


CLASSROOMS MATTER: UNDERSTANDING THE CURRICULAR
CHOICES OF TEACHERS INVOLVING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS IN
MIDDLE SCHOOL CIVICS CLASSROOMS

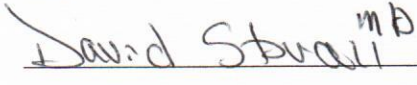
by

Tiffany Mitchell
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
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of
Doctor of Philosophy
Education

Committee:

 _____ Chair

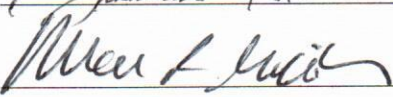
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Program Director

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Dean, College of Education and
Human Development

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Spring Semester 2017
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Fairfax, VA

Classrooms Matter: Understanding the Curricular Choices of Teachers Involving
Controversial Topics in Middle School Civics Classrooms

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

by

Tiffany Mitchell
Master of Arts in Teaching
American University, 2010
Bachelor of Science
Old Dominion University, 2006

Director: Dr. Marjorie Hall Haley, Professor
College of Education and Human Development

Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA



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Dedication

For my Nana (Edna Virginia Combs Carter), Grandma (Margret Gilbert), Great Aunt Mary (Mary Brown), Great Aunt Molly (Ruth Banks), Great Aunt Sis (Rebecca Louise Charlot), Aunt Bea (Edna Beatrice Carter), Aunt Barb (Barbara Ann Carter), Aunt Vonne (Yvonne Carter Dixon), my dear cousin (Vivian Deloatch), my sister cousin (Bianca Dixon) and my phenomenal mother (Cynthia Marie Carter).

This dissertation is dedicated to the strong black women in my family, who have provided me with all of the tools to complete this journey and pursue my dreams. To my mother, Cynthia Marie Carter, who instilled in me a love of self and of the people, nurtured my curiosity, and challenged me to see the world not only as it is but as it could be. She called me to utilize my gifts for the betterment of others with her unwavering faith that I would make a significant impact on the world. I am because of HER and I am because of the women that have come before me.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|--------|
| American Political Science Association | APSA |
| Carter School District | CSD |
| Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement..... | CIRCLE |
| Critical Race Theory | CRT |
| Elementary and Secondary Education Act | ESEA |
| Ethnographic Content Analysis | ECA |
| Institute of Education Sciences | IES |
| National Association of Education Progress..... | NAEP |
| No Child Left Behind Act..... | NCLB |
| National Council for the Social Studies..... | NCSS |

Abstract

CLASSROOMS MATTER: UNDERSTANDING THE CURRICULAR CHOICES OF TEACHERS INVOLVING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL CIVICS CLASSROOMS

Tiffany Mitchell, Ph.D.

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Dissertation Director: Dr. Marjorie Hall Haley

This study analyzed the embedded messages within a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum and highlights the curricular choices of civics teachers regarding discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school classrooms. This qualitative study utilized ethnographic content analysis to examine a state and local middle school civics curricula and teacher provided artifacts. In addition, semi structured interviews with six middle school civics teachers in Carter school district were conducted to gain insight on curricular implementation. This study extends research in the field with an analysis of middle school civics curricula through the five tenets of CRT in education framework. In addition, sense making theoretical framework was employed to elevate the voices of teachers in the literature on their instructional practices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial

topics. By situating this research in middle school classrooms this study provides insight on how democracy is cultivated in early adolescence.

The findings for this study have yielded a wealth of knowledge on the curricular messages embedded within a middle school civics curricula and the creativity of teachers to navigate those curricular messages. This study found the state mandated civics standards to be ambiguous with historical and contemporary civic experiences of people of color virtually invisible. Discussion appears more in the curricula of Carter school district than in the state mandated curriculum. This notes the value the district places on discussion as an instructional strategy to meet content objectives. All six middle school civics teachers in the study incorporated discussion as an instructional practice. Five of the six teachers facilitated discussions of controversial topics at the time of the study. All six teachers planned on implementing discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics this school year. Though all teachers planned or incorporated discussion, how controversy was defined and the topics that were off limits varied by teacher. This study extends research in the field by elevating the voices and curricular choices of six middle school teachers by highlighting their ingenuity when navigating curricular messages involving discussion with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics from both the state and local school district.

Chapter One

“There can be no democracy without truth. There can be no truth without controversy; there can be no change without freedom. Without freedom there can be no progress.”

– Andrew Young

The quote by civil rights activist Andrew Young highlights the connections between controversy, freedom, and progress as essential components of a democracy. Prominent studies in civics education research and the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) have proposed that the discussion of controversial topics is an imperative skill for adolescents to acquire in becoming engaged democratic citizens (Campbell, 2008; Hess, 2009; NCSS, 2010; Tannebaum, 2013). Controversial topics such as racism and police brutality, xenophobia and immigration, gun rights/control, abortion, religion, climate change, and the Supreme Court ruling on same sex marriage among others, are prevalent issues in today’s society. Research in the field of social studies education indicates that the discussion of controversial topics is beneficial for students; however, it remains unclear if and how discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics filter into classrooms. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the knowledge that is privileged in middle

school civics curriculum and highlights the curricular choices of middle school civics teachers regarding the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. This work is critical to exploring how democratic citizenship is being cultivated for students in middle school classrooms.

Schools are the institutions with the most universal mandate for incorporating younger generations of Americans into the polity (Flanagan & Stout, 2010). The call for civics education and preparation for democracy is cited in the constitution of nearly every state. Niemi and Junn (2005) suggest that schools, along with their teachers and curricula, have long been identified as the critical link between education and citizenship, and as the locus from which democratic citizens emerge. However, Americans do not wholly agree on the types of citizenship they want our schools to foster. The civic behaviors, collective civic actions, and topics to be discussed with students can vary widely across school and classroom contexts. Some stress loyalty to current institutions and practices, while others emphasize critical reflection of institutions and practices (Galston, 2004). Consequently, how civics is taught, specifically the implementation of curricular regarding the incorporation of discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics can differ between schools and/or classrooms. Therefore, the onus for developing citizenship is on the curriculum and the teacher. This study seeks to understand the intersection of the civics curriculum and the curricular choices of civics teachers regarding discussions that include diverse topics and/or controversial topics in middle school classrooms, to

gain an understanding of how democracy is being cultivated in a time of increased social movements, civic engagement, and societal changes.

Historically, schools have represented contested spaces, with the curriculum emerging as an ideological battleground (Zinn, 1999; Zimmerman, 2005). Kirkland (2015) states this idea explicitly, “They are contested spaces, where the imbrications of competing interests wrestle daily for ethical real estate. Just as they can harm, classrooms can heal. In this light, classrooms matter.” While a curriculum can assist students in understanding democracy, it should also help empower them to engage in it. In a democracy, schools should engage in equal levels of civic preparation and willingness to participate across social groups (Torney-Purta, 2002). Yet, as Levinson (2010) suggests, not all citizens participate in the electoral process at equal levels; a civic engagement gap exists such that historically marginalized groups are less likely to be civically engaged. Perhaps, civics curricula play a role in the civic engagement gap as the experiences of students of color are often misrepresented, undervalued, or silenced in the curriculum. It is imperative to critically analyze middle school civics curricula to determine the civic behaviors, knowledge, and actions that are privileged, and its inclusiveness of discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

Civics curricula outline the expectations for what should be taught, however little is known about how the curriculum is implemented by teachers. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping democratic citizenship through their

instructional delivery and curricular choices. It is essential that we not only take a critical look at middle school civics curricula but also gain an understanding of how it is being implemented by teachers. Perhaps, the interpretation and implementation of curricula is vastly different from what policy makers suggest; therefore, in addition to analyzing the policy expectations and messages embedded in a state mandated and locally designed middle school curriculum, it is imperative to garner teachers' voices. Understanding the curricular choices of teachers in middle school civics classrooms will help shed light on how teachers are interpreting middle school civics curricula, defining controversy for their students, and how the demographic composition of their classrooms promote or prevent discussions that include diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

This chapter delineates the statement of the problem, rationale and research questions of the study. In addition, the theoretical frameworks employed in the study are explained. The next section will focus on the implications of the variations in civic learning opportunities across schools, and the potential gap in the literature that doesn't center the integral role of teachers as agents in the implementation of middle school civics curricula.

Statement of the Problem

NCSS's objectives are broadly outlined and often serve as a guide for states to develop curriculum standards. They often mirror the principles put forth by Dewey in that they "promote civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and

engaged participants in public life” (NCSS, 2010, para. 1). How the curriculum defines civic behaviors and collective civic actions, specifically the framing of discussions and controversial topics, for students is imperative to understanding what civic knowledge is privileged. The curricular choices of civics teachers in middle school classrooms may reveal how curricular messages are interpreted and implemented. This research builds on previous work in the field of civics education in two ways; first by examining the messages involving the discussion of diverse topics and/or controversial topics embedded in middle school civics curricula, and second, by investigating how teachers interpret and implement those curricular messages in a middle school classroom setting. This research is designed to provide an opportunity for more teachers’ voices to emerge in the literature. By situating this research in middle school classrooms, this study provides insights on how democracy is cultivated in early adolescence.

Definitions, curricula, and instructional delivery matter. Since all youth have access to a public school education, coursework is an area where civic knowledge and skills could be developed (Cohen & Chaffee, 2013). Bryant, Gales, and Davis (2013) determined that the meaning and nature of responsible citizenship has varied over time and has been operationalized in various ways in the literature. Furthermore, different stakeholders could define the values embedded in the term “responsible citizenship” differently. The term appears frequently in civics curricula, and in addition, civic behaviors and collective civic actions can range from voting, running for public office, service learning and

community building, to protesting and civil disobedience. With various definitions of civic behaviors and collective civic actions, it is necessary to explore not only the curricula but also the perspectives of civics teachers who implement these curricula in their classrooms. Hess and McAvoy (2015) suggest that the call for schools to participate in building a robust civic culture that exemplifies deliberative forms of democracy, places schools, and their curricula in a very difficult, albeit very important position. Discussions of controversial topics and engaging in political debates are often described as an imperative skill for citizenship, yet rarely any guidance is provided on how to foster it. Further, there is scant research on how to approach discussions that include diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics at the middle school level. How terms of citizenship such as civic behaviors, collective civic actions, and controversial topics are defined in the curriculum may have an impact on the curricular choices of teachers, which could ultimately influence how citizenship is cultivated for students in middle school civics classrooms.

The location of a school is often not chosen by a teacher, however they can choose how to structure the teaching of civics in that context (Youniss, 2011). Across and within school districts, the manner in which civics education/learning opportunities are structured can be vastly different, and are in many ways unequal. Civics learning opportunities can range from a focus on political information/facts to service learning, or discussions and debates on controversial topics. In a study of Chicago public high schools, Kahne and Sporte (2008)

determined that schools varied in the types of civics learning experiences, which lead to inequitable civics learning opportunities: Not all students receive the same experiences in civics classrooms. While past research has shown that taking civics courses correlates with greater civics knowledge, Campbell (2008) determined that it is actually the nature of political discussions within a classroom, not simply the frequency of formal social studies instruction. The types of civics learning opportunities students receive, especially with regards to children of color and students from low socio-economic backgrounds, are widely different. Therefore, it is critical to explore the role in which the demographic composition of classrooms shapes how teachers implement civics curricula. There is widespread recognition that political power is distributed in vastly unequal ways among U.S. citizens (APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004; Levinson, 2010). Schools depending on the curricular opportunities they provide may be a contributing factor to reproducing inequities that could potentially filter into adulthood.

There is an extensive body of literature describing the necessity for developing students who are prepared to enter into and further our democratic society (Hess, 2004, 2009; Ross & Marker, 2005). More recently, there has been a focus on the types of civics education, and how certain methods that involve the inclusion of controversial topics are ideal for preparing students to engage (Hess, 2004, 2009; Campbell, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Studies have focused on school and classroom activities such as discussion and service learning

opportunities, however few studies have focused on teachers as agents of policy implementation of civics curricula, and what influences their curricular choices. In addition, few studies have focused on fostering citizenship during early adolescence at the middle school level. Wilcox (2011) suggests that in the current high stakes testing climate, middle schools should achieve a balanced approach towards enhancing academic achievement, while encouraging students to develop as responsible citizens in a democracy. Understanding the definitions and messages in a middle school civics curriculum, specifically with regards to controversial topics, and how teachers are making sense of the curricular messages and their instructional practices, can provide insights on how citizenship is being cultivated in a changing society in middle school classrooms. This research study highlights the intersection of civics curricula and the curricular choices of middle school civics teachers involving discussions that include diverse topics and/or controversial topics. The next section will describe the rationale for the current research study.

Rationale for the Study

In a review of the existing literature, the study of civics education and curricula is hardly novel; however, its analysis in relation to the curricular choices of civics teachers at the middle school level is. The voices of teachers are still limited in the field of civics education. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to extend the previous research in the field by analyzing messages in state mandated and curricula, and investigating if and how curricular messages are interpreted

and implemented by middle school civics teachers, regarding discussions that include diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics with students in early adolescence/middle school.

As one of the few states that administer a standardized test on civics/American government (Circle, 2014) in middle school, the state selected for this study provides public access to a robust middle school civics curriculum, documents that are critical to conducting a thorough document analysis. To understand what knowledge and civics messages are privileged by state mandated and locally designed curriculum documents, an ethnographic content analysis of middle school civics standards, curriculum framework, testing blueprint, and district-level pacing guide and units of study were conducted. In addition, teacher decision-making and rationale is essential to highlighting teachers' voices and building knowledge on how democratic citizenship is being cultivated in middle school civics classrooms. To garner teachers' voices on curriculum implementation, semi-structured interviews with middle school civics teachers, and teacher-provided documents such as lesson plans and activities were collected. An understanding of, if and how, the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics through teachers' voices shed light on how they're making sense of the civics curricular, and the rationale behind their instructional practices. The following section will outline research questions for the present study.

Research Questions

Based on the literature in the field, civics curricula are highly contested and their implementation varies across contexts. The curricular choices of middle school teachers could have a potential impact on how students understand and advance our democracy, especially during periods of societal upheaval or change. Yet, research in the field of civic education is limited with regards to teacher practice and implementation of the curriculum in middle school classrooms. Building on previous research, this study seeks to understand the messages embedded in state mandated and locally designed curricula involving discussions including diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics to provide insight on what civic knowledge and behaviors are privileged. In addition, how middle school civics teachers navigate the curricular messages from state mandated and locally designed curricula and the role of classroom demographics in shaping teacher practice is essential to understanding how democratic citizenship is being cultivated in the 21st century. The following questions elucidate these phenomena:

1. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a state mandated middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship?
 - 1a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a district-level middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship?

2. If and how do teachers define controversy, and which diverse and/or controversial topics do they choose to incorporate into the middle school civics curriculum?
 - 2a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics incorporated into teacher practice through the middle school civics curriculum? If not, why not?
3. How does the demographic composition of the classroom shape the curricula choices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms?

The research questions above were explored through the theoretical frameworks, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Sense-Making Theory, described in the next section. These will be further expounded upon in the next section of this chapter.

Theoretical Framework

State mandated and locally designed middle school civics curricula are social policies that impact instruction in schools. From a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, education is largely rooted in narratives that are white, middle class, male (Tate, 1997), and heterosexual. Issues of bias and perception involving race are critically analyzed in the tradition of CRT. Analyzing a selected middle school civics curriculum through a CRT lens can provide insight on the extent to which a curriculum can promote racialized messages of citizenship, civic knowledge that either value or devalue diverse political experiences, and discussions occurring in communities of color. In addition, understanding the

teacher perceptions of students from diverse backgrounds, and how that may shape their instruction, is critical to understanding the cultivation of citizenship in middle school classrooms that are increasingly diverse.

The relationships between policy decisions and their actual implementation or enactment in schools, and teachers' practices is never simply a matter of executing prescriptions and procedures (März & Kelchtermans, 2013). Therefore, sense-making theory was utilized to grapple with the interconnections of curriculum standards and teacher implementation. The understanding of curriculum policies provides insight on intended outcomes and expectations, and teachers' voices highlight the various ways in which curricular goals are achieved. Sense-making theory is a policy framework employed to provide insight on how curricular messages are being interpreted and implemented in middle school classrooms.

Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a conceptual framework for confronting complexity and centrally addresses how various forms of oppression matter in the interactions among policy, people, and places. Generally, CRT focuses on ways in which racism is deeply embedded in society that it appears "normal" for many (Glesne, 2011). However, since its inception, CRT has grown into a vast theoretical framework that challenges systemic racism in a variety of fields. This study was situated in CRT employed in education theory and praxis, specifically in the discipline of social studies (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Howard, 2003; Stovall, 2005). Researching the role of

race in the implementation of civics standards may reveal that there might be undercurrents of bias inherent in the civics curriculum. In determining best practices to teach civics to students, especially students of color, issues of bias can arise. Stovall (2009) states that in understanding racism as endemic to American life, CRT becomes integral in the identification of intricate relationships in school settings. Democracy in this country was founded on the principles of whiteness. Whiteness as hegemony, then, is evident in the knowledge, values, experiences, and ways of being valorized in society and in educational settings, including schools (Brown, 2014). In examining the role of race in the development of norms and the knowledge that is privileged in middle school civics curricular documents and teacher-provided artifacts, dominant narratives, biases, and perceptions must be analyzed using a CRT framework.

Scholars suggest that there are at least five tenets of CRT that can be used as a framework to inform CRT research in education (Solórzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005; Yosso, 2005). The five tenets are the 1) centrality of race and racism, 2) the challenge to dominant ideology, 3) a commitment to social justice, 4) a centrality of experiential knowledge, and 5) the interdisciplinary perspective. The five tenets of CRT research were an essential framework in this study to analyze middle school civics curricular documents and teacher-provided documents.

