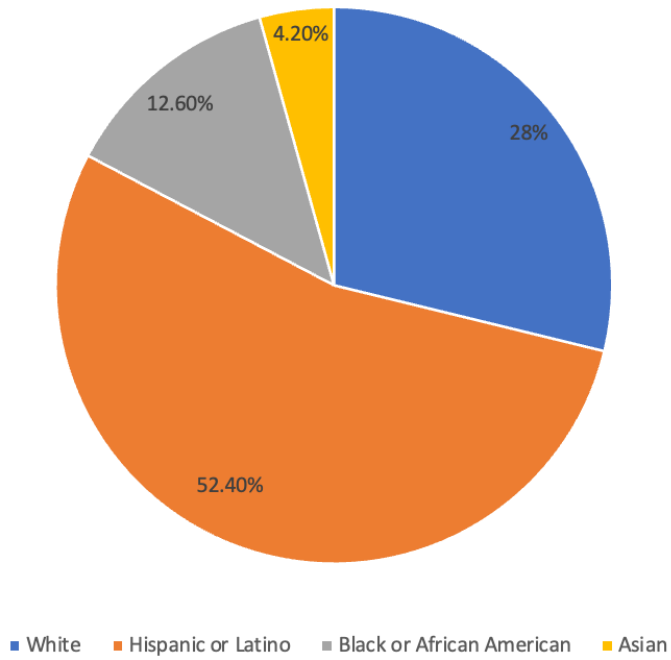
Figure 1.4

After considering the state and national student demographics, it is somewhat surprising to learn that the students in Stonewall ISD, according to the Texas Tribune (2017), are more White than both the student population of the nation and the state of Texas as can be below.

Stonewall student demographics 2017
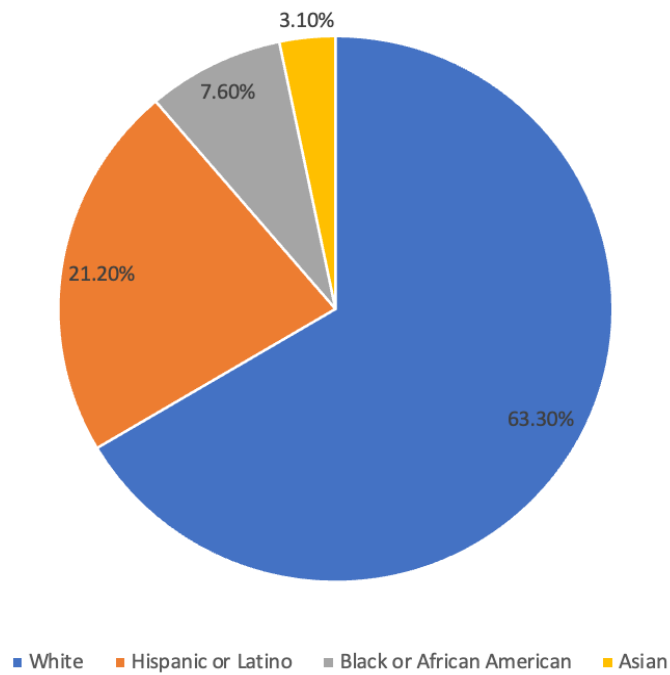
Figure 1.5

When compared to the rest of the United States and Texas, both the adult and student population of Stonewall is significantly Whiter. Before considering the potential impact of this disparity on students of color, what about the ethnic make-up of teachers? According to the NCES, during the 2015-2016 school year in the United States, 81% of teachers in traditional public schools were White. According to the Texas Tribune (2017), the state of Texas has a teacher force that is more diverse than the national norm as displayed below.

Texas teachers 2017

Legend: ■ White   ■ Hispanic or Latino   ■ Black or African American   ■ Asian
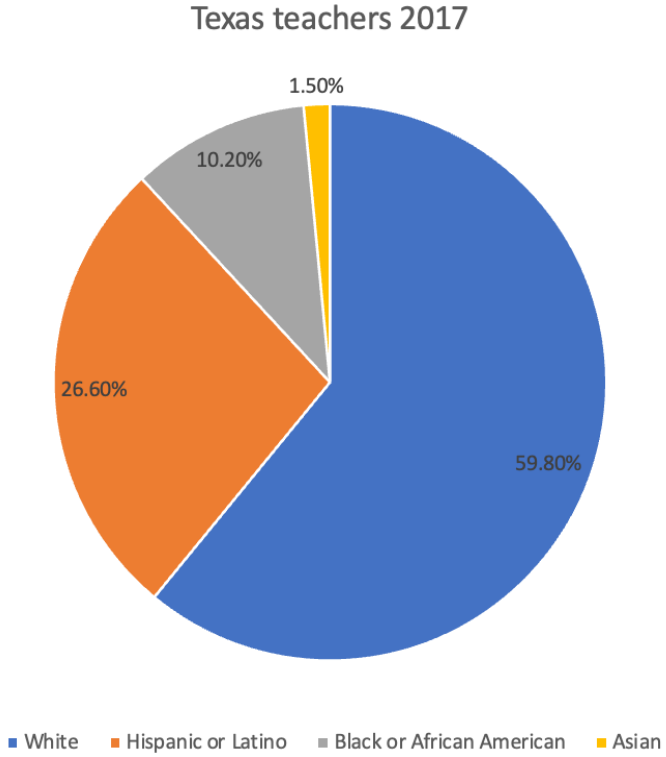
Figure 1.6

However, when you get to Stonewall, Texas the trend reverses. During the 2016-2017 school year, according to the Texas Tribune (2017), teachers in Stonewall ISD were significantly less diverse than both the nation and the state of Texas as can be seen below.
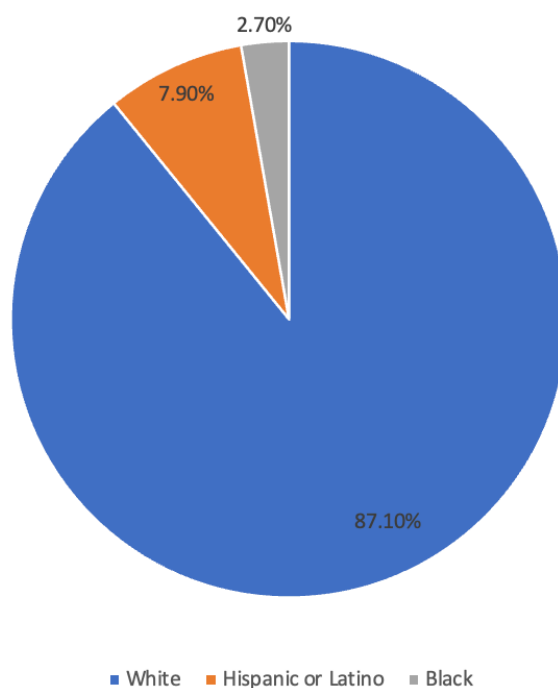
Figure 1.7

Educational Leadership

The leadership of Stonewall ISD also has a diversity deficiency. While the district does have a superintendent of Hispanic descent, 100% of its elementary school principals are White. Diversity improves a little when moving to the secondary level as one middle school principal is Black (out of three middle schools) even though the remaining eight principals are White. The principal at the district alternative high school is Black and her assistant principal Hispanic, while the principals of the other two high schools are White. The most diverse element of Stonewall's leadership is in its assistant principals at the high school level. Out of a combined total of 13 assistant principals at three high schools, two of them are Black and three are Hispanic or Latino. However, when one ascends further up the chain of command, one finds a school board that is 100% White.

Politics and Economics

Stonewall is also unique in its political and economic makeup. Stonewall has a strong conservative leaning. According to Federal Election Commission, 70.8% of Stonewall voters voted Republican in the last presidential election, while 24% voted Democrat and 5.2% voted Independent respectively. Economically, Stonewall is more affluent than most of Texas. According to the Department of Numbers, in 2017 the median income of Texas is $59,206. However, in Stonewall, the median income is $94,848. According to Data USA (2017) Stonewall also has less people below the poverty line (5.82%) than the national average (13.1%). Despite these promising numbers, they can be misleading. What the data do not show is where these people living at or below the poverty line are concentrated. Interestingly, many of these places are zoned for South Stonewall high school. The place where I work as a teacher. While 24.1% of Stonewall ISD's students are economically disadvantaged (Texas Tribune), this number is higher at South Stonewall high school (usually around 30% + depending on the year) because of its proximity to concentrated areas of poverty. This creates a unique dynamic at our school where a lot of our students are super-rich, some are in the middle, and many are struggling economically.

Religious Demographics

Concerning religion, Stonewall is substantially divergent when compared to the rest of Texas. According to Sperling's Best Places (2019), a demographic data research company used by realtors, Stonewall has an exceptional amount of religious fervor as 87.5% of its citizens claim to be religious while according to the Pew Research Center (2019), only 63% of Texans say religion is very important in their life. The predominant religious expression in Stonewall is Baptist at 57.6%. Baptists only make up 16.3% of those claiming to be religious in the rest of the

state. Stonewall is a little less Catholic (13.1% compared to 19.1%) and a little more Methodist (6.4 to 4.7%) when contrasted with other Texans. It is also interesting to consider that according to the data the number of those who claim to be Jewish, or Muslim is at 0%. While Eastern Religions make up 0.4% of those claiming religion. These numbers are a little shocking to me because I have had many Muslim students over the years and handful of Jewish ones. Despite this, there are not enough to show up in the data. This speaks to the extent that they are a minority.

The Problem

Why does it matter that Stonewall seems to be an enclave of Whiteness with large political, religious and economic majorities? When students of color are a significant minority among the student population, in schools that have majority White staffs, they are more likely to have teachers with low expectations due to implicit bias, experience inequitable disciplinary practices, cultural misunderstandings between students of color and their peers and teachers, reduced educational success and be less likely to finish high school and more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (Anderson, 2017; Anon, 2017). In other words, when a district is lacking in diversity, it increases the probability that there will be issues of inequality and injustice. If one considers the averages, students and their guardians in Stonewall ISD are likely to be White, make more than $90,000 a year, be Republicans and have a Baptist faith. What about the students who do not fit in those categories? How will they be treated by their fellow students? How will they be seen by their teachers who are also likely to be White? This type of environment can cause two issues that are problematic. On one hand, these demographics have the potential to create a dynamic where those in the majority assume their culture, beliefs and perspectives are normative as they are constantly reinforced by those around them. This

does not bode well for helping these students develop empathy, because when they encounter someone who has a different life experience or opinion, it is easier to write them off due to it being an exception to the rule of the cultural majority. On the other hand, in addition to the increased risks already mentioned for minority students, they also run the risk of being relatively unseen or having educational needs unmet because their perspectives and experiences are not heard or valued, thereby sending an implied message that they do not belong.

These apparent issues of equity are it is why it is critical to integrate discussions into the curriculum, where all students have a chance to be heard, challenged in their perspectives as they see many sides to an issue, and learn to be more empathetic as they consider multiple points-of-view. It also helps their teacher be more aware of their own positionality in addition to helping them learn more about their students as they share.

Relevant History of the Problem

Better Together

Although we need to be proactively finding specific ways to help our secondary students grow in empathy, Stonewall ISD has instituted some overarching programs that seek to help all students in the district cultivate this area of their lives. One of these initiatives is called *Better Together* and was developed by the assistant superintendent Dr. Tommy MacAfee who also serves as the director of student services. The first explicit goal of this program is to recognize that everyone (staff, teachers, parents, students, law enforcement and community members) is a vital part of school safety. In other words, in a community, everyone in the community has a role in ensuring the community's safety. According to *Better Together*, the safety of the district stakeholders rests upon four pillars: security, school climate, psychological support and a community culture of civility. While the ability to show empathy could certainly be relevant to

security and school climate, it is most applicable to psychological support and community culture of civility. Through these two goals, the district intends to identify and meet the social and emotional needs of staff and students. Philosophically, this means recognizing that all have a story and purpose like no one else and that these two things are most meaningful when they are used to help others. Living this out in educational contexts means understanding that the collective whole is stronger than anything that seeks to marginalize or hurt someone. This is how I think the artifact I hope to produce for my ROS will help the district reach these goals, especially at the secondary level as our students seek to understand the perspectives of all on controversial issues and grow in their empathy.

To help actualize the goals of *Better Together*, staff members on every campus are encouraged to do three things. The first is to *See You,* which means to carry yourself with composure and actively seek to find your gift and listen to your voice. The second is to *See Others,* by living empathetically through seeing the value in all and developing the art of understanding. The last one is to *See Us*, by helping to cultivate communal resilience through finding common ground with collective strength as the goal. Interestingly, the discussion method of Structured Academic Controversy parallels these goals nicely.

In order to help all stakeholders to carry out this vision that includes empathy, the district has created three action items. The first action item is the development of the CORE council and CORE club at the elementary school level. CORE stands for Creating Opportunities for Resiliency & Empathy. The purpose of the CORE council is for adults to lead students in creating safe and civil schools and accomplishing community campus goals. Through extension, by the purpose of CORE club is for students to lead other students from all walks of life with the goal of creating an authentic community. The second action item is the creation of six thematic

booster lessons that elementary school teachers or counselors can have with their students in order to help them grow emotionally. The lesson titles are as follows: *Finding Your Gift, Listening to Your Voice, Everyone has Value, The Art of Understanding, Finding Common Ground,* and *Our Collective Strength.* In addition to these two items, bi-weekly newsletters are sent to parents to help them build these skills at home and weekly one-pagers are sent to teachers district-wide to help them integrate these concepts in their lessons and pedagogical approaches.

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Other Empathy Building Initiatives

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In addition to the *Better Together* initiative, elementary counselors visit classrooms every month for SEL lessons with our students, and empathy is always part of the conversation, if not the main topic. Beyond this, different elementary schools in the district have various approaches to building social emotional capacities (including empathy). Some elementary schools have also used the *Leader in Me* program developed by Stephen Covey (1989). This program helps elementary school children understand, practice and apply the seven habits of highly effective people. Habit 5 is *seek first to understand before being understood* which has significant implications for empathy development. Another elementary school uses the *Great Expectations* program which has eight expectations for living that are taught to the students through various activities where empathy is implied such as "We will value one another as unique and special individuals" (Great Expectations, n.d.). There is also an elementary school that does what they call R time in the morning as kind of a school-wide huddle in the cafeteria. This time often references empathy. Additionally, several elementary campuses participate in Chick-Fil-A's character education program, which champions all sorts of positive character traits, including empathy. Concerning discipline, all elementary campuses have some sort of restorative practices being conducted, which include empathy. According to Dr. MacAfee, we

also bring trauma-informed practices/training to the district in the form of a national conference held here in SISD in June each of the past two years. Mental First Aid training was also provided to all counselors and administrators last year and is being provided to 30 teachers a month this year. These training sessions are huge in helping attendees better understand their students and support children of trauma need.

At the secondary level, each middle school and high school has a Peer Assistance and Leadership group (PALs). The objective of these groups is to help mediate what appear to be irreconcilable differences between students and go to the elementary campuses to tutor and mentor these students. However, only a tiny portion of secondary students are a part of PALs. There really are not any campus-wide initiatives at the secondary level to facilitate empathy growth.

Dealing with Controversy

While there is a clear and powerful effort to help our elementary students grow socially and emotionally, including in their ability to show empathy, these efforts wane to some degree at the secondary level. There also is not much emphasis in helping students being able to think about controversial issues in the republic and giving them the skills to discuss them in a civil manner. The exception to this is in the course offerings of debate and government. While only a handful of students take debate as it is an optional elective, all students are required by law to take American government in order to graduate. After talking to a few of the teachers, they do typically have a debate or two during the semester about a controversial issue such as issues addressed in a supreme court case. However, these activities are peripheral to the main objective of the class which is to help them understand how the government works and the nuances of a few supreme court cases. In addition to this, when they do debate, students are allowed to debate

their own view, so it is less likely that they will deeply consider views other than their own.

Since government is a required class and in some essence is meant to prepare students to be active citizens, like psychology, it is a strategic place to increase the emphasis on providing students the opportunity to research, discuss, and seek consensus on controversial issues that every active citizen must consider.

Significance of the Problem

Social Skills Are Deteriorating

Our world is becoming increasingly digital, which can make it more challenging for students to develop the necessary social skills that are needed to navigate everyday life, succeed in the workplace, and be an active citizen in a democracy. In addition to the ubiquitous nature of electronic communication, standardized testing often makes teachers hesitant to spend the necessary time for students to thoroughly research an issue, discuss it at length and reflect on it. In short, students are being pushed away from dialogic learning, but this is precisely what they need in order to be fully functioning adults. It requires emotional intelligence and impulse control to deescalate a situation when someone else is rude, inappropriate or losing control of their emotions. These are precisely the types of skills students develop when they discuss controversial issues with people they disagree with on a regular basis. Most careers also require the ability to work with others in a collaborative nature. There is a necessary amount of teamwork required within the structured academic controversy approach. Students pair up to work on one side of an issue together and then discuss it with two other students they disagree with and ultimately seek to come to a consensus. This type of dialogical activity is a skill that is critical in most professions. Lastly, in a republic, people *must* be able to research both sides of an issue and hold an intelligent discussion with someone they disagree with. Failure to master these

two basic civic skills ensures that future citizens will be more likely to fall prey to the "echo chamber" on social media sites that use algorithms to show you material that will confirm your biases rather than literature that might challenge what you already believe. This type of social media activity, in addition to political talk shows that appeal to a certain political perspective, causes the citizenry to see those they disagree with as inherently bad people and decreases the likelihood that they will be able to ascribe any legitimacy to their views. This can have disastrous consequences for the nation as a republic requires both political parties to be able to lend a degree of legitimacy to their opponent's views. If opponents are unable to give any validity to one another's perspectives, it is less likely that they will accept losing an election in a peaceable manner, and for republics to exist, they must be able to transfer power peacefully.

Empowering Empathy

Another necessary element to dialogical learning is its ability to facilitate empathy. In a structured academic controversy, as students are required to research and discuss both sides of an issue, it is more likely that they will grow in their capacity to see perspectives other than their own in addition to becoming more nuanced in their thinking. When students look around, they see a polarized world where most people are operating based on their in-group bias without regard for others. This can also lead to seeing others as less than human or at least not fully deserving of human rights. These types of attitudes are not good for the world in general, but they are especially harmful in a nation where there is so much diversity as the United States. Our students must grow in their capacity to show empathy and openness to compassion. Students that lack empathy can unintentionally (or intentionally for that matter) cause emotional and physical harm to other students and negatively impact educational incomes. As adults, they can

disrupt a functioning democracy by becoming so focused on "me" they can no longer see or work for the greater good of "we." This is what I seek to accomplish as I work through my ROS.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate to what extent students grow in their capacity to show empathy after engaging in four structured academic controversies. It also seeks to examine how much student's minds change on an issue after thoroughly researching it, discussing and defending both sides and seeking consensus. Students shifting in their thinking on an issue can be a marker for empathy as well as a sign that they can take a more nuanced approach and appreciate an issue's complexity and increase in their willingness to engage in compassionate acts. This is because it is believed that empathy is a bridge to actionable compassion. Students will write in reflection journals through this process. The hope is that while changes in empathy and thinking will be measured quantitatively, the journals will provide more insight into why the changes are occurring (or why they are not).

1. What quantitative changes occur in students' empathetic capacity, viewpoint and compassion willingness after participation in four structured academic controversy interventions?
2. How do students represent empathy, viewpoint, and compassion in reflection journals after participation in four structured academic controversy discussions?
3. How do the quantitative and qualitative strands inform one another regarding empathy, viewpoint and compassion willingness?

Important Terms

Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)- A four-step discussion method in which a group of four students are divided into teams of two and: 1. Each team of two is assigned to research and prepare to defend different sides of the same issue 2. Students engage in discussion of the issue with their opponents, presenting their side of the argument and carefully listening to their opponents' stance. 3. Groups of two switch positions and repeat steps one and two. 4. Teams of two abandon their positions and seek consensus on the issue (Johnson & Johnson, 1984).

Empathy- "[the perception of] the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the "as if" condition" (Rogers, 1959, p. 210-211).

Controversial Public Issue (CPI)- A public policy issue that is unresolved and on which contrary views are or could be held and are likely to spark significant disagreement (Hand & Levinson, 2012, Hess, 2002).

Compassion- "a cognitive, affective, and behavioral process consisting of the following five elements that refer to both self and other-compassion: 1) Recognizing suffering; 2) Understanding the universality of suffering in human experience; 3) Feeling empathy for the person suffering and connecting with the distress (emotional resonance); 4) Tolerating uncomfortable feelings aroused in response to the suffering person (e.g. distress, anger, fear) so remaining open to and accepting of the person suffering; and 5) Motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering" (Strauss, et al, p. 19, 2016).

Significant Stakeholders

Students are the most significant stakeholders in this study. However, different types of students will benefit from this study in different ways. It is my hope that all students will experience personal gains from increasing their capacity to show empathy. This is a soft skill that is essential to relationships, the workplace, and being an engaged citizen. It is also beneficial for students to research controversial public issues from multiple perspectives and seek consensus as it will prepare them to continue to engage in this type of cognitive civic task as they become adults. Students in majority and minority ethnic and socioeconomic groups in their school will profit from this study in that their understanding of "others" or those in "out groups" will become more nuanced and less reliant on stereotypes or overgeneralizations as they work through controversial topics together and seek consensus and equity on these complex issues.

Teachers are also stakeholders, and they navigate through the issues and their personal biases right along with the students. It is sometimes difficult for teachers to face the fact that they too have a lens or positionality in their thinking, that they are not objective. As teachers become more aware of their own biases, they tend to be more aware of them when they are planning lessons and engaging students. It is my desire that this study helps teachers become more self-aware as they use this method of discussion, which in turn makes them a more empathetic, culturally responsive and ultimately effective teacher with *all* of their students, not just the ones with which they share a cultural heritage.

It can also be argued that parents of students participating in the research can benefit as stakeholders as well. Students often inherit their worldview from their parents. As students are challenged to think through controversial public issues from multiple perspectives

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and discuss them, they will likely come across new perspectives and points of views on the issues that they may have not considered before. As student thinking becomes more nuanced in the research process, the discussions and consensus seeking, it is reasonable to assume that many students will share elements of their intellectual and empathetic journey with their parents. As students rethink controversial public issues, their parents may endure a similar process due to exposure to their children's thinking.

Closing Thoughts on Chapter 1

In a country that is as diverse as it is proud, if we are to thrive, we must learn to talk to and empathize with one another despite our differences. Our culture's dependence on technology makes it less likely that students, who are digital natives, will have the chance to practice the social skills necessary to enhance their capacity to show empathy, and ultimately live more compassionately. It is also improbable that students will be exposed to nuanced views on controversial public issues as most inherit what their parents think. Students must have the ability to show empathy and discuss issues that could cause division in order to help make their school, and nation, a safer and more equitable place.

In this action research study, I will examine to what extent engaging in structured academic controversies (SAC) about controversial public issues (CPI) to enable students to grow in their capacity to show empathy and willingness to engage in compassionate acts. In order to examine empathy growth, I will have students take an empathy measure before engaging in four academic controversy discussions throughout the duration of one semester about four different CPI's. Students took the same measure at the end of the semester to determine what extent they had quantitatively grown in their capacity to show empathy. Qualitatively, students will write in reflection journals before, during and after each SAC in order to better understand *why* students

were or were not growing in their empathy. In Chapter 2 I look at the history of the SAC

discussion method, how controversy and dialogical pedagogy has been used in classrooms in

addition to the importance of empathy and how some educators have already helped their

students grow in this area. In Chapter 3, I discuss the solutions and methods used in the research,

while looking at the analysis and results in Chapter 4, and the conclusion in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

If a democracy is to thrive, its people must be able to talk about the issues and give some degree of legitimacy to people they disagree with. Unfortunately, in the West generally and more specifically the United States, civility in political discussions has been steadily decreasing (Chen, 2017). People tend to avoid discussing things politically with people they might disagree with, and they tend to get their information about political issues from partisan sources which decreases nuance and legitimacy for opposing views (Mutz, 2015). This phenomenon has overflowed to the schoolhouse as most schools tend to avoid discussing controversial political topics. When students fail to think deeply about and discuss these topics, is it possible that they will uncritically maintain potentially incorrect or harmful views. If these views remain unchallenged, they could be socially and emotionally damaging to marginalized students in addition to disrupting their learning outcomes. If schools fail to teach students how to research and discuss controversial topics, where will they learn about them? In my ROS, I hope to address this issue and give teachers practical tools to assist them in facilitating discussions about controversial topics while promoting empathy growth and compassionate action.

This literature review examines the current state of political discussion in the United States. I show why we struggle as a broader society to discuss controversial topics in a civil manner and how students often take discussion cues from adults. I then narrow its scope to focus to the field of education and examine why controversial topics must be discussed in school in addition to why controversy is often avoided in those spaces. After discussing why controversial topics are necessary, in addition highlighting the cognitive, civic, and learning benefits that often

result from the practice, I then consider how controversial discussion intersect with emotional growth in students, how controversy promotes empathy among diverse student populations and potentially leads to an increased willingness to engage in compassionate action. Lastly, I explore the methods for the successful use of controversial discussions in the classroom.

Communication Deficiencies

The current political climate is one of extreme partisanship where parties demonize one another and make it difficult to have a conversation with someone you might disagree with. According to Jonathan Haidt (2012), one reason for this difficulty is that we are more intuitive and rapid in our judgements than we are logical and deliberate. We decide intuitively what we think about and issue and defend it with logical reasoning post hoc, which means we also tend to be "dreadful at seeking out evidence that might disconfirm those initial judgements" (Haidt, 2012, p. 55). According to Corey Seemiller (2018), "whether kids are hearing the chants, seeing the memes, reading the headlines, or watching the news, they are witness to many examples of adults not engaging in civil discourse" (Seemiller, 2018, p. 59) which can have an influence on the way students discuss controversial political topics. Powers, Koliska and Guha (2019) showed that, in general, students had little to no interest in discussing political views on social media due to its incivility and their concern with *self-esteem threat* (any outcome that could be detrimental to their self-worth such as "being labeled as ignorant" (p. 3641)*, continuity threat* (losing a friend or status) and *distinctiveness threat* (not contributing anything to the discourse). While students in this study expressed a preference to speak about political matters in person, many still "avoided discussing politics at work, in classes, or with the family when they were uncertain about audience reception, sensed tension" or didn't want to upset anyone (Powers et al, 2019, p. 3640). Because adults shouting on television or being insulting on social media are often the only

examples students have of discussing issues, "helping students develop competencies to engage in honest and respectful dialogue, especially across differences, can be challenging in an era of hyper partisanship and declining civil discourse" (Seemiller, 2018, p. 65). Diane Mutz (2015) showed the critical nature of this issue through a series of experiments.

In one experiment, subjects were hooked up to electrodes that measure skin conductance which is a good marker of sympathetic activation (p.22) and watched two different types of simulated political talk shows. In one version, the people on the show talked about controversial issues calmly and respectfully, in the other they were loud, insulting and rude. Subjects were significantly more aroused by the show where there was uncivil discourse. In another experiment, participants were shown the same type of shows; rather than determine the extent of their arousal while watching each show, their memory was tested after viewing the civil and uncivil discussion of controversial issues. Subjects were able to answer open-ended questions about each candidate's platform when the discussion was uncivil to a statistically significant level when compared to civil dialogue. Mutz concluded that "violations of social norms enhance arousal, and produced enhanced attention to the content, and thus greater recall" (Mutz, 2015, p. 27). Mutz (2015) argues that these types of "shout-shows" can be beneficial because they are more likely to interest viewers in politics, create memories about politics and make it more likely that these ideas will be retransmitted by word of mouth or via internet. The problem is that these shows are meant to be entertainment, not the only source of news, and they certainly do not model what a good discussion looks like regarding civility, learning from one another, showing empathy and giving legitimacy to opposing views (Mutz, 2015). Ultimately, while this experience of incivility may seem ubiquitous, "engaging youth in educational activities designed

to interrupt or challenge these behaviors might help change the culture moving forwards as our youth age" (Seemiller, 2018, p. 60).

Discussing Controversial Topics

When students discuss controversial topics in the classroom, the benefits are profound. Controversy, according to Johnson and Johnson (1988, p. 59), "is a type of academic conflict that exists when one student's ideas, information, conclusions, theories and opinions are incompatible with those of another and the two seek to reach an agreement." Engaging students in conversations about issues of controversy enables them to perform high-level cognitive tasks such as the rationale and cognitive rehearsal of a position, a more in-depth understanding of an issue (Johnson & Johnson, 1984) and critical thinking skills (Bickmore, 2014; Knecht, 2018). According to Reznitskaya et al (2009, p. 32), as students participate in these types of discussions they develop an *argument schema,* which includes "elements as the statement of belief, reasons, grounds, warrants, backing, modifiers, counterarguments and rebuttals." One reason for all these cognitive benefits is that students have been conditioned to expect monological learning, where the teacher has all the answers and there is one right answer or solution, which limits intellectual possibilities. Freire (1970) labeled this type of education as "banking" because students sit passively while information is passively deposited in them. This is problematic because "in the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry" (Freire, 1970, pg. 45). With a discussion, or dialogical learning, the single, clear answer has been replaced with ambiguity, with more than one potential solution or outcome, this requires more thinking (Gibbs, 2015). It also requires more social interaction as

"the main way that we change our minds on moral issues is by interacting with other people" (Haidt, 2012, p. 79) because they help us see errors in our thinking/beliefs that we would otherwise ignore or fail to notice.

Discussions centered around controversy also help students develop their interpersonal skills as they develop positive attitudes toward other students (Johnson & Johnson, 1984; 1993), collaborate in a group as they seek understanding together (Arnold, 2019), have "increased openness for alternative points of view, tolerance for dissent and sensitivity to inequity" (Bickmore, 2014, p. 293) and become students who become more 'justice-oriented' as they explore issues of equity and their underlying causes (Sheppard, Ashcraft, & Larson, 2011). Practicing the aforementioned skills in a classroom is important "because people tend to live among those like themselves, their interactions are often limited in their ability to expose them to oppositional perspectives" (Mutz, 2015, p. 35). Helping students grapple with contrary points-of-view through discussion empowers them to "cope reflectively with past historical responsibilities that are otherwise unconsciously censored in public discourse" (Brauch, Leone, Sarrica, 2019, p. 115). It is also interesting to note that discussing controversial topics allows for students to engage and showcase five of the nine multiple intelligences making it a highly impactful instructional strategy for most students (Arnold, 2019). Perhaps most importantly, when students discuss controversial topics, it is a predictor for "civic knowledge, support for democratic values, participation in political discussion [outside of school], and political engagement -measured by whether young people say they will vote when they become legally able" (Hess & Posselt, 2002, p. 288; Rossi, 2006). One potential reason for this increased participation is the fact that "controversy increases the likelihood that something will be discussed with others" (Mutz, 2015, p. 32), meaning that students continue the dialogue long after class is over and more likely to

discuss it with others. This is critically important, because for a democracy to thrive, it must have a citizenry that is invested in the outcome of elections and is willing to go vote.

Civic Education

Although the power of the ballot is central to a functioning republic, far too many citizens do not vote. In the 2016 presidential election, only about 6 in 10 eligible voters made their voices heard by casting their ballot (Smith, 2016). One reason cited for the low turnout was voter apathy. In other words, many eligible voters do not think it makes a difference. This is one critical reason why controversial public issues should be taught: in order to cultivate a more civically engaged student population. According to Avery, Levy, and Simmons (2013, p. 105), "civic deliberation is the serious and thoughtful consideration of conflicting views on controversial public issues for the purpose of decision making." Engaging in the dialogical activity is critical because "the democratic process rests on the premise that each side in any given controversy perceives the opposition as having some reasonable foundation for its positions" (Mutz, 2015, p. 35). In a discussion about a controversial issue, the teacher is more of a facilitator, and to some degree "steps aside" as the students dictate the nature and direction of the conversation which causes the class itself to resemble elements of a democracy (Arnold, 2019). Integrating this method into civics education helps students learn how to be skeptical and stand up for what they believe in the face of those who disagree with them and people in power. Students are also likely to experience cognitive dissonance during a controversial discussion when they hear alternative views as well as hearing "moral reasoning more sophisticated than their own" (Hess, 2002, p. 13) which leads to the nurturing of democratic values. Knecht (2018, p. 14) asserts that this enables students to "question authority, peacefully, and to provide alternative solutions supported by strong analyses." In addition to these perks, Sheppard,

Ashcraft, & Larson (2011, pg. 76) contend that when students engage in civic discussions about controversial topics, they develop "political virtues" which "are used to characterize those understandings which are concerned with the desirable attributes of citizenship." One of these virtues that students attain during these discussions is a robust understanding of the "rules of civic dialogue" (Gibbs, 2015, p. 262). Tolerance for dissenting views is another one of these critical attributes as "a society without political tolerance is likely to enact policies that deprive some people of their right to influence the political agenda" (Hess, 2009, p. 17). Unfortunately, even though the benefits of implementing controversy in the classroom is well-documented, research shows it is sparsely used.

Avoidance of Controversy

Despite the many benefits of evaluating controversial issues in an educational setting, many teachers avoid activities of this nature (Hess, 2002). One reason discussion may not be utilized as often as it should be is the influence of western individualism on pedagogy. According to Damianidou and Phtiaka (2016, p. 236), "schooling inculcates individualism and eliminates any collective responsibility for marginalized and vulnerable groups." Therefore, in most schools conflicts are stifled and avoided and the majority of students are isolated from one another (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2016; Hess, 2002; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Johnson and Johnson, 1985; Johnson & Johnson, 1993; Rossi, 2006;). Hess (2002), noted a study conducted by Mystrand, Gamoran, and Carbinaro in 1988 that showed 90 percent of instruction they observed in more than one hundred middle and high school classes involved no discussion at all. This means that, in general, teachers prefer to address controversial issues in a cursory manner because it is easier, and it takes less time (Misco, 2011). Teachers may avoid discussions because they may not have enough content knowledge, are concerned about their ability to control the

discussion and the high potential for parent complaints who may not want their children

discussing controversial issues (Avery, Levy & Simmons, 2014). Another reason for the

disparity of discussions about controversial topics is the current milieu and its focus on

standardized testing. Good discussions take time to prepare for and execute. Due to the

seemingly perpetual pressure on getting "good scores," on mandated tests, teachers do not

believe they have enough time to have good discussions (Bickmore & Parker, 2014, Misco,

2011, Preis, 2017;). Moreover, some teachers do not think the value of discussing controversial

topics outweighs the benefits as they are concerned that they will lose control of the conversation

(Rossi, 2006), be divisive and leave students who do not know how to articulate their point well

feeling "defeated and humiliated (Johnson & Johnson, 1988, p. 58)." It is also possible that

teachers do not feel up to the challenge of leading a discussion about controversial topics.

Research has shown that if teachers do not have an instructional model or appropriate training

for this activity, they tend to avoid it (Beck, 2013; Johnson & Johnson, 1988; Radstake &

Leeman, 2010). For this reason, in order to encourage frequent utilization of controversy in the

classroom and to increase the probability that it will be used effectively, teachers need proven

models for this approach.

Structured Academic Controversy

There are many approaches to discussing disputed topics in the classroom. Johnson and

Johnson (1988) listed four different learning modalities through which students can learn about

controversial topics: controversy, debate, concurrence-seeking, and individualistic. According to

their research, the most effective method for helping students meaningfully engage in issues that

are polemical is through Structured Academic Controversy (SAC). This type of discussion is a

five-step strategy that begins with a heterogeneous group of four students being divided into

pairs. Each pair is assigned one side of a controversial issue and is provided time to research the issue and develop their argument. It is important that students are assigned their position because this decreases the likelihood of emotional loss-of-control because there is less of an emotional attachment to the position. Diane Mutz confirms this as she emphasizes that "research on face-to-face interaction confirms that the distance between two people has important consequences for how two people react to one another" (Mutz, 2015, p. 38). She reports on an experiment where people were told in advance that a person, they were about to sit next to had similar or dissimilar political views. Subjects later reported feeling more intense like or dislike for that person after sitting next to them based on their issue positions. In other words, proximity increased emotional arousal (Mutz, 2015). This is one reason why SAC is more likely to elicit more civil dialogue because students perceive one another as neutral agents who are assigned a position. While they may still discuss the issue vigorously, there is less of a personal attachment. In step two, each pair presents their view while the other pair listens and takes notes. In step three, each group rebuts the points made by the other pair and seeks to defend their own. In step four, each pair is given the task of defending the opposite side of the issue and must repeat steps one through three. In the last step, members of the group are no longer required to defend a position on the issues but seek to come to a common position on the issue (Jacobs, 2010; Johnson & Johnson, 1988). This type of discussion involves a high level of collaborative reasoning and displays the "educative power of dialogue" as students are taught "not *what* to think, but *how* to think" (Reznitskaya, 2009, p. 35). According to Diana Mutz "granting legitimacy to those with whom one has significant differences of opinion is a complex and cognitively difficult task. To comprehend the logic and motivation behind views that are not one's own is an effortful, multistep process" (Mutz, 2015, p. 36). Since its focus is finding consensus and it requires

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students to thoroughly research both sides of an issues, SAC has the potential to be a big step in the scaffolding process of helping students legitimize views they disagree with because the dialogue remains civil. Mutz confirmed this in an experiment with political television. When subjects watched an uncivil debate, their dislike increased for the person and position they disagreed with. However, the subjects "found the very same arguments espoused in the civil version of the debate more legitimate than those in the uncivil one" (Mutz, 2015, p.46). This shows civility matters when we are trying to help students learn how to grant legitimacy to views, they disagree with. Using a specific approach to teaching controversial topics is valuable because students not only consider both sides of a controversial issue in order to gain a better comprehension, but they also reflect and think about how they feel about the issue after discussing it (Lo & Adams, 2018). Discussions of this type improve student literacy and their ability to navigate dense texts (Lo & Adams, 2018), increases students' perspective taking abilities, and fosters a sense of community as students strive towards a mutual goal of consensus (Avery et al, 2013). This contrasts with debating controversial issues in a manner where there is a winner and a loser. While debating controversial issues does share some similarities to structured academic controversy (SAC) such as being required to attain a deep understanding of both sides of an issue, the difference is that all students can excel in SAC because they are working together. This means that because no one "loses" in SAC there is an avoidance of humiliation and loss of self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 1985). It also means that when students walk away from the SAC, they will have more depth of knowledge about an issue which should help increase legitimacy because "although simple knowledge of oppositional arguments is not the same thing as granting legitimacy to oppositional views, having some awareness of arguments on the other side is an important prerequisite to granting them legitimacy" (Mutz,

2015, p. 42). In addition to promoting student self-efficacy and self-esteem, SAC and discussing controversial topics in general encourages students to practice empathy.

Empathy

The current political and social climate is polarized. Various groups on opposite sides of the political and ideological spectrum appear incapable of working together or displaying any degree of empathy which results in the erosion of "political trust and legitimacy" (Chen, p. 59). The impact of this deficiency goes beyond politics as Borba (2018) notes "when empathy wanes, narcissism, distrust, aggression, bullying and hate rise—and schools suffer" (Borba, 2018, p. 22). Being able to show empathy is necessary in a democratic society because of its collaborative nature (Casale, Thomas, Simmons, 2018). The modern attempt to define empathy dates to German idealism of the 19th century where it is defined as "an active attempt by one individual to get 'inside' the other through a deliberate intellectual effort" (Louie, 2005, p. 567). Empathy may have originally been an "intellectual effort," but modern psychology proposes there are at least two types of empathy: cognitive and emotional, also known as affective (Louie, 2005). Others take a more nuanced approach and divide empathy into five different types: cognitive empathy, historical empathy, parallel emotional empathy, reactive emotional empathy and cross-cultural empathy (Louie, 2005). Fletcher (2016) argues that in the process of helping children learn how to practice empathy, their moral imagination and practical wisdom must be cultivated. While developing a moral imagination helps children "envision given contexts from multiple frames of reference" (Fletcher, 2016, p. 143), cultivating practical wisdom is essential to empathy education because it can "sensitize children to the salient particulars of situations that call for an empathetic Response" (p. 145). Regarding promoting empathy in the humanities, Davison (2017) shows that the emphasis on historical empathy in the classroom enables students to find and

understand multiple perspectives, understand that historical figures are likely to have more than one view and will empathize with more than a single historical perspective. Louie (2005, p. 575), has observed that when students read works of multicultural historical fiction, they increase in their ability to show empathy as "students shorten the distances between the characters [others] and themselves." The work of Michelle Borba (2018) also focuses on how to make school a place where empathy is cultivated. She asserts that "empathy thrives in environments that prioritize face-to-face connections, so a key step for school leaders is to help teachers create classrooms that nurture meaningful interaction and engagement" (Borba, 2018, p. 24). Discussions help with this interaction as they encourage perspective taking which "is the cognitive side of empathy and is crucial for today's students" (Borba, 2018, p. 25) as it helps them broaden their thinking and question long-held assumptions. When students discuss controversial topics, they must practice empathy. Schools provide a great place to use empathy because students often cross paths and work with students that come from different cultural backgrounds, have different experiences and hold different views (Avery et al, 2014). As they empathetically work through controversial issues it helps them improve their ability to collaborate as "working together on common goals can help students make that crucial shift from 'me' to 'we'" (Borba, 2018, p. 26). However, while public schools may provide a great opportunity to apply empathy, teachers often focus on helping students develop other skills because "empathy is often the most difficult historical thinking skill to practice" (Buchanan, 2014, p. 91). While discussion in general provides an opportunity for empathy, SAC is uniquely tailored for the usage of empathy in that "Students must enter empathetically into the arguments of both sides of the issue, ensure that the strongest possible case is made for each side" (Johnson & Johnson, 1993, p. 43.). When teachers strive to make their class an empathetic classroom

through discussion of controversial topics and through other strategies, it is likely to improve student self-esteem, motivation and academic performance while also fostering "development of the life-long skills necessary for critical, reflective, and compassionate thinking" (Casale et al, 2018, p. 4). This type of empathetic thinking helps students develop their moral courage as Borba states that "strategies like debate, engaging class discussions, Socratic dialogue, and civic discourse also help students find their voice and practice speaking out" (Borba, 2018, p. 27). While these are all worthy things for teachers to cultivate in their classrooms, they must also be sensitive to their students' emotional state and how best to prepare them for a conversation that could elicit a myriad of emotional reactions.

Controversial Discussions & Emotional Well-being

Discussing a topic of controversy has the potential to be an intensely emotional experience. While emotional health is complex, at a minimum, it involves students having healthy self-esteem and behavior that is appropriate in a social context (Gama & Fernandez, 2009). Emotions can be a double-edged sword in a discussion. On one hand, they can be seen as a threat requiring a teacher to deescalate a verbally intense situation; on the other hand, emotions "enhance pupils' motivation or interest in the lesson" (Brauch, 2019, p. 128). Due to the increased use of technology, students do not always know how to decipher emotions and must be given the opportunity to develop the ability. According to Borba (2018), paired sharing, discussions, and class meetings have been shown "to increase students' sensitivity to emotional cues, nurture caring connections, and learn emotional literacy" (Borba, 2018, p. 24). According to Sheppard, Katz and Grosland (2015, p. 148) "strong attachments to our values and beliefs, discomfort with uncertainty, and fear of losing power seem to propel us further away from understanding and rational engagement with difference." In addition to this "face-to-face

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encounters may increase anxiety and suppress the potential positive effects of intergroup contact" (Mutz, 2015, p. 36). Also, when controversial topics are addressed, there is the potential to elicit emotions shame and guilt as some students realize "the reality of historical misdeeds committed by one's own national or ethnic group" (Brauch et al, 2019, p. 115). This may be another reason why teachers tend to avoid controversy as rational conclusions can be difficult to obtain. However, discussion of controversial topics is not the only place that emotions are an integral part of an educational experience. In their analysis of schools that integrate experiential learning, Gama & Fernandez (2009) by cultivating experiences for students where they are exposed to diverse "regions, communities and ethnic groups" via day and week-long trips, students developed more "feelings of empathy, compassion and generosity for fellow countrymen" (pp. 76). This shows that whether it be through discussion or another type of experience, providing students with opportunities to experience emotion in a positive/affirming manner is a worthy educational endeavor. In their search of the literature, Sheppard et al (2015) found that the place of emotions in the classroom was largely untheorized and largely remained "in the conceptual shadows" (p. 157). One thing that intersects with the issue of emotions and controversy is the teacher's decision whether or not to disclose their views on a particular issue. On one hand, if teachers tell students how they feel about a particular issue it could influence how students respond in an ensuing discussion or their views on the issue in general. On the other hand, some teachers believe they need to model how to take a stand and civilly present their views on an issue; if they remain silent about what they think it subtracts from the authenticity of the experience. Sheppard et al assert that regardless of whether teachers choose to disclose their views or not, it is more important that teachers recognize their "power and influence" as teachers and be perpetually aware of how their "words and actions may influence

the politics and emotions of students" (p. 162). Not only do teachers need to be aware of their power to influence how students think and feel about a particular issue, but they must also decide to what extent they will be involved when they have a class discussion.

The Influence of the Teacher

There are many approaches teachers can take when considering their involvement in the discussion. Being involved heavily as a participant-observer by asking the questions, keeping student responses on task and adding comments to student responses to being completely detached from the discussion as an observer only, teachers have a scale of involvement to choose from when considering their influence. According to Gerber et al (2005, p.26), when teachers take a stance on a complex issue or use "assistance questioning" to help students think through their discussion responses or conclusions, students become more engaged and exhibit higher levels of critical thinking. Even if teachers choose not to be involved in the discussion at all, it is necessary for them to consider their influence as Hess notes that "the single most important factor is the quality of the teacher's practice" (Hess, 2009, p. 53). For example, while teachers' personal views do not usually play a substantial role in the discussion itself, their "views strongly influence the definition and choice of CPI [controversial public issue] for discussion" (Hess, 2002, p. 32). In order for discussions to be effective and authentic teachers must be aware of their own views and prejudices and help students identify their own because, "once the universality of prejudice is accepted we can hold a conversation between members of different cultures based on the idea that we are all emotionally tied to culturally-couched-for prejudgements" (Lambert, 1998, p. 147). While teachers being aware of their own biases is critical, they must also be careful not to privilege one view over another as "the students will respond by attacking it, leading you to a confrontation you may have been trying to avoid"

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(Birkstrand-Reid, Carbone & Hendricks, 2011, p. 681). This is one reason why discussion-based techniques (such as structured controversy) are more effective because they are designed to not push empathy for a singular position.

How to Teach Controversy

When a teacher decides to address a controversial topic in the classroom, they are taking a risk. Discussing controversial topics has the potential to upset students, anger parents and derail a classroom activity. On the other hand, all the things that make education powerful and transformative can happen in a good discussion of a controversial topic. Nevertheless, it takes considerable skill on the part of the teacher to help their students successfully discuss controversial public issues as Seemiller (2018) notes, "we must not simply teach kids of the importance of engaging in productive civil discourse, we must help them practice it" (Seemiller, 2018, p. 60). A part of helping students practice it is being well prepared as the teacher as Hess (2009, p. 55) notes "developing sound lesson plans and having high expectations for students...are strategies evident in virtually all instantiations of skillful teaching." Teachers often see themselves and are often expected to be depositories of information. However, when teaching a controversial issue, the teacher is no longer the person that has the answer. According to Hand & Levinson (2012, p. 618), "to teach something as controversial is to teach it as unsettled, to present it as a matter on which contrary views are or could be held" meaning that even though they may be knowledgeable about a topic, they "are not authorities." This brings a unique element of equality and openness to a discussion as all are exploring questions to which no one has a complete answer. Even though it means admitting they do not have all the answers, "social studies educators have consistently been interested in the teaching of CPI discussions because of the connection between learning how to discuss divisive public topics and preparing

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for democratic citizenship" (Hess, 2002, p. 11). Levinson (2006) argues a part of teaching controversial issues is having an epistemological framework to work from and help set boundaries for the pursuit and execution of these discussions that are helpful for both teacher and student. He outlines three interconnecting strands to characterize controversy which are: "1. Categories of reasonable disagreement; 2. The communicative virtues or dispositions necessary to engage in reasonable disagreement; and 3. The modes of thought and experience which can best illuminate those disagreements" (Levinson, 2006, p. 1207). While having a framework for discussion matters, it seems that, in addition to the skill of the teacher, the most important element of a quality discussion is the preparation that happens before the discussion. Diana Hess has seen time and time again in her research that "students and teachers who prepare well for CPI discussion tend to have greater success" (Hess, 2002, p. 37). Sometimes students may resist learning about an issue because it contradicts their long-held beliefs. Brauch (2019, p. 125) argues that in order to help these students be receptive to new information, teachers must introduce "alternative principles of authoritativeness." While this means using authoritative texts that show diverse points-of-view, it also means using charts, diagrams, short videos and witnesses of events. A part of the preparation process is not only learning about the issues to be discussed but learning how to participate in the art of discussion which means devoting "a generous amount of classroom time to teaching students how to prepare for discussion, how to participate in them, and how to debrief them" (Hess, 2009, p. 56). This process must be scaffolded for students and takes time to do well.

Providing students, the opportunity to research and discuss controversial topics in the classroom is a critical piece to help students develop intellectually, emotionally and civically. This literature review has shown that in general, there are societal deficiencies in civil discourse

that the media tends to exacerbate (Seemiller, 2018, Mutz, 2015). Discussing controversy produces an unpredictable situation that students tend to avoid because there are potential threats to their self-image (Powers et al, 2019). Discussions are also avoided because teachers lack an instructional model (Radstake & Leeman, 2010), in addition to the fact that students are often isolated from one another in schools (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2016). Despite this, it is vital that students discuss controversy it helps students increase their cognitive ability (Gibbs, 2015, Knecht, 2018), helps them develop an argument schema (Reznitskaya, 2009), increases openness to alternative points of view (Bickmore, 2014) and helps students develop political virtues (Sheppard et al, 2011). Students are also likely to benefit emotionally from discussing controversial topics as discussions encourage the cognitive side of empathy and can increase students' sensitivity to emotional cues (Borba, 2018). While there are many methods to discuss controversy, the structured academic controversy method shows promise in that it has been shown to improve student perspective-taking abilities (Lo & Adams, 2018) and helps students to find common ground on issues (Jacobs, 2010). While there are numerous benefits, the teacher has the biggest impact on whether the discussion goes well and must teach the students how to prepare, participate and debrief a discussion (Hess, 2009). In order to gain the student benefits of discussing controversial discussions it is paramount that teachers know how to set them up for success.

Throughout my ROS I will attempt to develop an instructional model for helping teachers lead discussions on controversial topics while showing that this activity helps students grow in their capacity to show empathy. During my internship I will take a closer look at Social Emotional Learning and culturally relevant teaching in order to examine how they could potentially influence the way a teacher prepares their students for a discussion, how they lead a

discussion and how they debrief it. I will be working closely with the assistant superintendent of my school district who is passionate about empathy and social emotional learning and how students at the margins are affected by ill-informed and culturally obtuse policies and procedures. I will be doing several book studies on Social Emotional Learning and culturally relevant pedagogy in addition to doing an intervention with at-risk students using discussion and SEL.

CHAPTER 3: PROPOSED SOLUTION

Although educators believe controversial public issues teaching is a critical component of a democratic education, "support is rhetorical rather than substantive" (Hess, 2009, p. 24). This is partly because school is seen as a place to prepare children to participate in the economic marketplace, rather than the marketplace of ideas (Knecht, 2018). Additionally, teaching in the age of accountability encourages educators to drill and kill the basics of their subject so their students perform well on standardized tests and maintain a high accountability rating (Hess, 2009). Most teachers simply do not have the requisite time to prepare meaningful discussions about controversial topics, lack the know-how to lead them well and are also concerned about the potential to upset students or parents if things get heated (Hess, 2009). Students are also being impacted negatively in their social and emotional capacities due to the increased use of technology (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). This requires students have increased opportunities to engage one another in face-to-face activities in order to mitigate the social emotional challenges that the increased presence of technology can create. As students engage with controversial topics and one another, the social emotional benefits are profound (Johnson & Johnson, 1984; 1993). Therefore, this ROS seeks to provide teachers with a replicable method for helping their students discuss controversial issues and growing in their capacity for empathy. Ways students experience shifts in their perspective on controversial topics, and what causes those changes will also be explored. However, change in perspective or the increase in empathy, whether cognitive or affective, is not the final goal. The critical objective is actionable. The goal is to enable students to interact with *all* people they encounter with kindness. As Paul Bloom (2016, p. 21) notes, it is possible for the exercise of empathy to "motivate kindness that would never have

otherwise occurred." This means the ROS is ultimately designed to help teachers provide a

platform for students to discuss controversial topics in a manner that promotes a civil and

empathetic exchange of ideas in order that they might be more willing to engage the world in

which they *live* with more *compassion*.

Outline of the proposed solution

As a teacher of psychology, my experience confirms that the subject is a fertile ground

for controversial topics as Dunn, Gurung, and Naufel (2013, p. 14) assert that rather than frame

issues as "right" versus "wrong," psychologists [and psychology classes for that matter] "can

focus on the ways empirical evidence can inform multiple points of view on either side of a

given controversy." In my class we examine multiple controversial topics such as the ethics of

human cloning, spanking children, whether standardized tests are culturally biased and other

social justice issues through a psychological lens such as examining why poverty exists. For my

ROS, I facilitated four structured academic controversy (SAC) discussions in one semester about

various social issues that intersect with the psychology curriculum. In order to increase

generalizability to other social studies classes, I selected topics that could also be applicable to

American Government and U.S. history. A good discussion is an art and skill that requires

practice to do well. As students engaged in two prior controversial discussions during the first

semester, they analyzed what went well in these discussions and what could have been done

better. The post-discussion analysis of the SAC's during the first semester set the stage for them

to have excellent discussions in the second semester when they engaged in four more.

Since we were still amid a global pandemic, I was teaching students in both online and

in-person formats simultaneously. This created a challenge for having a good discussion. My

solution for this potential hurdle was to have live structured academic controversy discussions

(SAC) with my in-person students, while facilitating asynchronous online (SAC) discussions for my online students.

Justification of the proposed solution

Empathy is critical for human interaction, especially in a democracy with so much diversity and myriad points of view. Students may struggle to show empathy more than previous generations because of how much they communicate through various modes of technology such as social media, cell phones, and emails which decreases the ability to communicate with and understand non-verbal cues (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). In an educational context narcissism, aggression and bullying are more present in schools that struggle to show empathy (Borba, 2018). Our society is also increasingly polarized. This is unhealthy for a democratic society where the ability to collaborate and find common ground with people you disagree with is essential for its existence (Mutz, 2015). Discussion-based learning lends itself to cultivating this collaborative ability in students (Casale, Thomas, Simmons, 2018).

If students in majority cultural groups lack empathy, they will be more likely to bully or say or do potentially harmful things to students in minority groups that could affect educational outcomes and cause general harm (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019) because "American racism causes some children to respond by intensifying hostility toward people who are different than them" (Kahlenberg, Potter & Quick, p. 26, 2019). This means some students in majority ethnic groups hold racist, ethnocentric and nationalistic views about other cultural groups. When students hold these types of viewpoints about other students it often leads to deficient-minded thinking about the value of these students because "there is a devaluing of members of groups that do not represent the historically dominant group" (Rivas-Drake & Umana-Taylor, p. 18, 2019). While minority students sometimes hold discriminatory perspectives about other student

groups as well, the issue with the majority student group and discriminatory understanding of others is that it is more likely to lead to harm because of power dynamics (Costello & Dillard, 2019). According to Costello & Dillard (2019, p. 4), after Donald Trump was elected there was "a surge of incidents involving racial slurs and symbols, bigotry and the harassment of minority children in the nation's schools." They call it the "Trump Effect." Their research shows that Jewish students, students of color, immigrants and LGBTQ students have experienced a significant increase of discrimination at school and on social media. The impact of discrimination is devastating as "these students are more likely to report symptoms of stress, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), risk-taking activities, school avoidance and more" (Costello & Dillard, 2019, p. 5). When students experience the symptoms as a result of discrimination, educational outcomes are adversely impacted (Kahlenberg, at al., 2019). Proactive measures must be taken by educators to stem this dangerous tide and the Structured Academic Controversy discussion method is exactly the kind of model that "emphasizes communication, empathy, reconciliation and support to those who are harmed" (Costello & Dillard, p.5) as students consider how they can engage the issue in an actionable way when the discussion is over.

Study of the context and participants

As the study was conducted, all identifying information for the school district, city and student names was changed to ensure anonymity. For most of its history, Stonewall County has been a farming community. Located about 20 miles east of a major urban area, it was known as a diverse, hard-working community of farmers. In the late 1960's a portion of Stonewall Country was designated as a spot for a lake and by 1970, Lake Sherbet was complete. This action turned Stonewall into a sailing community which subsequently changed the demographics of the town,

making it a place of concentrated wealth. South Stonewall High School, founded in 2005 as the

second high school in a rapidly growing community, is a large high school of about 2,500

students. Demographically, SSHS is 65% White, 15% Hispanic, 14% Black and 6% Asian.