Centrality of race and racism. CRT asserts that race and racism is a permanent function of American life (Bell, 1992; Yosso, 2005). As Gay (2003)

suggests, race and racism are definitive, persistent, and pervasive features of U.S. history. Gay (2003) determined in her analysis of social studies textbooks used in teacher education courses that there was an extreme form of deracialization through exclusion of race-related issues, events, and experiences. In a more recent content analysis of standards and social studies textbooks in Virginia (Scott & Suh, 2015) determined that the textbooks and standards tend to describe people in the United States using the monolithic term “Americans” without considering the differences amongst them. They further provide examples that extend beyond voting, and examples of people tackling diverse challenges. Therefore, the careful analysis of normative values embedded in, and the invisibility of people of color in a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum is imperative to understanding the centrality of race and racism in curricular mandates, and how that may or may not filter into teacher practices.

Challenge to dominant ideology. CRT challenges the claims of neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy in society. In fact, CRT scholars argue that these claims are often rooted in self-interest, privilege, and power for dominant groups that seek to silence and ignore the epistemologies of people of color (Bell, 1987; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005). In the case of social studies, CRT can serve as an analytic tool to explain the systemic omissions and distortions, and lies that plague the field (Ladson-Billings, 2003). This tenet is important to consider when examining a middle school civics curriculum to

understand whose knowledge and experiences are privileged and/or silenced through state- and local-level policy expectations.

The commitment to social justice. A social justice agenda lies at the core of CRT research with the intent to eradicate racism and empower people of color. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) advocate that a social justice agenda rooted in CRT can work towards the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin through educational research. This research study lays the foundation for a critical analysis of a middle school civics curriculum while simultaneously elevating teachers' voices on incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in classrooms. CRT researchers (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways, with the potential to oppress and marginalize students of color coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower. Determining these contradictions and opportunities through a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum was a critical component of this work and could potentially lead to a shift in curriculum development within civic education.

A centrality of experiential knowledge. CRT research, centers on the narratives of people of color when attempting to understand social inequality (Howard & Navarro, 2016). Further, CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching racial subordination (Solórzano & Yosso,

2002). This research study included an analysis of a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum to examine the extent to which and how experiences of people of color are recognized and/or silenced in the curriculum and in teacher practices through teacher-provided artifacts.

The interdisciplinary perspective. An interdisciplinary approach to CRT is critical to this work as unearthing race and racism is multifaceted. Howard and Navarro (2016) state that CRT scholars believe that the world is multidimensional, and similarly, research regarding the world should reflect multiple perspectives. CRT asserts that the analysis of race and racism must be placed in both a contemporary and historical context using interdisciplinary methods (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This research study employed both CRT and the sense-making policy framework to explore a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum through the qualitative methods of document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Using interdisciplinary frameworks and methods provided a more complete picture of the potential role of race and racism embedded in a middle school civics curriculum, and how teachers implement that curriculum in their classrooms.

The five tenets of CRT were utilized in this research study to examine the knowledge that is privileged in a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum, specifically regarding the incorporation of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in discussions.

Sense-making theory. Sense making elaborates on the interconnections between actors and explains how context has shaped policy implementation (Datnow & Park, 2009). The crux of the research is to explore the interconnection of how state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curricula are understood and implemented in classrooms particularly with regards to discussions incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. Education researchers have argued that how teachers understand and enact instructional policies is influenced by prior knowledge, the social context of their workplace, and their connections to the policy message (Spillane et al., 2002; Coburn, 2005). The sense-making theory is the policy framework utilized in this research study to understand how teachers navigate the policy expectations embedded in a middle school civics curriculum and implemented in the classroom.

According to Spillane et al. (2002), sense-making theory's main contribution was to explicate in detail how local actors interpret and enact policy. State mandated and locally designed middle school curricula are education policies that outline the intended learning outcomes and expectations of students. The local actors are the teachers, and how they interpret or make sense of the civics curriculum, and how that shapes the curricular choices they make in civics classrooms, specifically with regards to discussions incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics, is analyzed in this study. Datnow and Park (2009) state that sense making occurs in a social context and is shaped by the

interactions set at various levels and groups; there can be different interpretations of the same message. What a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), and their situations and the policy signals (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002). Teachers could be interpreting civics and democracy very differently from its intended purposes. Understanding how teachers interpret state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curricula revealed how teachers are making curricular decisions in classrooms. This understanding could help policy makers and local districts understand how civics is being implemented, while simultaneously elevating teacher voices on policy implementation.

Sense-making theory, in conjunction with CRT, was employed in this research study. This interdisciplinary approach allowed for the critical analysis of the messages embedded in a state mandated and locally designed middle school curriculum, in addition to teacher-provided artifacts and semi-structured interviews to highlight teachers' voices on how they enact instructional policies in their classrooms. The next section compiles the definitions of terms that were explored throughout this research study.

Definitions of Terms

Civic behavior. Civic behavior includes political behaviors such as voting, running for elected office, campaigning (Bryant, Gayles, & Davis, 2011)

and also non-political behaviors such as charitable donations, service learning, and volunteerism (Perry & Katula, 2001).

Collective civic actions. Collective civic action can be defined as a form of citizenship practice consisting in mainly collective initiatives aimed at implementing rights, taking care of public goods or empowering citizens (Moro, 2010).

Civic discourse. Civic discourse involves the exchanging of ideas, political arguments, or debates. Shuster (2010) suggests that democratic societies must be societies where arguments are tolerated and encouraged.

Civic knowledge. Civic knowledge includes knowledge of the political process, political action (how a bill become a law or lobbying), and essentially how government and democratic processes works (Hatcher, 2011).

Internal political efficacy. Internal political efficacy is defined as the belief about one's own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics (Niemi et al., 1991).

Curricular choice. Curricular choice is defined as the decisions teachers make on how to implement curricula (Swalwell, Pellegrino, & View, 2015).

Controversial topics. Controversial topics refer to current events, topics, or issues with various viewpoints. The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) has proposed that the discussion of controversial topics is an imperative skill for adolescents to acquire, to become engaged democratic citizens (Campbell, 2008; Hess, 2009; NCSS, 2010; Tannebaum, 2013).

Demographic composition. Refers to the diversity of students within the classroom. This diversity can refer to race/ethnicity, gender, social class, religious affiliation, dis(Ability), language variety, and/or sexual orientation.

Discussions with diverse viewpoints. Discussions with diverse viewpoints involve classroom-based discussions around topics that can elicit multiple perspectives.

Magnet schools. Magnet schools were created in the 1970s as an intentional effort to achieve voluntary desegregation and defined in Part C Section 5301 of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA). Magnet schools are defined by Part C. Magnet School Assistance (2005, December 19) as an elementary or secondary public school or center that offers a special curriculum capable of attracting substantial numbers of students of different racial backgrounds.

Fundamental schools. Fundamental schools are choice schools that function in similar ways to magnet schools by offering an open specialized curriculum. In addition, usually mandatory parent involvement is a condition upon enrollment.

Teachers as agents of policy implementation. Teachers as agents of policy implementers refer to how teachers are making sense of policies such as curricula, curriculum frameworks, and pacing guides, and implementing them in the classroom (Hughes et al., 2010, Jorgenson, 2014). The understanding of how teachers navigate the meaning of policy expectations and interpret curriculum in

their classrooms highlights teacher voices and shed insight on their classroom practices elevating the agency of teachers in the process of policy implementation.

Title I schools. Title I, Part A is the component of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Title I schools receive financial assistance for having high numbers or percentages of children from low-income households to help ensure that all children meet rigorous, state academic standards (Title I, Part A Program, 2015).

Discussion is often cited, as a best practice to cultivate citizenship yet there is little research on discussions involving diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics at the middle school level. This chapter delineated the statement of the problem and rationale, which informed the research questions for this study. In addition, the theoretical frameworks employed to analyze the findings of this study and definitions of terms were explained. The next chapter will survey the literature in the field of civic education, specifically on the incorporation of discussions with diverse topics and/or controversial topics.

Chapter Two

The following literature review is foundational to the present study. It explores the varied definitions of citizenship, discussions of controversial topics in classrooms, civics curricula, diversity and teacher implementation through peer reviewed scholarly articles, and books and book chapters in the field of civic education. Research studies and peer reviewed scholarly articles were gathered from the Education Research Complete, Psych Info, and JSTOR databases. Books were also utilized as a resource since this is a predominant method of information dissemination in the field of civic education. In addition, relevant research in the field designed for teachers and the general public was gathered from the National Council for Social Studies and Tufts University's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). The array of sources in this literature review was essential to understanding the complexity of methods, definitions, and implementation of civics education.

Dewey (1916) stated that democracy depends on the willingness of learned citizens to engage in the public realm for the betterment of the greater good. Historically, civic education has been a cornerstone in public education as a tool to preserve our democracy. In the same regard, the best methods and strategies to implement civics have been highly contested. With many voices from

researchers and policymakers involved in the curriculum design, it is important to understand what is actually happening on the ground with teachers in classrooms. The research study is framed around five areas of literature; broadening the definitions of citizenship, exploring the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics as a tool for citizenship, diversity and the civics curricula, fostering citizenship in middle school classrooms, and teachers as policy implementers. The literature review seeks to explore the landscape in the field in the five key areas listed above.

Broadening the Definitions of Citizenship

Definitions matter. To understand how curricula and teachers define citizenship in classrooms, it is imperative to examine how civic behavior, collective civic actions, and discussions, specifically of controversial topics, are delineated in the literature. There is widespread agreement that the aim of citizenship education is the preparation of young people to possess the knowledge, skills, and values for active citizenship in our society (Ross, 2004). Traditional definitions in schools typically establish civic behavior in the form of character education and voting, which can be limited. People can engage as citizens in numerous arenas, from blogging and boycotting, to participating in civic organizations and mobilizing others, and voting and running for political office (Cohen & Chafee, 2013). There is no single value or way of thinking that defines American citizenship; thus, civic education can be more than a set of facts, learning about rights and obligations, and becoming an informed voter

(Youniss, 2011). This leads to variations in civic instruction across contexts depending on the district, or even amongst teachers within the same school. Moral decency, voluntary service, voting, and social movements can be taken as a paradigm of civic practice and placed at the core of civic pedagogy (Galston, 2004). In recent decades, definitions have been expanded to fostering internal political efficacy, service learning, and the importance of deliberation and discussion. Modes of active citizenship extend beyond the responsibility to vote, and possession of a knowledge base for an informed vote to include extending rights to others, a sense of political efficacy, at least a minimal sense of trust in one's government, and participation with others in political discussion and in activities to benefit the community, to name a few (Torney-Purta, 2002). By exploring the development of internal political efficacy, service learning, open classroom climates, and alternative forms of social action such as social movements, bolster definitions of citizenship.

Individuals who feel structurally included within the civic culture of our nation have political efficacy, and a belief that their participation in the polity can make a difference (Banks, 2015). Internal political efficacy is defined as the belief regarding one's own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics (Niemi et al., 1991). Internal efficacy has been studied extensively since the 1950s in the political science and psychology communities (Moeller et al.,

2014). In order to develop a sense of political efficacy¹, citizens need to feel that they can have a meaningful impact on political decision-making (Dassonneville et al., 2012). Internal political efficacy is often cited as an important tenet in civics curricula, for students to learn to make a difference with the goal that they will become actively engaged citizens.

In recent years, research has been emerging in the field on how to foster internal political efficacy in classrooms. Flanagan and Stout (2010) argued that when students' experiences at school (a) make them feel like they are part of something larger than themselves, and (b) show them that they are trusted and respected by persons of authority, those experiences should have a positive impact on adolescents' social trust. Community-based projects can be ways to boost political efficacy in students. For example, using a quasi-experimental design, Pasek et al. (2008) studied the influence of a Student Voices program in which students from 26 high schools throughout Philadelphia during the 2002-2003 school year investigated community problems and how politicians worked to solve them. They determined that the students who participated in the program had a higher sense of political efficacy relative to their peers who didn't participate in the program. Additional studies have explored the connection between curricular decisions and political efficacy. For example, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) conducted a mixed-method study of two government courses with

¹ There is a distinction in the literature between internal and external political efficacy. Internal political efficacy is cited heavily in the literature of civic education. This research study will focus on internal political efficacy.

two types of curricula, one more traditional, and the other with a social justice focus. The study included pre/post-test data, and observations of 84 students, individually or groups, in addition to teacher observations. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) determined that projects do not need to be large-scale as even modest projects provide adolescents with the opportunity to increase their sense of political efficacy. Based on an IEA civic education study data of around 2,615 14-year olds across 124 public and private schools, Gainous and Martens (2012) determined that especially for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the instructional breadth had a negative effect on political knowledge as measured on the assessment, although it did have a positive effect on political efficacy. Their argument is interesting as it is in opposition to much of the literature on best practices in civics education. Instructional breadth such as the discussion of controversial topics, community work, and service learning affect the political knowledge of students in a negative manner, while simultaneously stimulating their political efficacy. This research challenges the field, by asking what is more important for students to acquire, political knowledge and facts, or political efficacy. Internal political efficacy extends the narrative beyond voting, and may be a critical ideal to foster through civic education.

Service learning is another aspect of citizenship that is often incorporated into civics classrooms as a means to promote civic engagement. Service learning involves the integration of service with academic skills, content, and structured reflection on the service experience, and is an increasingly prevalent strategy for

civic education in our nation's Kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) schools and teacher education programs (Wade & Yarbrough, 2007). The idea is that through service learning projects, students will gain awareness and practice in being engaged citizens. An essential condition of active citizenship is that students should be able to feel able to make a significant contribution; they may not be able to eradicate poverty, but they can help a local soup kitchen (Dassonneville et al., 2012). Yet, the reviews on the benefits of service learning activities are mixed. The prominent belief in this field is that service-learning activities are worthwhile experiences for reinforcing students' learning regarding inclusive education, the community, and diversity, and they also help students become aware of the power dynamics in society (Seban, 2013). In that regard, service learning transcends the acquisition of facts or the civic behavior of voting.

However, some researchers argue that simply offering service-learning opportunities doesn't mean students will acquire the intended outcomes. Cone (2003) argues that we have offered the illusion of a radical pedagogy, when in reality, far too often the service, and the learning are nearly totally disjointed. Since programs vary widely implementation matters. Although many civics classrooms utilize service, there are no hard data on the types of service and what they accomplish (Youniss, 2011). This may be due to the current trend in service learning literature focusing on areas beyond academic success, and instead discussing the more obvious benefits to areas such as civic responsibility and community involvement (Hébert & Hauf, 2015). Overall, research on whether and

how precisely service learning improves academic growth or civic knowledge is limited.

Classroom settings matter. Hess and McAvoy (2015) argue that schools are, and ought to be, political sites. Campbell (2008) suggests that the classroom environment, which fosters a free, open, and respectful exchange of ideas is positively related to young people's level of knowledge about democratic processes. Furthermore, teaching practices that encourage a respectful exchange of views may build feelings of collective identity and solidarity, which in turn, enhance the youth's trust in people (Flanagan & Stout, 2010). An open classroom climate, which is often cited in the literature on the teaching of controversial topics, fosters deliberation. Camicia (2009) states that deliberation of public issues helps students understand the concept of public interest and what it means to be part of a public with a shared voice. The literature shows that in classrooms where political issues are discussed freely, there is a substantial, positive impact on an array of civic outcomes, notably, scores on an exam designed to evaluate adolescents' understanding and application of democratic principles (Torney-Purta, 2002; Niemi & Junn, 2005). However, political discussions may not be occurring in open classroom climates. More than 75% of U.S. students indicate that they are encouraged to express their views in classes. On the other hand, fewer reported they had the opportunity to explore controversial public policy issues through democratic discourse (Hahn, 2003). In an initial study on classroom climate and diversity, Campbell (2008) determined that racially diverse

classrooms have relatively low levels of political discussion. Alternatively, schools have become more segregated by class and race, and this transformation has had a very real effect on the issues classrooms take up, as the testing climate has reduced schools' primary focus to increasing test scores on achievement tests (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). By conducting a longitudinal study from 2005 to 2009 of high school classrooms with students and teachers, where controversial political issues are discussed focusing their experiences, Hess and McAvoy (2015) have begun to extend the field. Yet, more research is needed on not only if and when political discussions occur, but also on what types of topics and how they are cultivated in classrooms.

Although social movements such as women's suffrage and the civil rights movement may be highlighted in the social studies or civics curriculum, the question of whether it is important to teach social movements issues alongside other civics concepts, remains. As Kahne and Westheimer (2014) suggest, democratic citizens are, for example, able to examine structural causes of social problems and seek solutions, work that might be informed by their knowledge of social movements and various strategies for change. Yet, an increasing number of students are getting little to no education about the evolution of social movements (Westheimer, 2014). Some advantages to teaching social movements are that they provide individuals with the ability to collectively mobilize and develop a collective sensibility around particular beliefs and values, without solely relying on "traditional" forms of politics such as elections, voting, or lobbying (Wheeler-

Bell, 2014). Despite these benefits, the teaching of social movement issues or critical citizenship education is often perceived as “dangerous or disruptive.” The implication here is that “dangerous citizenship” is dangerous to an oppressive and socially unjust status quo, and to existing hierarchical structures of power (Ross & Vinson, 2014). Is that not precisely the goal of democratic education, to prepare students to make society better? As we are preparing students to be democratic citizens in the 21st century, close attention must be paid to alternative forms of civic education such as the role social movements and action play in helping shape civic engagement in our society.

The nature of citizenship and the meanings of citizenship education are complex, as are their multiple and contradictory implications for contemporary schooling and everyday life (Ross & Vinson, 2014). Throughout the literature it is evident that there is not one set model of civic education that is practiced throughout schools. Dassonneville et al. (2012) determined that there is no single optimal solution or best practice for civic education; various forms of civic education were found to have different outcomes. How is that achieved in classrooms? Is that reasonable for teachers? Who decides what forms of civic education is best for students? As aims, methods, and strategies for citizenship education are varied, so must definitions of citizenship, which should extend beyond traditional dominant narratives.