Typically, about 30% of its student population is on Free-Reduced Lunch. Additionally, many of

the students in the high school are extremely wealthy. The school has a reputation for being a

school with a well-to-do student population. However, the reality is that while there are a lot of

wealthy students, there is a significant number of students (approximately 700) who are

economically disadvantaged and some that experience food insecurity as evidenced by an on-

campus food bank for students in need. The other high school in town has a food bank as well

which suggests city-wide disparities exist. SSHS can be a challenging place for students of color,

immigrants and LGBTQ students to go to school due to the composition of the school as a

predominantly conservative, wealthy and white place. I have had many students of color over the

years tell me that SSHS is an exhausting place to attend. Recently, after the death of George

Floyd at the hands of a police officer, a Stonewall Black Lives Matter chapter was founded.

Interestingly, this organization polled previous students of color who were alumni of SSHS about

their experience there. They found that these students had experienced a frequently hostile

environment due to both students and teachers at SSHS regarding racial matters. One of the most

common offenses used in the survey was the n-word being used with impunity by students.

Additionally, my Hispanic and LGBTQ students have experienced significant incidents of

discrimination and bullying at the hands of other students. In the same survey given by Stonewall

BLM, Hispanic students also mentioned being discriminated against, one even felt it was

necessary to transfer schools due to the environment. As the staff sponsor of a gay straight

alliance club one year, incidents of bullying and harassment that happened on campus were

discussed regularly by gay and transgendered students. This type of intervention is necessary. As is this case with many high schools in the United States, the student make-up of Advanced Placement classes is disproportionately white (see following figures). The sample was comprised of 59 students divided between three psychology classes. While there was some diversity, it did not match the racial demographics of the school, this likely had an influence on the way some topics such as cultural bias in schools and prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system were discussed.
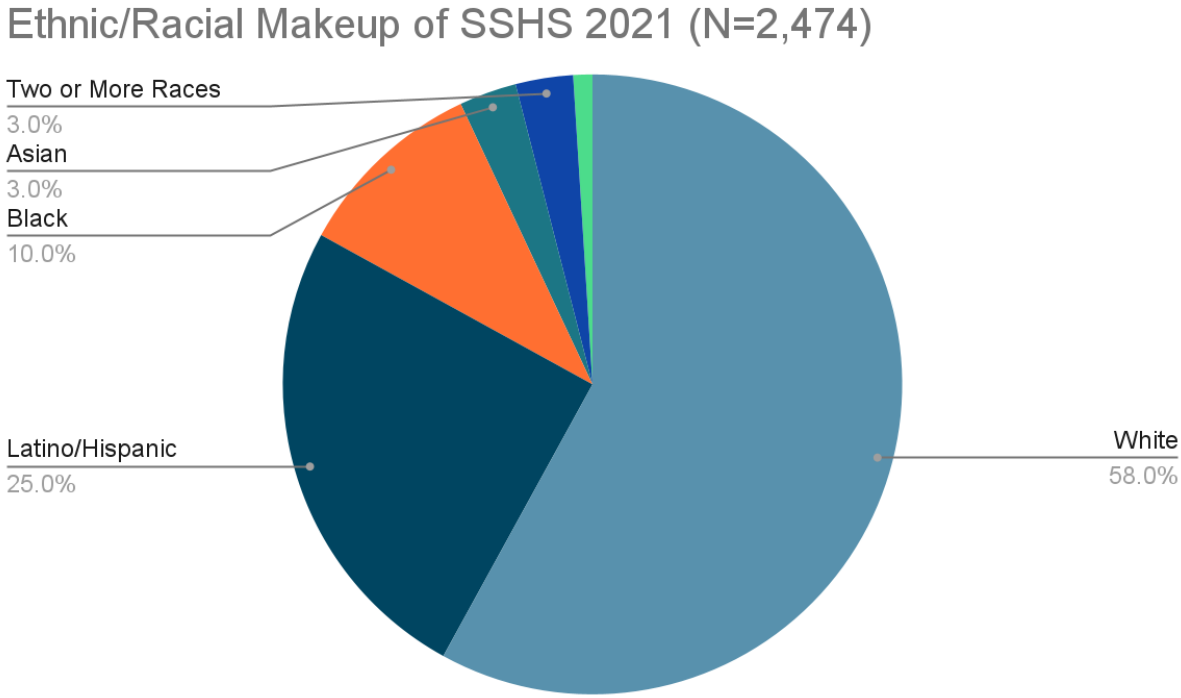
Figure 3.1

Ethnic/Racial Makeup of Students in AP Psych Class (N=56)

Black
3.6%

Asian
12.5%

Latino/Hispanic
10.7%

White
73.2%
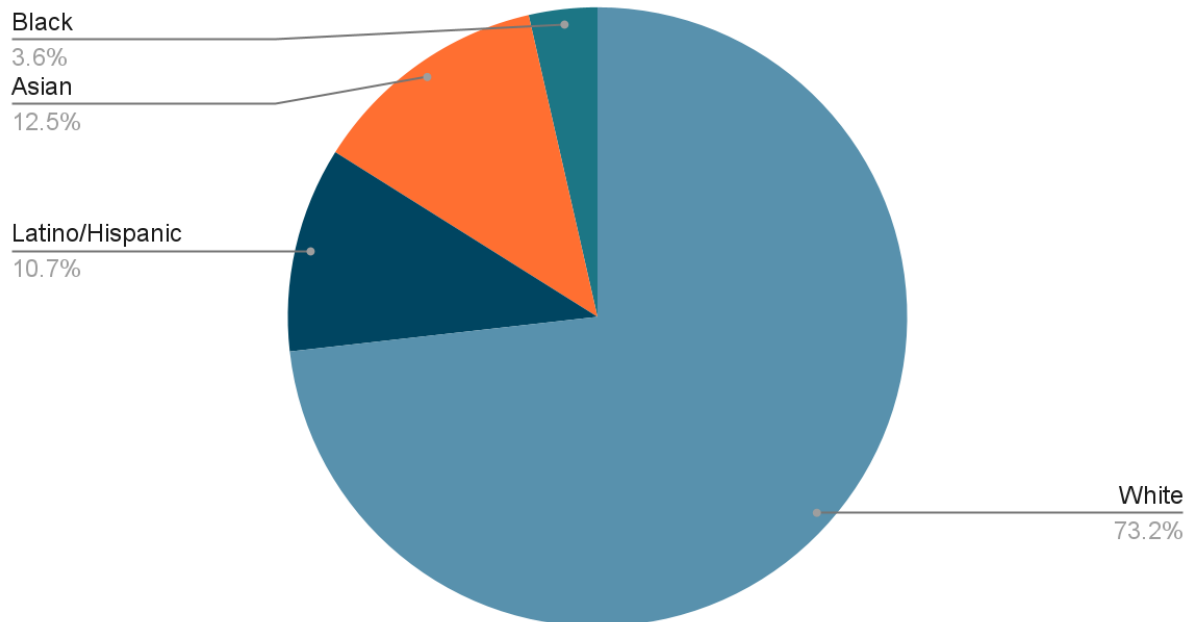
Figure 3.2

Proposed research paradigm

For this study I used a concurrent QUAN→QUAN+QUAL→QUAN mixed-methods

design with a complementarity rationale because I employed different methods (empathy

measure and journals) to examine the different parts of a phenomenon (empathy) and its impact

(shifts in perspective and willingness to show compassion). A complementarity rationale seeks

"elaboration, illustration enhancement, and clarification of the findings from one strand with the

other strand" (Creswell & Plano Clark, p. 290). This allowed me to quantitatively examine the

extent that students grow in their capacity to show empathy as a result of this intervention. I also

wanted to understand why the growth was happening (or why it was not), how their perspective

was shifting and to what extent they grew in their ability to engage compassionate acts. This was

the purpose of the qualitative reflection journals. Sequential and concurrent strands are illustrated in the figures below.

Strand I: QUAN

Procedure		**Product**
Non-probability Convenience Sampling		Three AP Psychology Classes
Empathy Measure QCAE	Quantitative Data Collection	Scores Numeric Data
Descriptive Statistics Wilcoxson Signed Rank Test	Quantitative Results	Score Totals *p* values *z scores* Empathy Baseline
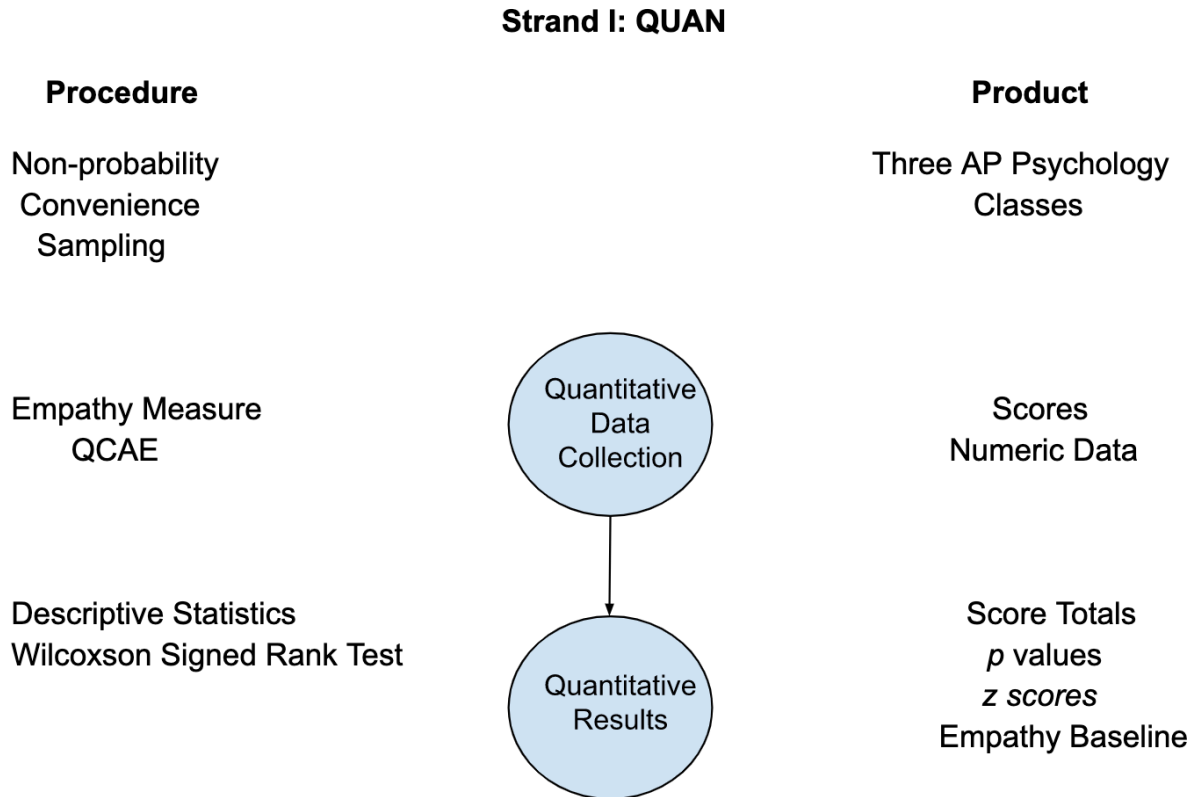
Figure 3.3

Strand II: QUAN/QUAL

Procedure		**Product**
Non-probability Convenience Sampling		Three AP Psychology Classes
Student Reflection Journals Issues/Compassion Willingness Inventory	Qual + Quan Data Collection	Text Data Scores/Numeric Data
Coding journals (In Vivo, Values, Descriptive) Wilcoxson Signed Rank Test	Quan/Qual Results	Inductive Codes Viewpoint/ Compassion Willingness Shifts

Figure 3.4

Strand III: QUAN

Procedure		Product

Non-probability
Convenience
Sampling

Three AP Psychology
Classes

Empathy Measure
QCAE
Pre/Post Viewpoint/
Compassion Willingness
Inventories

 Quantitative
Data Collection

Scores
Numeric Data

Wilcoxson Signed Rank Test

Quantitative
Results

Score Totals
p values
z scores
Empathy Shifts

Figure 3.5

Joint Display

Strand I   Strand II   Strand III

Joint Analysis:
Converging Qual &
Quan

Joint Results

Figure 3.6

Data Collection Methods

Participating students completed an empathy instrument at the beginning and end of the semester to quantitatively determine the extent they grew in cognitive and affective empathy. The empathy measure administered was the QCAE (Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy) because it measures the two main types of empathy. The questionnaire was given at the beginning of the study and after they engaged in four SAC's. The data gleaned from the questionnaire complements the quantitative and qualitative information collected during each SAC.

The four topics for discussion connect with units of study in psychology, were as follows:

- Prejudice and discrimination: Is there systemic racism in the criminal justice system?

- Fundamental Attribution Error: Is poverty caused more by a person's disposition or their situation?

- Group differences and the question of bias (ie intelligence scores): Is the public school system culturally biased?

- Altruism, Conflict and Peacemaking: Should altruism influence a nation's immigration policy?

In addition to teaching students how to participate in discussions and creating a platform for discussion, students also wrote in reflection journals before and after each discussion. Before the discussion, students completed some pre-discussion questions in their journals about why people disagree about the issue in addition to thinking about reasons why others support each side of the argument. Students were directed to quality sources and were required to cite their sources. The process of finding sources was also modeled for them. At the conclusion of each SAC, students did some post-discussion as they reflect in their journals how their mind changed on the issue and why, and to what extent their willingness to act changed as well. The journal questions are semi-structured as some of the reflection questions will be the same for every discussion (These questions are in the appendix).

For the asynchronous discussion, there were three discussion threads, one for each phase. In phases I and II, students were assigned a position to defend and phase III they sought consensus. For each asynchronous phase, students were required to make a total of five posts (15 posts total). In the first post in each thread, students stated their position. In the second and third posts they critiqued two of their classmates' arguments that argued for the other side of the issue.

In posts four and five, they responded to two of their classmates who critiqued their initial position. Although the discussion is asynchronous, for it to flow, students were given a 24-hour window in which to make their posts in each phase. This means all three phases took a total of 72 hours. Reflection prompts for students' reflection journals were archived for replicability purposes.

In addition to the reflection journals the students kept as they progressed through each SAC, they were also administered quantitative issues surveys before and after each SAC. These surveys were be designed to complement the information being provided by the students in their reflection journals. Before students researched, discussed and sought consensus with their peers about each issue, they first completed issues surveys given at the beginning of each SAC. Surveys measured via Likert scale where students stood on a given issue and also determined the extent these students were willing to engage in acts of kindness that were relevant to the issue being discussed. After students researched and discussed the issue with their peers, they filled out the same survey to determine what extent their mind changed on the issue and whether they were more willing to engage in actionable compassion.

I designed each of the issue inventories. In order to get a better understanding of each issue, I researched multiple partisan perspectives. For the *cultural bias in education* inventory, all questions were coded with a liberal partisan lean, as I thought that would be easier to score because I would only be required to code the responses in one direction. However, after the first SAC I experienced a growing concern about how my conservative leaning students might feel about only seeing statements they disagreed with most of the time. I was concerned this could result in them being less engaged in the activity or being made to feel pressure to think a certain way. Therefore, for the remaining three inventories I tried to put an equal amount of liberal and

conservative leaning statements in the issue inventory. This also means I was required to dual code these responses in the quantitative analysis to get a better gauge on how students' perspective changed. An example of a liberal leaning statement in the issue inventory on cultural bias in education was "Disciplinary practices in public schools disproportionately affect students of color." This statement was coded Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3) Not Sure (0) Disagree (2) Strongly Disagree (1). An example of a conservative leaning statement in the issue inventory on causes of poverty was "In general, people are poor because they do not work hard." This statement was coded Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Not Sure (0), Disagree (3), Strongly Disagree (4).

Justification of use of instruments in context

Some assume that because empathy is considered an expression of *agreeableness*, one of the big five elements of personality, that it is immutable to a large degree (Reniers et al, 2011). However, recent research in the field of neuroplasticity shows that this is not necessarily the case (Giorgi, Petermann, Schipper, 2014). Using the Questionnaire for Cognitive and Affective Empathy (QCAE), they revealed that with continuous social-emotional stimulation, it is possible to increase someone's capacity to show empathy which also leads to learning effects (Giorgi, Petermann, Schipper, 2014). Prior to this study the QCAE was field tested on both adolescent age students and adults and showed validity and reliability for those age groups (Reniers et al, 2011). I used this measure for empathy because it has demonstrated construct and convergent validity and because it measures both cognitive and emotional empathy. It is important to measure in order to see which type is more pliable with social-emotional stimulation in addition to determining which is more closely related to a willingness to engage in kindness.

While I predicted that the largest area of growth will be in the area of cognitive empathy because of the multiple perspective taking nature of SAC, I was also curious to determine if there is any perceivable growth in emotional (affective) empathy as this may influence their willingness to show compassion. There were other empathy measures, but they were either too brief, or they only focused on one type of empathy or were not really designed for adolescents.

While there are various issues inventories available such as isidewith.com, politicalcompass.org and the Pew Research center, I have constructed my own issue inventory questions and actionable kindness questions for each SAC topic as there were not inventories that related to these topics. While the issues questions were developed from a cursory reading of literature about cultural bias issues in education. I have researched many of these during my time at A&M. For compassion willingness, I used the research of Mascaro (2020) and Batson (1983, 1991, 2009) to develop compassionate acts of varying levels. Batson essentially defines compassion as costly helping behaviors, while Mascaro identifies it as a benevolent emotional response and intention to act. Mascaro later added that the three core components of compassion are— "awareness of suffering, an affective response, and a motivation to help" (p.13). While the inventory examines students' awareness of each issue, there is one affect question on the survey and then the motivation to help questions are categorized by levels of personal cost (listening as doing, time, money and personal risk to reputation or self). An example of a listening as doing question from the issue of cultural bias in education was "I would be willing to listen to a story from a student of color about how they experienced discrimination at school." These questions were coded as Very Willing (4), Willing (3), Not Sure (0), Unwilling (2), Very Unwilling (1).

Data Analysis Strategy

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics via the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. I conducted a two related samples test with all pre and post quantitative measures. For the issue inventories I used the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test to determine the extent students' thinking shifted on each issue in whether there was growth regarding willingness to engage in compassionate acts concerning each issue.

For qualitative data I conducted inductive analysis by creating codes, categories and themes from the reflective journals for analysis and determining which constructs emerge (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). I used In Vivo, descriptive and values coding methods to categorize and synthesize the data. Because there were approximately 240 journals to analyze, I decided to use In Vivo coding to capture the complexity of what the students were experiencing. However, there were times when it was difficult to capture what was happening with a quote, and descriptive coding was also used to supplement In Vivo. Additionally, because students discussed controversial topics for an entire semester, much was revealed about student values, beliefs and attitudes and thus there were moments when values codes were the most appropriate way to categorize what was occurring in the data.

Because it has a complementarity rationale, each strand built upon the other to provide a complete picture. The quantitative data provides a specific empathy growth measure in addition to the movement scale that was created from it. Quantitative data from the issues inventories provides insight on the extent that empathy is related to the degree that students change their minds on various issues and their willingness to engage in compassionate acts. The qualitative journals provide additional insight into why there are shifts in empathy, issue perspectives and

compassion willingness. This was my plan for merging my data in order to analyze it more thoroughly. In other words, my hope was that each strand would inform the other.

For qualitative analysis I used the constant comparative method as I went from one reflection journal to the next. As I read each journal I categorized and compared the journals for analysis. The constant comparative method is a part of the Grounded Theory approach in that it seeks to generate a theory and explain how the social world works (Glaser, 1965).

Timeline

After receiving approval from both Texas A&M and the IRB at Stonewall ISD, all students in my AP psychology classes were invited to participate in the study enabled me to attain my non-probability convenience sample. Students and their parents were informed of the purposes of the study, which topics would be studied and be provided with consent forms at the beginning January 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some students were remote learners, these students did an online discussion of the same issues but were administered the same quantitative measures as everyone else and they completed the reflection journals as well. Only the students who are present in class participated in the live SAC discussions. While there were not any students that opted out of the research, some students had incomplete data profiles because they did not complete all the work for various reasons.

After returning the informed consent forms, students were administered the empathy measure in the form of the QCAE questionnaire in early February 2021. After completing the measure, from late February 2021 to early May 2021, students participated in four Structured Academic Controversies. For each SAC, they were administered an issues inventory before and after each discussion to determine to what extent their perspective changed on the issue and their willingness to engage in kind acts relative to the issue, as a result of the research and discussion.

Students also wrote in their reflection journals before and after each discussion. In the middle of May , 2021 (about a week before the school year was over) students were administered the empathy measure (QCAE) again and submitted their final reflection journals.

Reliability and Validity concerns

There is ample research that shows the QCAE is both reliable and valid. In addition to the studies already mentioned that displayed the reliability and validity of the QCAE (Reniers et al, 2011; Giorgi, Petermann, Schipper, 2014), there are other studies that strengthen the claim of these research studies. Across cultural contexts, Liang et al (2019) showed that the QCAE maintained its validity and reliability regarding college students (n= 1224) in China. Researchers in Italy also conducted similar research and came to the same conclusions showing that the QCAE was both valid and reliable and that it displayed cross-cultural adaptability (Girolamo, 2019). These findings are important, because often in the West, measures are developed by research teams that are often predominantly White, increasing the possibility of cultural bias. Cross-cultural validity is a critical component for measure being given in the United States as it continues to increase in its cultural diversity.

As previously mentioned, I used the complementarity rationale for the different qualitative and quantitative strands of the research to ensure validity. For the student reflection journals as I developed codes and themes, I quantized the qualitative data by "assigning numeric scores to qualitative codes and themes" (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016, p.119). As I read the journals, I created codes of the most common responses to each question, quantified them and created charts showing their distribution. I then took these to create broader categories and themes. I then attempted to synthesize the empathy scales entries with the student reflection journals to provide specificity and elaboration to each scale category. As the scales enable

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synthesis of data, they provide a complementarity picture of information gleaned from each strand. In order to ensure validity and reliability for the qualitative reflection journals I used the constant comparative method as I read through them and created codes and themes that emerged from the data with In Vivo, descriptive and values coding.

Closing thoughts on Chapter 3

As I began the research, my hope was that students would become more nuanced in their views while increasing their capacity for empathy and compassion. While I elected to use the QCAE because it measures cognitive and affective empathy, just in case an unexpected change occurred, I predicted students would develop more complex views and expand in their ability to show cognitive empathy, because structured academic controversies are more cerebral than emotional. I was unsure, but hopeful that there would be a notable change in compassion willingness. As a psychology teacher, I am aware that most human beings suffer from *overconfidence*, meaning we assume we know more than we do. In large, part we base our perspectives more on intuition rather than information. Also, most people also tend to experience *self-serving bias*, where we seek out information that confirms what we already believe and minimize any information that contradicts what we think to be true. However, when we climb out of the echo chamber and expose ourselves to differing viewpoints as we read and discuss issues with others, our perspective is likely to experience some shifts.

This has been my experience as I grew up as a conservative in the city of Stonewall too. My family and friends were conservative, and I remained so until I went to university. Though I went to a private Christian university, I was exposed to different ideas and began to be moderately challenged in my thinking by what I was learning and the viewpoints of others. I also had the opportunity to travel the world which caused me to become more nuanced in my thinking

as I encountered different perspectives. However, I remained a conservative until I became a teacher. My first teaching job was in the inner-city and I was introduced to points-of-view and lived experiences that caused a significant shift in my own thinking and how I saw the world. I was also tasked with teaching social studies to a group of predominantly Black and Hispanic students. In order to engage these students, I was obligated to research and teach U.S. history from multiple perspectives. This pursuit of a more nuanced history ultimately led me to get a masters' degree in humanities with an emphasis in history. My time with these students and the way we researched and wrestled with history forever changed me. This does not mean, however, that I desire for students to become liberals or seek to indoctrinate them, rather I think it beneficial for our views to be challenged. In my own experience, when my perspective was challenged, especially by the views of others who have lived different lives, I became a better thinker, my views become more nuanced, and I became a more compassionate person. This is how I hope my students benefit from this activity. It In the next section where the results are analyzed, it shows that SAC discussion method facilitated this kind of experience for students. That in addition to experiencing shifts in their thinking as result of participating in these discussions, most students increased their capacity for empathy and their willingness to engage the world as a more compassionate human being.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Introducing the Analysis

During the spring of 2021 I was able to successfully lead my students (both remote and in-person learners) through four structured academic controversies. Due to the time constraints of a semester and the fact that I created the issue inventories used for each structured academic controversy, I did not begin my data analysis until the summer. The quantitative data included five measures that were administered to each student twice. The Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy was administered at the beginning of the semester and again at the conclusion of the fourth SAC. Additionally, students were administered an issue inventory before and after each SAC (n=4). Issue inventories determined both student thinking about the issue and to what extent they were willing to engage in compassionate acts relevant to the topic.

Quantitative data was first entered into Excel and later SPSS for analysis. While I considered units of standard deviation and the means of the compared variables, my primary interest was in determining whether there were statistically significant changes in the variables I was analyzing. If the p values were statistically significant, I also examined the z scores to determine the extent of the change.

In my qualitative analysis I used the constant comparative method with the reflection journals to inductively create codes, categories and themes with In Vivo, descriptive and values coding. After the initial first cycle coding of reading through the journals to create emergent codes, I went back through the codes for second cycle coding to synthesize them into broader themes.

After examining each strand respectively, I then organized both strands together on a Google Slides presentation, organized by controversial issue, so I could look at the two strands of data side by side hoping that each would inform the other as I operated under a complementary rationale. To achieve this, I created three charts displaying how the quantitative and qualitative data on empathy, viewpoint and compassion was confirming, disconfirming and how they each strand expanded understanding of the other.

Presentation of Data

As this is a mixed methods study I will be presenting both qualitative and quantitative data independent of one another and will also synthesize the data and explore how each of those strands complements the other. Data will be organized and presented in conjunction with the research questions.

Question 1: *What quantitative changes occur in students' empathetic capacity, viewpoint and compassion willingness after participation in four structured academic controversy interventions?*

Question 2: *How do students represent empathy, viewpoint, and compassion in reflection journals while engaging in four structured academic controversy discussions?*

Question 3: *How do the quantitative and qualitative strands inform one another regarding empathy, viewpoint and compassion willingness?*

Results of Research

Quantitative Data

Quantitative Data for Empathy

As previously mentioned, students were administered the Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (QCAE) before and after engaging in four structured academic

controversy discussions. The null hypothesis was that there would not be a significant growth in empathy as a result of the intervention. All quantitative data for scales and subscales that were measured with the QCAE as defined by Reniers (2011) are outlined below in table 4.1. The QCAE appealed was designed with scales and subscales for cognitive and affective empathy. Due to the nature of the structured academic controversy discussion method being more analytical than emotional, I predicted the most significant changes would be in the category of cognitive empathy. Reniers (2011) defines cognitive empathy as "the ability to construct a working model of the emotional states of others." The QCAE measures cognitive empathy with two different subscales: *perspective taking* and *online simulation*. Reniers (2011) provides the following definition for these subscales:

- *Perspective Taking*: "intuitively putting oneself in another person's shoes in order to see things from his/her perspective."

- *Online Simulation*: "an effortful attempt to put oneself in another's position by imagining what that person is feeling...likely to be used for future intentions."

The results for affective empathy did not yield as much significance according to the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. These results can also be seen in Table 4.1 below. Reniers (2011) defines affective empathy as "the ability to be sensitive to and vicariously experience the feelings of others." The QCAE measures affective empathy with three different subscales: *emotion contagion*, *proximal responsivity* and *peripheral responsivity*. Reniers (2011) provides the following definitions for these subscales:

- *Emotion Contagion*: "the automatic mirroring of the feelings of others."

- *Proximal Responsivity*: "the affective response when witnessing the mood of others in a close social context."

- *Peripheral Responsivity*: "the affective response when witnessing the mood of others in a detached social context."

I was most hopeful that if the students experienced any increase in affective empathy, it would be in the *proximal responsivity* subscale. This is because they were engaged in controversial discussions at proximity. It may be possible that students did not experience more growth in this category, as can be seen below, because some of them were online and therefore not near one another as they were unable to see facial expressions nor hear tone of voice.