Exploring Discussions with Diverse Viewpoints and/or Controversial Topics as a Skill for Citizenship

Niemi and Junn (2005) research marked a shift in the study of civic education by drawing attention to the classroom and its impact on the preparation for democratic citizenship. As Dewey (1916) highlighted in his book *Democracy and Education*, discussion and intercultural communication are critical to broadening the definition of democracy. Since all youth have access to public school, coursework is one place where civic knowledge and skills can be developed. For example, civics education may have a role in helping prepare future engaged citizens (Kahne et al., 2006). Knowledge of current events has also been linked to increased political knowledge and civic understanding (Galston, 2004). In classrooms where students are exposed to the real world of political issues, they are introduced to the lifeblood of participatory democracy, namely discourse, and debate (Campbell, 2008). Schools are institutions that are able to provide young people with the opportunity to reason with others who may hold a variety of views, and where students can learn political disagreement and compromise (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Campbell (2008) suggests spaces with open classroom climates that foster civic discourse and debate.

Throughout the literature, discussions of controversial topics and current events are situated as a critical need in the preparation of students to be active citizens. Even NCSS has suggested the discussion of controversial topics to be a “promising practice.” This term was framed in a position statement by NCSS,

which stated that students need to learn how to study controversial issues by (1) gathering and organizing facts, (2) evaluating information and sources, (3) discriminating between facts and opinions, and (4) discussing different view points in order to be able to think and make clear, informed decisions (“Academic Freedom and The Social Studies Teacher,” 2010). NCSS and prominent researchers in the field of civic education have proposed the benefits (such as increased civic engagement and the ability to grapple with a variety of opinions) of discussing controversial topics and current events.

There are a few factors including classroom management, academic freedom, pressures of standardized testing, and ethical challenges, which may prohibit the discussion of controversial topics in classrooms. At the lowest level, it may be an issue of classroom management. Teachers, as such, fear the classroom environment may become uncontrollable when the lesson deviates from the traditional lecture and note-taking, teaching-centered approach (Tannebaum, 2013). It could also be that students may not be able to articulate their thoughts, or have opportunities to express their views in a classroom setting. As Diana Hess (2004) has often suggested, the use of controversy is often contingent on students’ abilities to participate in discussions with one another. There can be a larger issue of academic freedom, and with the rise of standardized testing, there may be little room left in the curriculum to teach the skills and actively engage in discourse on controversial topics. While the goal of high standards for achievement is worthy, we must remain aware that powerful and

creative teaching requires a strong measure of academic freedom for teachers to serve as thoughtful curricular-instructional decision-makers (“Academic Freedom and The Social Studies Teacher,” 2010). Defining controversy and what encompasses a controversial topic, is subjective in and of itself. The subjectivity may prohibit teachers from engaging in political discussions in classrooms. Similar ethical challenges a teacher may encounter in the selection of topics and the guidance of the discussion, may arise. Zimmerman (2016) suggests that some teachers have been discouraged or even barred from addressing controversial issues, particularly if the teacher has displayed a liberal or unorthodox bent. Hess and McAvoy (2015) cite this phenomenon as the political education paradox, which contrasts the need to provide students with a nonpartisan political education on the one hand, and the need to prepare them to participate in the actual, highly partisan political community, on the other hand. Drawing that line can lead to ethical challenges, particularly with impressionable adolescents, and can be difficult for a teacher to navigate.

While past research has shown that taking civics courses correlates with greater civic knowledge, Campbell (2008) determined that it is actually the nature of the political discussion within the classroom, and not simply the frequency of formal social studies instruction, that has an effect. Controversial issues, then, are the one area of the curriculum in which teachers can engage students in genuine discussion, and join them in a collaborative, mutually attentive, and responsive exploration of questions, to which none of them know the answers (Hand &

Levinson, 2012; Hess, 2009). To build on this body of literature there has to be a critical look into how teachers are defining controversy, and whether they are incorporating the discussion of controversial issues, and the reasoning behind it. This study provides insight on if and how discussions incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics are occurring in middle school classrooms, and at what level; if not, why not?

Diversity, Civics Curriculum and Curricular Opportunities

America is gearing up for major changes, one of which involves demographics. According to the U.S. Census (2012), minorities now 37% of the U.S. population are projected to comprise 57% of the population by 2060. The demographic shift has already begun in public schools. According to the Department of Education Pews Research report, in the fall of 2014, 50.3% of students in public schools were minorities, and 49.7% were white students; in the years following, the percentages are expected to increase for minorities and decrease for white students (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). Further, today's rapidly changing demographic context again raises the question as to how schools promote engagement, with whom, and which notions of community are being advanced (Jacobsen et. al 2012). The current trends since 2014, suggest that diversity appears to be expanding into areas and school districts that were predominantly white. Maxwell (2014) states that although the projected diverse majority will remain concentrated in major urban areas, in a handful of historically diverse states such as California, Florida, New York, and Texas, it is

by no means an exclusively big-city or big-state trend. Now many rural and suburban communities are becoming increasingly diverse across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines as well.

As populations continue to shift, U.S. schools must acknowledge that its teaching force lacks diversity. Roughly 83% of teachers in public schools are white (NCES, 2013). Goldenberg (2014) suggests that there can be a clash of cultures that occurs in classrooms between students of color who are mostly from low-income households, and their teachers who are predominantly White and middle class. Gay and Howard (2000) refer to this as a demographic divide across race, cultural, linguistic and socio-economic contexts between teachers (predominantly white) and K-12 students (increasingly from racial/ethnic groups of color and low income). This is not to suggest that white teachers cannot teach students of color successfully, quite the opposite. As scholars in the field of multicultural education and cultural relevancy have previously suggested, white teachers must not only recognize their privilege, but also value the cultural experiences and knowledge of students of color, and find meaningful ways to incorporate that into the classroom (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2003). In fact, the valuing of diverse narratives and cultural experiences is vital for all teachers to integrate in all classrooms.

Understanding how citizenship is cultivated for diverse students, and how civic experiences of communities of color are valued in curriculum and instructional practice, are critical questions as demographic trends shift in public

schools. Historically, ethnic and linguistic minorities have been marginalized in society and in schools. Marginalized students are those who have been left out and excluded from the story of active citizenship in the United States, including minority groups and those with low socioeconomic status (SES; Scott & Suh, 2015). Educating for a diverse democracy can no longer be ignored. Since the inception of the social political entity of “America,” there has been resistance and opposition to traditional forms of governance. Marginalized groups have organized and worked for their group rights throughout U.S. history, bringing greater equality, and social justice for all Americans (Banks, 2008). Civic knowledge that is inclusive of diverse communities is for everyone.

Yet, as previously referenced in the work of Campbell (2008), the role of racial diversity, and the demographic composition of a classroom can influence the nature of civics education and discussion. It is imperative to explore this further through teachers’ voices, to understand how the demographic composition shapes instruction. In addition, diversity as a definition has to extend beyond traditional classifications that are usually binary (Black²/White or Rich/Poor). Jacobsen et al. (2012) offers the example that a multiracial school comprised of White, Black, Latino, and Asian students faces a very different set of issues than a school comprised of White and Black students. Although both schools are diverse they confront different questions regarding identity that may influence the nature of instruction in their classrooms. Outdated binaries do not capture the complexity

² Black refers to African Americans and both terms will be used interchangeably

of the diversity and demographic composition of schools in the 21st century. Students in classrooms belong to multiple identities to include but not limited to racial/ethnic identity, religious affiliation, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and social class. Therefore the demographic composition of a classroom can be viewed as an opportunity to engage in discussion that could foster a diversity of viewpoints, or prohibit it, as not to offend a particular group: Both shape the manner in which civics education is cultivated. More research is needed in this area regarding teachers' voices in the role diversity and demographic composition plays in shaping their instructional practices in civics classrooms.

Nearly every research article on civics education cites the intellectual debates of curricula, and the highly contested nature of the subject (Galston, 2004; Niemi & Junn, 2005; Ross, 2004; Youniss, 2011). Varied priorities from research and policy to schools and communities embody significantly different beliefs regarding capacities and commitments that citizens need for democracy to flourish; and they carry significantly different implications for pedagogy, curriculum, program evaluation, and education policy (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). All public school curriculum subjects related to addressing the fundamental issues of what it means to be a democratic citizen within the United States, prompt contentious exchanges between politicians, cultural observers, academicians, and leaders within state departments of education (Chandler & McKnight, 2009). With numerous stakeholders involved with the development of civics and the political nature of the subject, it is quite easy to understand tensions

around curricula. The decision-making process for social studies curricula involves several entities at various levels of influence that do not necessarily act or move in concert (Jorgenson, 2014). Because of the diversity of viewpoints on the meaning of citizenship education— and thus diversity in the purposes, content, and pedagogy of social studies education— social studies educators have devoted considerable attention to identifying categories and descriptions of the major traditions with the field (Ross, Mathison, & Vinson, 2014).

The interpretation of civics education tends to range on a spectrum, which places definitions of civic behavior and curriculum in context. Parker (1996) describes three different conceptions of civics education for a democracy as (1) traditional, (2) progressive, and (3) advanced. Traditional civics education focuses on the acquisition of knowledge. Progressive education has a similar commitment to civic knowledge, but embraces visions of a stronger democracy, while advanced civics education builds on the progressive prospective, in addition to careful attention to inherent tensions between pluralism and assimilation politics of recognition. Many researchers have built on these ideas by adding elements of social critique and multiculturalism (Banks, 2008; Freire, 1973; Freire, 1998). Parker (1996) highlights that curricula tend to range on a continuum from students being receivers of political knowledge, to being quite critical of its developing agency. Standards are not neutral and could directly or indirectly influence the type of citizenship education that occurs in classrooms (Journell, 2010).

Recognizing the range of influences and methods for civics instruction from a focus on political knowledge, and service learning, to discussions of controversial topics, what curricular opportunities do students have access to? More importantly, is it equitable for all students? Between 2005 and 2008, Kahne (2008) surveyed more than 2,500 California high school students about their civic experiences. Kahne (2008) determined a significant civic opportunity gap in which wealthy, white, and academically successful students regularly received the best civic learning opportunities such as service learning simulations, and were 80% more likely to take part in panel discussions, or debates than their peers at predominantly low income or high minority schools. Fridkin, Kenney, and Crittenden (2006) studied affluent and low income school districts, and determined that resource-rich schools may provide “apprenticeships” to help students develop the skills necessary for political activism. In contrast, schools strapped for resources are less likely to dedicate time and teacher preparation to developing a curriculum that includes opportunities to practice democratic activities. Inequitable access to civic learning opportunities is a disservice to all youth. Low income and less educated citizens, as well as recent immigrants and those less proficient in English are often underrepresented in the political process and have far less of a voice (Kahne & Spote, 2008). Not to suggest that schools are wholly responsible, but if students of color are not receiving the curricular opportunities cited throughout the literature to be beneficial for future civic engagement, then the school is playing a role in reproducing this social inequity.

Further, what roles are teachers enacting as implementers of the curriculum in classrooms, to mitigate or reproduce those inequities? In a democracy, schooling should result in equal levels of civic preparation and willingness to participate across social groups (Torney-Purta, 2002).

Students across the United States are exposed to a common narrative about the nation's history (Hahn, 2003). Textbooks have long been recognized as fostering dominant, white, middle class cultural norms, and promoting nation-bound metanarratives by limiting the number of perspectives in the curriculum (Camicia, 2009; Zimmerman, 2005). Textbooks are the main knowledge and pedagogical resource in schools, and teachers and pupils rely on them for the legitimate truth and guidance, but pupils ought to learn to develop an autonomy that will prepare them to live in an ambiguous and complex reality (Firer, 2013). Textbooks rarely engage in controversial topics. If teachers are solely relying on this information, a curricular opportunity could be missed in the classroom. If not, how are teachers incorporating and supplementing materials for students in classrooms? In this regard, there is little research on what teachers are doing in civics classrooms.

Research suggests that civics textbooks are no different. In content analyses of civics textbooks ranging from the 1980s to the mid-2000s, it was determined that many texts focused on voting, with minimal evidence of social change or other examples of citizenship (Barth & Shermis, 1980; Gonzales et al., 2004). Unfortunately, research demonstrates the ways in which social studies textbooks

promote mainstream democratic education, by privileging dominant cultural representations, ideologies, and metanarratives of American exceptionalism (Camicia, 2009). The dominant pattern of social studies instruction is characterized by text-oriented, whole-group, teacher-centered approaches aimed towards the transmission of “factual” information. While many social studies educators and researchers have long advocated instructional approaches that include active learning and higher-order thinking, within a curriculum that emphasizes antiracism, gender equity, multiculturalism, social critique etc., the dominant pattern has persisted (Ross, 2014). As we continue to move in a more diverse direction, it is imperative to focus on the narratives of democracy in instructional materials, as well as curricula that are utilized in schools. As public school classrooms continue to grow as it is imperative to continue to expand on the literature involving diversity and curricula. Are schools serving as a buffer to change the reproduction of traditional narratives, or disrupting them and embracing a multicultural anti-racist lens to civics education? This work in the field must continue to analyze curricular messages, and include teachers’ voices, to understand at the classroom level if and how teachers are incorporating diverse perspectives, counter narratives, and embracing controversial topics to address systemic issues in today’s society.

Fostering Citizenship in Middle Schools

Middle school students are at a stage in their identity and psychosocial development in which they are curious to learn more about themselves as well as

engage in learning experiences about the world around them (Brighton, 2007). Much of the research in civic education tends to be large-scale studies involving high schools and high school students, or large data sets such as NAEP and International Educational Achievement Civic Education Study (Campbell, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Early adolescence is a ripe developmental age for fostering citizenship. Busey and Russell (2016) find that of all middle school-level subjects, social studies is most ideally positioned to provide a developmentally and culturally responsive educational experience for students regardless of ethnic, racial, linguistic, or cultural background. In research on civic education and engagement in middle school, discussions involve the concept of emergent citizenship, (Geller et. al 2013; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013) which describes a period when early adolescents can have and develop various attitudes and beliefs about citizenship. Building on this work, Guillaume et al. (2015) suggest, based on a large-scale longitudinal study, that middle school as a developmental niche, is a context where adolescents' emergent participatory citizenship behaviors can be enacted as well as unpacked. With scant research in fostering citizenship in middle schools, especially involving controversial topics, this study offers an opportunity to extend previous literature in the field.

Teachers as Agents of Policy Implementation

Educators and teachers have an opportunity and a responsibility to help prepare students from all backgrounds to be active, democratic citizens (Scott & Suh, 2015). In education, as in other professions, the best policies and materials

will come to naught without well-educated and skillful professionals to implement them (Hughes et al., 2010). Jorgenson (2014) suggests that rather than engaging in exercises on implementing a set of activities predefined by policymakers, textbook companies, or a high-stakes tests, teachers should be actively engaged in considering the perennial curriculum question: What knowledge is of the most worthy, the least worthy, and for whom? Yet, there are few studies that focus on the voices of teachers and how they are making sense of the curriculum and deciding how to teach democracy for all of their students.

Persons in a number of roles make decisions about curricula and instruction (Shaver, 1979). With numerous and sometimes competing voices at the research, policy, and instructional level, the debate of the best method to teach democracy, and how teachers implement civics instruction, remains unclear. Ross (2006) argues that while an educator might be charged to teach the “formal curriculum” their experience in the classroom is the “enacted curriculum” including the beliefs, values, and preferences that influence day-to-day instruction. Swalwel, Pellegrino and View (2015) determined in a study of 25 pre-service and in-service teachers exploring how lesser known individuals of the Civil Rights Movement were taught, that teachers made choices along four main themes; technical knowledge, philosophical reasons, relevance, and appropriateness. Teachers do not only make curricular decisions based on their content knowledge. In an example from the science content area, Nehm and Schonfeld (2007) studied the effects of a 14-week evolution course at the graduate

teacher education program, and although there was a statistically significant increase in the knowledge of pre-service teachers of evolution, it didn't change their teaching practices. Teachers still preferred not to teach evolution. Teachers are not just following a curriculum map or pacing guide, they could also be making decisions based on their personal values and beliefs. Other factors besides knowledge, such as teacher beliefs can have a significant effect on teacher practice (Anthony, Smith & Miller, 2015). The ways educators advance ideas of citizenship may privilege some political perspectives regarding the ways problems are framed and responded to, as there is are politics involved in educating for democracy; politics that deserves attention (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). It is imperative that more research is conducted to explore the role the personal civic values and beliefs, ideological, or political perspectives influence the instructional practices of teachers.

Systemic pressures such as testing or perceptions of testing, lack of academic freedom, time constraints, to name a few, also influence the curricular decisions of teachers in the classrooms. Vinson (2006) proposes that the drive for states, national government, and professional educational associations to standardize and impose a singular theory and practice of curriculum, instruction, and assessment can be oppressive. Winstead (2011) determined in a qualitative study of nine social studies elementary teachers in the era of standardized testing, under No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that despite the belief in the relevance of social studies, the focus on assessed subjects deprives students of time for

social, civic, and critical discussions. High stakes testing and the accountability movement have a direct influence on what and how subjects are taught, which have implications in social studies classrooms. In light of the tensions that manifest between the formal and the enacted curriculum, a significant part of teacher development at various stages of teachers' careers must include attention to how they make curricular decisions, and the cultural and social contexts in which they make them (Swalwel et al., 2015).

Analyzing the messages embedded in state mandated and locally designed curricula, and the curricular choices of middle school civics teachers is paramount to extending the literature in the field of civic education. This can help shed light on how teachers are serving as policy implementers, how citizenship is being fostered at the middle school level in curricula and practice, and the extent to which the demographic composition of classrooms shape instruction.