QCAE Results n=49					
Empathy scales Subscales	*p*	Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Ties	*z*
Sum	.04	18	30	1	-1.9
Sum cognitive	.02	15	29	5	-2.2
Perspective taking (cog sub)	.04	15	26	8	-2
Online simulation (cog sub)	.06	15	29	5	-1.8
Sum affective	.8	26	20	3	-.14
Emotion contagion (aff sub)	.4	21	17	11	-.74
Proximal responsivity (aff sub)	.5	15	22	12	-.60
Peripheral responsivity (aff sub)	.7	16	18	15	-.29

Table 4.1

Student's pre and post empathy scores were analyzed for changes using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. The overall sum score on the QCAE did exhibit a statistically significant increase in empathy capacity from pre to post administration with a *p* value of .04 and a *z* value of -1.9. Therefore, the null hypothesis, that there would not be a statistically significant increase in empathy, is rejected. Overall, there were 49 students that were administered both the pre and

post QCAE. Unfortunately, there were eight students who were administered the pre-empathy measure but did not submit the post measure at the conclusion of the study.

In order to more thoroughly analyze the quantitative data, I created two tables that show the extent of empathy change and how scores were distributed across varying levels of empathy. Although one students' empathy score did not change from pre to post administration, table 4.2 shows the extent of empathy change. Empathy scores for 17 students decreased from pre to post administration. From this I created three categories for empathy decrease. Students in the minimal decrease category (*n*=10) had a score reduction of 1 to 4 points. Students in the moderate decrease category (*n*=4) had a score reduction of 5 to 9 points and students in the significant decrease category (*n*=3) had a score reduction between 10 to 19. Empathy scores for 31 students increased from pre to post administration. From this I also created three categories for empathy increase. Students in the minimal increase category (*n*=14) displayed a score increase of 1 to 4 points. Students in the moderate increase category (*n*=11) showed a score increase of 5 to 9 points and students in the significant increase category (*n*=6) had an increase of 10 to 15 points. In creating these categories I decided to keep the minimal and moderate the same on both ends of the spectrum. For the significant decrease/increase I started at the same point value (-10/10) and included the range to the farthest outlier (-19/15). While negative and positive ranks are similar in the minimal category the most notable difference occurred in the moderate category (see table 4.2). There was also an interesting difference at the significant increase level as there were twice the number of these students (12%) compared to the students who exhibited a significant decrease (6%).

Empathy Change					
Decrease			Increase		
Significant	Moderate	Minimal	Minimal	Moderate	Significant
6%	8%	20%	28%	22%	12%

Table 4.2

Table 4.3 displays chart how students' empathy generally increased. The categories are my own created from the mean of the pre-administration of the empathy measure which was 95. The categories are divided by units of nine because that was one unit of standard deviation. One can observe in the table that there is a general increase in empathy as a significant number of students moved up to a higher category of empathy. In the pre-administration of the empathy measure, 67% of students possessed a level of empathy that was average or higher. After the SAC, this percentage increased to 74%.

Empathy Distribution									
Far Below Average		Below Average		Average		Above Average		Far Above Average	
Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
8%	8%	24%	16%	51%	42%	16%	28%	0%	4%

Table 4.3

Since this study was conducted with students participating via two different modalities, in-person and remotely, I was curious to see if there was a noticeable difference between them in the categories of empathy variance. Overall, in-person and remote students were either the same or close to the same most empathy variance categories. One significant difference was in the category of moderate increase with remote students (n=7) nearly doubling the number of in-

person students (n=4). An even more dramatic difference was found in the category of minimal decrease as remote students accounted for more than 80% of the students in this category. It is also interesting to note that all students in the significant decrease category were remote learners. While it is tempting to conclude that in-person students are more likely to increase in their capacity for empathy than remote students, I think the sample size is too small to justify those conclusions. However, because I was curious, I also segregated in-person and remote learners' scores on all empathy scales and subscales to determine if there were any significant differences as a result of modality. These figures are displayed in the table below.

Empathy variance: In-person modality vs. remote modality		
Extent of variance	In-person	Remote
Significant increase (+10 to +15)	3	3
Moderate increase (+5 to +9)	4	7
Minimal increase (+1 to +4)	8	6
Tie	0	1
Minimal decrease (-1 to -4)	2	9
Moderate decrease (-5 to -9)	3	1
Significant decrease (-10 to -19)	0	3

Table 4.4

In addition to variance, I also wanted to see if there were any significant statistical differences in empathy between the two modalities. This comparison is outlined in the table below.

QCAE *p* values and *z* scores: In-person modality vs. remote modality		
Empathy scales	In-person (n=20)	Remote (n=29)
Empathy sum *p*	.03	.4
Empathy sum *z*	-2.1	-.78
Cognitive sum *p*	.06	.1
Cognitive sum *z*	-1.8	-1.3
Perspective taking (cog) *p*	.1	.1
Perspective taking (cog) *z*	-1.3	-1.4
Online simulation (cog) *p*	.1	.2
Online simulation (cog) *z*	-1.3	-1.2
Affective sum *p*	.7	.5
Affective sum *z*	-.34	-.53
Emotion contagion *p*	.7	.1
Emotion contagion *z*	-.34	-1.4
Proximal responsivity *p*	.6	.5
Proximal responsivity *z*	-.40	-.53
Peripheral responsivity *p*	.4	.8
Peripheral responsivity *z*	-.73	-.18

Table 4.5

When in-person and remote learners are segregated, the only statistically significant category is the sum empathy score for in-person learners with *z* score of -2.1. However, the cognitive sum was very close to significance at .06 and a *z* score of -1.8. It is interesting that both in-person and remote learners were almost identical in the cognitive empathy subscale of perspective taking. This is not surprising as modality likely has the least effect on researching an

issue and attempting to view it from multiple sides. I was surprised that there was a greater difference in the *z* scores for affective empathy subscales of emotion contagion and proximal responsivity. I assumed that students engaging one another face-to-face would experience more growth in this area than students typing on a screen, unable to see each other's facial expressions or hear tone of voice. My hope to see a difference in affective empathy being present in in-person learners was the main reason why I segregated the data. Again, it may simply be that the sample size was too small to draw any conclusions about which modality is better suited to help students grow in their capacity for empathy. Despite the small sample size, in-person learners do appear to have an advantage regarding the greater potential to experience empathy growth. However, it is also encouraging to observe that remote learners appear to be able to grow in that capacity as well. More research will need to be conducted in order to determine the extent to which remote learners are able to grow in empathy in comparison to in-person learners.

Since the nature of the structured academic controversy is to cognitively research, inhabit and argue for multiple points of view regarding an issue, it is not surprising that students experienced the most growth in cognitive empathy. This is encouraging and exciting because it shows that with this type of discussion students can move past monolithic caricatures of people they disagree with, that it is possible for students to see things from the perspective of others with a little work, in addition to coming to a more nuanced understanding of controversial topics. While I did not necessarily expect the students to grow significantly in the area of affective empathy, I do think that it is important for students to grow in the area of proximal responsivity as it is relevant to any discussion of a controversial topic where it is possible to lose control of one's emotions or misinterpret the emotions of those with whom you are discussing.

Quantitative Data for Viewpoint

Students were administered issues inventories before and after each SAC to determine the extent to which their perspective changed after each discussion. All results from the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test are displayed in Table 4.6.

Quantitative viewpoint change results												
Issue viewpoint from pre to post	p	n	Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Ties	Pre mean	Post mean	Pre SD	Post SD	Pre min/max	Post min/max	z
Sum	<.001	56	4	52	0	183	210	69	77	48/327	46/352	-6
CBPS	<.001	46	6	39	1	32	42	8	8	17/51	29/60	-5
C of P	<.001	43	11	31	1	43	49	10	9	24/64	21/67	-4
P&D in CJS	<.001	51	7	43	1	69	79	19	17	13/112	41/115	-5
I&A	<.001	46	8	38	0	79	89	16	13	46/119	51/118	-4

Table 4.6

The issue inventory was scored to a four-point ordinal scale with "not sure" scored as a "0". Other options were "strongly disagree", "disagree", "agree" and "strongly disagree" and were scored 1-4. I ran the data using a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. All issue inventories were statistically significant with a p value of <.001. I therefore reject the null hypothesis that there would not be a statistically significant change in student viewpoint after engaging in four structured academic controversy discussions. Like the quantitative data on empathy, in order to obtain a clearer picture of viewpoint data, I have also included change and distribution charts for viewpoint. For the viewpoint change displayed on table 4.5, the category of minimal change is defined by an increase or decrease of 1 to 5 points on the issue inventory from pre to post. Moderate change is marked by an increase or decrease of 6 to 10 points on the issue inventory from pre to post and significant change was anything beyond an increase or

decrease of 10 points or more. I elected to define the categories by units of five (rather than the four I used on the empathy measure) due to the greater degree of variance than seen on the empathy measure. As can be seen on the table, many students had significant changes in their viewpoint. The conservative and liberal identifiers indicate in which direction their viewpoint changed. It is likely that there was so much movement because a significant number of students indicated in the reflection journals that they knew little about these issues before the SAC. Thus, for many students, this SAC prompted them to formulate their opinion on the matter for the first time. Although it most shifts were in a liberal direction, the distribution chart will show that most students moved to a moderate position.

Viewpoint Change							
	Minimal			Moderate		Significant	
	Conservative	Ties	Liberal	Conservative	Liberal	Conservative	Liberal
CBPS	6%	2%	15%	4%	21%	2%	47%
CP	20%	2%	22%	4%	27%	0%	22%
PDCJS	7%	2%	19%	5%	19%	0%	46%
I&A	10%	0%	13%	2%	21%	4%	47%

Table 4.7

For issue inventory distribution, I created four categories: lack of awareness, conservative, moderate and liberal. Distribution for these categories in all four SAC's can be seen on table 4.6 below. Viewpoint stances that indicated a conservative lean were coded with a 1 or 2, and more liberal stances were coded with a 3 or 4. Since students had the option to select "not sure," (coded as 0), having a lower score did not necessarily indicate a conservative stance, because students may have possessed a lack of awareness about the issue and thus were "not sure" about many questions. For this reason, lack of awareness was made a category for students

who scored very low on an issue inventory. It is important to note, that out of all the issue inventories only one student scored in the lack of awareness category in the pre-SAC issue inventory administration. Therefore, the category was not included on table 4.6. The conservative category was defined by the number of questions in the inventory +1, and the moderate and liberal categories were based on the same unit of measurement in ascending order. For example, the cultural bias in education issue inventory had a maximum possible score of 60 (15 questions x4). Though no student scored in this category for this topic, if they had scored between 0 to 15, they would have been placed in the lack of awareness category. Students in the conservative category scored between a 16 to 30. Students in the moderate category scored between 31 to 45 and students in the liberal category scored between 46 to 60. Again, the categories are not perfect because students who scored in the conservative category for the pre administration may have lacked awareness on the issue and selected "not sure" often, which would have given them a lower score. Regardless, the table captures how students moved in their viewpoint from pre to post. While there was significant movement, most students took a moderate stance on most issues.

Viewpoint Distribution						
	Pre-SAC Inventory Score			Post-SAC Inventory Score		
	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal
CBPS	40%	51%	8%	2%	64%	33%
CP	25%	41%	32%	6%	39%	53%
PDCJS	28%	59%	9%	13%	57%	28%
I&A	15%	67%	17%	2%	63%	34%

Table 4.8

The issue inventory for cultural bias in education was the only one that framed issues from a perspective assuming there is cultural bias in schools and students either agreed or disagreed with these statements. For the remaining issue inventories, I tried to include statements that could be interpreted as both liberal and conservative, and reverse coded them accordingly. While standard deviation did not change from pre to post for this issue, the mean increased significantly. There was also a significant amount of movement in the minimum/maximum scores from pre to post. A variance of this degree is likely an indicator that this is an issue the students were not very familiar with before they engaged in the SAC process of research and discussion. They would later indicate this in their reflection journals. Thus, for many students, this SAC prompted them to formulate their opinion on the matter for the first time. Because the mean increased but the standard deviation did not, this shows that while in general the students shifted in one direction, they maintained their ideological distance as they did so. Overall, this issue experienced some of the most dramatic viewpoint movement, because it was an issue many had not considered before.

Looking at the quantitative viewpoint data for the second issue in Causes of Poverty also shows some interesting shifts. This is the first inventory in which I attempted to include both conservative and liberal statements, requiring reverse coding for quantitative analysis. In my development of the inventory, I used common sentiments expressed by both conservatives and liberals. This issue also showed the smallest amount of change from pre to post in both the mean and minimum/maximum scores. There was a slight decrease in standard deviation from pre to post, which shows that even though students maintained diverse perspectives, they moved a little closer in their like-mindedness. It may be that students were

more familiar with this issue than the others and that many came to the SAC with some predetermined conclusions. This could help explain that while the students did shift in their thinking, the movement was not as dramatic as the other issues. It is also possible that students have more life experience with this issue as approximately 30% of Stonewall's students are on free-reduced lunch (FRL) each year. However, Stonewall has a reputation of being a "rich kid" school, so it is also reasonable that some well-to-do students may have also had some preconceived notions about wealth and poverty coming into the discussion. Some of the movement could be attributed to the class' examination of the fundamental attribution error in psychology class. Students took the issue inventory before they were aware of the tendency in humans to overemphasize the influence of one's disposition and underemphasize the influence of one's situation. Students gaining an understanding of this concept likely influenced the movement to a more liberal perspective as they understood that many people experience poverty due to circumstances beyond their control.

Quantitative data on Prejudice and Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System also tells a compelling story. This has been an issue of increasing relevance the last decade since the killing of Trayvon Martin (2013) and Eric Garner (2014) and came to a fever pitch with the death of George Floyd in 2020. In cultivating this measure, I used talking points and types of policy that have been discussed and advocated for by liberals and conservatives for nearly a decade. This issue had the most significant movement in a liberal direction. While the max score did not move much, the minimum score changed more than any other issue and mean increased ten points from. The standard deviation decreased from pre to post administration more than for Cultural Bias in Schools or Causes of Poverty showing that students increased in their like-mindedness at a higher rate. I suspect the dramatic change happened in this issue for two

reasons: moving beyond an overly simplistic framing of the issue by the media and hearing the perspective of students of color during the discussion. While I will discuss this more in my analysis of the qualitative strand, many students were shocked when they examined the data and research surrounding the issue. Until being required to take a deeper look and conduct some authentic research, it seems most students had only been exposed to shallow perspectives, snippets of video clips and short sound bites from various media commentators. Their understanding of the issue was both peripheral and impersonal and the discussion changed that.

The final SAC about Immigration and Altruism also yielded some interesting shifts. As a teacher this was a bit more challenging than the others because some students struggled to initially understand what was meant by altruism and connect its relevance to immigration. The initial essential question was "Should altruism influence the immigration policy of the United States?" Even after defining it for them and giving examples, numerous students' ability to relate it to the issue of immigration, especially at the policy level was wobbly at best. To help clarify the issue I talked with my in-person students before their discussion and sent a message to my remote students. For both groups I brought up Kohlberg's levels of moral development and framed the issue in this manner. In order to provide an example relevant to immigration, I brought up the issue of the *St. Louis*; a ship of more than 900 Jewish migrants that landed in Miami in 1939. Though they were fleeing the Nazi's in Europe as refugees, they were denied entry into Cuba, the United States and Canada and sent back to Europe where nearly a third of them (n=254) were murdered in concentration camps (Blakemore, 2019). I told my students that if we understand altruism as "engaging in benevolent behaviors without concern for self-interest or external rewards" or simply "doing good for the sake of good" then should the U.S. have accepted the Jewish refugees in an act of altruism, regardless of whether it benefited

the nation? Or were the actions of the U.S. morally justifiable? I then amended the essential question to say, "Should the United States' immigration policy be influenced by altruism in regard to refugees and asylum seekers whose lives are in danger?" This clarification helped students in their understanding, and they were better able to engage the issue.

As a burgeoning researcher, I am still learning how to develop quality measures and as a mixed-method researcher, I made tweaks to each inventory as I progressed through the research. For this inventory, I used the usual conservative and liberal lean statements, but because the immigration issue has been relevant since the beginnings of the United States, I also used multiple quotes from various famous politicians and authors throughout the history of the United States. I was curious to see how students would respond to the quotes, especially if the individual saying the quote was a popular member of a political party, but the sentiment in the quote did not reflect the current sentiments of that party. Tribal loyalty is often a heuristic for critical thinking when one is considering what they think about an issue. Americans often turn to their favorite partisan news network to be told what or how to think about the latest incident or policy issue. Or if they recognize someone as being "on their team" they are less inquired to think critically about a topic, because they are inclined to manifest in-group bias and fall in line with their tribe's thinking on the issue. However, I was curious how the students would respond if I elicited a sense of confusion, or partisan pause so to speak, regarding their political loyalties. Perhaps, I hoped, they would be more likely to critically engage the issue if I made it more difficult to use a heuristic.

While there were minimal changes in the minimum/maximum scores from pre to post, there were some big jumps in both the mean and standard deviation. The pre to post mean changed ten points and standard deviation changed more than any other issue. This tells me that

generally, students moved in one direction in their viewpoint while simultaneously increasing in their degree of like-mindedness. As I listened to the discussion it was evident that students were seeking a balance between humanitarian compassion and reasonable policy that doesn't cause harm to existing citizens. Perhaps students appear to be closer in their thinking on this issue more than any other is due to their desire to strike a balance between altruism (good for the sake of good), utilitarianism (greatest good for the greatest number) and pragmatism (greatest practical good). Although this issue inventory had the most questions, the distribution was not as extreme as prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system. The issue of immigration seems ubiquitous throughout the nation's history and thus it follows that students had some initial leanings in their viewpoints.

I will go into greater detail regarding the analysis of various changes in viewpoint in the mixed section of analysis. However, with a quick glance at Tables 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8, one can see that students experienced the most shifts in their thinking in the issues of cultural bias in public schools and immigration and altruism, with prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system not far behind. It is interesting that causes of poverty experienced the least amount of significant change. In hindsight, it would have been better if the issue inventories had the same number of questions in order to have better symmetry and allow for easier comparison. Regardless, one still gets a sense of how students changed in their thinking when looking at the results on three quantitative tables. Because students had more positive rank on every issue, it may appear that the students became more liberal. This is not necessarily the case for two reasons. It is important to remember that Stonewall is a predominantly Republican city with approximately 70% voting for this party in the 2020 presidential election. If students' views are any reflection of their parents, schools in this town are close to being "like-minded" schools,

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where most of the students lean in one political direction and are not usually challenged in their thinking. When these students are required to seriously examine the other side, it stands to reason that if their thinking becomes more nuanced it is likely to move in a liberal direction because that is the perspective with which they are least familiar. Second, while most students did move in a more liberal direction on every issue, this does not mean they became liberals. Most students moved towards the middle and became more moderate in their thinking (Table 4.8). Therefore, the type of quantitative movement seen as a result of the research and discussion is that students become more nuanced and moderate in their views.

Quantitative Data for Compassion Willingness

The compassion willingness questions were embedded within the issue inventory at the end of each survey. In its most basic form, I define compassion as "costly caring." However, the amount of cost it requires to act can vary. I arranged the willingness questions from least costly to more costly. I determined the smallest level of compassion was to allow oneself to affectively "feel" compassion for another. Thus, all compassion willingness statements began with, "I feel compassion for…" and were then followed by statements that started with, "I would be willing" questions that vary in cost or risk of cost to oneself. Examples of other costly behaviors that were included in the inventory were listening, sacrificing time, donating money, engaging in behaviors that risk relationships or reputation, and engaging in behaviors where one risks experiencing personal harm. Each inventory also had a question regarding one's willingness to engage in activism which could encompass multiple levels of risk.

Unlike issues inventories two through four that included both conservative and liberal sentiments and were reverse coded, the compassion willingness statements were all coded in one direction. Like viewpoint, the compassion willing scale to a 4-point ordinal scale where I

coded "very unwilling" as 1, "unwilling" as 2, "willing" as 3, "very willing" as 4 and "not sure" as 0. I then ran the scale through the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. Results for quantitative compassion willingness are displayed on Table 4.9.

Quantitative compassion willingness results												
Compassion willingness	p	n	Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Ties	Pre mean	Post mean	Pre SD	Post SD	Pre min/max	Post min/max	z
Sum	.003	56	17	36	3	78	81	28	30	16/124	14/128	-2
CB in E	.2	46	14	27	5	29	30	6	5	7/36	13/36	-1
C of P	.1	43	12	20	11	21	22	5	5	6/28	8/28	-1
P & D in CJS	.005	51	12	29	10	21	22	6	6	6/32	8/32	-2
I & A	.2	46	13	15	18	25	25	6	5	13/32	11/32	-1

Table 4.9

Overall, one can see by looking at the table that while there was not a statistically significant increase in compassion willingness for every issue, there *was* for the overall compassion willingness sum of all inventories combined (.003) and for the issue of Prejudice and Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System (.005). Therefore, the null hypothesis, that there would not be a statistically significant increase in compassion willingness, is rejected.

In order to create table 4.8 seen below, I established levels of compassion change that had the same numerical markers as the levels of change for empathy. Minimal change was set at 1 to 4 points in a positive or negative direction. Moderate change was from 5 to 9 points in a positive or negative direction and significant change started at an increase or decrease of 10 points and extended to the farthest outlier in each direction. A quick glance at table 4.9 reveals that most students experienced minimal change on every issue. Table 4.11 helps clarify why most students' compassion shift was minimal.

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Compassion Change							
	Minimal			Moderate		Significant	
	Decrease	Ties	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase
CBPS	17%	10%	45%	10%	6%	2%	6%
CP	18%	25%	27%	6%	18%	2%	0%
PDCJS	17%	19%	37%	5%	17%	0%	2%
I&A	28%	40%	22%	0%	8%	0%	0%

Table 4.10

For compassion willingness distribution I also created a lack of awareness (LOA) category like the one for viewpoint. This is because in being able to choose "very unwilling"(1), "unwilling"(2), willing"(3) and very willing"(4) students were able to select "not sure" for these questions as well and these responses were coded 0. Therefore, I took the maximum possible score for each inventory and divided it by four to create categories of compassion willingness: lack of awareness, some compassion, more compassion, most compassion. For example, on the issue of cultural bias in schools there were nine compassion willingness questions with a max score of 36. The lack of awareness category was between 0 and 9, some compassion ranged from 10 to 18, more compassion ranged from 19 to 27 and most compassion ranged from 28 to 36. What makes the distribution table so informative is that it shows why most student experienced minimal change in compassion as indicated by the change chart. Table 4.10 reveals that students did not increase dramatically in their compassion because except for prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system, most students were already at the level of most compassionate on every issue. However, there was compassion growth and thus each issue merits a brief analysis on compassion was experienced.

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Compassion Distribution								
	Pre-SAC Compassion Willingness				Post-SAC Compassion Willingness			
	LOA	Some	More	Most	LOA	Some	More	Most
CBPS	2%	4%	26%	67%	0%	6%	10%	82%
CP	2%	4%	30%	53%	0%	9%	27%	62%
PDCJS	3%	13%	49%	29%	0%	19%	33%	47%
I&A	0%	11%	32%	60%	0%	9%	27%	67%

Table 4.11

While there was not a statistically significant shift in compassion willingness from pre to post for Cultural Bias in Education, there were some notable movements as more students increased than decreased and standard deviation decreased a little showing students grew nominally closer in their compassion willingness. For many students this was an issue they had not considered before, and they may not know anyone affected by its potentially negative outcomes. It seems reasonable to assume that the more abstract an issue remains the less likely someone will be willing to engage in costly caring regarding the issue. As students researched and discussed the issue, including discussing it with students who had experienced cultural bias, it became less abstract, and that is why there was some movement in compassion willingness. I suspect that if my psychology classes were more diverse, students may have moved even more in their compassion willingness because they would have had the opportunity to hear from more students of color. However, this did not occur as Advanced Placement classes are disproportionately composed of white students when compared to on-level classes (a nation-wide phenomenon). Also, on closer examination of the compassion willingness scores, most students started with a high score. After, the SAC, this number was even higher. In fact, students had the highest post SAC compassion willingness scores on this issue. My initial thought is that due to

the fact students did not know much about the issue going into the SAC, it was less politicized for them, thus compassion could not be seen as tribal betrayal and students were less hesitant to intuitively lean into compassion.

There was not much movement for Causes of Poverty. It seems that for both the issues inventory and compassion willingness, that a significant number of students selected "not sure". The only category where there were distinct changes was in the positive and negative ranks. Though there was not a statistically significant change, the standard deviation remained the same, and the minimum/maximum score barely changed from pre to post, the mean increased a little. As will become clearer in the qualitative analysis, it is likely because there are already so many programs and opportunities that exist for those experiencing poverty that many students may have felt that it was not necessary for them to increase in their compassion willingness. Another reason why there was not much change is due to where the students started at the beginning. Like cultural bias in education, when one examines the compassion scores closely, it is evident that more than a majority already possessed a high amount of compassion on this issue.

The most significant change in compassion willingness from pre to post occurred in Prejudice and Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System. This was the only stand-alone issue that had a z score of -2 and yielded a statistically significant change. Although the mean increased minimally, the standard deviation did not change and the minimum/maximum scores did not shift much either, the most sizable difference can be seen in the negative/positive rank as many students increased in their compassion willingness. It may be that there was more increase here than other issues because unlike poverty, where many programs already exist, the zeitgeist of the moment entails a sense of urgency to do something and that there is much to be done.

Unlike the other three issues, students began this SAC with the least amount of compassion. While some students were compassionate to begin with, many were less so. This helps explain why there was a statistically significant increase in compassion because this issue provided the most room for growth. Students did have some familiarity with the issue because of high profile cases, but they were less acquainted with the studies that examined issues with the system. Gaining a more thorough understanding of the issue and hearing some classmates talk about their experiences was likely a catalyst for the extent of shifts in compassion.

While there was not a statistically significant pre to post change in compassion willingness for Immigration and Altruism, the data yielded some interesting developments. Although the pre and post mean was the same and the minimum/maximum scores remained virtually unchanged, there was a slight decrease in standard deviation showing the students because a nominally more like-minded. The negative/positive ranks were also interesting as there was some increase and decrease which is typical, but what was most unexpected was that 18 students remained the same. This initially surprising but considering the students became more like-minded in their thinking on the issue inventory than any other issue, it seems that the students desire to be compassionate in a way that does not create more chaos. Thus, they might be willing to engage in less costly compassionate behaviors, but it may be that some students who remained the same in their willingness equated more costly compassionate action with a potential to create more chaos and possibly cause harm to existing citizens. However, like the compassion level at the outset of cultural bias in teaching, an overwhelming number of students were already willing to engage in compassionate acts regarding this issue and were therefore limited in their ability to grow in this capacity. The numbers for both viewpoint change, and

compassion willingness are incredibly similar for cultural bias in schools and immigration and altruism.

When one examines all compassion inventories, it is observed that more than half of the students already possessed a high level of compassion for every issue apart from prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system. This shows that even though most students started with a high amount of compassion willingness on most of the issues, most of these same students continued to grow in compassion anyway which materializes in a greater willingness to act. Any growth, even minimal growth, in this category is significant.

Before concluding the quantitative section, it is necessary to evaluate the internal consistency and reliability of the measures. For this Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the pre and post of each measure as can be seen on Table 4.10. This formula is an "index of reliability for the total score of a set up measurements" (Menon, 2021, p.5) It helps to assess whether items in a quantitative measure achieve validity. Though the alpha would yield a value of 1.0 if the total score variance was "perfectly attributable to common factors running through the test items" (Menon, 2021, p. 5) values that are > 0.7 are considered acceptable, > 0.8 are good and > 0.9 are excellent (Menon, 2021). All quantitative measures in this study yielded an internal consistency ranging from .73 to .89 with 66% of the measures yielding a Cronbach's alpha or .80 or greater.