Approaching social studies in this manner situates teachers and students at the center of the curriculum, and repositions textbooks and state curricular guides closer to the margins (Leahey, 2014). More teachers' voices are needed to explore their rationale for and how middle school civics is taught. In this chapter a review of the literature highlighted the intersections and potential disconnections between definitions of citizenship, the discussion of controversial topics, diversity, curricula, and teacher implementation in middle school classrooms. The following section presents the research design of this study which seeks to gain insight on the messages embedded in a state mandated and locally designed middle school

civics curriculum, and gather teachers' voices on their curricular choices in middle school civics classrooms.

Chapter Three

This chapter presents a qualitative research design that seeks to gain insight on the embedded messages in a middle school civics curriculum, and the instructional practices of civics teachers involving discussions incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school classrooms. Positionality, design of the study, and research setting are described. In addition, data sources, descriptions of participants, and procedures are explained. Lastly, the data analysis plan is presented.

Positionality Statement

In research, positionality tends to refer to aspects of an individual that are not necessarily embodied in the person and include both ascribed characteristics (nationality, race, gender, and ancestry) that are relatively fixed and/or culturally dynamic, and achieved characteristics (educational attainment, socio-economic status, and institutional affiliation) that can directly or indirectly impact the researchers' ability to conduct research and analyze data (Glesne, 2011). As an African American woman, and a history and civics teacher, who was reared in poverty, and is currently a doctoral candidate at George Mason University, I am operating within several positionalities as I engage in this research. Within positionality theory, it is acknowledged that people have multiple overlapping

identities, thus making meanings from various aspects of their identity (Kezar, 2002). As a minority student from a low socio-economic background, I felt that my history and culture were rarely reflected within K-12 classroom spaces. However, being reared by a single mother in a socially conscious home, I was taught, in depth, about African American history, race and racism, and the role of activism in the various struggles for equal rights that extended beyond the narrative of voting within communities of color. Prompted by these experiences, I became a history and civics teacher who often supplemented and taught outside of the curriculum, which helped my students value diverse perspectives, and civic experiences. As a doctoral candidate, my research agenda is firmly rooted in youth and minority political empowerment, civic education, social justice history, and multilingual/multicultural education.

Glesne (2011) states that being attuned to positionality is being attuned to intersubjectivity, how the subjective of all involved guides the research process, content, and ideally the interpretations. As an African American middle school history and civics educator, my personal and professional background uniquely positions me to conduct this research through the five tenets of CRT (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), and sense-making theory (Spillane et al., 2002). The five tenets are the centrality of race and racism, the challenge to dominant ideology, a commitment to social justice, a centrality of experiential knowledge, and the interdisciplinary perspective. As an African American woman, I have a keen understanding of the pervasiveness and centrality of race and racism as it

permeates our society. Through my doctoral education in multilingual/multicultural education and education policy, I have a foundation in education research to understand and analyze language that challenges dominant ideologies and reveals the power and self-interest of dominant groups. As a social justice educator, I have a keen interest in the betterment of all people and can readily recognize a commitment to a social justice agenda. As a history educator of color, I value the counter narratives and knowledge of people of color as a critical component in analyzing and understanding racial inequity. By analyzing the data through two disciplinary theoretical frameworks, CRT and sense-making theory, and an interdisciplinary perspective was utilized in this study. In addition, as a current history and civics educator, I understand the process of instructional decision-making and interpretations of state mandated and locally designed curricular messages, and how these trickle into my classroom. This insight as a teacher lends well to the analysis of sense-making theory in regards to understanding the curricular choices of middle school civics teachers.

Although my position led to the development of the research questions and the present study, they could also lead to bias throughout the research process. As a social studies and civics teacher, I bring assumptions and perceptions of civics education and teacher practice to my role as a researcher. As a middle school educator for over eight years in urban school districts, my experiences may shape my understanding of teacher practices and implementation. In addition, as an educator of color, I am more attuned to counter

narratives in history involving people of color and other populations that are marginalized by various institutions in our society, and bring that wealth of knowledge to classroom instruction. I recognize that the participants of this study may not have similar experiences. Therefore, I accounted for my positionality by adhering to the tenets of qualitative research including theoretical frameworks, memo reflections and dialogic journals, and transparency, to ensure the data or interpretations of the data are not misrepresented throughout the research process. This study utilized the five tenets of CRT (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and the sense-making theory (Spillane et al., 2002) as frameworks. To account for potential biases due to positionality, I wrote memo reflections and dialogic journals throughout the research process to provide a space to react to data, and document any preconceived notions, bias, or beliefs, in an effort to be transparent and accountable throughout the research study.

Design of Study

A qualitative design including ethnographic content analysis and semi-structured interviews were employed for this research study. Creswell (2008) suggests that ethnography is a useful design for studying groups in education, their behaviors, beliefs, and language. The present study included document analysis to evaluate the knowledge that is privileged within a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six middle school civics teachers, to understand how they interpret state and local civics curricula, to implement diverse

viewpoints and/or controversial topics in civics classrooms. The integration of document analysis and semi-structured interviews through the interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks of CRT and the sense-making theory illuminated the embedded messages in a middle school civics curriculum, and the rationale and decision-making behind the curricular choices of civics teachers in middle school classrooms (see table 1 for the list of research questions with corresponding method and data sources that were utilized to investigate the phenomena in this study).

Table 1

Research Questions, Methods and Data Sources

| Research Questions | Methods | Data Sources |
|--|---|--|
| 1. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a state mandated middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship? | 1. Document analysis (Ethnographic content analysis) | 1. State-level civics standards, curriculum framework and testing blueprint |
| 1a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a district level middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship? | 1a. Document analysis (Ethnographic content analysis) | 1a. District-level curriculum documents (i.e. pacing guide, units of study, district policy on controversial policy) |
| 2. How do teachers define controversy and which diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics do they decide to incorporate with the civics curriculum? | 2. Semi-structured interviews | 2. Semi-structured interview transcripts |
| 2a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics do they decide to incorporate with the civics curriculum? | 2a. Semi-structured interviews & document analysis | 2a. Semi-structured interview transcripts and teacher provided artifacts |
| 3. How does the demographic composition of the classroom shape the curricular choices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school civics classroom? | 3. Semi-structured interviews | 3. Semi-structured interviews transcripts |

Document analysis. Document analysis was conducted through an ethnographic content approach (ECA). Ethnographic content analysis is used to document and understand the meaning of communication as well as verifies theoretical relationships (Altheide, 1987; Altheide & Schneider, 2012). As an outgrowth of more traditional qualitative content analysis methods, Altheide (1987) argues that ECA consists of reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation, with the aim of being systematic and analytic, but not rigid. For the purposes of this study, ECA was employed with several state and local district curricular documents including the middle school civics standards, curriculum framework, testing blueprint, local school district pacing guides, and teacher-provided artifacts such as lesson plans and/or activities.

In addition, this study was analyzed through the five tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) situated in education theory, and praxis specifically in the discipline of social studies (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Howard, 2003; Stovall, 2005). The five tenets are 1) centrality of race and racism, 2) the challenge to dominant ideology, 3) a commitment to social justice, 4) a centrality of experiential knowledge, and 5) the interdisciplinary perspective. Exploring a text often depends as much on focusing on what is said, and how a specific idea or concept is developed, as well as focusing on what is not said, the silences, gaps or omissions (Rapley, 2008). Therefore, ethnographic content analysis of a state

mandated and a locally designed middle school civics curriculum, with teacher-provided artifacts was examined using the five tenets of CRT research, to analyze curricular messages, the role of race in the development of norms in civics standards, dominant narratives, biases, and perceptions. ECA is oriented to uncover and supplement, as well as supplant prior theoretical claims (Altheide, 1987; Altheide & Schneider, 2012); therefore, ECA coupled with CRT allows for a deeper analysis of the messages that may be systemically racialized as the orientation lends itself to constant discovery and constant comparison of meanings and nuances.

Document analysis was utilized to address research questions that explore the manner in which state and locally designed civics curricula frame the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms. Messages that are conveyed through curriculum and standardized tests could influence teacher practice. Understanding the knowledge that is privileged in both a state mandated and a locally designed civics curricula through ethnographic content analysis can provide insights on the messages teachers are receiving in regards to incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. Documents can raise questions about your hunches and thereby shape new directions for interviews (Glesne, 2011). Analyzing the messages teachers are receiving from both the state and local school district are critical to this study, to frame the semi-structured interview questions. The results from the ethnographic content analysis of a state mandated and locally designed

middle school civics curriculum were utilized to develop questions to pose to teacher participants. Therefore, document analysis assisted in the framing and development of the semi-structured interview questions, which is critical to understanding the influence of curriculum policies on teacher practice.

Lastly, document analysis assisted with ensuring the trustworthiness of this study through the analysis of teacher-provided artifacts including lesson plans and/or activities, following the semi-structured interviews. The teacher-provided artifacts were used to confirm teacher-reported practices obtained through semi-structured interviews. This will be further explained in the data analysis plan. The analysis of these documents could also serve as a form of validity through triangulation. Triangulation, as a strategy for validation, usually involves independently obtaining one or more alternative sources of qualitative data, and checking to see if the inferences you draw from them are comparable to those obtained in the first instance (Bazeley, 2013). Document analysis was used to both analyze critical messages of the curriculum, understand the connections of those messages to the content of instructional materials provided by teachers, and frame semi-structured interview questions (see figure 1 for a visual representation of the research study process).

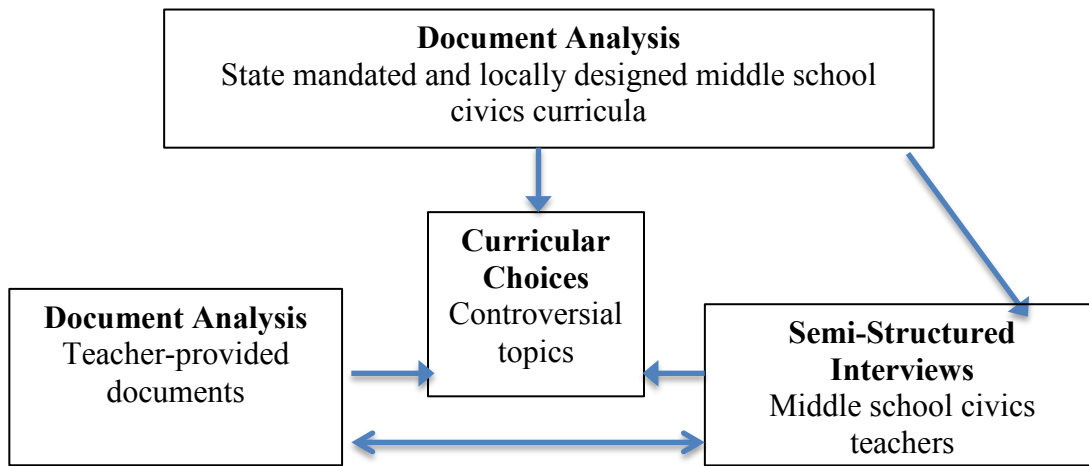


Figure 1. Visual representation of the research study process.

Semi-structured interviews. In order to understand how teachers interpret the messages of both a state mandated and district-level curriculum involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Based on research in the field, teachers' voices are limited in civic education, and even more so at the middle school level. A semi-structured protocol is imperative when engaging in interviews with classroom practitioners as it allows some flexibility for participants in sharing their perspectives, curricular choices, and teacher practices. Semi-structured interviews recognize that questions may emerge in the course of interviewing and may add to or replace pre-established questions (Glesne, 2011). A semi-structured protocol allows space for clarification and elaboration. Engaging in semi-structured interviews allows for

engagement with participants that give space for clarification, understanding, further elaboration, and depth (Galletta, 2013). As the nature of this discussion may take interesting nuanced turns, the interview protocol is flexible. “More or less, open-ended questions are brought to the interview situation in the form of an interview guide” with the understanding that the conversation is fluid (Flick, 1998, p. 94). Semi-structured interviews with middle school civics teachers in one school district were used to discover how teachers interpreted and implemented middle school civics curricula, how they define controversy, incorporate diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics, and the role of the demographic composition of their students as an influence or challenge when approaching certain topics.

This research study involved the analysis of messages embedded within a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum regarding the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. In addition, the voices of six teachers in one school district and their curricular choices were highlighted. The understanding of curricular messages and teachers’ voices on instructional practices provide a wealth of knowledge on the role of curriculum policies, and how teachers make sense of policies in classroom spaces.

Research Setting

Under No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), proficiency in reading and mathematics has taken priority in many schools across the country. With this reform, many schools, especially schools that are low performing, social studies,

and civic education have become secondary. Social studies curricula are not highly regarded as an essential academic domain in light of the present accountability standards and foci (Winstead, 2011). Although all fifty states and the District of Columbia require some form of civic education, forty states require a course in American government or civics. Approximately eighteen states have a statewide course with a corresponding standardized test, specifically in civics and American government as a requirement for graduation. The present study was conducted in one of the eighteen states (CIRCLE, 2012; Zubrzycki, 2015). The selected state has a civics course with a corresponding standardized test at the middle school level, which makes it an ideal location for document analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Site selection for document analysis. Document analysis of middle school civics curricula was conducted in a state in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. For inclusion in this study, the site must have a statewide middle school civics curriculum and corresponding standardized test. Mora (2011) found that there is a significant impact on pedagogical practices in the classroom based on the importance ascribed to standardized testing. Eighteen states have a statewide course with a standardized test in American government or civics as a requirement for graduation (CIRCLE, 2014). Of the eighteen states, only two have a middle school course with corresponding standardized test on civics. One of the states only recently implemented the civics course with a corresponding standardized test. The other state has had a middle school civics course with a

corresponding standardized test for over 15 years. The state with a long history of accountability for civics education at the middle school level was chosen as the selected site for the present study.

In the selected site, civics is taught in middle school grades in either the 7th or 8th grade depending on the local school district. The state recently revised the history and social science standards that were implemented for the 2016-2017 school year. With newly revised civic standards, the document analysis component of this study was used to address research questions 1, 1a, and 2a, which involve the context and embedded messages within the curriculum. In purposeful selection, particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, the selected state with a civics course and corresponding standardized test at the middle school level has been purposefully selected as a site to conduct document analysis. In addition, this state provides public access to state mandated curricular documents including middle school civics standards, curriculum framework, and corresponding testing blueprint. The selected site for document analysis provides access to robust information on a statewide middle school civics curriculum.

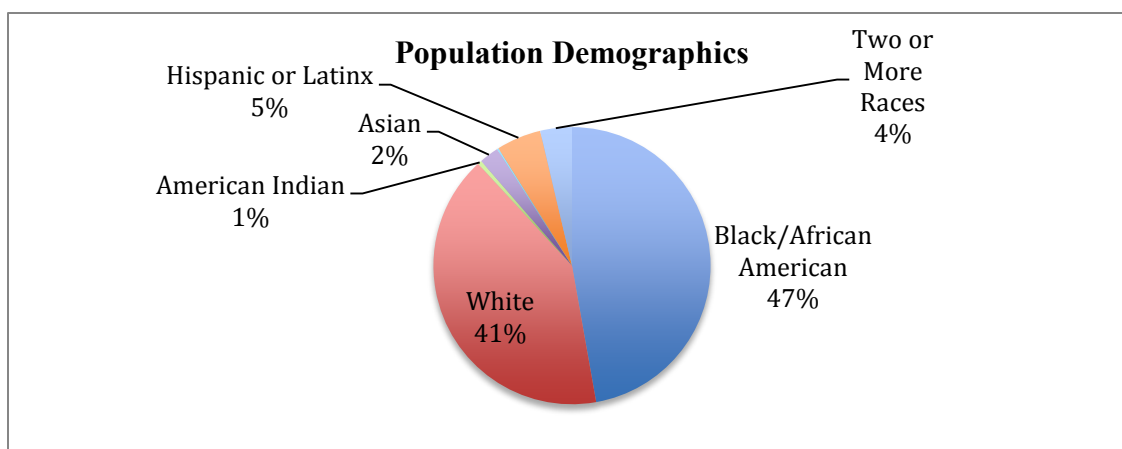
Site selection for semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured component of this study was used to address research questions 2, 2a, and 3. These research questions garner an understanding and document how middle school teachers define controversial topics for students and their teaching

practices, and how the demographic compositions of their classrooms might influence their instructional practices surrounding the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. One school district within the selected state was chosen purposively. The inclusion criterion for this study was an average-sized school district within the state and has approximately 5-10 middle schools, with classrooms comprised of various demographic compositions including schools that are more homogenous or heterogeneous. Also, critical to inclusion in this research study was the selection of a diverse school district servicing a majority of students of color. This is representative of the demographic shifts occurring in public schools, nationally (Krogstad & Fry, 2014), as more public schools beyond urban districts service a majority of students of color.

Carter city. Over the last decade, the African American population has increased while the White population has declined, making Carter a predominantly Black city with rising Hispanic populations. For much of its history, the population of Carter has mostly been White and African American. Carter has a rich African American tradition and culture that permeates throughout the city. Carter city is a story of Black empowerment despite a legacy of slavery and segregation. As in most mid Atlantic and southern cities during the 18th century, slavery was a cornerstone in Carter, with a large enslaved African population. During the Reconstruction era, newly freed Black residents began to open businesses, and some attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities

(HBCUs). By the late 19th century, there were dozens of Black-owned businesses, creating a strong Black middle class. As segregationist policies became the law of the land in the early 20th century, Black businesses and schools thrived in African American neighborhoods. Even with integration, neighborhoods remained largely segregated across racial and class lines until the early 2000s. The city is less segregated now, however, African Americans comprise a majority of Carter City's population.

Carter is a medium-sized city, with multiracial and people of color comprising approximately 58% of the population based on the 2015 U.S. Census data (see Figure 2 for population demographics). Although Carter is becoming increasingly diverse, with a significant White population, African Americans comprise most of the city's population. Historically, the main industry in Carter was agriculture and fishery based; this has now evolved into more urbanized industries such as retail, tourism, and manufacturing. The median household income is \$50,000, with 15% of the population living in poverty, 24% of which includes children under 18 years old. Citizens over 25 years old (89%) are high school graduates, and about 23% hold a bachelor's degree or higher. As Carter is a city where people of color are the majority of the population, the school district is an ideal site for conducting this research.