Cronbach's alpha for quantitative measures		
	Pre administration	Post administration
Empathy	.77	.80
Issue inventory CBPS	.74	.77
Compassion willingness CBPS	.84	.84
Issue inventory CP	.80	.80
Compassion willingness CP	.73	.78
Issue inventory PDCJS	.87	.89
Compassion willingness PDCJS	.75	.81
Issue inventory I&A	.86	.81
Compassion willingness I&A	.84	.84

Table 4.12

It is remarkable that students showed a statistically significant increase in the capacity for empathy and fascinating that students' viewpoints shifted in a statistically significant way for every issue. It is important to remember that this was *after* students had already done two SAC's previously in the year about the ethics of human cloning and whether spanking is an acceptable parenting practice. One wonders if students would have experienced even more growth if the empathy measure had been administered before those SAC's. Although there was not a statistically significant increase in compassion for every issue, it is heartening that there was in the aggregate. This shows that with a semester or more of work engaging controversial topics from multiple perspectives it is possible for students to grow in both their capacity for empathy, cultivate a more nuanced perspective and increase in compassion willingness, even if most students had a high level of compassion already.
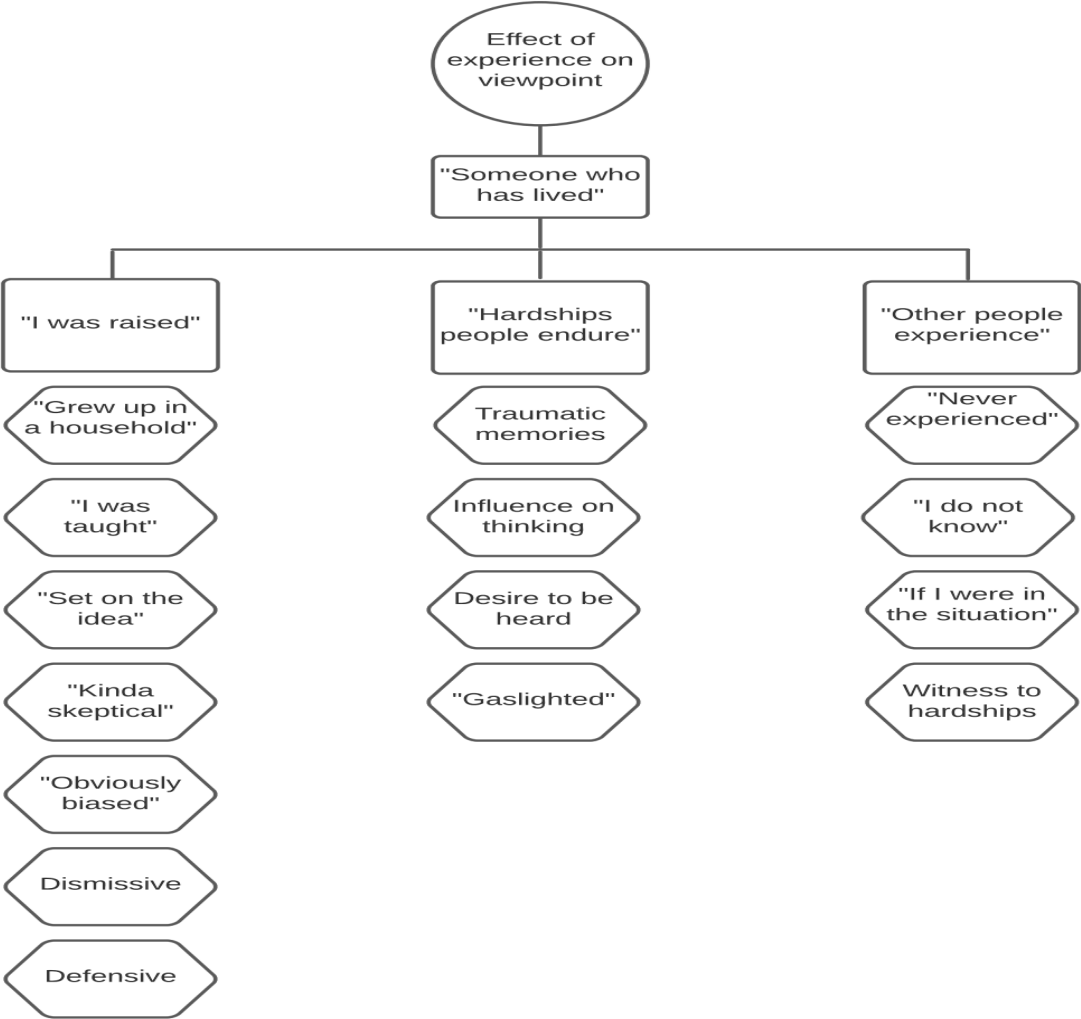
Qualitative Data

In addition to researching both sides of each controversial issue and participating in four structured academic controversy discussions, students also wrote in reflection journals both before and after each SAC. At the conclusion of the semester, each student had completed one reflection journal for each of the four issues. Students were asked the same questions before and after each SAC to determine what they thought about the issue, to consider how others thought about the issue, to what extent their group reached a consensus, to what extent their mind changed and what extent they would be willing to engage the issue with compassion. There were a few additional questions added to the final reflection journal about to determine the extent students enjoyed the activity and they were asked to assess its value (see appendix). I was most interested in how students represented empathy, viewpoint and compassion while participating in structured academic controversies.

While 56 students submitted at least one reflection journal, not all students had a complete data set for each issue. For Cultural Bias in Schools, 53 students submitted (95%), for Causes of Poverty, 52 students submitted (93%), for Prejudice and Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System, 49 submitted (88%) and for Immigration and Altruism, 47 submitted a reflection journal (84%). I initially wanted to deductively code the qualitative data with a provisional list of codes based on my research questions. However, after reading through the data the first time, I decided to inductively code to maintain an open mind, let the data emerge and speak for itself, rather than "force-fit the data into preexisting codes" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 41). In order to fully capture the complexity of what the students were experiencing I used a combination of In Vivo, values and descriptive coding. In Vivo coding "refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 137) and

placed in quotation marks. It is excellent at capturing both the voice of the participants and the complexity of what is occurring in the data. Because students were discussing controversial topics, their values were stated explicitly or implied. Thus, I thought it appropriate to use values coding in order to better capture the "paradigm, perspective and positionality" of students (Saldaña, 2021, p. 172). Descriptive coding "summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 133). While reading through the student journal entries, their writing was too verbose at times to create an In Vivo code and it was difficult to ascertain a value, thus descriptive coding was a pragmatic method for capturing what the other two methods could not. While reading through approximately 240 journals I selected what I interpreted to be quotes that were relevant to the research questions. From this first cycle analysis of coding, I assembled 22 pages of salient quotes from the student journals. For my data layout I took the quotes from these pages, wrote them all on individual notecards and spread them out on a single table. In the process of second cycle coding, I read through these student responses on the notecards multiple times, using the three coding methods in order to put "things together into new assemblages of meaning" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 5). If I struggled to categorize a salient quote, I would go back to the student's journal entry and read it in its entirely hoping context generate deeper understanding and an accurate categorical placement. As I read and reread the notecards, I continued to ask myself the question, "What do I see going on here?" From this process three major relevant themes emerged: *Effect of experience on viewpoint, Effect of insight on viewpoint* and *Norms for civic discourse*. As these themes emerged, I ended up not using all quotes I initially thought were relevant to the questions and analysis. However, these themes and their corresponding categories and codes are displayed on

the figures below. In the following section I will explain the data relating to each theme, using quotes as illustrative examples and show how each relate to empathy, viewpoint and compassion.

Figure 4.1 Qualitative theme I

As students reflected on their beliefs, values and thinking, they continuously referenced their life experience as criteria for determining for what is real and ways of thinking about an issue. Though I descriptively refer to this theme as *Effect of experience on viewpoint*, I also paired it with the In Vivo code "someone who has lived" because of the way students referenced their lived experience as the primary way of knowing and understanding. For this theme there

were three In Vivo coded categories: *"I was raised"*, *"Hardships people endure",* and *"Other people experience."*

The *"I was raised"* category focuses on the impact of one's upbringing on values, beliefs and ways of seeing the world. This includes one's homelife, friendships and formative life experiences. Because these are foundational to one's identity, when they are challenged students sometimes experience resistance. Many students were honest about their intuitive resistance when they came across information or points of view that contradicted with what they already believed as one student noted "*At first I thought* that poverty is primarily caused by one's disposition, *but now* I believe it is a combination of both, depending on each case."

Students also admitted skepticism when the confronted ideas that conflicted with the way they were raised as one student expressed "It felt weird to see things another way from what I was taught. And I didn't know what to do, believe what I was taught or see the other side...I even went home and talked to my mother and sister about it." Another element of this resistance students expressed was motivated reasoning as they occasionally admitted that they "want to believe" a certain perspective and resisted changing their mind. One female student, after experiencing some of her classmates getting defensive about certain topics, asserted that some students have what she described as "privileges that hinder" empathy and understanding. It is these life experiences that caused students to be dismissive or defensive about other students' experiences. Because beliefs and identity are often closely intertwined, some students interpreted ideas contrary to their own as a "personal attack" and others engaged in *whataboutism*, or raising different issues rather, or excusing unjust actions, rather than wrestling with the one at hand. According to a student, an example of this occurred when students were discussing "George Floyd and basically excusing what Derek Chauvin did because Floyd was on drugs or had a

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criminal past" rather than discussing Chauvin's excessive use of force that resulted in Floyd's tragic death. In reference to the discomfort that grappling with the issue caused when parts of the issue run counter to one's experience, a student wrote that "it's easier to pretend something isn't real."

Contrary to "privileges that hinder" other students had experienced numerous hardships and expressed how they shaped their thinking as well in the category of *"Hardships people endure."* In reference to prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system, one student of color was candid about her experience and how it influenced her point-of view as she lamented "Police brutality took away a family friend, racial profiling sent my brother and cousin to jail, and the amount of stories I've heard from my parents and grandparents and parents will never not burn in my mind." Some students were more explicit about how the challenges they have experienced have influenced their thinking as one student was thinking through the complexities of poverty said, "at times I would think that people have the ability to work hard enough and get themselves out, but as someone who has lived in poverty and seen first-hand how difficult it is, I know that that is not always true." Students in this category also expressed the *Desire to be heard* by those who have not endured the same hurdles. There were numerous occasions when these students felt their experiences were dismissed by those who had not experienced similar challenges in their life. One student of color admitted as much as she noted with frustration that, "Living in America as a black person, you are constantly being gaslighted for your own experiences in this country." By *"Gaslighted"* the student meant that those she engages in conversation about challenges she has experienced tried to get her to question her own reality. Some students attributed this dismissiveness to a group phenomenon bemoaning the fact that "they don't see it" or are simply unaware of the oppressive realities experienced by

other groups. According to students, the solution for this type of behavior intersects with both empathy and compassion as they emphasized the need to "listen to people's stories and not to dismiss them if you disagree with them." This requires a posture of openness motivated by compassion to hear and understand where others are coming from. And when true listening occurs, it gives the listener empathetic access to the lived experiences of others.

When students realize that *"Other people experience"* lived realities that are different from their own, it opens the door for more empathy which often causes students to shift their viewpoint and engage the issue with more compassion. The first element of this process is to be aware that "it is possible" for others to live through different circumstances that result in viewpoints and ways of seeing the world that are different from our own. From this awareness is it then reasonable to understand that people have endured unique hardships that have impacted the way they see an issue. One student reflected on this regarding how people of color have experienced the criminal justice system writing, "I do not know what they have disproportionately experienced." In recognizing that others have suffered, an empathetic response becomes possible as students seek to see and understand from those perspectives. This recognition can occur as an attempt to empathetically see yourself in difficult circumstances or "dangerous situations" that others have lived through and imagine how would feel. Or it can occur when you witness the difficult experiences of others, especially those you care about, and allow them to shape how you engage with reality even though you have not directly experienced them yourself. One student referenced this when explaining how she felt about immigration stating, "most of my best friends are Hispanic and many of their parents are undocumented immigrants." A frequent outcome of students using the experiences of others to gain a more robust understanding of reality was compassion. For example, during the immigration SAC,

students were more likely to seek win/win solutions, or those that benefitted both immigrants and existing citizens. Similarly, for cultural bias in education, some students began to recognize that the "same thing does not work for everyone" due to the awareness of students' diverse experiences and abilities. This shift in viewpoint and compassionate response stemmed from students recognizing the limits of their knowledge and understanding of the issue based on their own experience.
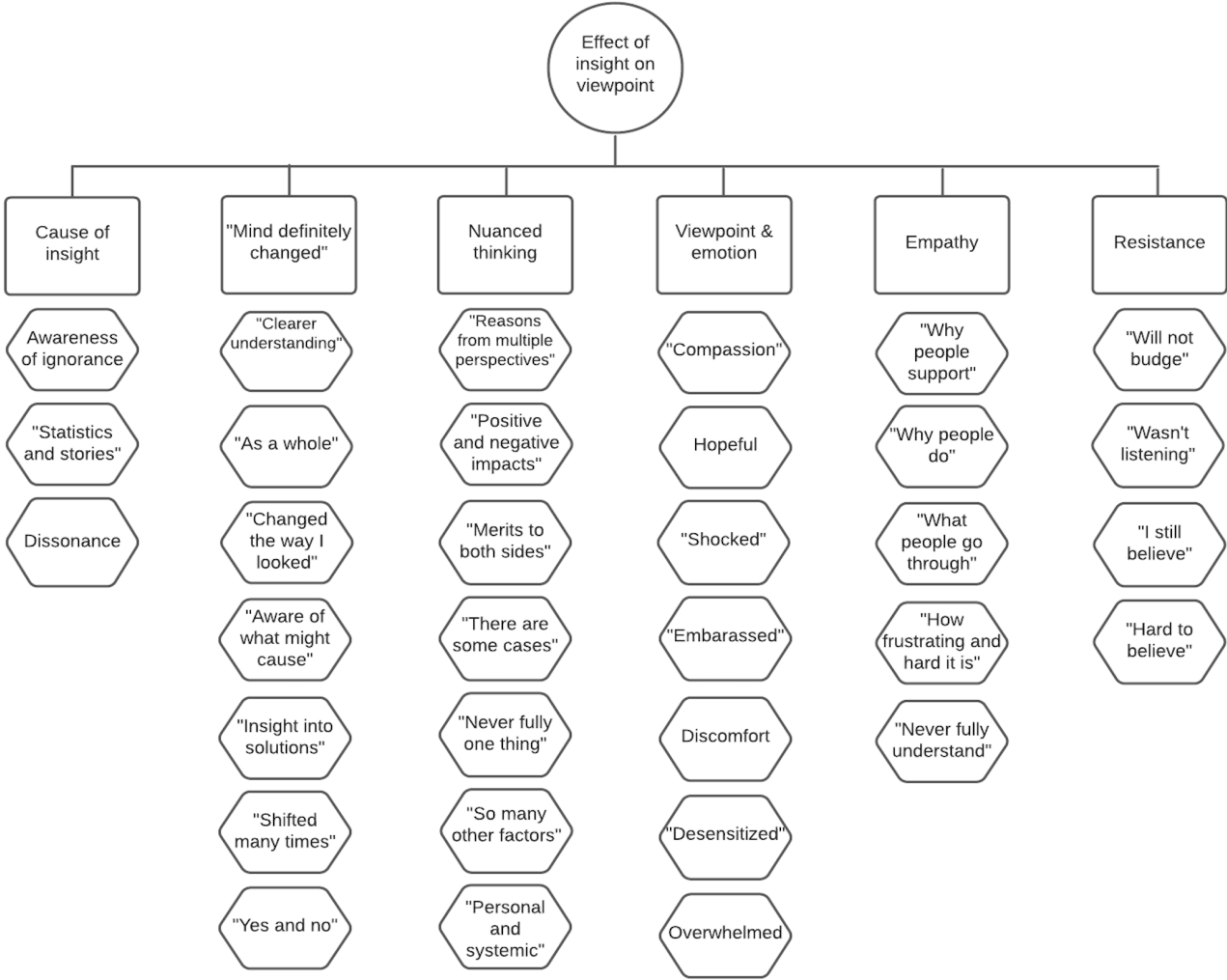
Figure 4.2 Qualitative theme II

The second major theme was *Effect of insight on viewpoint.* This theme was coded using a combination of In Vivo and descriptive coding. In addition to *Cause of insight*, it

examines the various ways students were impacted by insights they gained from discussion and the *Resistance* to changing their perspective that was exhibited at times.

While there were myriad responses to students experiencing insight, there were three main causes of insight that continuously emerged in the reflection journals: *Awareness of ignorance*, *"Statistics and stories"*, and *Dissonance*. Students experienced the realization of their lack of awareness in different ways. As they began to thoroughly research the issue from multiple perspectives, they quickly understood they possessed a lack of understanding and knowledge of the issue(s). For example, students researching immigration admitted that they "didn't really understand" or did not "really have much knowledge of immigration policies." Others admitted that they had not ever considered the issue before as one student writing about cultural bias in schools confessed that they "didn't know a lot about the topic before I began researching." For many students this newfound awareness cultivated a desire to learn even more.

When students did seek to learn, they discovered that personal anecdotes (that they read in their research or heard from other students through discussion) combined with research studies that provided statistics were the most potent combination in being a catalyst for insight. Students indicated that these studies provided "new points" and statistics that they could not ignore. And while students did read about powerful personal stories that were equally informative about an issue, "hearing" another student recount their experience during a discussion yielded exceptional force in causing students to shift their thinking. Students also reported that both *statistics and stories* elicited continuous reflection about the issue after the discussion was over that ultimately culminated in the student deciding to change their mind.

Students were asked after each SAC if they had experienced any dissonance during the research or discussion and students frequently admitted to experiencing a significant amount of

dissonance on every issue. Students reported that they endured cognitive dissonance as a result of encountering the dissenting voices of other students as one student stated that the "people who disagreed made me think." Cognitive dissonance also caused students to experience a suspension of certainty as one student in a moment of discomfort admitted that she "didn't know what to believe" and another "questioned [her] thinking" as they were writing in their reflection journals after the SAC and pondering about the points made by their peers. Students pointed to emotional discomfort as well as they learned about the suffering of others. One student referencing the stories he read about the injustices of people of color had endured in the criminal justice system wrote that it was "hard to look the other way." Often when students became cognizant of their lack of knowledge it increased their desire to learn more and their openness to learn from others. This typically resulted in a shift in viewpoint.

While many students noted that their "mind definitely changed," they experienced this change in different ways. Students most frequently referenced their seeing and understanding. Gaining a greater understanding of the issue enabled them to see a clearer picture of the world in the fullness of its reality, including the good *and* bad, as one student admitted when referencing her growing understanding of systemic racism that "the rose-colored glasses are coming off slowly." Seeing differently also enabled comprehend the big picture regarding a controversial topic and identify both causes of issues and their potential solutions. Students also differed in the extent of viewpoint change. Some students had a more dramatic viewpoint change as many cited that their mind changed "a lot" or "quite a bit" throughout the research and discussion process. Others only experienced a slight change in their perspective as one student indicated while referencing immigration that they found themselves "*leaning more* towards" a stance that

welcomed immigrants. Similarly, students expressed that they maintained most of their original beliefs but had made allowances for certain situations.

Making concessions for the complexity of an issue is foundational to the category of *Nuanced thinking.* As students were required to research both sides of an issues and discuss it with other unique individuals, it follows that students would point to the newfound ability to empathetically cite reasons from multiple perspectives. From a policy perspective, they also became more aware of the difficulty of adopting policies that are equally beneficial to all and how to navigate the inherent messiness. Other codes in this category related to the ability to resist seeing an issue from an overly simplistic or monolithic perspective. For example, while considering causes of poverty, rather than contributing it exclusively a personal or systemic issue, students refrained from dichotomous thinking and expressed how both could be involved in varying degrees. For example, while two students disagreed on the extent of the influence of situation and disposition on poverty, they agreed that both played a role as one stated, "I never really saw the situation side of things. I grew up in a household where, if you didn't have money, it was because you were lazy and weren't working hard enough...but there are some situations that may be the cause to their poverty." And the other expressed "I can now understand how disposition may play a small part in it. I still believe it's more heavily influenced by situation, however." This experience of nuance and the resulting shifts in perspective was prompted by both research and hearing the perspectives of other students.

Controversial topics tend to elicit emotion because they deal with topics that intersect with values, identity and lived experiences. In general, students experienced emotions related to insight garnered from research, discussion and feeling overwhelmed. Most student emotions that occurred during the phase were responses to the awareness of how little they knew before

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researching. Reactions to this realization ranged from being surprised about what was discovered in the various research studies that showed disparities in arrest rates for people of color to feeling "weird" about learning things that contradict what they were raised to believe about the causes of poverty. Regarding cultural bias in schools, a student of color expressed embarrassment that she "didn't know more about the issue." Students noted feeling compassion as they gained insight during both the research and discussion. Also, during the phase III of the discussion students were encouraged when they were able to find common ground with classmates expressing that it was "heartening to see how the class came to a consensus." Unfortunately, not all students felt heard and were frustrated at times as one student of color said she felt, "desensitized to the negative opinions and baseless arguments made by the opposing side." Students also felt overwhelmed when considering how much work there is to be done in creating an equitable and just society and regretted the fact that they had yet to act. There was also evidence that some doubted their ability to make a difference as one student admitted feeling "so small and not able to enforce…any real change" another stated that "students do not have that much power" to effect meaningful change. Another student echoed this lack of hope in reference to the criminal justice system writing that he did not "believe there could be any solution to this issue even with a policy in place." One might reason that because negative emotions were experienced by some students that this type of activity should be avoided. However, experiencing and managing negative emotions and working through them with resilience is a part of being a citizen outside of school. Thus, while it is preferred students experience positive emotional outcomes, if they do occasionally experience one's that are distressing, this is preparation for what they are likely to encounter later as active citizens. In addition to the experience of emotion, the ability to show empathy is another phenomenon that will enable students to engage civics in a humanizing way.

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While students mainly experienced different types of cognitive empathy as the SAC activity focuses on perspective taking, they also affectively felt the emotions of other points-of-view they were trying to understand and realized that there are limits to completely understanding what someone else is going through. Cognitively, participants were able to better empathetically understand why their cohorts supported certain perspectives and why members of the general populace engaged in certain types of behavior, political or otherwise. Students affirmed that this is key for finding common ground as one student retorted that it is "important to put ourselves in other people's shoes, in order to obtain a better understanding of why people do what they do." In addition to understanding people's thoughts and actions students also were able to get a better cognitive grasp on circumstances that influence people's situation as one student expressed that they were now "more considerate to what people go through and how they end up in poverty." Through research and discussion students also gained a better comprehension of incidents of hardship and their effect as one student referencing cultural bias in education admitted that they "got to see many first-hand experiences of it that I never would have known about or experienced on my own." Seeing suffering in others can elicit a transformative affective response that changes one's viewpoint and propels them to action. A particular student expressed this was a critical part of civic engagement writing that "everyone must put themselves in the shoes of those who are getting discriminated against and understand how *frustrating* and hard it is for them." Though empathy is a powerful lever for viewpoint change and compassionate action it is not the same as lived experience as one Black student proclaimed that people of color "will always have different sentiments about certain issues, and the white majority will never be able to fully understand what that entails." Therefore, while empathy is foundational to efficacious civil engagement it is not a panacea. This requires a perpetual posture of humility and

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willingness to listen and learn when engaging others of different backgrounds, beliefs and experiences.

Students often did become better listeners as they grew in their capacity for empathy, but sometimes they exhibited resistance to new ideas and perspectives. In general, this experience of resistance was visceral or an attempt to resolve cognitive dissonance through belief perseverance. If a belief is challenged that is central to one's identity or a core value of a group to which they belong it tends to elicit a strong emotional response combined with an unbearable amount of dissonance. Examples of this resistance occurred most often during the discussions about the criminal justice system and immigration. When discussing the disparities present in the criminal justice system, one student wrote "there is a victim mentality when it comes to this issue, and I will not feed into it." This type of response was unusual. Most of the time, when students displayed resistance, they eventually modified their thinking to accommodate the new information. On the immigration issue, a student admitted that she could not bear to listen to any information that countered her belief in treating immigrants altruistically. Despite this, she moved to the middle slightly as she better understood the perspective of those she disagreed with. Similarly, a student admitted being "deterred by the BLM [Black Lives Matter] riots" which caused him to resist considering whether there was injustice in the criminal justice system. He was ultimately able to move past the resistance to a moderate view in the middle as a result of his research. The phenomenon of belief perseverance was occasionally observed when facts of a given issue were not enough to change students' intuitive lean about an issue. For example, after engaging in research, discussion and even reading a module in the psychology textbook in class showing significant amounts of research that poverty is predominantly caused by situations, a student candidly expressed that she persisted in the belief that poverty is "primarily caused by

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disposition." Additionally, despite being shown evidence that police officers of color can be just a discriminatory as white officers in their interaction with people of color, one student did not see how a system could possibly be racist "that involves minorities and minority leadership." In their rebuttal these students did not use research studies or facts, but implied that to move from their original position on the issue felt intuitively wrong.

Overall, when considering the effect of insight on viewpoint, the results are substantial. When students are given the opportunity to research multiple perspectives of an issue an discuss these with a diverse group of students, they not only become aware of how little they know but shift in their viewpoint as they learn more information and are able to see the issue from the point-of-view of others who have experienced it differently. For the most part, this results in a more nuanced and humanizing student perspective that makes compassion a more likely outcome. There is also a higher probability that students will have improved their ability to think critically and productively engage in civic discourse.
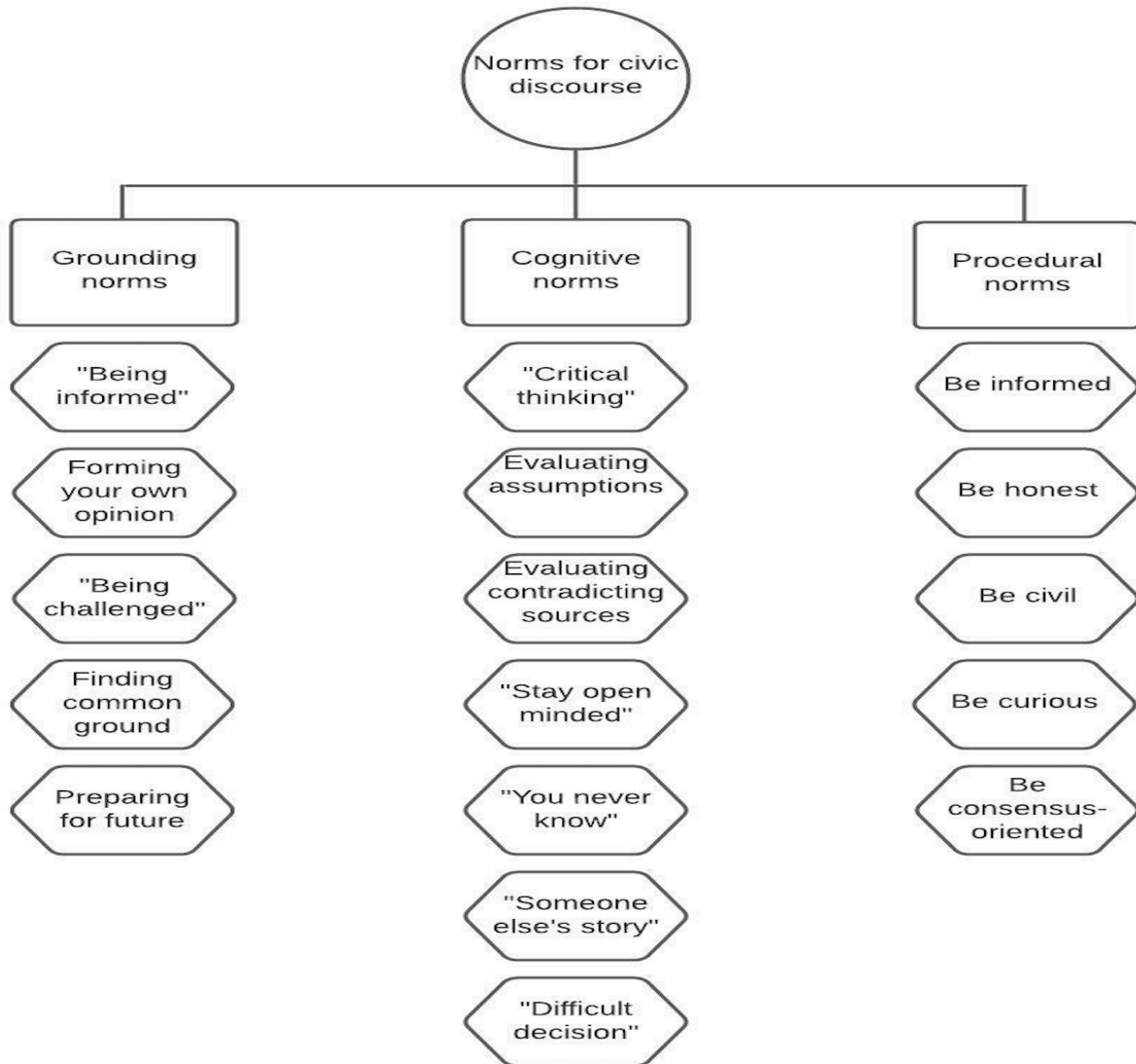
Figure 4.3 Qualitative theme III

Throughout the four structured academic controversy discussions and after, students had much to say about what they learned regarding how to best participate in discussions about controversial public issues and why they matter. While some of the codes are In Vivo and others are descriptive, all the codes for *Norms for civic discourse* are grounded in student values.