Carter school district (CSD). The selected school district is comprised of middle school civics teachers who receive the same state and local curricular messages. However, middle school civics teachers teach in varied demographic classroom settings, therefore, interpretations and implementation of curricula may

Figure 2. The chart depicts the population demographics of Carter city. vary across contexts. According to the U.S. Census (2014), roughly 16% of the population in Carter is school-aged (5-18 years old). According to the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) report titled Numbers and Types of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools From the Common Core of Data: school year 2009-10 (n.d.), the average student population of a middle school within the selected state is 722. Middle schools in Carter school district (CSD) range in population totals from 673-1,408, averaging around 860, with two of the schools servicing K-8th grades, slightly skewing the data. Accreditation status may also put pressure on schools from the school district and the state department of education. Schools

that are in “warning” may have to implement new instructional policies or undergo leadership transitions to achieve and maintain accreditation. In addition, the state mandated standardized assessment data for middle school civics might provide insight on priorities, obstacles, and opportunities that influence teacher practice in the various school settings (see table 2 for 2014-2015 middle school population totals, accreditation status and testing accountability results). CSD provides an ideal setting for addressing the research questions as the population totals are close to an average sized school district in the state, and are potentially comprised of populations that are majority students of color, with a range of instructional settings.³

³ All information for Carter City was gained from census data, publicly available information and scholarly texts but specific references are withheld to maintain anonymity.

Table 2

2014-2015 Middle School Population Totals & Accountability Results

| School | Student Population | | Accreditation Status | Civics Test Pass Rate % | |
|------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| | School | 8 th Grade | | <u>School</u> | <u>District</u> |
| Charlot* | 623 | 223 | Partial-Warned | 79 | 82 |
| Dixon* | 1,019 | 368 | Partial-Warned | 85 | 82 |
| Gilbert* | 714 | 244 | Partial-Warned | 87 | 82 |
| Combs# | 1,408 | 173 | Fully Accredited | 92 | 82 |
| Patterson^ | 680 | 178 | Fully Accredited | 96 | 82 |
| Taylor > | 668 | 230 | Partial-Approaching | 83 | 82 |
| Marshall= | 1,194 | 122 | Fully Accredited | 80 | 82 |
| Grant+ | | | | | |

Note. Symbols were used to distinguish between the types of middle school settings within the school district. * denotes a Title I school, which means the school receives federal funding to support students identified as economically disadvantaged by their free and reduced lunch status. # denotes a K-8th grade school. ^ denotes a magnet school with an application based admission and selection based on a lottery system. > denotes a fundamental school with an application-based admission. + denotes a 3rd-8th grade full time gifted program and data not publically available. = denotes a PK-8th grade school with a 6th-8th grade STEM and engineering focus program, an application based admission.

Data Sources

The data sources for this study included a range of state mandated and locally designed civics curricular documents and teacher-provided artifacts. These

documents were used to uncover the civic knowledge that is privileged, and how discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics are framed in state mandated and locally designed curricula. In addition, transcriptions of semi-structured interviews were analyzed to understand the influences of middle school civics teachers, and the implementation of instruction of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics (see table 1 for the list of data sources with corresponding method for each research question of this study). Each of the data sources utilized in the research study is described below.

State mandated middle school civics standards. The civics standards provide a framework for the instructional programs designed to raise achievement. State curricula mandate that the same civics and government standards be taught to all 7th or 8th grade students. The standards set the tone for the knowledge, definitions, and values that are privileged in the curriculum. There are 10 main civics standards, each defined by multiple subordinate standards.

State mandated middle school civics curriculum framework. The curriculum framework amplifies the standards by defining the content understandings, knowledge, and skills that are measured by standardized assessments. The civics curriculum framework suggests the minimum content that teachers should cover, and is typically utilized in conjunction with the standards as a model for local districts, and for teachers to develop and implement civics curriculum.

State mandated testing blueprint for middle school civics assessment.

Testing blueprints provide teachers with a guide on the type and amount of questions that will be tested for the content area. High stakes testing sets the tone of what should be studied and how it should be taught (Winstead, 2011). The testing blueprint is imperative to understanding what knowledge the test privileges are based on and the standards that are heavily tested.

District level civics curriculum pacing guide. State mandated curricula documents only provide the minimum content of the entire curriculum. In fact, the state curriculum documents suggest that school divisions should incorporate the standards, curriculum framework, and testing blueprint into a broader, locally designed curriculum. Local pacing guides provide insight on how local school districts prioritize state mandated civics standards by explicitly stating the approximate amount of time teachers should devote to particular standards.

District level civics curriculum by unit. Similar to the state mandated curriculum framework, the district expounds on the standards by offering suggestions and resources for curricular implementation by unit. The pacing guide is embedded with this document with suggested timelines to complete each unit. Each unit includes the standards, essential understandings and questions, and learning plan with the skills, suggested learning experiences, key vocabulary and supporting resources. This is the primary document that middle school civics teachers in Carter school district utilized for their instruction.

Teacher-provided artifacts. Teachers were asked to provide evidence of their teacher practices through lesson plans or activities involving civic behaviors, collective civic action, and citizenship. Carefully chosen artifacts can highlight, situate, and provide concrete examples of diverse topics such as learning, instruction, and assessment (Ormrod, 2005). Teacher-provided artifacts on specific civic lessons and activities incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics provide insight on curricular choices and instruction of civics teachers in middle school classrooms.

Semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to garner teachers' voices on their implementation of state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curricula. Each semi-structured interview was fully transcribed by the researcher. The goal of transcribing is to be as true to the conversation as possible, yet pragmatic in dealing with the data (Bazeley, 2013). This provided insight on the interpretations of curricular messages and the implementation of middle school civics curriculum.

Carter school district policy on teaching about controversial issues. According to state law, local school boards can adopt bylaws and regulations for the district. Carter school district issues a policy in 2013 outlining the parameters for teaching about controversial issues. The policy also highlights the importance of teacher impartiality when bringing controversial topics in the classroom. This is critical to understanding the freedoms and pressures middle school civics teachers have to teach controversial topics within Carter school district.

Participants

The participants for the semi-structured interview component of this study included middle school civics teachers within the Carter school district. Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at George Mason University (GMU) and the Carter school district's (CSD) external research accountability office. Once approvals were obtained, an email was sent weekly between late September to the end of December to all middle school teachers currently teaching at least one course of 8th grade Civics and Economics within the school district. Participation in semi-structured interviews was voluntary and coordinated through email communication. Informed consent (Appendix B) was obtained, and small incentives were provided for participants upon completion of the interview process and participant validation.

Teacher participants. Middle school civics teachers within the Carter school district can provide insights on the implementation of curricula surrounding diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. There are 17 teachers in the Carter school district who teach at least one section of 8th grade Civics and Economics course. All middle school civics teachers within the selected school district, teaching Civics and Economics in the 2016-2017 school year were invited to participate in the research study. Ideally, all civics teachers in the district would have been interviewed with the goal of securing at least one teacher from each middle school (see table 2 for population and accountability results of schools within selected school district).

Participants in this research study teach in four different types of school contexts including Title I (a school with high percentages of children from low-income households) public schools, gifted programs, and two different choice public school settings. The varied classroom settings provided insight on civics instruction across demographics and socio economic contexts in the classroom spaces (see Table 3 for a brief description of the school contexts in this study).

Table 3

Brief Descriptions of School Contexts

| School Name | School Focus | Brief Description |
|-------------|----------------|---|
| Dixon | Title I | Traditional public school that receives targeted assistance to support students from low-socio economic households |
| Patterson | Magnet | Choice middle school. Application required for admission to choice school based on a lottery system. Transportation not provided. |
| Taylor | Fundamental | Full time program for students identified as gifted. Transportation not provided. |
| Grant | Gifted Program | Full time program for students identified as gifted. Transportation not provided. |

After multiple recruiting efforts, six semi-structured interviews were obtained and conducted for this study. The six teacher participants represent four

of the eight middle schools in the Carter school district. Demographic data was collected for each teacher participant including race and ethnicity and gender. The teacher participants in this study consisted of four white, one African American and one teacher declined to identify their race and ethnicity and referred to themselves as human (see figure 3). There were four males and two female teacher participants in this study (see figure 4). The teaching experience and education background was also gathered and furthered explained in the following chapter.

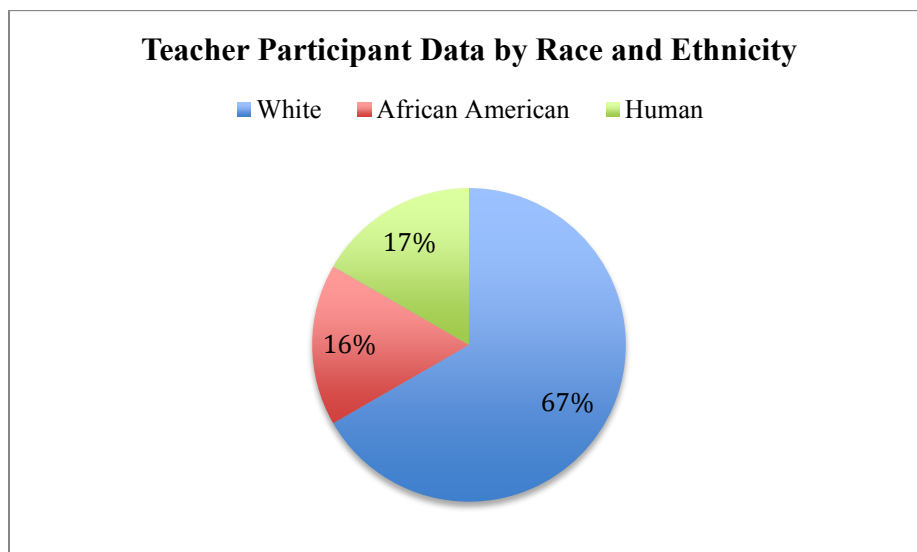


Figure 3. This chart depicts the teacher participant demographic data by race and ethnicity. Human denotes the participant selected term to identify their race and ethnicity.

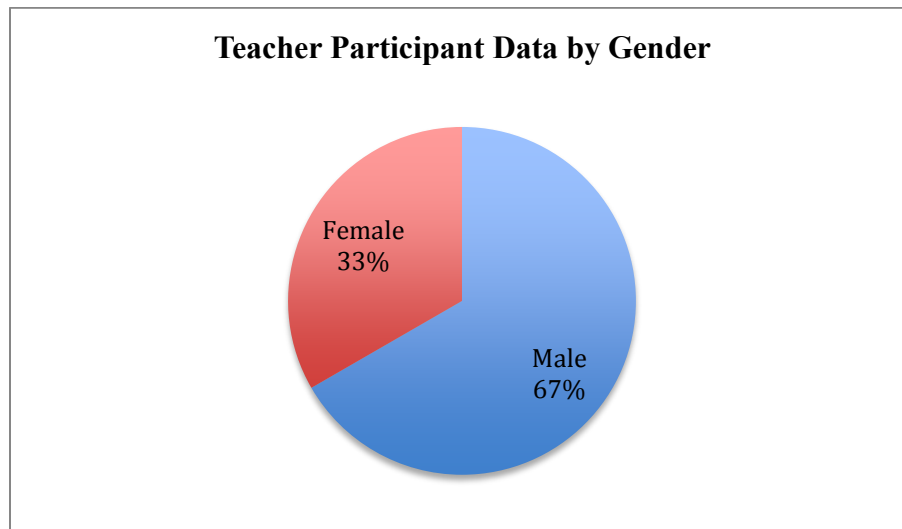


Figure 4. The chart depicts the teacher participant demographic data by gender.

Procedures

The research study included the analysis of one state mandated middle school civics curricula through an ethnographic content approach (ECA). The curricular documents included the state mandated civics standards, curriculum framework, and testing blueprint. The curricular documents that were analyzed for this research study are publically available; therefore, the document analysis component of this study is exempt from the George Mason University Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. Curricular documents were imported into NVivo statistical analysis software, and they were coded using an ethnographic qualitative approach, and then themes were determined to assist in the development of semi-structured interview questions. Organizational categories are useful ways to order gathered data into broad areas or issues (Maxwell, 2013),

and the themes served as the organizational categories for the semi-structured interviews.

The next component of the research study included semi-structured interviews with middle school civics teachers within the Carter school district. First, approval was obtained through a George Mason University IRB protocol (Appendix A), and then the Carter school district external research approval process was facilitated. Permission to conduct semi-structured interviews and collect teacher-provided artifacts were requested through email. Emails were sent to all middle school civics teachers within the Carter school district, once a week, from late September to December of 2016. Interviews were scheduled at a time and location of the participants' choice. The semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) was conducted with six participants representing four of the eight middle schools in Carter school district. Each semi-structured interview was intended to last approximately 35-45 minutes; most averaged 30 to 40 minutes.

Prior to the semi-structured interview, an email including the informed consent form (Appendix B) and a request for a teacher-provided artifacts such as a lesson plan or a description of the lesson or lesson materials/content involving the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics was sent to participants. Artifacts enrich what you hear in interviews by supporting, expanding, and challenging your portrayals and perceptions (Glesne, 2011). Each semi-structured interview was recorded using the computer program *Audacity*, which allows for the creation of audio files directly onto a computer. Each audio

file was given an alias to protect the identity of the participant. *Audacity* audio files were saved in password-protected folders on NVivo and Dropbox, and then deleted from the *Audacity* computer program as an additional layer of security. Participants were given a small incentive upon completion of the interview.

All semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed within 30 days of collection by the researcher. There is value in a researcher transcribing interviews as it builds intimate knowledge of the data (Bazeley, 2013).

Organizational categories based on the research questions, and themes that emerged from document analysis were used to organize the transcription data from semi-structured interviews in NVivo software. NVivo allows researchers to work with a wide range of data (i.e. documents, and visual and audio files in different formats). NVivo was the software management tool for both the document analysis and semi-structured interview components of this research study. The researcher is central to the analysis and interpretation of results found, as opposed to the software used (Wiltshire, 2011). Reflective memos and annotations were also utilized throughout the transcription/interpretation phase of each interview. Finally, participants were invited to validate their interview transcription, and offered an additional small incentive upon completion of the interview process.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis occurred for both components of the research study, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Document analysis was

conducted through an ethnographic content analysis (ECA). Semi-structured interview transcripts were analyzed to understand how teachers are interpreting and implementing the messages from the state and local civics curricula in middle school classrooms.

Document analysis. Ethnographic content analysis (ECA) of state mandated and district-level curricula utilized the tenets of CRT in education as a framework. CRT provided insights on what civic expectations and knowledge is privileged, surrounding the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. ECA is strongly oriented to qualitative data analysis as it involves description, attention to nuances, and openness to insights (Altheide & Schieder, 2012). The initial phase included a search for key words or phrases involving diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics throughout curriculum documents. The second phase delved deeper by searching for examples of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in multiple curriculum documents. Themes were developed based on the coding of the documents. Themes are similar codes that are aggregated together to form major ideas (Creswell, 2008). The themes that emerge from this process were used to create organizational categories (i.e. diversity, multiple perspectives etc.) for semi-structured interviews and frame questions for the interview protocol. The analysis of the documents provided insights on the curricular messages of state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curricula.

Semi-structured interviews. In the semi-structured interview protocol, questions were grouped into the organizational categories based on themes that emerged throughout the document analysis. The categories were intentional for organizational purposes, yet were flexible. A similar coding process with curricular documents occurred with semi-structured transcript data, as the document analysis was integral in the organizing of broad categories. The initial coding phase of the semi-structured transcription data were open to allow for emergent themes. Initial coding creates a starting point to provide the researcher analytic leads for further explanation (Saldana, 2015). The second cycle of coding involved making sense of the first cycle of codes. The first cycle of codes are reorganized and reconfigured to eventually develop a smaller and more select list of broader categories, themes, concepts, and/or assertions (Saldana, 2015). From the initial coding, categories or themes were developed based on the data, using a categorical coding matrix. Maxwell (2013) suggests that a tool for displaying and further developing the results of a categorizing analysis of your data is a matrix that is structured in terms of your research questions, categories or themes, and the data that address or support these themes. This was critical to draw connections between the coding from the document analysis of curricular documents, transcriptions of interviews, and teacher-provided artifacts.

Document Analysis of Teacher-Provided Artifacts. In addition, critical analysis of teacher-provided artifacts provided a more complete picture of the instructional practices in middle school civics classrooms. The understanding of a

phenomenon grows as you make use of the documents that are a part of the participants' lives (Glesne, 2011). In addition, teacher-provided artifacts enhance depth and accuracy of evidence gathered through triangulation. Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals with other sources of data (Creswell, 2008). Themes from both the document analysis of curricular documents, and semi-structured interview transcripts were compared and contrasted to have a more complete picture of the type of instruction that is occurring in middle school civics classrooms.

Validity

Maxwell (2013) states that although methods and procedures do not guarantee validity, they are nonetheless essential in the process of ruling out validity threats, and increasing the credibility of the conclusions. To increase the trustworthiness of this research study, the procedures described below were employed to address validity threats:

Analytic memos and dialogic journals. Analytic memos are an uncensored and permissibly messy opportunity to let thoughts flow and ideas emerge (Saldana, 2015). This served as a tool to generate codes and categories. Memos chronicle the researcher's thinking that is occurring during the data analysis process. Dialogic journals are a form of memoing that extend to the researcher's reactions, thoughts, or questions about a quote derived from the data that prompt critical reflection. Dialogic reflection is often situated in action research (Wong, 2005) and there is value in dialogic journaling for qualitative

research purposes. Ward and McCotter (2004) suggest that dialogic reflection involves a focus on the views of others and the process of learning. Given the positionality of the researcher, dialogic journals were critical as a space to react to the data and also parcel out personal bias in the interpretation phase of data analysis.