Grounding norms are the foundational reasons students frequently pointed to when explaining why this type of activity is an important part of what should be happening in schools preparing students to be engaged citizens. As students learned more about each of these issues,

they not only began to realize how little they knew as one student admitted "I don't normally consider topics like this because they are not spoken about enough", but that they were gaining awareness to "important issues" and understanding how these topics impacted their lives and the lives of those they care about. Also, being better informed on the issues helps students "know the facts and not just argue emotionally." You cannot do something about a problem of which you have no knowledge. A significant number of students pointed to forming their own opinion, and the way an opinion is formed, about an issue as an essential skill. Students placed a premium on opinions being informed by "facts and evidence" and learning to "think for themselves" rather than being too heavily influenced by "what their parents say", "one news source", or their own personal "bias." Students also prized the act of being challenged in their viewpoint and implied that they are often coddled in public schools as one student expressed that "school has sheltered students too much and they deserve to have their beliefs challenged." In addition to having "your opinion, your thoughts and your morals" challenged, students valued being tested in a broader sense as well because it "is necessary for us to learn and grow as people." A part of the challenge that students esteemed was to "try to find common ground" with those they disagreed. Students displayed an urgency to "reach a middle ground," citing its importance "especially now" due to the hyper-partisan political atmosphere of the United States and beyond. Though students celebrated the fact that there was "a lot of compromise" they were also candid about "not able to completely agree with some people." Despite this, as they gained a "better understanding for one another" they were able to "better analyze where exactly" they disagreed and were usually able to "find at least one point that was agreeable or interesting" to both parties. Students also seemed to be cognizant of the fact that this activity was helping to prepare them for future "conversations that may be difficult to have." At a time when it is not unusual to have

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relationship with friend or even family member fractured over political disagreements, being able to find reliable information and have civil consensus-oriented discussions was deemed invaluable.

Students also highly regarded ways of thinking throughout the structured academic controversy. While critical thinking was an expressed value, students elaborated that this type of thinking not only entails criticizing views you disagree with but to also "hear other ideas and think critically about your own stance." This means keeping an open mind by being open to the views and experiences of others, being willing to question your assumptions and allowing for the possibility that you could be wrong. It also requires knowing that if one has a robust awareness of the issue, at some point you will face the challenge of thinking through complexities and gray areas that are likely to be present in most controversial topics. A part of this cognitively strenuous process is working through conflicting authorities as one student admitted that they "stumbled upon several contradicting sources, invalidating each side's statistics." Not only did this make their viewpoint decision more difficult but it also required a certain level of media literacy to evaluate the quality of sources and corroborate them with others. This can be arduous work. Like recognizing that there is a strong possibility that there are details relevant to the issue that you do not know, it is also imperative to remember that there are personal stories and ways of experiencing the issue of which you are unaware. Therefore, students expressed that practicing humility and showing empathy were paramount during the SAC's.

In addition to identifying the reasons for discussing controversial issues and esteemed cognitive tasks to practice while engaging in dialogue, students also identified rules that ought to guide the discussion itself. Students placed a priority on being informed so that they could understand important "issues more deeply" and not get too emotional. It is easy to rely on one's

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intuition, but this does not require work and feelings can be misleading. While it is still possible to be carried away by emotion despite being informed and not all information is equally valid, students placed a premium on knowing the facts and "logical thinking" when entering a discussion in order to avoid letting their "emotions get the best" of them. Being able to honestly engage the issue and others was also appreciated. Because we live in an age where cancel culture abounds, and people are worried about unintentionally saying the wrong thing. The SAC structure significantly reduces this concern. This was confirmed multiple times as one student wrote they loved feeling like they "could openly speak about the issue without worrying [they] would be attacked or judged and that made it easier to listen to/understand the sides [they] did not initially agree with." Another student expressed she felt the freedom to be candid during the deliberation because "the parts that give me anxiety about debate and expressing my ideals-confrontation and anger-have been removed." Thus, this student was able to be honest throughout the discussions and felt "affirmed" in the process. One discussion trait that makes this level of honesty possible is the emphasis on civility. Because students were expected to "remain cordial" and "communicate respectfully" it laid the groundwork for a discussion many students described as both "fun" and "civilized." On the other hand, if one assumes they know everything, they tend to be dismissive and do not make a good discussion partner because they lack curiosity. Being able to "hear others' perspectives" and empathetically put themselves "into differing point of views" was a frequent reason students cited for characterizing the activity as fun. This is one reason why it is essential for students to enter the discussion with a healthy inquisitiveness as they recognize that there is a wealth of knowledge to be discovered in one another. Students often showed gratitude to one another because they "enlightened [each other] on topics [they were] ignorant about," helped each other "see all sides" of an issue and better

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understood "why someone supports something." From a research perspective, because the activity demands students to "argue for the other side, [they] look at information" they would not have otherwise, a vibrant investigative spirit is necessary to get the most out of this part of the activity. There a significant amount of categorical overlap between the grounding norm *Finding common ground* and the procedural norm *Be consensus oriented.* Journal quotes used for one could be used for the other. At the heart of being consensus oriented as a procedural norm is to cultivate a desire in students to "better understand the other side." Students have shown that even when they disagree, when they have better sense of where the other is coming from, they are usually able to reach some level of agreement. *Norms for civic discourse* show that students value a deeper level of knowledge about controversial topics and one another. Much of this knowledge is gained through interaction with others as students listen and attempt to empathetically enter others' point-of-view. Students also valued the inherent cognitive and social challenges of this activity and emphasized the importance of prosocial behaviors to guide interactions in the discussion and beyond.

Overall, when considering the qualitative research question, "*How do students represent empathy, viewpoint and compassion while participating in structured academic controversies?"* students exhibited these characteristics in compelling ways. At the heart of *Effect of experience on viewpoint* is the realization that your limited experience provides inherent limitations on what you know and understand. However, when this awareness occurs, students become more curious and open to the perspectives of others. Though some students do experience resistance, *insight* often results in shifts in viewpoint, an increased capacity for empathy and often more compassion for those who have endured hardships. Finally, as students gained experience in researching and discussing controversial public issues, they experienced a greater sense of why

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this type of activity is so important in developing civic literacy and what were the most effective ways for conducting dialogue.

In conclusion of the qualitative analysis, students displayed a significant amount of qualitative movement in empathy, viewpoint and compassion. As students became more aware of the limits of their knowledge and experience to provide a comprehensive picture of reality, most became more eager to seek out and understand the perspectives and experiences of others. While some students were able to overcome their dissonance and resistance and gain a better understanding of the world through others, even those who displayed resistance still experienced a suspension of certainty in their views. In a manner like empathy, students increasing their awareness of the issues was the biggest catalyst for viewpoint change. This increase in awareness sparked student indecision, movement to a more moderate stance and resistance to viewpoint change. Even when students did not change their mind, their previously held viewpoints were deeply challenged. For many, the increased awareness led to an increased willingness to get involved in an actionable way. This was revealed qualitatively in the sections of the reflection journals that focused on compassion. Like resisting a change in viewpoint, some students resisted compassion if it could be interpreted as a betrayal of their tribe. However, most students experienced various levels of compassion from feeling to willingness to engage the issue in a sacrificially actionable way. Disrupting the just-world phenomenon or the belief that the world is generally fair was an impetus for increasing many students' willingness to get involved. However, the extent of students feeling overwhelmed, and their sense of hope influenced their willingness to get involved as students varied in their self-belief to effect change. Therefore, in addition to integrating this type of discussion method to engender empathy and nuanced

perspectives, it is also evident that more research needs to be done on how to empower civically engaged students.

Mixed Data

The intent of the last section of results and third research question, is to examine how the qualitative and quantitative strands inform one another. According to Creswell and Clark (2018), "The intent of integration in a convergent design is to develop results and interpretations that expand understanding, are comprehensive, and are validated and confirmed...by comparing the two data sets" (Creswell and Clark, 2018, p. 221). According to Clark and Ivankova (2016), when results from quantitative surveys and qualitative data are integrated researchers are "better able to understand factors that influence individuals" (Clark & Ivankova, 2016, p. 41) In this study, by combining the results of the quantitative measures with the qualitative data gleaned from the reflection journals I was able to more ably comprehend what caused shifts in empathy, viewpoint and compassion. Therefore, in the following charts, I compare the quantitative and qualitative data for empathy, viewpoint and compassion. For each chart, there are three paired columns of quantitative and qualitative data. The first paired column in each chart displays confirming quantitative and qualitative data, the second paired column demonstrates disconfirming data, and the third column shows how the data strands mutually expand understanding of each other.

Mixed Data for Empathy

Empathy Confirming		Empathy Disconfirming		Empathy Expansion	
Quantitative	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative
Sum p= .04	"In order to come to an agreement... everyone must put themselves in the shoes of those who are getting discriminated against and understand how frustrating and hard it is for them."	Significant decrease n=3	"At first I thought that poverty is primarily caused by one's disposition, but now I believe it is a combination of both, depending on each case." "Although my opinion did not change much, I better understand the other side."	Significant increase n=6	"Seeing the very small percentage of people who escape poverty, I feel more compassion." "People believe that the hard work they put into their life becomes devalued when someone argues they've been through worse."
Sum Cognitive p= .02	"I had an initial thought of "I do not think school can be biased" but as I saw statistics and heard stories, it showed me that other people experience stuff that I do not."	Moderate decrease n=4	"I didn't really understand if there really was racial bias in schools. But after doing research and hearing other students' perspectives over this topic, I realized there is bias."	Moderate increase n=11	"I was honestly shocked...I started on position B...But there are some interesting stats and influential accounts and stories that make it hard to look the other way."

Figure 4.4 Mixed data for empathy

Empathy Confirming		Empathy Disconfirming		Empathy Expansion	
Quantitative	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative
Perspective taking p= .04	"I didn't really understand if there really was racial bias in schools. But after doing research and hearing other students' perspectives over this topic, I realized there is bias."	Minimal decrease n=10	"I realized how important it is to put ourselves in other people's shoes, in order to obtain a better understanding of why people do what they do."	Minimal increase n=10	"I had an initial thought of "I do not think school can be biased" but as I saw statistics and heard stories, it showed me that other people experience stuff that I do not."
Online simulation p= .06	"I had to think about how I felt personally if I were in the situation."	Moderate increase n=11	"Kids have so much access to all these different people and things to help them succeed in school, that they can't really blame cultural bias for their difficulties."	Minimal decrease n=10	"Poverty...is a personal choice."

Figure 4.4 Continued

There were myriad examples of data from the quantitative strand being confirmed by data from the qualitative strand. As previously outlined in the quantitative section, students experienced statistically significant growth in their overall empathy score (.04), in the cognitive category (.02), the cognitive subscale of perspective taking (.04) and very nearly for online simulation as well (.06). Students provided an abundance of qualitative examples to choose from that confirmed this growth, but I highlighted those that displayed overall empathy growth, cognitive growth as the student emphasized *thinking*, perspective taking considering the student's focus on point of view and online simulation as the student expressed *feeling* how someone else would feel as an aid to understanding what others think and experience.

There were also elements of disconfirmation and expansion between the two strands. In the quantitative strand, I created six levels of empathy movement: significant decrease, moderate decrease, minimal decrease, minimal increase, moderate increase and significant increase. I then looked at the journal entries of students who were at varying levels of the decrease side of the empathy continuum. I observed that students that experienced a quantitative decrease in empathy still occasionally shared sentiments that indicated an increased capacity for empathy. This shows that even if students failed to achieve statistically significant empathy growth, all students experienced some degree of qualitative increase in empathy. It was also interesting that one of my students who was in the moderate increase category said several things that could be perceived as less empathetic, while saying things at other times in her journal that displayed a substantial amount of empathy.

I used the increase side of the continuum for empathy expansion. Looking at students' journals that displayed an increase in empathy, I attempted to understand why they increased. The qualitative themes *Effect of experience on viewpoint* and *Effect of insight on viewpoint* were helpful for providing insight into why students grew quantitatively in their capacity for empathy. At varying levels of frequency, students that experienced an empathy increase pointed to understanding the limits of their experience and their realization of their lack of awareness led them to use the knowledge and experiences of the others to see and understand the world differently. When significant empathy growth occurred in students, they wrote about not only being able to better understand where people from different socioeconomic and cultural groups were coming from, but those within their own cultural group with whom they disagreed. The codes of resistance and dissonance also helped expand understanding of why some students decreased quantitatively in empathy. Though there were some examples of students who

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decreased in their empathy score writing statements that could be perceived as less empathetic, it was more common that these students wrote things that indicated empathy growth. Unfortunately, some of the students who said things that could be viewed as antipathetic, did not complete both pre and post empathy measures and thus had incomplete data sets (and I don't know where they fall on the increase/decrease continuum). Therefore, looking at both data sets for empathy it is evident that all students experienced some level of empathy growth. Students who increased quantitatively in empathy, generally indicated this change in the qualitative strand, while students who decreased quantitatively displayed a qualitative level of growth too. However, some students who grew quantitatively, sometimes said things that could be perceived as less empathetic. This shows that empathy is not a zero-sum phenomenon, where students have it or they do not. That even if students grow quantitatively, they may experience qualitative moments where they are lacking in empathy. Students are complex. Controversial public issues are complex. In general, students did the best they could as they researched and discussed these issues from within the limits of their experiential lens. The data indicates that if SAC's are done with fidelity, students will experience some level of empathy growth as they gain access to their classmates' perspectives and a more nuanced understanding of the human experience.

Issue	Viewpoint Confirming		Viewpoint Disconfirming		Viewpoint Expansion	
	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual
CBPS	p=<.001 NR=6 PR=39	"In the end kids are responsible for their own success." "After researching and learning that there have been studies that show cultural bias I realized that I could support that side." "I didn't really understand if there really was racial bias in schools. But after doing research and hearing other students' perspectives over this topic, I realized there is bias."	Ties-1	"If anything I am more confused about side B than I was in the beginning." "Concerning textbooks and white holidays. That we openly talk about holidays served in the Western hemisphere, and take time off for them, but we don't cover other less known holidays in education. Another is textbooks...not putting kids of color in ...pictures...and many books have skimmed over important cultural things."	Significant viewpoint change=51% Moderate viewpoint change=26%	"I didn't know a lot about the topic before I began researching." "Being a minority student, I felt almost embarrassed that I didn't know more about the issue."

Figure 4.5 Mixed data for viewpoint

Issue	Viewpoint Confirming		Viewpoint Disconfirming		Viewpoint Expansion	
	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual
CP	p=<.001 NR=11 PR=31	"I still believe it's primarily caused by disposition, but the people that are in poverty because of their difficult situation...have my full sympathy." "I now see that it is more about situations and circumstances that are out of our control." "Before, I believed that there were more cases of disposition being a factor in poverty, but I realized (almost) everything can [be] traced back to a circumstantial factor being the cause of a person's poverty."	Ties-1	"I hadn't at first thought about how generational trauma could make it even more difficult to escape poverty. I found it pretty convincing. It's hard to pull yourself up by the bootstraps when people like you have been oppressed for hundreds of years."	Significant Viewpoint Change=23% Moderate Viewpoint Change=32%	"At first I was pretty set on the idea that poverty was dispositional, and you determine the outcome of your life by the choices you make. But, now I understand...the external situations overpower an individual's disposition." "I believed that poverty was solely based on one's disposition and their choices in life. After researching and learning of extreme situations where escaping poverty is nearly impossible."

Figure 4.5 Continued

Issue	Viewpoint Confirming		Viewpoint Disconfirming		Viewpoint Expansion	
	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual
PDCJS	p=<.001 NR=7 PR=43	"I just find it hard to believe that in a system that involves minorities and minority leadership, it is still racist." "Racism is more seen in this system than I expected or realized." "I love that the criminal justice system is working at making things a lot better...but I cannot ignore the fact that there is racial prejudice and bias."	Ties-1	"I had not taken into account how the drug war has affected minorities and low income areas because this issue is not spoken about as much as it should be."	Significant Viewpoint Change=46% Moderate viewpoint change=25%	I was honestly shocked...I started on position B...But there are some interesting stats and influential accounts and stories that make it hard to look the other way." "A member of my family is convinced that Black people are not discriminated against because there are so many black artists and music artists, which to me seems extremely narrow minded especially after seeing the statistics."

Figure 4.5 Continued

Issue	Viewpoint Confirming		Viewpoint Disconfirming		Viewpoint Expansion	
	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual
I&A	p=<.001 NR=8 PR=38	"We may be helping others, but at what cost?" "Reading about specific cases where altruism wasn't present and immigration was denied to those escaping dangerous situations was very convincing." "I did not understand all the hardships people endure."	Ties-0	"I found the entire argument to be convoluted and strange, to a point where I can't necessarily condemn any side for their given view. There are merits to both sides, but I have to agree with the refugee part...more confused about the topic now"	Significant Viewpoint Change=52% Moderate Viewpoint Change=23%	"I did not have a solid stance on this issue before because I did not know a lot about it. Now I have an opinion." "Beforehand I didn't really have much knowledge of immigration policies, but after I have learned and agree with altruistic beliefs affecting the reasoning in government issues...for this issue I was more learning and generating an opinion."

Figure 4.5 Continued

One subject of the first two research questions was concerned with identifying the ways students change their perspective after engaging in four structured academic controversies. There was a statistically significant difference in viewpoint from pre to post on every issue with a *p* value of <.001. While there were a few ties on every issue, most students shifted their viewpoint in a more conservative or liberal direction. Of the students that experienced a shift, the majority shifted in a liberal direction on every issue. This does not mean that most students

became liberals. Most students ended up in the moderate political category on every issue, except causes of poverty. Since students moved in both directions, but more moved in a liberal direction than conservative, for viewpoint confirming I displayed the negative (conservative) and positive (liberal) ranks from the quantitative issue inventory along with the p value for each issue. Next to the quantitative column of empathy confirming I cite three quotes from the reflection journals. The first quote in each issue is from a student that moved in a more conservative direction and the quote from their journal indicates this shift. The following two quotes in each issue are from students who moved in a liberal direction and elaborate on this transition in their reflection journals. Most of the students who changed their minds expressed that they were not as informed on the issue as they had originally assumed.

There were two qualitative elements to viewpoint disconfirming: confusion and pre/post issue inventory ties. On the issues of cultural bias in public schools and immigration and altruism, two students admitted to being more confused about the topic than before the SAC. While it is good to be challenged in one's thinking, and to suspend certainty for a season as one thinks through the issue anew considering new information, confusion is not the goal of the SAC. Therefore, I put them in viewpoint disconfirming. While they are not paired with any specific quantitative data, they contradict one of the essential goals of the study: to challenge students in their thinking in a way that promotes nuance, not confusion. They are the first quotes in the respective issue category of those two issues. The qualitative theme of *Norms for civic discourse* also reveals that students value being informed, forming your own opinion and evaluating contradicting sources. These students' state of confusion was largely caused by contradicting sources. This highlights the importance of media literacy and working through

contradicting sources in a community of other students as each seem to cultivate a well-informed opinion.

The other subject of disconfirming is the few students who tied from pre to post on the quantitative issue inventories. There were no ties on the issue of altruism and immigration, but each of the other issues had one tie. It is disconfirming because when I analyze these students' reflection journals for the issue on which they experienced a tie, they indicate that they did change in their thinking. This tells me that there were areas of the issues that were not fully addressed by the inventories, and it was in these places that the students changed their minds. But it shows that students did experience a qualitative shift in their thinking, even if they did not experience a quantitative one. Regarding viewpoint expansion, I endeavored to analyze why there were so many dramatic quantitative shifts in viewpoint with the qualitative theme of awareness of ignorance. Repeatedly, for each issue students recognized the limits of both their knowledge and experience. As they researched the issue and discussed it with their peers, they began to formulate views on issues they were unaware of or knew little about. Or their initial views were challenged as they learned more about the topic. In the quantitative column for each issue, I highlight the percentage of quantitative moderate and significant changes in viewpoint. In the qualitative column, I sought to expand understanding of this dramatic change by inserting two qualitative quotes from students' reflection journals that exhibit the category of awareness of ignorance and the impact of experience.

Issue	Compassion Confirming		Compassion Disconfirming		Compassion Expansion	
	Quantitative	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative
CBPS	p=.2 PR=27	"African Americans are three times more likely to get harsher punishments for committing the same offense as their white counterparts. Because of this, I can understand some racial bias in public education. When I am eligible to vote, I will use my vote as a way of sparking change." +15	NR=14	"I'd be willing to help another student, as long as they aren't only willing to blame cultural bias immediately." "Listen to people's stories about how cultural bias affected them in school, speak up against any cultural bias you witness, attend discussions regarding standards and advocate for more ethnic representation in textbooks."	Ties 5 (100% in Most Comp.) More Comp. 1=26% 2=10% Most Comp. 1=67% 2=82%	"We [white people] tend not to believe other races, whether it be because we are racist or just ignorant, and we will write away…why something bad has happened to a certain race. It's always, 'they should have followed the law,' 'they should just abide by the dress code just like everyone else," etc...I can work with other students and we can create a program at school."

4.6 Mixed data for compassion willingness

Issue	Compassion Confirming		Compassion Disconfirming		Compassion Expansion	
	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual
CP	*p*=.1 PR=20	"Be kind to everyone and always try to be positive towards other people because you never really know what someone is going through." +8	NR=12	"Compassion can be shown by listening to those who are suffering and helping in ways that they say are helpful." "You can show compassion by donating to nonprofit organizations that try to combat poverty. Especially considering the fact that it is situational and these people are no less than the rest of us."	Ties 11 (63% in most comp.) More Comp. 1=39% 2=27% Most Comp. 1=53% 2=62%	"It all comes down to people's underlying beliefs and how they were raised. If one grew up struggling with poverty, they probably would have a better understanding of it compared to never had to struggle...the extra money I do receive can be donated to charities. I can also volunteer in food drives and help make blankets for the homeless population."

Figure 4.6 Continued

Issue	Compassion Confirming		Compassion Disconfirming		Compassion Expansion	
	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual
PDCJS	*p*=.005 PR=29	"I would be willing to directly protest for police demilitarization." +7	NR=12	"I would be willing to attend public events that support side A. I will not be silent when human rights are being violated, and I wish to help in every possible way to fix the problems in our justice system." "...to acknowledge it as an issue and advocate for prison reforms in any way I possibly can without coming across as an extreme advocate."	Ties 10 (60% in Most Comp.) More Comp. 1=49% 2=33% Most Comp. 1=29% 2=47%	Racism has always been an issue. Some people refuse to see how racism affects people of color today...by trying to understand others' point of view and speaking one on one with other people of color about their experience with modern-day racism."

Figure 4.6 Continued

Issue	Compassion Confirming		Compassion Disconfirming		Compassion Expansion	
	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual	Quan	Qual
I&A	*p*=.2 PR=15	"I have definitely started to understand the struggle that people go through to enter the United States legally. I have started to believe that there should be less strict immigration policies. I will advocate for this." +7	NR=13	"Better educate myself and others on the difficulties of being an immigrant, whether it's having to leave a dangerous country, living in constant fear of being deported, the strenuous process of gaining citizenship...I am very willing to...hear people's stories and learn how I can help them." "Volunteer at elementary schools to help children of immigrants learn English. Spread awareness in the community about the issue. I would be somewhat willing."	Ties 18 (77% in Most Comp.) More Comp. 1=32% 2=27% Most Comp. 1=60% 2=67%	"People have stereotypes of illegal immigrants and there is much disagreement on how helpful they are to American society...I would be willing to go to a protest advocating for illegal immigrants.

Figure 4.6 Continued

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Part of the analysis was concerned with ways students experience and represent

compassion. For the mixed portion of compassion confirming, I took the *p* value of pre and post

quantitative administrations for each issue and included the positive ranks indicating an increase

in compassion. Qualitatively, I incorporated quotes from students who experienced moderate to

significant growth in compassion regarding this issue. To highlight this growth, I inserted the

point increase of their quantitative compassion measure next to their quote. There were two

qualitative parts to compassion willingness disconfirming to complement the negative ranks

from the compassion measure. The first quote for each issue in the column is from a student who

decreased in compassion willingness but remained in the category of "most compassion" at the

conclusion of the SAC. This shows that even though there was a significant number of negative

ranks, most of these students remained in the category of "more compassion" or "most

compassion." The second quote for each issue in the column is from a student's reflection

journal who scored at the lower end of the compassion willingness spectrum (some compassion

or lower) at the conclusion of the SAC. It is disconfirming because while these students exhibit a

lower quantitative compassion willingness than most of their peers, they still exhibit a qualitative

willingness to engage the issue compassionately. Regarding compassion expansion, I endeavored

to use the qualitative data to expand upon the quantitative data. At first glance, it appears that

though most students did not significantly increase in compassion willingness. This is further

supported by the fact that out of four issues, only one exhibited a statistically significant

difference in growth from pre to post (prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice

system). However, on further examination of the quantitative distribution charts, one can see that

a significant number of students were already at the level of "more" or "most" compassion and

that many of these students tied in their compassion willingness from pre to post at these higher

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levels. To expand upon this qualitatively I examined students' reflection journals who had a tied score from pre to post at the highest level of compassion willingness (many of these students scored the maximum willingness score on both administrations). I included two quotes from the same student in the qualitative column for each issue. The first quote for each student was from the pre-cognition prompts as it shows how they already possessed a high amount of compassion influenced by their empathetic outlook. The second quote from each student shows a high level of qualitative compassion willingness as corroborated by the quantitative measure. My design was to show that many students already possessed a significant amount of compassion willingness and that is why the changes were not as dramatic as those of viewpoint. It is also interesting to note that empathy is not the only spark for compassion as many of my students who had relatively low empathy scores yielded high compassion willingness scores. This implies that while empathy does play an important role in compassion willingness as revealed by this study, there are other factors at work. My initial assumption is that a student's personal code of ethics also plays a role in compassion willingness as several pointed to the importance of ethics and behavior regarding these issues. The connection between ethics and compassion would be a good topic for further research.

In concluding the mixed portion of data, the qualitative data has helped provide a clearer picture of quantitative results. While most students experienced a quantitative increase in empathy capacity, all students experienced a qualitative increase. While many students endured dramatic quantitative changes in their perspectives, all students experienced qualitative changes in their viewpoint. This was typically caused by students recognizing they were ignorant about issues and the different life experiences that others have relevant to the topic. Although the quantitative increase in compassion was not as dramatic as the change in viewpoint, this was

because many students already had a high amount of compassion. And whether a student had a low or high quantitative compassion willingness score, all exhibited a level of qualitative compassion willingness.

Interaction between the Research and the Context

Impact of Context on the Results

Students engaged with these controversial issues amid a politicized pandemic, a month after a hyper-partisan election in which the legitimacy of the outcome was disputed by many members of a major party and Critical Race Theory was being deemed one of the greatest threats to public education by many politicians and members of the populace. In this atmosphere, most educators were (and still are) wary of bringing up controversial public issues in the classroom for fear of upsetting the wrong parent or student or being accused of indoctrinating students. Stonewall High School is in a predominantly white community (see context) that is largely conservative. Therefore, this activity was apropos to the environment in that it sought to challenge student thinking in what is very nearly a like-minded environment, face these critical issues with courage, help students think through them and formulate their own opinion with an eye towards civic engagement. Other than some student confusion regarding the issue of altruism and immigration which I described earlier, there were no operational issues, nor was there resistance from students, parents or administrators. However, due to the politically charged environment and schools being accused of teaching Critical Race Theory or indoctrinating students, the assistant superintendent of Stonewall ISD observed two of the four discussions (causes of poverty and prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system) to ensure fidelity to stated research objectives.

Student Reflection on Experience
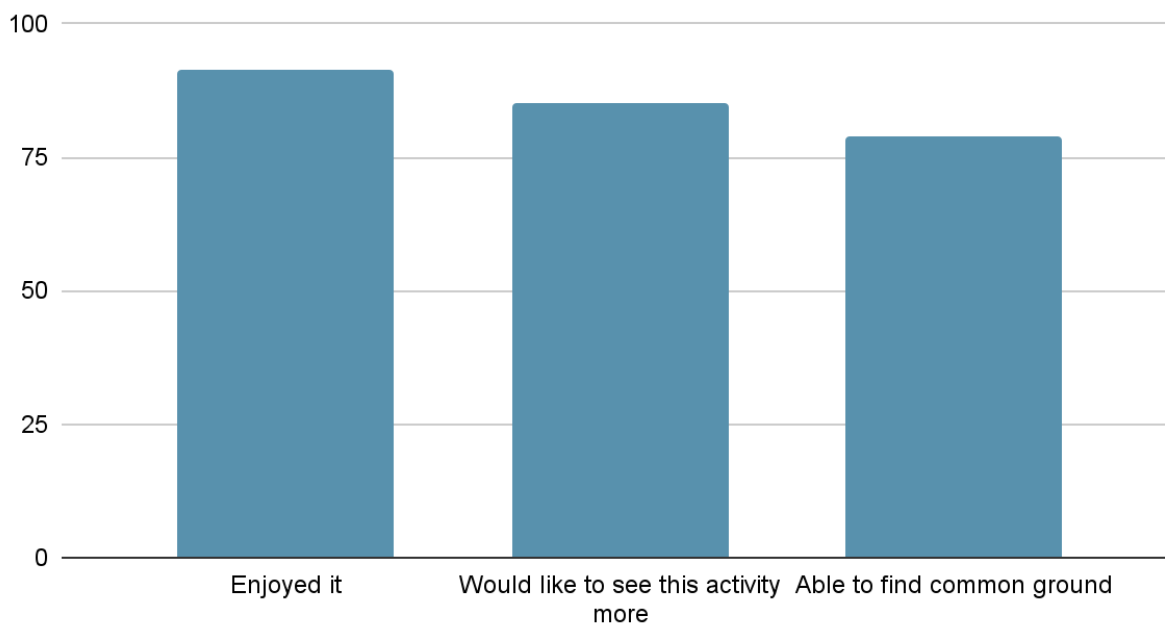
Figure 4.7

Though I placed the category of *value of activity* in the qualitative viewpoint section, I felt it most appropriate to put this in this section concerned with how the context influenced the research and vice versa. Students placed a high value on this activity as 91% said they enjoyed it. Numerous codes that emerged that displayed the different ways students valued the activity. First, students expressed that SAC's were a catalyst for intellectual and moral growth as one student conveyed "There is no point to living life thinking your opinion is the correct opinion, and never allowing someone to challenge you, your thoughts, and your morals. This is necessary for us to learn and grow as people." Second, students conveyed that this method of discussion was the safest methodology for discussing these topics because they were able to explore the issue with a partner and discuss it with a small group, which facilitated healthy social and emotional habits. And they had to discuss both sides of the issue. Approaching it this way takes

off some of the pressure that comes with a public discussion as one student confessed "because the parts that give me anxiety about debate and expressing my ideals-confrontation and anger-have been removed. Also, I have been affirmed." Third, students experienced empathy as enjoyment. If one is not accustomed to hearing others perspectives, especially those from a different cultural or political background, it can be fun to have access to those points of view in a personal atmosphere where there is no pressure to "win" as one student voiced "I had fun hearing others' perspectives and being able to have a civilized discussion" and another retorted "I truly enjoyed this method of research over any other way I have ever done in school." Finally, students also indicated that the activity was empowering. Part of the power students experienced was improving their ability to think independently as a student revealed that it helps "students think for themselves and not simply believe what one news source, or their parents tell them." Other students, aware that they were participating in a study designed to help the U.S. navigate the hyper-partisan landscape indicated that it made them "feel important to take part in a study that could influence change in our country." Considering this last code and the fact that students struggled with hope for change and lack a sense of self-efficacy for compassionate action at times, it is possible that if students participated in this activity with higher frequency, it could generate enough empowerment to help them overcome those feelings. Those that did not enjoy it found the numerous measures and many journals to be labor intensive. Therefore, while it seems all students enjoyed the act of researching and discussing issues with their peers, as they progressed throughout the semester with all the pre and post measures combined with the journals, some found it tiresome, and participation dropped off a bit. Despite this, 85% said they would like to see this activity more in their other classes. As students explained why they would like to participate in this activity more frequently they explained why they prefer the discussion

methodology. One student who affirmed the safety of this method when compared to others, referenced a discussion in another class that went poorly as she recalled, "I remember a Socratic seminar about *To Kill a Mockingbird* turned into a race debate...it was very uncontrolled, and non-professional...I hope more classes implement this, where we debate both sides." While one wonders what this student means by debating "both sides" of racism, she implies both the safety and orderliness of the activity as students discuss the issue from multiple perspectives. Another supported the methodology as a tool for sparking a change in what seems to be a harmfully hyper-partisan environment as he expressed that talking about controversial topics in this way "is the first step in making meaningful change in our country." Students also continued to emphasize how this activity was a catalyst for intellectual and emotional growth. One student implied that this cultivation was necessary because the school "has sheltered students too much and they deserve to have their beliefs challenged." At one level SAC's help students acquire nuanced knowledge about important topics and they indicated that "being informed on controversial topics is important." Another student explained that because "you are forced to argue for the other side" and find more information that you normally would have to find information that supports both sides, this activity helps disrupt confirmation bias. Students also revealed that they grew in their ability to base their arguments on facts rather than feelings, biases or what talking points they had inherited from their parents. One student reflected this change as he noted that the activity helped him to form opinions "based on research backed by evidence, not solely bias." Another student echoed this sentiment as she said that it "would be great for everyone so that they can actually know the facts and not just argue emotionally." Similarly, in reference to the development of intellectual autonomy a student quipped that "it allows students to form opinions based on facts and not what their parents say." The activity was

also an impetus for intellectual enhancement in that it helped students improve their ability to move past black and white thinking and better navigate and understand the complexities of various issues. This belief was affirmed by a student who asserted the activity "allows students to become open-minded in their beliefs by seeing all sides of an issue." Seeing multiple sides also seemed to help students find a compromise as a student communicated that it "helps us to open our eyes, research important topics, and reach a middle ground." Students also reported that these avenues of intellectual development prepare them to be a civically engaged citizen.

It is not easy to talk about controversial topics, especially with whom you may disagree. However, students voiced that the SAC's prepared them for "conversations that may be difficult to have" in the realm of civics and beyond. One thing that makes talking about controversial topics difficult is our dependence on intuition which allows for a deficiency of in-depth knowledge of various topics. Multiple students asserted that being aware and "informed on controversial topics is important." But if students are not given an opportunity to learn about them, especially in a diverse context where it is likely their views will be challenged, they often do not as a student admitted, "I don't normally consider topics like this because they are not spoken about enough...it also increases cognitive skills as well as logical thinking." In addition to increasing students' knowledge of the issues, it also prepared them for civic engagement by developing the skills needed for this kind of endeavor. If students are unable to regulate their emotions as they listen to their classmates, it is unlikely they will have a substantive discussion. A student suggested that SAC helped to forge this ability because "you must be able to hear other ideas and think critically about your own stance." While it is critical to be able to authentically listen to others and be willing to engage your own ideas critically, it is also necessary to express your ideas clearly and students affirmed that the activity "helps students

develop communication skills." One student elaborated that this does not only mean communicating logically and clearly but also "to learn to communicate respectfully and try to find common ground." Regarding the topic of compromise, as students completed their reflection of their participation, most indicated that they were able to reach a consensus.

It is encouraging to note that nearly 80% (79%) of students revealed they were able to find common ground with those they disagreed. Finding common ground appears to intersect between increasing empathy capacity as students better understand one another and a shift in viewpoint as a result of gaining a better understanding of the issue. As students reflected on empathy and understanding others, one student asserted that even though they may persist in their disagreement with someone at least they better "understand why someone supports something," sometimes referred to as "the other side" and another noted that they could "better analyze where exactly we disagree." Even if on rare occasions consensus was not reached, students felt like they "possessed a more complete understanding of the issues discussed." A part of this comprehension was not limited to grasping the peculiarities of the issue, but it also helped cultivate a "better understanding for one another." Thus, students found in one another both information about the controversial topics at hand such as a student who said, "other people also enlightened me on topics I was ignorant about," but also knowledge about each other that had a humanizing effect, which made them more responsive to one another. Sometimes students do not listen to one another because they do not believe those, they disagree with have anything worth hearing. As students continued to engage in this activity, this impulse was increasingly resisted as they became more familiar with one another. In addition to the acquisition of a better understanding of the issues, this increased knowledge of the other was equally important a driver for compromise.

Students seemed to be heartened that "there was a lot of compromise." Even though students were not always able to completely agree most expressed that they were "able to find at least one point that was agreeable or interesting" on which consensus could be established. While consensus was often reached, some students suggested that this was because there was not much initial disagreement as one student noted, "while we often found common ground, this is usually because most of us didn't disagree in the first place." Some students went into greater detail about why they were able to reach a compromise alluding to the fact that it is a safer and more effective methodology for discussing controversy. One student indicated that consensus was often reached because they had to keep their emotions in check and were "forced to remain cordial." Another student spoke to the safety embedded in the method and said, "I loved feeling like I could openly speak about the issue without worrying I would be attacked or judged and that made it easier to listen to/understand the sides I did not initially agree with." This displays that in addition to facilitating a greater connection between students and harvesting a deeper understanding of controversial topics, students enjoyed this method of discussion because it removed the dual threat of the pressure to win an argument and the anxiety of losing face with one's peers if their thinking was in the minority.

Research Impact on the Context

In addition to being an activity that was transformative and one in which students would like to participate in more as outlined in the section above, there were additional impacts on the context. While the students who participated in the research enjoyed it, school was dismissed for summer vacation before I was able to share the results with them (and many of them graduated). While I have had a few conversations about the results with a few returning juniors, I was unable to share the results with all the students en masse because of the constraints

of the calendar. However, many educational leaders at the central office were aware of my research. The social studies coordinator at Stonewall ISD asked me to present a staff development on the results of my research and how to effectively use the SAC method. One impetus for this request was HB 3979. Dubbed by some as the anti-Critical Race Theory bill, it demands that if controversial issues are taught, they are taught in a way that gives impartial deference to multiple sides of an issue. This SAC is a perfect solution for this requirement. I had finished compiling all my quantitative data by that time and was able to share the results with a cafeteria full of social studies teachers from Stonewall ISD. Teachers were very interested in the results and were more motivated to attempt the activity because of the student outcomes in empathy and compassion. In addition to the results, I was able to share some helpful ways to lead an SAC activity with students. For this I provided a template that I modified from teachinghistory.org and tips on how to lead the discussion. After the professional development, many teachers wanted to talk to me further about integrating this method of discussion into their pedagogical practice. I have continued to use the SAC in class and students have continued to provide positive feedback. At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, we were still during the pandemic and a new issue was being discussed in American culture about whether it was ethical to require vaccination. Thus, to maintain relevance and provide students the opportunity to research and vigorously discuss matters of cultural and civic importance, I led the students through an SAC with its central question being: "Is it ethical to require vaccinations?" Once again students expressed enjoying the activity and thought about the issue in ways they had not before. Regarding further study, since conversations with parents was one of the most efficacious ways for helping students overcome their ontological obstructions, I am working on a template

that will guide students through these conversations with their parents at home. I plan to use it in the spring when we do an SAC about whether spanking is an appropriate parenting practice.

Summary

After engaging in four structured academic controversies about issues concerning cultural bias in schools, causes of poverty, prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system and immigration and altruism, students exhibited multiple salient transformations. As revealed by quantitative data, there was a statistically significant increase in empathy and compassion and statistically significant changes in viewpoint regarding these issues. The qualitative data showed that virtually all students experienced some level of growth in empathy and compassion even if it was not indicated by the quantitative measures. Additionally, students qualitatively expressed that the most significant catalysts for these changes was the recognition of the limits of their knowledge and their truncated ability to see and understand the world as it is without the help of the information gained through others' perspectives and experiences. The structured academic controversy has shown to be a discussion method that can increase students' capacity for empathy and compassion and assist them in holding a nuanced view of the world in all its complexity. It better prepares them for civic engagement and to live well with those who hail from different cultural, religious and political backgrounds. Most importantly, this activity cultivates praxis. Students who engage in SAC's about controversial public issues are not merely more informed and empathetic to those who are different, but are more ready to take action in order to create a more just world.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Summary of findings from Chapter IV

After engaging in four structured academic controversy discussions during the spring of 2021, students experienced significant quantitative and qualitative shifts in empathy, viewpoint and compassion willingness. As a group, students' empathy scores on the QCAE increased at a statistically significant rate from pre to post administration. Students as whole also experienced statistically significant growth on the empathy subscale of perspective taking as and were very close to also this level of growth on the subscale of online simulation as measured by the QCAE. While some students did experience a quantitative decrease in empathy, all students displayed qualitative empathetic growth as revealed by their reflection journals about each issue. Within the qualitative strand, in addition to the category of empathy, awareness of ignorance and understanding others experience different realities, manifested as ways students experienced empathy. As students gained access to other perspectives, their structure and understanding of reality changed to incorporate the experiences of others.

Students experienced the most dramatic change in their viewpoint. Quantitatively as a group, students had statistically significant change in their viewpoint on all four controversial issues. While most of these shifts were in a liberal direction, many of these students found themselves in the moderate political category at the conclusion of each SAC. The exception to this being the causes of poverty issue where most students were in the liberal category after the SAC. In the reflection journals, students pointed to many qualitative reasons for their shifts in viewpoint, but most emergent codes revolved around insight and its effects. As indicated by the quantitative issue inventories, most students moved to a moderate position on most topics.

There were also important shifts in compassion willingness. As a group, students experienced a statistically significant increase in their compassion willingness when the compassion willingness for all quantitative inventories was combined. In reference to each issue, students only exhibited a statistically significant increase in compassion willingness for prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system. However, the quantitative shift in compassion willingness was not as substantial as transitions in empathy and viewpoint because the students began with a relatively high compassion willingness. Also, while some students decreased in their quantitative compassion willingness and some were already at a relatively high level, all students indicated a degree of qualitative growth in compassion willingness indicated by their reflection journals. Students pointed to an increase in awareness as a catalyst for their willingness to take compassionate action relevant to each issue. Though some students expressed compassion, they struggled with hope and self-efficacy and questioned their ability to effect meaningful change. On the other hand, other students experienced compassion in a way that caused them to disrupt just world phenomenon in others and question their own (and others') experience of learned helplessness as they developed a belief that they could make a difference and desired to do so. Lastly, although some students resisted shifts in viewpoint and compassion as they experienced dissonance, they often suspended their certainty as they thought through the issue more thoroughly, making them more receptive and understanding with those whom they disagree.

Discussion of Results in Relation to the Extant Literature or Theories

Although there were many connections between the extant theories and this research, the most pronounced areas of relevance were regarding overcoming barriers, engagement, and the necessity of quality teacher/student preparation. One barrier that was often overcome throughout this experience was the bias that comes with the (often intuitive) first conclusion. Haidt's (2012) analysis of intuition and reason in making judgements regarding moral issues was manifestly applicable. Though students often admitted not knowing very much about the issues, they still took an intuitive stance, and many admitted resisting changing their mind despite being shown evidence and reasoned arguments that contradicted their initial stance. Yet students did change their mind because "friends [and classmates] can do for us that we cannot do for ourselves: they can challenge us, giving us reasons and arguments [and personal anecdotes] that sometimes trigger new intuitions, thereby making it possible for us to change our minds" (Haidt, 2012, p. 55). Another limitation surpassed in this research was that of student participation. As outlined earlier in the literature review, Powers, Koliska and Guah (2019) have highlighted three key threats that can prevent students from meaningfully participating in controversial discussions: self-esteem threat, continuity threat and distinctiveness threat. The SAC discussion method has shown that it is able to mitigate these threats. Students are less worried about self-esteem threat or "looking ignorant" or "dumb" because they are required to research both sides of the issue before engaging in discussion, so they typically come to the table with much to say. Secondly, they are paired up with a discussion partner, so even if they have less to say about the issue or are not skilled in debate, their partner is able to make up for it and both students appear to be capable and well-informed. Also, it is a discussion, not a debate. Thus, the objective is to learn from those with whom you are speaking, not win. There are no "losers" which means students

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should be able to meaningfully participate without being worried about their self-esteem being damaged. It is also less likely that students will lose status or a friend due to the discussion because in phases I and II students must argue for both sides, and thus give a general impression of neutrality. While students do express their genuine opinions in phase III as they seek consensus with their classmates, it is less likely that they will have a social tie severed because they have learned to approach the issue and their classmates with a respectful stance that seeks to understand. This means that even if students finish the consensus seeking phase in a state of disagreement it is unlikely that they will lose a friend or status because they have maintained a posture of mutual respect throughout the process and shown that they understand where those they disagree with are coming from. Like self-esteem threat, is the concern that students will not have anything original to say (distinctiveness threat). While this is possible as students get further into rounds II and III in the discussion, because students are required to engage in intense preparation with a partner, they have been shown to almost always have some original points to make in the discussion.

Students also showed that they improved in their ability to engage one another and in their desire to participate in civic engagement. The enhancement of these impulses aligns with current research on the topic. Lo and Adams (2013) have shown that when students discuss controversial topics their perspective taking improves and their ability to come to a consensus does as well. Both these phenomena were seen throughout the semester both in real time discussions and in the reflection journals. Students frequently changed their minds on the issues when they encountered the thoughtful perspectives of others and were able to reach a consensus most of the time. In some respects, these two abilities were tied together as students were better able to understand where others were coming from, they became more willing to compromise in

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their consensus seeking. Borba (2018) asserts that empathy blooms in classrooms that focus on face-to-face interactions and that perspective taking helps to nurture cognitive empathy and can help students question long-held assumptions. This was also shown to be true as students increased in their empathetic capacity at a statistically significant rate as a result of the four SAC discussions. Of the different types of empathy, students experienced a statistically significant increase in the cognitive empathy category of perspective taking. There was more growth in this empathy category than any other. Time and time again, students noted in their reflection journals that they had "always thought" a particular way about an issue and that the research and discussion had caused them to reevaluate their original conclusions. This new awareness was often directly connected to facilitating a more empathetic and often more compassionate response. Fletcher (2016) showed that empathy is likely to be cultivated when students discuss controversial topics as students are sensitized to situations and issues that they may not have been fully aware of before. This research expanded Fletcher's original conclusions because it showed that students not only increase in empathy as they are made more aware of the issues but their compassion willingness as well. Often this willingness manifested in the desire to increase civic engagement such as voting. Hess & Posselt (2002) and Rossi (2006) have shown that discussing controversy is a predictor for civic engagement. When writing in their reflection journals about what they would be willing to do, one of the most common responses was choosing to vote in elections and choose officials who pledge to make meaningful changes regarding the issues of discussion. Additionally, a significant number of students expressed a willingness to write or meet with elected officials and/or engage in peaceful protests. In an age where voter apathy is concerning, witnessing students express a commitment to increase their civic engagement as a result of these discussions is heartening and affirms conclusions of

previous research. Mutz (2015) contended that when students discuss controversial topics in the classroom, they are likely to continue the discussion after class and expand the dialogue to others outside of class. This was also shown to be true as students often left class continuing the discussion and wanted to continue talking about it in class days after the discussion ended. Moreover, students also indicated that they continued the discussion when they got home with their siblings and/or parents. This phenomenon of continuing the discussion after the SAC was shown to have a profound impact as it was one of the levers students pointed to that ultimately caused them to change their mind, in some cases it was what enabled them to overcome resistance. The literature was also emphatic about the involvement of the teacher being an essential ingredient for a successful discussion (Hess, 2002). I have found this to be true before conducting this research and it was further confirmed throughout the four SAC's. There have been occasions where I did not require an adequate amount of preparation for seminars or other types of discussion, and it showed in the student's poor execution. Therefore, students were given a template to find reliable sources, engage in the discussion and reflect on their thinking throughout the experience. However, it was not enough to set high expectations and require a substantial amount of preparation as students sometimes needed a guide thinking through and discussing the issues. The extent of the teacher's involvement often depends on what each class needs, and this is very often different for each group of students. This requires skill on the part of the teacher to know when and how to guide students. For most SAC's I employed what Gerber et al (2005) define as "assistance questioning." While I usually just tracked the discussion on a piece of paper and listened, depending on the needs of the students, I would sometimes ask questions that pushed students to clarify their thinking or help them identify assumptions. Students usually responded positively to my questions and would engage one another at a higher

cognitive level of discussion. Overall, this research aligns with and expands the literature that contends students are better prepared to interact with one another and the world in which they live when they participate in discussions about controversial public issues. But for this to occur, the teacher plays a critical role in facilitating both quality preparation and participation.

Discussion of Personal Lessons Learned

The process of doing action-based research these past two years has been very instructive. I have learned about elements of practice that I will take with me for the remainder of my career in education and beyond. As I have encouraged students to be more reflective about what they think and why it has made me more reflective. Like my students, as I have led these SAC discussions I have also learned more about these issues and questioned my own assumptions at times. As mentioned in chapter 3, my own views changed as a result of life experiences and exposure to diverse perspectives. However, as I listened to the discussions and read through the discussion journals, I was continually challenged in my own conclusions and gained new insight as well. This experience has brought me to a more meaningful understanding of the fact that what happens in a classroom reveals the pedagogical fingerprint of the teacher. This fingerprint reveals the passion, knowledge and peculiarities of the teacher as a human being and artist. I have been disillusioned with the political system and partisanship that marks our society often driven by an oversimplistic framing of issues and dehumanizing those who are not members of one's tribe. I have been horrified at the indifferent and calloused response to human suffering just because they are perceived as other. Lastly, I have been frustrated with the apathy of adults and sometimes students towards civic engagement. All of these were reasons why I chose to pursue this research topic and sometimes take the direction I do in my classroom. Also, as Freire alludes to this fact, the interaction between teachers and students is reciprocal. Teachers

reflect, and are often changed by, what happens in their classroom. I have learned much about and from my students during this process and there is no doubt that my time with them has changed me.

This experience has also made me more reflective about the systems in which I work. I have become more sensitive to problems of practice and how action-based research could help address those issues. For example, the high school at which I teach continues to struggle with fights between African American young women. These ladies move in from traditionally underserved areas and are unaware of the policies and procedures of their new school, especially regarding the consequences of fighting. The schools from which they come do not punish fighting as severely as my school and thus when they resort to violence to resolve differences, they are sent away to the alternative school, which we know from research is correlated with all kinds of negative social and economic outcomes. Before this research experience I may have forlornly shrugged my shoulders, not knowing what could be done. But now, with an eye toward action research, I have cultivated a habit of asking questions and looking for systemic solutions that can be tested and evaluated. While our school has tried to implement Social Emotional Learning and restorative discipline practices, perhaps there is a way we can leverage these approaches in a more effective manner. I desire to take what I have learned from this experience and continue to engage in the practice of systemic reflection and evaluation with an eye for making school safer and more efficacious for all students.

The final lesson I have learned is that hope is not naive regarding what is possible with education. It is so easy to be jaded by the system, by bureaucracy, and the injustices that some many students have experienced. It can be difficult to utilize one's social imagination and visualize what is possible regarding the way school is done because it has been done a particular

way for so long. But this experience has impressed upon me that change for the better is achievable. During one semester, I witnessed students be transformed as they engaged in controversial issues and one another. They became better thinkers, more informed about issues relevant to civic engagement and more eager to participate in the republic. They also grew in their capacity for empathy and compassion. Although these developments occurred in one classroom with a group of roughly 50 students, I am confident that if this willingness to engage the issues and model for doing so was adopted more broadly, this same transformation could occur at a broader level.

Implications for Practice

While I think that there are myriad implications for practice in this research, the ones that hold the most significance relate to what students want from the educational process and that there should be discussion-based pedagogical standards in addition to those of cognition and content.

Connect to context

When I first began this research, I assumed that many of the students at Stonewall high school were content with the state of their knowledge of and interaction with the world. That they might feel threatened if some the assumptions that supported their worldview were questioned. I found this assumption to be false. Though the town of Stonewall is a predominantly conservative space and though some parents, both liberal and conservative, have no desire to question the legitimacy of their views, students *want* to be challenged in their thinking. Students *want* to know and understand those outside their immediate social circles. They sense that the world is changing, are trying to determine where and how they fit and are willing to wrestle with controversial topics that influence the world in which they live and are in the process of shaping.

In assessing their value of this research and approach to discussion, students nearly unanimously affirmed that they immensely enjoyed this activity and would like to see something similar in all their classes. There is something thrilling and dynamic about seeking out answers to difficult questions and grappling with multiple sources and other human beings as you seek a solution.

These students were also eager to engage the issues authentically. While standards are an important starting point, they should not be the goal, but the foundation from which students seek to build an understanding of the world and exist well within it. However, many students struggle to connect what they are learning in class to what is happening in the world beyond the school building. Students see there is conflict. Students see there is suffering and injustice. They sense something is at stake and that they have a part to play. But they, like adults, are not always sure where to begin. Thus, standards should be used as tools to connect students to present problematic issues that are plaguing the world in which they live. Rather than sit as passive recipients of static knowledge, students would be better served by their education if they practice identifying problems and proposing solutions. After each issue was discussed, students often indicated in their reflection journal that their initial knowledge of the topic was limited, but now that they know more, they desire to keep learning in addition to *doing* more. As students gained knowledge of these issues it was as if it sparked a fire that is fundamental to existence: knowing the world in which you live well enough to make it better.

In addition to experiencing a genuine engagement with controversial topics, it is apparent that students also desire authentic interaction with one another. To point out that students often sit passively in rows, disconnected from one another, acting like little boxes in which the teacher seeks to deposit information is not a new critique. It is not a revolutionary statement to say that because we are social beings, human interaction should be a foundational element of education.

Though educators know that discussion, collaboration and problem solving *should* be a part of education, it is seen less often in classrooms that are more frequently marked by worksheets, lectures and videos. It is also becoming more apparent that due to the amount of time students spend on social media, it is critical they are given more opportunities to have face-to-face interaction in the context of a classroom. This struggle to make education more social has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2020-2021 school year, Stonewall ISD opted to give students the choice to either attend school remotely from home or attend in-person. Those that attended in-person were required to wear masks and plexi-glass shields were put on every desk to better protect those learners. Teachers struggled to manage both modalities well. Often, they would prepare lessons for their remote students by creating videos with them teaching content and posting assignments for them to practice mastery on the learning management system (LMS). However, when in-person learners arrived to class expecting a live lesson from a real-life teacher, many teachers sat at their desk and hit "play" on their prerecorded video and instructed the students to do the lessons as remote students via the LMS despite the fact that they were in a classroom, proximate to 20 other humans. Conversely, some teachers focused more on their in-person learners, posting the bare minimum online for the remote learners to work through on their own in isolation. Other teachers tried to teach both modalities simultaneously, instructing the in-person learners while allowing remote learners to watch and ask questions via Zoom. While students got something different from every teacher, what seemed to be universal was the experience of isolation. Therefore, when students got the opportunity not only to gain authentic knowledge of controversial topics, but interact with one another as well, the response was enthusiastic to say the least. Though my remote students enjoyed examining the issues in an authentic way. I felt bad for them as they discussed them in a

manner like what they would experience on social media, in front of a screen, without access to tones of voice, facial expressions, and the thrill of real-time discussion. But they made the most of it and I was proud of them. I think this is the second significant appeal to doing SAC type activities more in class. Student's desire and need interaction now more than ever as they become increasingly isolated by technology and the ongoing pandemic.

Connection to field of study

In general, everyone seems to agree that students should be interacting with one another and engaging in more frequent discussion. As the nation continues to descend further into the pit of partisanship, both political parties and the nation seem to sense that something is missing from education. A part of the missing piece is the insufficient amount of discussion in social studies classrooms. The attempt to identify and address this deficiency has brought about more controversy as the powers that be (and their constituents) disagree about what topics should be discussed, how they should be discussed and what civics assignments are permissible in a social studies classroom. One issue fueling this debate is whether Critical Race Theory (CRT) should be addressed in schools. This theory that is over 40 years old, is more frequently discussed and analyzed in graduate school seminars and law schools and seeks to analyze how racism is not limited to individual bias or prejudice but can also manifest in legal systems and public policy (Sawchuk, 2021). However, with the advent of the 1619 Project and its creation of curriculum for public schools, the debate over this theory and its relevance to public schools came to a fever pitch in the spring of 2021 as legislative bodies all over the United States attempted to pass laws to keep CRT out of public classrooms. Since my educational context is in Texas, I will examine the efforts to ban CRT in this state as an illustrative example for what is happening more broadly in the nation. On June 15, 2021, Texas House Bill 3979 was passed into

law to be made effective September 1, 2021. It was later amended and replaced by Texas Senate Bill 3 which was made effective December 2, 2021. On one hand it is encouraging in that it lays out requirements for a "civic training program" to be made available for teachers and administrators to assist them in teaching civics. Included in this program will be how to conduct "guided classroom discussion of current events," how to conduct "classroom simulations and models of governmental and democratic processes," and how to cultivate "media literacy, including instruction on verifying information and sources and identifying propaganda" (Texas Senate, 2021). Using the SAC discussion method would be germane for accomplishing all those objectives. Later in the bill it addresses knowledge *and skills* that should be a part of K-12 civics training. Some of these skills include formulating and articulating "reasoned positions," listening and engaging "in civil discourse, including discourse with those with different viewpoints," how to "responsibility participate as a citizen in a constitutional democracy" and how to "effectively engage with governmental institutions at the local state and federal levels" (Texas Senate, 2021). Though it stops short of making discussing controversial public issues a requirement in the standards, of which I am an advocate, the fact that it seeks to provide a civics training program to help teachers integrate discussion more into the classroom and will require standards to incorporate "civil discourse…with those with different viewpoints" is a move from which students will benefit cognitively, socially and civically. The bill also attempts to provide guidance for teachers in a way that aligns with the SAC method of discussion as it states, "a teacher who chooses to discuss a topic described by Subdivision I (which includes topics such as the *Federal Civil Rights Acts of 1964*, the *Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Nineteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution* and *the complexity of the historic relationship between Texas and Mexico*)… shall, to the best of the teacher's ability, strive to explore that topic from diverse and

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contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective" (Texas Senate, 2021). While this all sounds good and works well with the objectives of the SAC discussion method, one wonders if exploring topics such as the civil rights movement would require teachers to remain neutral about the perspective of hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. One would hope not, because although it was a "contending perspective" in the 1960's when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, it is resolved that white supremacy is an evil ideology that conflicts with the founding ideals of the United States, though the nation continues to struggle at times to completely reject white supremacy and to fully live up to these ideals. Also, another element of discussing controversy is the freedom to evaluate all ideas or "contending perspectives" and narratives relevant to a contemporary issue. In addition to this, after students discuss an idea and begin to formulate a position, it stands to reason that they would be encouraged to *act* on those civic convictions, like citizens, and be provided with guidance and the space to practice democracy and civic engagement. This is where the bill is more constricting and problematic.