Participant validation. Participant validation, also known as member checking, is a process in which the research asks the participants in the study to check the accuracy of the accounts (Creswell, 2008). In capturing the instructional practices in middle school civics classrooms, it was critical that the voices of the participants of the study are not misrepresented. This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misrepresenting the meaning of what participants say or do, and the perspectives they have on what is going on as well as being an important way of identifying biases and misunderstandings (Maxwell, 2013). Transcriptions of teacher-provided documents were sent to participants to verify the accuracy of the words and ideas obtained during the semi-structured interviews; participants validated five of the six interviews conducted.

Triangulation. The use of teacher-provided documents in conjunction with semi-structured interviews allowed for triangulation of the data obtained for this research study. Triangulation involves the collecting of information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods (Maxwell, 2013). Teacher-provided artifacts assisted in corroborating the evidence gathered in the semi-structured interviews with middle school civics teacher in the Carter

school district. The study included middle school civics teachers who work in varied classroom settings, with different backgrounds and influences. The use of two methodological approaches, document analysis and semi-structured interviews, provides a more complex picture of the instructional practices of civics teachers regarding the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

Summary

This ethnographic qualitative study included both document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Document analysis provided the context and in-depth understanding of the knowledge that is privileged in state and district-level curricular documents. Semi-structured interviews garnered the voices of middle school civics teachers coupled with teacher provided artifacts to highlight their instructional practices related to discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. This shed light on how the curricular messages of state mandated and district-level curricula are interpreted and implemented in the classroom. This study was designed to extend previous research in the field by analyzing messages in state mandated and locally designed curricula, and investigated if and how curricular messages are interpreted and implemented by middle school civics teachers, regarding discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. The next chapter will present the findings of this study.

Chapter Four

The purpose of the study was to extend the previous research in the field by analyzing messages in a state mandated and locally designed curricula. In addition, this study investigated if and how curricular messages are interpreted and implemented by middle school civics teachers, regarding discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. The study placed a middle school, state and local civics curriculum and teachers' voices in the center of the analysis. This study revealed the curricular choices of six middle school civics teachers within Carter School district involving discussions incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. This chapter presents the findings of the present study guided by the following research questions:

1. How are discussions incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a state mandated middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship?
 - 1a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a district-level middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship?

2. If and how do teachers define controversy, and which diverse and/or controversial topics do they decide to incorporate into the middle school civics curriculum?
 - 2a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics incorporated into teachers' practices through the middle school civics curriculum? If not, why not?
3. How does the demographic composition of the classroom shape the curricular choices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms?

The findings of this research study are divided into two sections; the first section includes document analysis of state level and Carter school district middle school civics curriculum documents, the second section presents the voices of six 8th grade civics teachers from Carter School District to highlight their beliefs and teacher practices on incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. Although, the sections are divided in two for organizational purposes components of the document analysis will be embedded throughout both sections.

Document Analysis

Analyzing the messages embedded in state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics is a cornerstone to this study. It is critical to understanding the curricular opportunities middle school teachers may have to

incorporate discussions of controversial topics. Document analysis was employed to answer the research questions 1 and 1a:

1. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a state mandated middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship??

- 1a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a district level middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship?

In addition, document analysis was also utilized to answer question 2a:

- 2a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics incorporated into teacher practice through the middle school civics curriculum? If not, why not?

Document analysis of teacher provided artifacts coupled with responses from semi-structured interviews with six middle school civics teachers in Carter school district elucidate the instructional practices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

Both the state and Carter school district curricular documents were analyzed through the five tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education framework outlined by (Solórzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005; Yosso, 2005). The five tenets are the 1) centrality of race and racism, 2) the challenge to dominant ideology, 3) a commitment to social justice, 4) a centrality of experiential knowledge and 5) the interdisciplinary perspective. First, the state

level middle school civics curricula were examined then the Carter school district curricula using the five tenets of CRT (see table 4 for a list of state and Carter school district curricular documents that were analyzed in this study). As Tyson (2003) states using CRT as a framework in the critical examination of civic education allows the existing gaps in the national and local curriculum standards to become more visible.

Table 4

List of Middle School Civics Curriculum

| Level | Curriculum Documents | Brief Description |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| State Mandated | 10 Civics Standards | There are 10 main civics standards, each defined by multiple subordinate standards |
| | Civics Curriculum Framework | The curriculum framework amplifies the standards by defining the content understandings, knowledge and skills that are measured by standardized assessments |
| | Testing Blueprint for Civics & Economics Standardized Assessment | Testing blueprints provide teachers with a guide on the type and amount of questions on that will be tested for each standard |
| Carter School District (CSD) | Policy on Teaching Controversial Issues | Policy document adopted in bylaws adopted by the Carter city school board outlining the parameters for teaching controversial issues |
| | CSD Pacing Guide | Pacing guide state the amount of time teachers should devote to particular standards |
| | CSD Civic & Economics Curriculum by Unit | Each unit includes the standards, essential understandings and questions, and learning plan with the skills, suggested learning experiences, key vocabulary and supporting resources |

Semi-Structured Teacher Interviews

Six 8th grade civics teachers were interviewed from Carter school district for this study. The teachers represent four of the eight middle schools in Carter school district and teach in a variety of contexts from Title I, gifted to magnet school settings. Semi-structured interviews were used to answer the following research questions:

2. If and how do teachers define controversy and which diverse and/or controversial topics do they decide to incorporate into the middle school civics curriculum?
 - 2a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics incorporated into teacher practice through the middle school civics curriculum? If not, why not?
3. How does the demographic composition of the classroom shape the curricular choices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms?

The teachers were asked to share their beliefs and teaching practices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. Teachers also described a teacher artifact to highlight an instructional strategy, document or media they utilized in a lesson involving discussions with diverse viewpoints

and/or controversial topics in a 8th grade civics classroom. In addition, teacher participants provided their insights on curriculum and recommendations to policy makers. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed through sense-making theory framework (Datnow & Park, 2009) to understand how teachers are navigating the policy expectations embedded in a middle school civics curriculum and implemented in the classroom. These findings are presented in the second section this chapter.

Section I: Document Analysis of Middle School Civics Curricula

Findings for research question 1. How are discussions incorporating diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a state mandated middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship? This study analyzed three state mandated middle school curricular documents for civics including the state standards, curriculum framework and the testing blueprint. The state standards provide a basic outline of the curricular expectations for middle school civics instruction. The curriculum framework expounds upon the standards by providing detailed suggestions for curricular implementation including essential understandings, essential questions and potential experiences teachers could include in their classrooms. Finally, the testing blueprint identifies the number of questions that appear on the state standardized test for middle school civics and economics by standard. This information was pivotal in understanding what standards are prioritized, as assessments often dictate how instruction is implemented.

The standards don't explicitly state to teach controversial topics or topics with diverse viewpoints therefore standards were identified that could potentially serve as opportunities to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics (see table 5 for a list of identified standards that involve discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics).

Table 5

Potential State Standards for Discussions of Controversial Topics

| Standard | Standard Description |
|----------|--|
| CE. 1b | Analyzing how political and economic trends influence public policy, using demographic information and other data sources |
| CE. 1d | Determining the accuracy and validity of information by separating fact from opinion and recognizing bias |
| CE. 1e | Constructing informed, evidence-based arguments from multiple sources |
| CE. 1i | Applying civic virtue and democratic principles to make collaborative decisions |
| CE. 1j | Defending conclusions orally and in writing to a wide range of audiences, using evidence from sources |
| CE. 2a | Explaining the fundamental principles of government: consent of the governed, limited government, rule of law, democracy and representative government |
| CE. 3d | Examining the responsibilities of citizenship, including registering and voting, communicating with government officials, participating in political campaigns, keeping informed about current issues and respecting |

| | |
|---------|--|
| | differing opinions in a diverse society |
| CE. 3e | Evaluating how civic and social duties address community needs and serve the public good |
| CE. 5c | Analyzing campaigns for elective office, with an emphasis on the role of media |
| CE. 10a | Examining the impact of media on public opinion and public policy |

The curriculum framework exemplifies the ten main civics standards and provides more information on the essential knowledge, understandings and potential learning experiences each standard (see table 6 for examples of curricular opportunities outlined in the curriculum framework for middle school civics). The essential understandings suggest the minimum content students should learn from each standard. The potential learning opportunities can guide instructional activities teachers could incorporate into their civics classrooms. The potential learning opportunities is not an exhaustive list and as stated in the beginning of the framework, localities should modify the curriculum to meet the needs of their community. This is an important document to analyze, as this is the primary document that includes the standards, essential knowledge and understanding and potential learning opportunities.

Table 6

Examples of Essential Understandings and Learning Experiences

| Standard | Example of Essential Understandings | Example of Potential Learning Experiences |
|----------|--|---|
| CE. 1b | Demographic information is often used by governments and businesses in the development of policies and decisions | Use data to determine how a current issue (e.g. immigration, civil rights) has changed over time and resulted in public policy actions |
| CE. 1d | It is critical to determine the accuracy and validity of information and recognize bias to draw informed conclusions, solve problems and make informed decisions | Select an event or issue. Explore multiple sources that report the same event or issue. Examine the information to determine the accuracy and validity of the sources |
| CE. 1e | Analyzing various types of sources with multiple points of view produces an understanding of ideas, concepts and actions of individuals and groups | Select an issue. Gather information from a variety of sources to argue the costs and benefits of a local, state, national or international issue |
| CE. 1i | Civic virtue is the cultivation of habits of personal living that are viewed as important for the success of the community. | Promote collaboration with others both inside and outside the classroom. Examples of collaboration may include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socratic Seminar • Two way journaling • Digital media |
| CE. 1j | Students present, listen critically, and provide evidence to support opinions by comparing and contrasting viewpoints etc. | Investigate a school issue that has a community impact. Prepare a brief speech to deliver and offer possible solutions |

| | | |
|---------|--|---|
| CE. 2a | Fundamental political principles define and shape American constitutional government | Definitions provided for consent of the governed, limited government, rule of law, democracy and representative government |
| CE. 3d | A basic responsibility of citizenship is to contribute to the common good | Civic responsibilities are fulfilled by choice; they are voluntary. Responsibilities of citizens include keeping informed regarding current issues, respecting others' right to an equal voice in government |
| CE. 3e | A democratic society requires the active participation of its citizens | Express concern about the welfare of the community as a whole |
| CE. 5c | The media play an important role in the political process | <p>Mass media roles in elections</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying candidates • Emphasizing selected issues • Writing editorials, publishing op-ed pieces, posting to social media/blogs • Broadcasting different points of view |
| CE. 10a | The media inform policymakers and influence public policy | <p>Ways the media play an important role in setting the public agenda</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing public attention on selected issue • Offering a forum in which opposing viewpoints are communicated • Holding government officials accountable |

Discussion is not a tested area on the standardized multiple choice test for middle school civics. However, standards such as citizenship, the constitution and structures of American government are, therefore the number of tested questions in an area provide a sense of the emphasis teachers may place on particular standards (see table 7 for the number of test questions in the reporting categories of the identified standards that could potentially be used to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

Table 7

Testing Blueprint for Middle School Civics Standardized Test

| Reporting Category | Identified Standard(s) for Discussions with Diverse Viewpoints and/or Controversial Topics | Number of Test Items within Each Reporting Category |
|--|--|---|
| | CE. 1b, d, e, i, j | Not tested on the standardized test |
| Principles of Government and Citizenship | CE. 2a, 3d, 3e | 7 |
| Political and Government Process | CE. 5c | 10 |
| Structure of American Government | CE. 10a | 9 |

The standards and curriculum framework were then analyzed and the findings organized by the five tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education while the testing blueprint provides context for what is prioritized in the curriculum.

Centrality of race and racism. Racism is ordinary not aberrational, the usual way society does business (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The pervasiveness of race and racism is so entrenched in civic education that it is difficult to recognize. Standards identify the principles of citizenship that perpetuate of civic norms and values that can be dismissive of the historical experiences of people of color. The state mandated standards and curriculum framework for middle school civics provide a glimpse into the nuanced ways in which curriculum preserve civic ideals.

The state mandated standards begin with outlining the skills that demonstrate “responsible citizenship”. The term “responsible citizenship” in itself is problematic. One of the ways in which responsible citizenship is demonstrated is through the concept of civic virtue; standard CE 1i states that applying civic virtue and democratic principles are necessary to make collaborative decisions. It is difficult to determine the meaning of “civic virtue” by simply reading the standards. However, the curriculum framework is designed to expound on the standards. The explanation of civic virtue is outlined in the curriculum framework CE 1i as the cultivation of habits of personal living that are viewed as important for the success of the community. The description of civic virtue is not only ambiguous but also problematic. The definition of civic virtue raises a few

questions. Who determines the meaning of success for the community? Whose views and habits are privileged, valued or suppressed within a community? These questions highlight the underlying ways in which vague generalizations such as “civic virtue” are laced with themes of power. Understanding who defines civic virtue in for communities should be questioned. As educators teach civic virtue whose ideals are being perpetuated? The state cites in the introduction of the curriculum framework that the vagueness of some concepts is intentional to provide localities with the flexibility to be implement instruction in nuanced ways. However, it is a missed opportunity not to address the issue of power embedded in concepts such as “civic virtue.” For many people of color, often have to engage in civil disobedience and operate outside of defined terms of civic virtue to obtain equal rights. Clark, Vontz & Barikmo (2008) state historically, civil disobedience has been an effective method of influencing but also ameliorating unjust laws. Yet, that is not mentioned as a skill for “responsible citizenship” and diminishes the power of citizens to challenge injustice. The ambiguity of this term could perpetuate a racialized perspective of what “civic virtue” is that could be counterproductive to the perspectives of civic virtue defined by people of color.

Banks (2008) suggests that absent from these minimal definitions of citizen and citizenship is the rich discussions of citizenship in democratic, multicultural societies. Ideals of citizenship are foundational elements of civics curriculum. Definitions of citizenship and civic duties are racialized and tend to

be dismissive of the experiences of people of color especially in reference to how they had to struggle to obtain equal citizenship. For example, the state curriculum standard CE 3d prompts students to examine the responsibilities of citizenship by registering and voting, communicating with government officials, participating in political campaigns, keeping informed about current issues and respecting differing opinions in a diverse society. At first glance, the examples provided that illuminate responsible citizenship appears to be impartial. Everyone is taught to register and vote. Yet, the United States has a deplorable history of impeding the voting rights of people of color. In more recent history, there are currently measures imposing voter restrictions that disproportionately impact people of color. There are systemic barriers to civic engagement for many people of color in this country. Reducing responsible citizenship to registering and voting negates the institutional barriers for people of color who have and are denied that right.

Another term that is mentioned often when teaching democracy is the concept of the “common good.” The curriculum framework defines this standard in CE 3d as a basic responsibility of citizenship is to contribute to the common good. Common good means the advantage or benefit for all in a society or group. At the founding of this country, the ideals or common good that benefitted society was rooted in the oppression of people of color. Who defines the common good? Whose interest does the common good serve? As a citizen, is contributing to ideals that systemically oppress others responsible? The concept of the “common good” sounds good in theory but has failed in the practical sense as a group or

individuals are often left out. In regards to people of color, Bell (1980) describes this as interest convergence “The interests of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites.” In teaching students the responsibility of citizenship, it is important that words such as “common good” are to be questioned as to ensure that ideals rooted in oppression are not continued.

The centrality of race and racism is so commonplace that it is difficult to recognize. It appears harmless and therefore can be potentially dangerous. Of course we want students to have civic virtue and work towards the common good. But what do those words really mean? Whose idea of civic virtue and common good are taught in classrooms? It is also imperative for students understand the imperfect society in which we all live and critically analyze the political ideologies of citizenship that are being taught. Therefore, space to challenge the dominant ideology in a middle school civics curriculum is important. The next tenet will explore the opportunities in the state middle school civics curriculum to challenge the dominant ideology.

Challenge to dominant ideology. Understanding the pervasiveness of race and racism is central in the analysis of a middle school civics curriculum. Parker (2006) suggests that citizenship is not only the command of privileged groups, however, but also of marginalized groups who struggle for access to power. Challenging dominant ideologies in civics education is not only necessary but also critical to the development of citizenship with young adolescents. There are a

few instances in the standards and curriculum framework that could be utilized as opportunities to challenge dominant ideologies. Standard CE 1i involving civic virtue, suggests the promotion of collaboration with others inside and outside of the classroom by using Socratic seminar, two way journaling and digital media. These examples provide a chance for students to engage with strategies that allow them to grapple with the issues and other perspectives.

Tools such as Socratic seminar focus on the process of negotiation to reach a shared understanding through the exchange of ideas. These perspective-based discussions are typically grounded in a shared text or resource and could serve as a space for students to wrestle with divergent viewpoints. At a minimum the curriculum framework advocates for Socratic seminar as a potential teaching opportunity that could be utilized in classrooms to challenge perspectives and engage in social issues. However, that is also dependent on the teacher, the resources utilized and the topics selected for discussions. In order to challenge a dominant ideology you have to first recognize that it is one. Therein lies the challenge. Critically analyzing the source of materials is a way to begin to recognize ideology. Standard CE 1d suggests students learn to determine the accuracy and validity of information by separating fact from opinion and recognizing bias. Detecting bias is a crucial skill for adolescents to cultivate. This provides another chance for students to challenge and question especially through discussion.

These standards provide an opportunity that could be used in powerful ways to challenge dominant notions of civic values, or citizenship. However, there is no way to truly know if that is the intended purpose of these standards. It would depend on the teacher, the materials they select and how they chose to implement these standards.