In addition to politicians and teachers, others agree that ramping up civics' instruction and democratic experiences in the classroom are more necessary than ever as Paul Eaton, retired Army major general and senior advisor to VoteVets, expressed concerns about another attack on the capital and a potential military-led coup occurring after the next presidential election in 2024. To counter this radical tide often fueled by misinformation and ignorance, Eaton highlighted the need for better civics education saying "I had a conversation with somebody about my age and we were talking about civics lessons, liberal arts education, and the development of the philosophical underpinnings of the U.S. Constitution. And I believe that bears a re-teach to make sure that each and every 18-year-old American truly understands the Constitution of the United States, how we got there, how we developed it and what our forefathers wanted us to understand

years down the road. That's an important bit of education that I think that we need to re-address"

(Kelly, Caldwell, & Valentine, 2021). If students are going to evaluate "how we got there" [the

Constitutional Convention of 1787?] and "how we developed it" [the Constitution?] and be

civically and historically informed, it is necessary that they be able to "explore that topic from

diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective" and have

frank discussions about the treatment of indigenous peoples, the origins and practice of slavery

and the relationship between white and black throughout the history of the United States.

However, in addressing this topic, the Texas Senate Bill 3 forbids examining the perspective that

"the advent of slavery in the territory that is now the United States constituted the true founding

of the United States; or with their respect to their relationship to American values, slavery and

racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to the

authentic founding principles of the United States which include liberty and equality" (Texas

Senate, 2021) nor that students may be required to understand the 1619 Project. This seems like a

contradiction within the bill and a not-so-subtle attempt to limit free speech in the classroom

about an issue that is still being debated in the broader public. Additionally, the aim of civics is

to foster both understanding *and* civic action. The bill even esteems this contention as it initially

supports responsible participation as a citizen and effectively engaging with governmental

institutions. In order to cultivate this impulse for action and civic self-efficacy, many teachers

assign projects that require differing levels of civic engagement and problem solving. This is

relevant to this research because after engaging in SAC's and hopefully increasing capacity for

empathy, the ultimate desire is for students to engage the world in which they live with

compassionate action. While students can certainly do this outside the classroom, SB 3 expressly

forbids making this type of civic practice an assignment stating a teacher "may not require, make

part of a course, or award a grade or course credit, including extra credit for a student's…lobbying for legislation at the federal, state, or local level…social policy advocacy or public policy advocacy…political activism, lobbying, or efforts to persuade members of the legislative or executive branch at the federal, state, or local level to take specific actions by direct communication…participation in any internship, practicum, or similar activity involving social policy advocacy or public policy advocacy" (Texas Senate, 2021). Therefore, although the structured academic controversy discussion method is apropos for what the Texas lawmakers desire as a frequently occurring activity in social studies classrooms, "a teacher may not be compelled to discuss a particular current event or widely debated and currently controversial issue of public policy or social affairs" (Texas Senate, 2021). But if they do, they face a challenge. They must figure out what the "contending perspectives" are in a tumultuous political and social environment that often sees resolved issues as "contending" and contending issues as resolved or forbidden, while being careful not to assign anything civically practical that could be considered a violation of the law. To help teachers navigate this moment, in addition to personal courage, they need a model for discussion and training on how to implement it with fidelity. The SAC can help meet this need.

Lessons Learned

The first educational lesson that this research process taught me is that courage is essential. People are on edge. Some parents are concerned that their children are being indoctrinated. Many teachers are burned out after teaching in a pandemic for the past two years, trying to teach via multiple modalities while caring for many children who are struggling with mental health, while legislators, most who have never worked in education, are trying to score political points with pedagogy and content standards. It would be easy to go with the flow, to not

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challenge the status quo, stay under the radar and other clichés that imply compliance. But this is not what students need. This is a moment that demands gumption. Teachers must model courage with their actions and the way they choose to help their students engage the world. When I sought approval for this research with Stonewall ISD, the educational leaders at central administration recognized the transformative value of the activity and the need for activities like it in this historical moment, but they were nervous. There have been many recent examples in the news of teachers and curriculum coordinators who have been put on administrative leave or fired because of the way they mishandled a lesson or professional development. No one wants to be in the news for what the wrong reasons. They could have played it safe and said, "no" but they allowed me to proceed with the research. They showed courage. However, the assistant superintendent did sit in on two out of the four SAC's. After the two he observed, he expressed how impressed he was with the student's arguments. Additionally, the topic of teaching with valor was salient when we returned from summer break 2021 to better understand the nuances of HB 3979. In that professional development, as the social studies coordinator attempted to elaborate on what we could teach and what topics and media sources it would be wise to stay away from, some teachers responded with anger, some with sarcasm, others with silent confusion. In the next professional development session, I shared the methods and results of my research. Many were shocked when I told them which topics were discussed by the students (there was a loud murmur), but I think they felt empowered to discuss similar topics in their own classrooms and teach with courage. It is not enough for one teacher to be brave. But teachers and administrators can inspire one another with their daring. Courage is contagious. And anything is possible with a community of courageous educators supporting one another as they support students in their learning and their lives.

Though it may seem obvious, the second lesson I learned is that discussion must be a foundational activity for every subject. I have supported discussion-based learning for most of my teaching career already. But this research has shown me that it is not simply a good activity that should be used frequently in the classroom, but the thing in which all other educational moves should be grounded. In addition to the cognitive, collaborative, creative and social benefits that occur from discussion-based learning, we are living in an age that makes it even more necessary. Due to the amount of time most students spend in front of a screen each day, compounded by the fact that they have been living through a pandemic the past two years that has further isolated them, they must talk to one another. Watching what my students have been enduring and seeing how they respond to the opportunity to talk to one another about meaningful and relevant things, and how hearing them talk has impacted me, is what has made this a non-negotiable for me as an educator.

The final lesson I have learned is that while discussion is essential to the educational process, it is not enough. Students must be given the opportunity to apply what they are learning outside the classroom. If students are going to break the cycle of civic apathy and transform their world into one where empathy and compassion are the norm, schema for participatory civic engagement must be cultivated. Based on my reading of SB 3, it seems as though it is illegal in the state of Texas to require civic action such as engaging in activism or doing a service project. However, though teachers currently are limited in their capacity to assign actionable civic assignments, it does not mean they are prohibited from showing students how to take action or even provide opportunities to do so (they just cannot require it or make it a grade). On my own campus at Stonewall High School, two clubs (one conservative and one liberal) have been started since the passage of HB 3979 and SB 3 in order to provide a platform for civic engagement that

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could potentially result in opportunities for action. Regarding my own classroom, I am considering providing opportunities for civic engagement that are relevant to the topics we examine in SAC's. This would provide them with an immediate way to get involved should they feel so inclined. And according to multiple reflection journals, this the missing piece for students getting more involved; the know-how and the opportunity to do so. There are also both liberal and conservative groups that seek to fill this knowledge and opportunity gap for students such as Alliance for Youth Action and Turning Point USA. Thus, in addition to teaching the basics of advocacy in class, students could be directed to organizations like these and others with the hopes of increasing civic involvement. This also means that if students are discouraged from engaging in civics by their state representatives (and legally prohibited from doing so in the context of a classroom), adults must model the desired behavior and increase their own civic engagement in order to advocate for an education system that encourages (or even requires) civic knowledge, discussion and action outside the classroom.

Recommendations

In addition to making the discussion of controversial public issues a curricular requirement, I have several recommendations for future research based on things that occurred throughout the research process the last two years that center around interpersonal growth and discussion-based learning. While this research showed that it is possible to use discussion of controversial topics to engender student growth in cognitive empathy in perspective taking and online simulation, students did not show much growth in affective empathy. Therefore, future research should seek to determine how to help students grow in their capacity for proximal responsivity, or how aware they are of the emotional cues of those around them. It is critical to be attuned to the emotions of another while discussing a controversial topic. Another area of

future research is the use of remote learning and its impact on the capacity for empathy and compassion. The integration of remote and in-person learning was not the original plan but a result of circumstances dictated by the global pandemic. While the sample size was too small, and the growth of the online students was not as significant as those who attended in-person, there was still observable quantitative and qualitative increase for many remote students. This points to the need for further study in this area. When so much of what students experience regarding technology seems to be inhibiting the opportunity to practice and grow interpersonal skills, if it can be shown that online thread discussions about controversial topics can help students improve in their perspective taking ability and cognitive empathy it would serve as an essential practice for those teaching and learning with that modality. There were also moments in this research where students experienced what I refer to as "partisan pause" or the inability to immediately classify an argument or perspective into a tribal or political party category. When this occurred, students tended to think more critically about the issue because the heuristic was not there to enable a snap judgment. One example of this was the quotations on the issue inventory for immigration. There were several quotes by recognizable conservative and liberal politicians who were quoted as saying something that would probably not align with their party today. It created partisan pause because students recognized the name as a heuristic, but the messaging in the quote did not align with today's party line. Therefore, the students had to think a little more. Because critical thinking is a goal in any classroom and we desire students to authentically engage these controversial topics and question their assumptions, it would also be a worthy research pursuit to determine how we can help students and adults experience partisan pause more often so they can interact with the issues more critically. It also needs to be said that Stonewall is a conservative area with nearly 70% voting for Donald Trump in the 2020

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presidential election. Though most students ultimately took a moderate stance on the issues, they moved from a conservative position in a liberal direction to this moderate position. While there are likely multiple reasons for this, it would be interesting to conduct this study, or one like it, in an area that is predominantly liberal to see which direction students move in their thinking. Lastly, and this may be more appropriately answered by historical analysis than educational research, but I am curious why it is so difficult for some folks to engage in frank discussion about the flaws of the United States (historical or otherwise). Therefore, while this research is promising regarding student's empathy and compassion growth, there remains much to be learned and understood about discussing controversial public issues in the classroom.

Closing Thoughts

This moment feels unprecedented. As the United States approaches the one-year anniversary of the January 6 attack on the capital and the world nears the two-year mark of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a general impression that there is a crisis regarding the health of democracy in the United States and one of social isolation and mental health brought about by the pandemic. According to an NPR/Ipsos poll, 70% of Americans assert that the "country is in crisis and at risk of failing" (Rose & Baker, 2022). Reasons for this belief fall along partisan lines, as two-thirds of Republicans maintain the belief that voter fraud played a role in the election of Joe Biden, though leading Republicans such as Mike Pence have affirmed the viability of the election results. And Democrats are concerned about voting restrictions being passed by Republican-led state legislatures. Additionally, a poll conducted by Harvard found that 52% of young people believe that the republic is "in trouble" or a "failed democracy" (Summers, 2021). Also, according to Pew research, the last two years of the pandemic have caused a dramatic rise in depression, anxiety and suicide rates in students, showing a critical demand for

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schools to be more responsive to students social and emotional needs (Vestal, 2021). These sentiments combined with the fact that teachers are being increasingly limited in the way they are permitted to teach about some controversial topics such as the definition of racism and the history of slavery and discrimination in the United States, make for a challenging situation to say the least. While the structured academic controversy discussion method is not a panacea, it possesses the requisite elements that will help educators navigate this moment with wisdom, courage and efficacy as we reimagine the way we do school. As we attempt to create a new vision for education that adequately meets the needs of students, learning and understanding will always be goals because in many ways they are a fundamental pursuit of life itself. In his recent memoir, entertainer Will Smith expressed how learning is a cornerstone in life's quest stating that, "Living is the journey from not knowing to knowing. From not understanding to understanding. From confusion to clarity. By universal design, you are born into a perplexing situation, bewildered, and you have one job as a human, figure this shit out. Life is learning. Overcoming ignorance is the whole point of the journey. You're not supposed to know at the beginning. The whole point of venturing into uncertainty is to bring light to the darkness of our ignorance" (Smith, 2021, p.114). I would add that in our attempt to figure it out and bring light to our blind spots, we need each other. It cannot be done alone, or even with those whom we agree. However, this research shows that it can be done. Through media literacy and discussion, we have access to greater understanding through the experiences and perspectives of others. With the light of dialogue and the knowledge and empathy it cultivates, we are then able to both see a better world *and* be inspired to go transform the one in which we live.

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APPENDIX A

ARTIFACT

Outline of Professional Development

I. Objective and Intro: an anecdote from the Common School Movement

II. Why address controversy through dialogue?

III. What is a Structured Academic Controversy?

    A. Debate vs. Discussion

    B. Phase I

        1. Phase I research

        2. To provide resources for students or let them find them?

    C. Phase I Discussion

    D. Phase II: Switch sides

    E. Phase III: Consensus building

    F. Teachers Practice SAC. Essential question: Are border walls effective?

    G. Topics for structured controversy

IV. Conclusion and exit ticket

APPENDIX B

REFLECTION JOURNAL PROMPTS

Precognition Journal Prompts for SAC's 1-4

1. Predict and explain what you think are the main reasons why people support position A.

2. Predict and explain what you think are the main reasons why people support position B

3. What underlying ideas are at the heart of this issue? In other words, why do people disagree about it?

Post-cognition Journal Prompts for SAC's 1-4

4. What was the consensus that all group members could agree with?

5. Which laws or policies should be put in place or changed regarding this issue?

6. Were there any reasons to support position A that you didn't consider before you began your research? What are they and to what extent did you find them convincing?

7. Were there any reasons to support position B that you didn't consider before you began your research? What are they and to what extent did you find them convincing?

8. To what extent have you changed your mind about this issue as a result of this activity? If your mind has not changed at all, why do you think that is?

9. Did you experience any cognitive dissonance during this activity? If so, at what point and what did you do to resolve the dissonance?

Additional Post-cognition Journal Prompts for SAC 4

10. To what extent have you enjoyed participating in this research? Please explain.

11. Would you like to see activities like this employed more frequently at school? Why or why not?

12. Did this activity help you find common ground with those you disagree with? Please explain.

APPENDIX C

ISSUE INVENTORIES

Issue 1: Cultural Bias in Schools

<u>All questions will be answered with a Likert scale indicating Strongly agree, Agree, disagree, strongly disagree, not sure</u>

Aptitude tests like the SAT are culturally biased against students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

IQ tests are culturally biased against students of color.

Standardized curriculums like TEKS in Texas do a poor job of representing students from minority cultures.

Disciplinary practices in public schools disproportionately affect students of color.

White-middle-class values are assumed in most public-school policies and practices (i.e. dress code).

Because most teachers are White, cultural norms of students of color are often misunderstood.

Teachers of all cultural backgrounds often show implicit bias against students of color.

Culturally relevant lessons are not a priority in most classrooms.

Because the United States is a predominantly monolingual nation, many teachers see English Language Learners (ELL's) as a burden.

The home language of bilingual students is generally not valued in educational settings.

Students of color and English language learners are often implicitly seen as less intelligent than other students.

Advanced placement classes are implicitly seen as places where students of color do not belong.

Most textbooks do not adequately represent students of color.

Students of color and English language learners are disproportionately placed in special education programs.

Teachers tend to have lower expectations for ELL students and students of color.

I feel compassion for students who experience cultural bias where they go to school (affect).

Compassion Willingness: All questions (apart from the affect question) will be answered with a Likert scale indicating Very willing, willing, unwilling, very unwilling, not sure

I would be willing to listen to an immigration story from another student about how they came to the United States and what challenges they endured.

I would be willing to listen to a story from a student of color about how they experienced discrimination at school.

I would be willing to stand up for an ESL student or student of color experiencing discrimination even if it could harm my reputation.

I would be willing to stand up for an ESL student or student of color experiencing discrimination even if it put me at risk for bodily harm.

I would be willing to go to a school board meeting and advocate for training that helps teachers recognize their biases and create more culturally relevant experiences and/or for the district to spend funds on a more culturally relevant curriculum.

I would be willing to donate to an organization that helps teachers recognize their implicit biases and helps them create culturally relevant learning experiences.

I would be willing to contact my state representative about creating more inclusive state standards for social studies.

I would be willing to contact textbook publishers and advocate for more ethnic representation in textbooks.

Issue 2: Causes of Poverty

Respondents will have the option to choose from Strongly Agree, Agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree

In general, people are poor because they do not work hard.

Individuals living in poverty have no one to blame but themselves.

In general, people are poor because they lack the motivation that "successful people" possess.

In general, people are poor because they are less intelligent.

In general, people are poor because they waste their money on harmful addictive behaviors such drugs, alcohol and/or gambling.

In general, people are poor because they prefer to live off the welfare that the state provides.

In general, people are poor because they do not know how to manage their money.

In general, people are poor because of the circumstances that are beyond their control.

In general, people are poor because they do not have educational opportunities (ie cannot afford to go to college or do not have time because they must work to support their family).

In general, people are poor because of systemic inequities (racism, lack of quality education available due to where they live, lack of affordable healthcare etc.).

In general, if you are born poor, you are likely to remain so.

Poverty disproportionately affects Americans who have traditionally experienced oppression (ie African Americans, Latinos, Immigrants and Children)

Being part of a traditionally oppressed group (African Americans, Latinos, Immigrants) has a greater potential to cause more health issues, which can lead to poverty.

It is possible to work fulltime and still live in poverty.

There are not enough living wage jobs available for all who want one.

Where you grow up and/or live can influence how likely you are to escape poverty.

The make-up of your family or household structure can lead to poverty.

I feel compassion for those affected by poverty (affect).

All questions will be answered with a Likert scale indicating Very Willing, Willing, Not Sure, Unwilling, Very Unwilling

I would be willing to listen to someone tell their story about what caused them to experience poverty and what the experience is like.

 I would be willing to tutor high school dropouts to prepare them for the GED even if my good friends said it was a waste of time.

I would be willing to volunteer my time at a local elementary after school tutoring program to help children in poverty overcome the gaps in their education.

I would be willing to volunteer my time in a part of town known for having a high crime rate, in order to train workers in computer skills so they can get better-paying jobs.

I would be willing to donate to an organization that helps children and families experiencing poverty such as the Children's Defense Fund.

I would be willing to write/call my congressman/congresswoman or senator and advocate for raising the minimum wage.

Issue 3: Prejudice and Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System

<u>Respondents will have the option to choose from Strongly Agree, Agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree</u>

In general, the criminal justice system upholds the law without bias, prejudice or discrimination.

If there is a subgroup in the United States that is pulled over, arrested, incarcerated, or killed by a police officer more frequently than other groups, it is simply because they commit more crimes, not because there is bias, prejudice or discrimination.

In general, police officers do not racially profile, but do their best to impartially uphold the law.

When people are released from prison, they are given the necessary tools to be successful in order not to be a repeat offender.

Racial profiling is a frequent reason for police pulling people over **and** the extent of police presence in neighborhoods.

Drug use in the United States is generally the same between various racial and ethnic groups in the United States, but one group is disproportionately targeted and punished.

People of color are more likely to be pulled over, arrested, incarcerated and killed by a police officer because there is the existence of both individual and systemic racism.

Once you become a felon, the system makes it extremely difficult to legally build a life for yourself, making it more likely you will return to a life of crime.

The United States has the largest population of incarcerated individuals because it has the highest crime rate in the world.

Having officers of color in a police force ensures that there will be little to no discrimination in that police department.

Police officers of color discriminate against people of color at a similar rate to that of white officers.

The United States has the largest population of incarcerated individuals because of systemic racism.

It is possible to support the police in general while simultaneously desiring police accountability.

Policing in the United States is fine the way it is.

Police need more accountability in the form of unconscious bias training, body cameras, de-escalation training and making it easier to investigate misconduct.

Policing needs to shift to a nationwide "community policing" model (creating community partnerships and helping solve problems in the community).

The police should be defunded (reduce the size of police departments and redirect a lot of funding to other social services such as addiction, mental illness, job training and homelessness).

The police should be abolished (end policing entirely and replace them with "community care workers")

"For profit" prisons create an unnecessary motivation to incarcerate people that disproportionately affect communities of color.

The "War on drugs" has made the United States safer and has been a good use of taxpayer money.

"For profit" prisons are a good idea because they save money.

The "War on drugs" has not made the United States safer, has wasted taxpayer money and has disproportionately affected communities of color.

Mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses has helped reduce the drug use/sell rate in the United States and made the country safer.

Drugs should be decriminalized (no criminal penalty for use) and legalized (use is legal).

The United States should make penalties for selling and/or distributing drugs even harsher than they currently are.

The "War on drugs" should continue as is.

Mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses has done nothing to reduce drug use/sell rate in the United States, caused the prison population to explode and has disproportionately affected communities of color..

People convicted of a felony should have the right to vote.

People convicted of a felony should be able to receive federal loans in order to go to college.

Companies should receive incentives from the federal government to hire ex-convicts.

I feel compassion for people of color who have been disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system (affect).

I feel gratitude for police officers (affect).

<u>All questions will be answered with a Likert scale indicating Very Willing, Willing, Not Sure, Unwilling, Very Unwilling</u>

I would be willing to listen to someone's story about their perceived experience of discrimination, prejudice and or racism within the criminal justice system.

I would be willing to be an activist/advocate for criminal justice reform even if my friends disagreed.

I would be willing to volunteer my time to help prisoners or recently incarcerated people earn their GED and improve their ability to get a job.

I would be willing to go a lawful assembly (peaceful protest) in support of criminal justice reform, even if I knew I could be harmed.

I would be willing to donate money to the Sentencing Project, an research and advocacy group working to reduce the use of incarceration in the United States and address racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

I would be willing to write/call my congressman/congresswoman or senator and advocate for the repeal of mandatory minimums for drug offenses.

Issue 4: Altruism and Immigration

<u>Respondents will have the option to choose from Strongly Agree, Agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree</u>

In general, I think most immigrants are dangerous.

In general, I think most immigrants are law-abiding citizens seeking a better life or fleeing a dangerous situation.

We should put America first in regard to immigration. If this means separating families and deporting millions of undocumented immigrants back to dangerous situations, then so be it.

The United States has a moral obligation to help citizens of the world who are fleeing war, religious persecution, genocide, famine or other imminent dangers.

In general, I think immigration is good for the United States.

Undocumented immigrants take jobs from more deserving American citizens.

Undocumented immigrants often work jobs that no one else wants to work.

Undocumented immigrants are often exploited, underpaid, and put in dangerous situations.

The United States should use a merit-based system for immigration. In other words, only allow immigrants in who are likely to make the U.S. stronger and smarter.

I support DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals- This program provides temporary relief from deportation for undocumented immigrants who arrived as children. It allows them to work and attend school legally without constant fear of being deported. It does not provide permanent legal status as it must be renewed every two years. Source: americanimmigrationcouncil.org)

The policy of "birthright citizenship" for children of undocumented immigrants should be eliminated. (This policy enables children of undocumented immigrants who are born in the U.S. to automatically become citizens, it is based on a particular interpretation of the of the 14th amendment. Source: constitutioncenter.org)

The current immigration policy of the United States compromises national security and public safety.

"If the machine of government is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law." Henry David Thoreau

"No man is above the law and no man is below it: nor do we ask any man's permission when we ask him to obey it." Theodore Roosevelt

I support the policy of "Chain migration" (This policy is where a U.S. Citizen or lawful permanent residents to sponsor a family member to come to the United States, usually a spouse, sibling or child. Source: kunr.org.)

There would not be so many undocumented immigrants if the path to citizenship was less difficult and it did a better job providing asylum to refugees.

ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement) is a necessary organization that protects that safety of Americans and ensures the rule of law.

ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement) makes communities less safe because it creates an atmosphere of fear in immigrant communities, and they are less likely to report a crime, suspicious behavior or work with law enforcement for fear of being deported.

I support the visa lottery (the Diversity Visa program allows 50,000 randomly selected people—only from countries that don't send many immigrants to the United States—to obtain permanent residency. Source: boundless.com).

I am against any form of amnesty for undocumented immigrants.

Outsourcing influences the availability of American jobs far greater than undocumented immigrants.

"Every aspect of the American economy has profited from the contributions of immigrants...Everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life." John F. Kennedy

"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best...they're sending you people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." Donald Trump

"America's elected representatives have a duty to regulate who comes in and when...In meeting this responsibility, it helps to remember that America's immigrant history made us who we are. Amid all the complications of policy, may we never forget that immigration is a blessing and a strength." George W. Bush

"Every immigrant who comes here should be required within five years to learn English or leave the country." Theodore Roosevelt

"I believe in the idea of amnesty for those who have put down roots and lived here, even though some time back, they may have entered illegally.' Ronald Reagan

"Our kind reception of emigrants is very proper, but it is dictated more by benevolent than by interested consideration." James Madison

"Illegal immigration costs taxpayers 45 billion a year in healthcare, education and incarceration expenses." Ric Keller

"Among the number of applications…, cannot we find an American capable and worthy of the trust?...Why should we take the bread out of the mouths of our own children and give it to strangers?" John Adams

"Let's be clear. This is a nation founded by immigrants. Unless...your history is of your ancestors being kidnapped and brought over on a slave ship, unless you are Native American, your people are immigrants." Kamala Harris

"We simply cannot allow people to pour into the United States undetected, undocumented, unchecked, and circumventing the line of people who are waiting patiently, diligently and lawfully to become immigrants in this country." Barack Obama

I feel compassion for immigrants (affect).

All questions will be answered with a Likert scale indicating Very Willing, Willing, Not Sure, Unwilling, Very Unwilling

I would be willing to listen to an immigrant tell their story of what caused them to immigrate and what challenges they faced.

I would be willing to post in support of the humane treatment of immigrants on social media, even if my good friends who disagree with me saw it or I lost followers.

I would be willing to volunteer my time at a local organization that teaches English as a second language (ESL) to immigrants in order to help them get better jobs.

I would be willing to cross the border to help feed and care for immigrants waiting for asylum even if it was potentially dangerous.

I would be willing to donate to *Families for Freedom*, a human rights organization made up of former detainees, immigrants at risk of deportation, and their loved ones, FFF fights to abolish laws that tear families apart.

I would be willing to donate to a undocumented immigrant bail fund in order to help them get a better attorney and have a chance to put together a successful defense against deportation.

I would be willing to write/call my congressman/congresswoman or senator and advocate for a more efficient path to citizenship for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

IRB DETERMINATION

DIVISION OF RESEARCH.

February 18, 2020

NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION

Type of Review:	Initial Review Submission Form
Title:	Empowering Empathy Through Discussion
Investigator:	Mary Margaret Capraro
IRB ID:	IRB2020-0117
Reference Number:	105889
Funding:	
Documents Received:	IRB Application (Human Research) - (Version 1.0)

Dear Mary Margaret Capraro:

The Institution determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations. Data gathering efforts are intended only for the student's record of study and will not yield generalizable data.

Further IRB review and approval by this organization is not required because this is not human research. This determination applies only to the activities described in this IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made you must immediately contact the IRB about whether these activities are research involving humans in which the organization is engaged. You will also be required to submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Please be aware that receiving a 'Not Human Research Determination' is not the same as IRB review and approval of the activity. IRB consent forms or templates for the activities described in the determination are not to be used and references to TAMU IRB approval must be removed from study documents.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Administrative Office at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855- 795-8636.

Sincerely,
IRB Administration

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