Commitment to social justice. The commitment to social justice through a CRT lens involves challenging systems of oppression with the ultimate goal of eradicating racism. There are no specific instances in which the state mandated curricula that explicitly confront racism and oppression. The essential understanding of standard CE 3d highlights an acknowledgement of inequity by stating that civic responsibilities are fulfilled by choice; they are voluntary. Responsibilities of citizens include keeping informed regarding current issues, respecting others' right to an equal voice in government. It recognizes inequity but doesn't advocate for any action to change it.

There are general themes of service to your community present in the state mandated middle school civics curriculum. Community service though important is not social justice. Standard CE 3e states that a democratic society requires the active participation of its citizens and is further explained in the curriculum framework as the ability to express concern about the welfare of the community as a whole. This opportunity involves the use of expression, which could include discussions of issues that challenge societal ills. The curriculum also states in CE 3e evaluating how civic and social duties address community needs and serve the

public good. Service to community is a popular cornerstone in civics education. Yet, the evaluation of community needs is critical to challenging social norms. On the one hand, service to the public good is questionable. The questions that arise are whose public good? Who defines that? What if the public good is rooted in the oppression of others? Though there are potential opportunities, there is no real sense of a commitment to social justice that is rooted in a CRT lens of dismantling racialized systems in the state mandated middle school curricula.

Experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge centers the narratives of people of color and to examine the extent to which and how experiences of people of color are recognized and/or silenced in the curriculum. The incorporation of multiple perspectives and diverse source materials are mentioned a few times in the state mandated curriculum. For example, standard CE 1b states and is further explained in the curriculum framework as the use of data to determine how a current issue (e.g. immigration, civil rights) has changed over time and resulted in public policy actions. The use of demographic data can preserve or disrupt narratives involving issues such as race, immigration and civil rights. It depends on the demographic data that is used and how it is being analyzed. There are other instances where multiple sources and perspectives are outlined in the curriculum. CE 1e states constructing informed, evidence-based arguments from multiple sources and CE 1j defending conclusions orally and in writing to a wide range of audiences, using evidence from sources. Also, the role of media is important to analyze when gathering sources. In standard CE 10a highlights the ways in which

the media sets the public agenda by focusing attention on a selected issue or by offering forums where opposing viewpoints are communicated.

The clearest directive from the standards is given in CE 1e, in which students are expected to analyze various types of sources with multiple points of view produces an understanding of ideas, concepts and actions of individuals and groups. The potential learning experience for CE 1e is for students to select an event or issue, explore multiple sources that report the same event or issue and examine the information to determine the accuracy and validity of the sources. It is evident that the standards recognize the need for students to understand, analyze and evaluate multiple sources and perspectives. However, it is unclear what narratives are centered in classrooms, source material or discussions.

Interdisciplinary perspective. The interdisciplinary perspective of CRT asserts that the analysis of race and racism must be placed in both a contemporary and historical context using interdisciplinary methods (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Race or racism is not directly stated in the state mandated middle school civics standards. Standard CE 1b does employ the historical perspective by explicitly advocating for the use data to determine how a current issue (e.g. immigration, civil rights) has changed over time and resulted in public policy actions. Race and racism is central to immigration and the civil rights movement. The inclusion of these two specific examples demonstrates promise but otherwise there is an inherent silence embedded in the state mandated standards.

The interdisciplinary approach as a tenet of CRT is not limited to historical perspectives. Howard and Navarro (2016) suggest that CRT scholarship should reflect multiple perspectives, as the world is multidimensional. In standard CE 10a the curriculum framework calls for the analysis of the ways in which the media set the public agenda, which is an example of critical media analysis. There is a lack of multicultural perspective in the curricula as diverse experiences are invisible. In addition, there is no mention of capturing the lived experiences and voices of citizens to describe their civic identities and practices. This sociological perspective could be a powerful tool to value and center the knowledge of individuals not represented in the curriculum. Overall, the interdisciplinary perspectives incorporated in the state mandated civic standards are narrow.

Summary of findings for research question 1. There are ten civic standards that could potentially incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. All of the standards, with the exception of CE 10a that focused on the role of media are not tested on the state standardized test. Being that discussion, analysis and understanding multiple perspectives are not tested this can either provide teachers with some flexibility or could constrain them to only teaching the standards that are tested. Voices were garnered in research question 2 and 2a to capture the thoughts and instructional practices involving incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms.

The five tenets of CRT provide a framework to expose the silencing of the experiences of people of color in the state mandated middle school civics curricula. Civic ideals such as responsible citizenship and civic virtue are described as registering, voting and applying democratic principles to make collaborative decisions. However, these examples dismiss of the plight of people of color to obtain the right to vote and the ongoing struggle of voter suppression. There is no mention of civil disobedience, which for people of color has been historically employed to gain equal rights. By not including the ways in which people of color have struggled to access citizenship devalues their civic actions and narratives. There is one mention of civil rights and immigration however race and racism is not explicitly stated. It is evident that local school districts and teachers are left to interpret the ambiguity of the civic norms, ideals and values in the state standards. Tyson (2003) suggests that democratic values when juxtaposed with explicitly challenging injustices and self conscious activism as civic participation can become the cornerstone of students' examination of privilege and power. The state mandated middle school civics standards do not appear to offer such opportunities for students to engage in this examination of privilege and power.

The state mandated curricula serves as a policy directive to local school districts to further develop the curriculum that is taught in middle school civics classrooms. To some extent the state mandated civics curriculum were designed to be vague. However, it does not offer opportunities to engage in the analysis of

power. The following section will explore the findings of research question 1a, which analyzes the potential opportunities to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics through curricula from Carter school district.

Findings for research question 1a. It is apparent that the state mandated middle school civics curricula are vague and to some extent it was designed to be. The state curriculum serves as a guide for the minimum content that should be covered and localities are tasked with tailoring the curriculum to their school districts. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics framed in a district level middle school civics curriculum as a skill for citizenship? This study analyzed a policy memorandum on teaching controversial topics, pacing guide and unit plans from Carter school district. The policy outlines guidelines for teaching controversial topics; the pacing guide delineates the timeline for each standard by unit, which provides a sense of which standards are prioritized in the school district. The unit plans defines the standards, essential understanding and questions in addition to providing suggested learning opportunity and resources for teachers to incorporate in their classrooms. These curriculum documents provide more insight on the explicit curricular messages teachers received in Carter school district (see table 4 for the list and brief description of Carter school district curriculum documents). The Carter school district expounds on the state mandated curriculum that were analyzed through the five tenets of CRT. Therefore, the findings for the Carter school district

curriculum are organized by document and the pacing guide provides context for what is prioritized in the curriculum.

Teaching controversial issues policy. There is a memorandum on teaching controversial issues in the policy manual for Carter school district that was adopted in 2013. The policy recognizes the need to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics into the curriculum and offers specific guidelines for teachers when broaching such topics in classrooms. The guidelines listed in the policy are below:

Sensitive or controversial issues may be (1) any topic that society is in the process of debating; (2) any topic for which more than one position is being supported; or (3) any issue that may arouse strong emotions. These issues may be part of the instructional program only when they are relevant to the subject being taught and only after consideration has been given to the age and maturity of students. No individual may impose personal views on students and a balance must be maintained through the presentation of all sides of an issue.

There is space for teachers to incorporate controversial topics in the classroom provided that they remain impartial, present multiple perspectives, and connect it to the curriculum being taught. Yet, there may also be hurdles for including potential administrative pressures, impartiality and bias, and defining appropriateness for students. These hurdles could impede controversial topics from filtering in the classroom. This policy goes on to state the following:

Before introducing materials to the class, the teacher must discuss with the building administrator those materials that the teacher believes might contain potentially objectionable language, concepts or graphics. The building administrator will rule on the appropriateness of these materials and concepts.

In times like today, there is no shortage of controversial issues being discussed in the media. This policy statement can be both empowering and also constraining therefore it is imperative to understand how teachers navigate this policy.

Teachers can use this to embrace controversial topics and incorporate them in a balanced age appropriate manner for students or could avoid them all together due to potential systemic pressures. The voices of civics teachers are vital to understand if and how they navigate this policy, potential administrative pressures and balance incorporating controversial topics in the middle school civics classrooms. The voices of six teachers from this school district are explained in the second section of this study.

Carter school district pacing guide. The pacing guide outlines the suggested amount of time that should be spent on each standard for four nine-week quarters (see table 8 for the amount of time each standard is allotted). Standards CE 1b-j focus on the essential skills discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics such as analyzing a variety of sources, multiple perspectives and discussion. Standards CE 1b-j appear with an asterisk in eight weeks of the first, second, third marking periods and three weeks of the

fourth marking period. The asterisk denotes that the standards are introduced in the first quarter and are assessed based on content links to the curriculum. It is an expectation that these skills are embedded throughout the curriculum, which shows a district level commitment to standards CE 1b-j. Even though these standards are not tested on the statewide standardized assessment it appears Carter school district values them as important skills for citizenship at the middle school level.

The other standards identified in this study that could be used to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics and are tested on the standardized assessment are CE 2a, CE 3d-e, CE 5c and 10 a. Standard 2a focuses on the fundamental principles of government and standard 3d-e outline the responsibilities of citizenship and service to community needs. Standard CE 5c analyzes political campaigns and the role of media along with CE 10a. Standard CE 2a is allotted two weeks, standards CE 3d-e are designated three weeks and standard 5c is assigned with two weeks. All of those standards are taught in the first nine-week marking period. Standard 10a is also allotted two weeks but is taught in the third nine-week marking period. There are other standards taught during that time period the pacing could be a potential barrier to engaging in discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics on a regular basis in middle school classrooms.

Table 8

Time Allotted for Each Standard in CSD Pacing Guide

| Standard | Total Time Allotted | Specific Marking Period |
|--|---------------------|---|
| CE 1b-j Essential skills for discussion and exploring multiple perspectives | 27* weeks | 1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd and 4 th |
| CE 2a Fundamental principles of government | 2 weeks | 1 st |
| CE 3d-e Responsibilities of citizenship, civic duty and service to community | 3 weeks | 1 st |
| CE 5c Political process and role of media | 2 weeks | 1 st |
| CE 10a The role of the media | 2 weeks | 3 rd |

Note. * Denotes the opportunity to incorporate these skills when it connects to the content it does not mean that these skills are integrated daily.

Unit plans by standard. Unit plans provide specific information the implementation of the standard including essential skills, questions, suggested learning opportunities and resources. Similar to the state mandated curriculum framework, Carter school district unit plans provide insight on the direct messages teachers received about the implementation of curricula. Standards CE 1b-j are skills that are designed to be embedded throughout the curriculum and do not appear explicitly in the unit plans.

Standard CE 2a is taught in unit two within the first eight weeks. The enduring understanding of standard CE 2a is that the fundamental political

principles define and shape American constitutional government (see table 9 for the fundamental political principles).

Table 9

Political Principles of American Constitutional Government

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Consent of the governed | The people are the source of any and all governmental power. |
| Limited government | Government is not all-powerful and may do only those things the people have given it the power to do |
| Rule of law | The government and those who govern are bound by the law, as are those who are governed. |
| Democracy | In a democratic system of government, the people rule. |
| Representative government | In a representative system of government, the people elect public officeholders to make laws and conduct government on the people's behalf. |

The suggested learning opportunities involve matching definitions and drawing illustrations of the political principles. The resources for this standard include textbook, workbook and review games. Yet, discussion could also be a powerful tool to grapple with the ideals of democracy, power and equity. However, that is not mentioned explicitly in the unit plan but perhaps this is a place where

standards 1b-j would be beneficial as it applies the skills of multiple perspectives to content.

Standard CE 3d and 3e concentrate on the responsibilities of citizenship and service to the community. The enduring understanding and essential understanding for these two standards are in unit one and expected to be implemented within the first nine weeks of school (see table 10 for list of standards on responsibilities of citizenship and community service).

Table 10

Standards on Responsibility of Citizenship & Community Service

| Standard | Enduring Understanding | Essential Questions |
|----------|--|--|
| CE 3d | A basic responsibility of citizenship is to contribute to the common good. | What are the ways individuals demonstrate responsible citizenship? |
| CE 3e | A democratic society requires the active participation of its citizens. | In what ways do citizens participate in community service? |

Unfortunately, outside of the essential questions and the enduring understanding there is no further directive, message or suggested learning experience for these standards. As previously discussed, the term responsible citizenship is vague and problematic. The Carter school district curriculum doesn't further explain beyond

what is stated in the state mandated civics curriculum. Perhaps, this is an opportunity for teacher autonomy to co-construct meaning with students on citizenship, common good and service. There is a content connection to language arts mentioned in the unit plan that suggests for students to read books about immigrant experiences. This is an opportunity to value experiential knowledge, a tenet of CRT, by having students situate the voices of immigrants as they are learning about citizenship in unit one.

Standard CE 5c involves the political process by analyzing campaigns for elected office with an emphasis on the role of the media and is in unit three of the curriculum occurring in the first nine week marking period. The essential questions of CE 5c include how do voters make informed choices in elections? How does the media play a role in the political process? The enduring understanding states that voters evaluate information presented in political campaigns to make reasoned choices among candidates. This evaluative process is an opportunity for discussion of diverse viewpoints by analyzing political candidates in an election. This standard integrates CE 1b-j by explicitly stating to teach the following skills of separating fact from opinion, detecting bias, evaluating sources and identifying propaganda. In addition, the suggested learning opportunities involve the analysis of political cartoons, evaluation of campaign literature and discussion. This is the first time discussion is mentioned as an instructional tool to meet a content objective in the unit plans of Carter school district. The topic suggested is to have students discuss what candidates use

money for and research how much money was spent by candidates. Initially, the discussion topic appears to be more of a brainstorm prior to research. However, campaign finance is a controversial issue could bolster a discussion. For standard CE 5c on the role of media and the political process, teachers are directed to use media outlets such as YouTube and Teacher Tube to facilitate classroom discussions. The evaluation of media and campaigns provides an opportunity for students to grapple with diverse viewpoints and controversial topics that may arise as a result of media coverage and political platforms.

Discussion is mentioned three additional times in the Carter school district unit plans. For standard 5e, which focuses on the requirements for voter registration there is discussion stated with no context. Teachers could incorporate a discussion on the history of voter registration and voter suppression that disproportionately impact people of color. In unit five on local governance discussion is described as a tool to discuss the ways in which the media impacts local issues. In unit seven on the federal and state court process discussion is identified as a means to deliberate the ways due process relates to the actions of national, state and local government. These curricular directives offer discussion as a tool for authentic engagement around standards.

Summary of findings for research question 1a. Though not robust, there are four references to discussion in the Carter school district, much more than the state mandated middle school civics curriculum. Both the middle school curricular documents from the state and Carter school district appear to recognize

discussion as an instructional tool to enhance the curriculum. Discussion is mentioned more in the Carter school district curriculum than in the state mandated documents. Many of the standards are written in a way that a teacher could incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics into the content expectations beyond where explicitly stated. Document analysis provides the context for the constraints and opportunities provided in the state and local curriculum for teachers to engage in controversial topics. However, the voices of teachers are critical to understanding if and how they are navigating the curricular messages and utilizing discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms.

Section II: Teacher Voices on Teaching Controversial Topics

Findings for research question 2. If and how do teachers define controversy and which diverse and/or controversial topics do they decide to incorporate into the middle school civics curriculum? This study highlights the voices of six middle school civics teachers in Carter school district through semi-structured interviews. The profiles of the teacher participants in this study include their race and ethnicity, gender, teaching experience and educational background. All of the participants in this study are mid-career or veteran teachers with backgrounds in history and political science.

Dominic. Dominic is a male in his fourteenth year of teaching middle school civics and economics. Dominic identified his race and ethnicity as human. He holds a degree in history.

Mack. Mack is a white male in his eighth year of teaching social studies with five years experience in teaching middle school civics and economics. He holds a degree in history.

Jess. Jess is a white female currently in her fourth year of teaching middle school civics and economics. She holds a degree in political science.

Eli. Eli is an African-American male in his twenty-third year in teaching social studies. Eli has approximately ten years of experience in teaching middle school civics and economics. He holds a degree in political science.

Paul. Paul is a white male in his eighteenth year of teaching social studies. He has approximately ten years of teaching middle school civics and economics. He has a background in English and history.

Taylor. Taylor is a white female in currently in her eighteenth year of teaching social studies. She has approximately fourteen years of experience in teaching middle school civics and economics. She holds a degree in history. Teacher provided artifacts were also gathered to illuminate their instructional practices for incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

Let's go there: Incorporating controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms. Teacher voices are pivotal to this study as they shed light on their thoughts on bringing controversial topics into the classroom and how they define controversy for their students. In addition, the insight of the six teachers in Carter

school district provide insight on the benefits and challenges of incorporating controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms.

Discussion is an instructional practice that is mentioned four times in the Carter school district middle school civics curriculum. All six middle school civics teachers in Carter school district incorporate discussion into their classroom. Eli is an African American male teacher with twenty-three years of teaching experience in the district. He stated, “Personally, I like to use discussion all of the time. That is where I start and that is how I hook them.” Mack, a white male in his fifth year of teaching civics shared this sentiment by saying “I love it (discussion) because a lot of the time that is when you get the most fire and vigor out of kids.” Both teachers cite discussion as an effective tool of engagement.

Teachers also incorporate discussion based on their personal attributes and beliefs. Paul is a white male teacher with ten years of experience in teaching in middle school civics. He describes himself as a pretty bold guy. He stated, “I don’t mind going into controversial zones at all. I actually kind of like it. They like it too.” Taylor, a white female in her fourteenth year of teaching thinks there is so much information out there for students to question. She stated:

I think its good that they are asking questions in a controlled climate opposed to walking around asking their friends. They may not have all of the proper information so at least here I can steer them in the right direction.

She is suggesting that the classroom can be a processing space for students. Jess, a white female in her fourth year of teaching civics also sees the value in structuring discussion. At the time of the interview, she hadn't had a discussion with controversial topics but planned to. She shared that she would incorporate Socratic seminar as a tool for students to deal with some of these tense ideas. Socratic seminar is mentioned as a potential learning strategy for standard CE 1i on cultivating civic virtue. Dominic is a fourteen-year veteran civics teacher believes that not having more discussions on controversial topics is the reason why we are in the problem we have now with adults. He stated, "People in the past generation were too afraid to engage it (issues) head on."

All teachers have or intend to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics into the classroom. Their reasoning varies slightly, from fostering student engagement and providing a safe space to process current events to preparing students to engage in deliberative discussions as adults.

Defining controversy for middle school students. The way controversy is defined for middle school students by the six teachers provides an understanding of how controversial topics are incorporated in classrooms. Paul defined controversy as, "Anything that equals or has forces on both sides that are very driven, vocal or emotionally charged." Two teachers mentioned that they don't even define controversy at all. For example, Dominic tells his students, "This is what people are saying." Similarly, Taylor said, "She just talks about things

loosely.” Whether formal or informal other teachers focused not only the definition of controversy but began discussing the parameters they establish as they are preparing to have a discussion with controversial topics. Mack discussed setting the tone before discussing controversial topics. He stated:

I try to make sure my students understand that just because they don’t agree with someone else it doesn’t give you them the moral high ground. Moral high ground is something I try to stay away. I remind them they are not better than anyone else, you just think differently from the other person.

Taylor shares the same sentiment of respect and discusses teacher impartiality when discussing controversial topics. She stated:

The class tends to get along. They understand each other and don’t take things personally. They understand that we don’t have to agree but we must respect that everyone has a right to their viewpoints. That’s why I don’t tell them my views on different topics. This isn’t about what I feel it’s about me presenting to you the picture so the students can decide where they fit.

Controversy is often defined as topics with multiple perspectives. There seems to be less of a focus on defining controversy and more on ensuring discussions are respectful.

But can they handle it? Gauging the appropriateness of controversial topics for middle school students. Appropriateness is often at the center of the

discussion when deciding which controversial topics are incorporated into middle school civics classrooms. In fact, Carter school district has a policy on teaching controversial topics in which the age and maturity of students must be taken into consideration when discussing issues. The six teachers describe the types of controversial topics they incorporated and how they navigated appropriateness for middle school students.

Some of the teachers approached controversial topics in a very open manner in which few topics were off limits. Mack shared one of the ways he was able to get students energized about discussions was through spontaneity. His students said, “Maybe we will talk about it.” He stated:

We talk about the election and the legalization of drugs; we will talk about just about anything that is a controversial. A lot of students have strong opinions and very passionate about those topics. As a teacher you can tap into that vein to have better responses and discussion.

Dominic refers to his classroom as a marketplace of ideas. He said, “Whether its abortion or the death penalty I don’t shy away. I always tell my students in the classroom they are to offend.” Paul agrees that you have to approach topics that might make some people skirmish. He shared, “I have to go where other classes won’t tread and that’s the way it is.”

Paul also noted the limitations of approaching controversial topics with middle school students. He stated, “I would never do anything obscene.” All teachers agreed that nudity and sex are examples of topics that are off limits for

discussion with middle school students. Eli is open to introducing a variety of controversial topics but also understands that not all topics can be covered. He said, “For instance sex, I won’t go there. Not because I can’t talk about it but because they can’t talk about it at this age.” Taylor also mentions if something goes a little above where they should be she doesn’t mind contacting parents to answer more questions for their child and making them aware of the classroom discussion. Jess expressed trepidation as well when engaging in controversial topics with middle school students. She stated, “I knew before I started that I was going to pick a path. I was going to cover certain things due to people’s feelings.” The slight worry of emotions sheds light on her belief that students can’t handle certain discussions. Not only due to their age but also because of her personal beliefs. She shared, “I have my own opinions and I don’t want to become emotional in talking about certain things either so for all of us I think it is better to just talk about the issues.” Her insight is important, as teachers per the policy mandate of Carter school district must remain impartial in classroom discussions. Then the question becomes not only can the students handle controversial topics but can the teacher.

Summary of findings for research 2. All six teachers incorporated or planned to have classroom discussions. When the interviews were conducted, five of the six teachers facilitated discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. Though all teachers planned or incorporated discussion, how controversy was defined and the topics that were off limits varied by teacher.

Appropriateness was gauged differently as some teachers left the classroom open to any topic and others stressed the need to provide structure to guide discussions from becoming too emotional for students to handle or for the teacher to manage.

These insights highlight the willingness of teachers to “go there.” Some incorporated discussion as a tool for engagement and enhance the curriculum others saw the classroom as a safe space for students to stay informed and process current events. In these ways, all six teachers are using discussion as a skill for citizenship by allowing students to think critically and express their ideas about issues in society. The next section will explore the findings for research question 2a, which explores the specific instructional practices the six teachers utilized to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. This section will also explore the rationale behind their curricular choices of the six teachers in Carter school district.

Findings for Research Question 2a. How are discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics incorporated into teacher practice through the middle school civics curriculum? If not, why not? The findings in this section answer the second research question by exploring the creativity of teachers and any challenges that might inhibit their instructional practices involving the discussion of controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms.

Yet, it’s right in your face: The prevalence of controversial topics in an election year. For civics teachers, teaching in an election year provides an opportunity for real world application of content as it relates to the constitution,

electoral process and structure of government. The election of 2016 had no shortage of controversial topics discussed in the media. Understanding how six educators in Carter school district taught the presidential election and the controversial issues that emerged in 2016 showcases the way in which teachers creatively discuss and connect current events to the middle school civics curriculum.

It is suggested in the Carter school district unit plan for standard CE 5c on the media and the political process that teachers use media outlets such as YouTube and Teacher Tube to facilitate classroom discussions. All six teachers discussed their use of media as it relates to teaching the election. A popular media resource that was mentioned by five of the six teachers was the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt sponsored Channel One news, which is an online platform for daily news and current events geared toward secondary students. The source material teachers used to aid discussions provide insights on the varying controversial topics that penetrated the middle school civics classrooms of the six teachers in this study.

Dominic stated that, “I don’t think you can teach civics without current events.” In addition, he shared that he uses media from a variety of outlets such as Reuters, Fox and CNN. Paul, who also shows the news daily said, “Students hear things so we do current events all the time. The standards are the cake and we are adding the icing and the fruity stuff on top.” Eli agrees that a lot of the news they watch lead into what they are going to cover and often serves as a segue to

instruction. Mack also saw the value incorporating media as authentic learning experience. He shared, “He wants to provide students with as much information through the news and media to give them real world application of what they are discussing and learning.” Jess utilized CNN student news daily and stated “every once in a while we will use the newspaper if something is applicable.” She noted with the 1:1 technology initiative, students have an iPad, which allows them to do a lot of research on the election. All teachers discussed using Channel One and other media sources such as CNN student news, Reuters, NY Times, C-Span, real clear politics, and news articles from various outlets to prompt informal and formal discussions of current events and at the time of this study primarily the election.

Eli immediately connects teaching the election to the curriculum by saying, “it is a standard to teach the election process, and it fits perfectly. This election has been pretty good because of the controversy. They want to talk about it all the time and it’s going to be sad when we have to move on.” Dominic identifies as apolitical shared that he loves teaching in years like this as well but that honestly he doesn’t treat it any different than any other year. He stated, “this is an interesting time to teach civics for sure and I am looking forward to it. It is important to be critical of every president and think about how does it affect the constitution.”

In the words of Paul, “This election is bizarre and really atypical.” Jess stated that, “For the most part it has been so tense this year that truthfully I have

not talked much about some of the more contentious issues.” Both Jess and Paul discussed the need to balance and structure discussion on the candidates in this election in particular. She shared:

We have to talk about what the candidates’ actual ideas are. One of the things I try to tell my students is that there are students that support both sides in class. We talk about platform ideas rather than facial features or what someone looks like. We do not talk about emails, women and some of the comments that are inappropriate for their age level.

Paul shared that his classroom is more open to discussing contentious topics, “We talk about what is hot for example immigration and Black Lives Matter.” Yet, he expressed a similar sentiment to Jess in regards to structure:

I have been getting them to analyze the platform not the personalities.

Trying to get them to away from the personality part of it and push them towards the issues.

Taylor also indicated that her class talked and discussed the election extensively. She said, “I make it clear from the get go that we don’t have to like your opinion but we need to know the reason why you have it. We are not going to agree on the everything and that is a good thing because we want differences.” Similarly, Mack conveys the same message to students by saying, “You don’t have to have the same opinions but you have to respect the opinions of others.” All six teachers stated that respect is a central theme they emphasized when discussing the election.

Several issues of the 2016 election were at the center of discussions in some of the middle school classrooms in Carter school district. Three of the six teachers used the website isidewith.com as a resource to have students grapple with issues and determine their potential political affiliations. Eli stated:

I have students take the quiz on isidewith.com. They answer a bunch of questions and it will tell them if their political opinions line up with Democrats or Republicans and so that prompts a lot of discussion.

Mack uses isidewith.com in a related way to have students understand where they stand politically. He shared, “The site also helps students figure out what are the most important issues to them.” Taylor noted, as her students navigate the website they are often not familiar with many of the issues or topics. She expressed:

A lot of topics I have to explain. They didn’t know what Affirmative Action was and there were many questions about abortion and hydraulic fracking. I even said with that one we would have to pull that up because I am not really sure. I believe it is important that they ask questions. If you don’t encourage them to ask questions then you’re encouraging them to spit back what they’ve heard and never try to figure things out for themselves.

All teachers discussed and analyzed candidate platforms. Utilizing various media sources allowed for the six civics teachers to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics into classrooms on a regular basis. It is evident to varying degrees that the six teachers interviewed in the Carter school

district value the importance of using the classroom as a space to have students examine the issues and platforms of candidates in the 2016 election.

And the youth shall lead them: The power of student interest in driving classroom discussions of controversial topics. Controversial topics are prevalent in society and media. Although media was a common resource employed by all six teachers often the topics of discussion were prompted by the students in their classrooms. Therefore it is imperative to highlight the role of students in bringing controversial topics into middle school classrooms.

Four of the six teachers cited Black Lives Matter as an issue brought to the classroom by students. Carter city is a majority African American community. Paul shared, “Black Lives Matter and immigration are the hot issues, they love that stuff because they see it all the time. I try to shoot for issues that get them to look at both sides of an issue and are not clear cut.” Mack, who describes his student population as being predominantly African American agreed and said, “I connect the Black Lives Matter movement and what’s happening on the news to the freedom of assembly and the right to protest.” Taylor shared, “My students have strong opinions about Black Lives Matter. So I prompt them by asking what is the purpose of the group and how does their work fall into the realm of constitution.” Three of the four teachers found creative ways to facilitate a discussion on a topic that students were interested and connect it to the constitution.

After students take the middle school civics standardized test in the fourth nine weeks of school, Carter school district provides three weeks of time for students to conduct a project citizen community service projects. Project citizen is a Center for Civic Education program in which students work together to identify, research and present a solution to a community problem. Jess describes a time in the previous school year when students wanted to use Black Lives Matter as a topic to examine for their project citizen project. She stated:

One thing that we did not include was Black Lives Matter. One of the reasons, was it is not necessarily a local or state issue. It is a national issue. But also, it can be offensive to different people. Project citizen is supposed to be about problems you can actually solve not necessarily national things. To my knowledge there is not a Black Lives Matter movement in the community but I always offer explanations for why something can't be done, or addressed. I usually focus on whom it might offend or hurt.

Though this topic was student driven they were in effect silenced from examining Black Lives Matter as a local issue, as it didn't meet the criteria for the project citizen program. Students are bringing controversial topics and issues that they are passionate about to the classroom and whether it is discussed depends on the teacher. Jess shared, "Sometimes something will come up and I'll decide that we really need to talk about it." It appears to be a balancing act between student interest and teacher discretion while appropriateness is simultaneously being gauged on which topics are filtered into their classrooms. Dominic described his

class as one in which anything is fair game (drugs, death penalty, guns) he said, “They say all the time they love this class because they feel that can speak freely and not be judged or told we are wrong.” When describing his class Eli stated:

I tell them I don’t know what I am going to say next class period it really depends on what the students ask me. The students drive a lot of it. They will come in and ask what do you think or I believe that then we go from there. I look for ways to relate it to the bigger picture.

There is tremendous power in students driving the topics of discussion. The six teachers paint a picture of middle school students who are passionate about current issues being discussed in society particularly of race.

To some extent, you are what you teach: How personal beliefs and educational background influence instructional practices. Being impartial when discussing controversial topics is a policy mandate from the school district. In the words of Paul, “Students really can’t tell what my slant is on this or that because I try to keep that neutral. But you know how it is it is almost impossible to do that.” This study also asked the six middle school civics teachers about their personal and educational background and beliefs on citizenship as that can provide insight on potential influences on their instructional practices, topics and source materials they incorporate into their classrooms.

Taylor hails from a family of public servants including teachers, police, fireman and military. Eli’s mother was a social studies teacher. Both shared how their parents encouraged them to become educators. Taylor who originally wanted

to be a math teacher shared the guidance she received from her father. He said, “I think you would like history or social studies better because of the discussions.” Interestingly she shared that discussions is incorporated regularly in her instruction. Eli shared the influence of his mother in his commitment to keep his class fun and engaging. He shared her advice, “When you stop having fun its time for you to go because then it becomes work. As long as I am having fun I will keep doing it.” Dominic shared how his background guides his instruction:

I had to go through the process of becoming a citizen. So I know a little bit of how the system works. Since high school, I have always been involved with demonstrations and protests. I was a community organizer so I definitely believe that people need to be involved to make the system work for them. That's what I try to do with my students.

Taylor, Eli and Dominic demonstrate that personal backgrounds and influences matter. It is clear that their personal beliefs about education filter into their instruction from discussion and fun to community involvement.

Four of the six teachers have a degree in history and two have a degree in political science. All of the teachers are certified with four or more years of experience as a civics teacher. Educational backgrounds matter too. Paul has a background in English and history. He often uses analogies when students are missing the point. Paul provided this example:

For instance, if I am explaining the curriculum I try to apply those (controversial) topics or any topics from history into what we are talking

about. I am great at analogies and seeing both sides. That's what I try to pull that across and do that on a daily basis.

Jess has a degree in political science and described it as her passion. Patriotism is an important tenet she feels should be passed down to younger generations. She describes her reaction when students refused to stand for the pledge of allegiance. She shared:

It has become more frequent and irritating for teachers that more students won't stand for the pledge. That is not tolerated here. It is actually a procedural thing at this point. You don't necessarily have to say it, but you have to stand up with the rest of the class. So we have been talking about that. Sometimes I feel the students don't really understand at this point in their lives what it really means as far as patriotism is concerned.

Jess who expressed a slight apprehension to discussing contentious issues in the classroom facilitated discussions on patriotism. She believes personal responsibility and patriotism are important tenets of citizenship for her students. Mack said, "He believes with all of the negativity in the world that staying well informed and being a positive impact on society is important." He challenges notions of patriotism as well but from the angle of freedom of speech. He described a lesson for the first day of class:

We started the year with the Colin Kaepernick debate. We talked about freedom of speech. Yes, he was kneeling during the national anthem but

what is his message? That is something that I think is very controversial that we heard about for weeks. It's kind of tapered off a little bit now but that is something I addressed on the first day of school. Just to give them an idea of what this class will be like.

These six teachers are influenced by an array of things from their personal lives, influences and educational backgrounds. Despite maintaining impartiality in discussions it is clear the topics they choose to incorporate or the structure of their classrooms align to some extent to their personal beliefs and influences.

The creativity of civics teachers: The nuanced ways teachers incorporated controversial topics in middle school classrooms. Teachers creatively make curricular decisions involving discussions. This nuance was captured through the voices and teacher provided artifacts of middle school civics teachers. Both describe their instructional practices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school classrooms.

Each teacher described or provided artifacts that they used in a lesson in which they incorporated discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics (see Table 11 for a list and brief description of teacher provided artifacts).

Table 11

List and Brief Description of Teacher Provided Artifacts

| Teacher Participant | Artifact | Brief Description of Artifact |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Eli | Fact Review Packet | *Study guide for the middle school civics curriculum |
| Jess | Platform Analysis of Third Party Candidates Lesson | A lesson involved researching independent political parties |
| Dominic | Media on Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock | Media used to prompt discussion of the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock |
| Mack | Media on Charlotte Protests | Media used to discuss the recent protests led by Black Lives Matter activists in Charlotte following the death of Keith Lamont Scott at the hands of the police |
| Taylor | Images of Ku Klux Klan | Images used to prompt discussion on first amendment rights |
| Paul | Amending The Constitution Position Papers | Students choose a controversial amendment such as the right to bear arms, birthright citizenship or the electoral college to research and discuss |

*Denotes the artifact that was submitted by the participant but it is not representative of their classroom instruction involving discussion. The participant explained that this is policy expectation but that they often incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. They cited several examples of this during the interview.

The constitution and the political process were the primary standards employed to connect the curriculum to controversial topics and facilitate discussions. Eli initially provided a fact review packet of the curriculum as an artifact. He explained:

I sent you what they give us. It's a set of facts but they need some background in current events to show students it's not just facts on a page.

The curriculum is dry you have to use discussion or you will lose them.

In his interview he described several lessons and noted that he uses discussion often as a hook to begin his class. When teaching the Electoral College, he opens with a discussion based on the Electoral College map. He said simply, "Why do you think these states voted for Trump?" from there a discussion ensues. Jess provided a lesson on the political process in which students researched and analyzed the platforms of third party candidates. She also shared developing a potential discussion on the Electoral College by saying, "We might touch on the electoral college and whether or not it should be abolished, which is a little controversial depending on what your viewpoint is." She makes a strong point about the time constraints. She stated:

As you know as a teacher we have limited time so I have to be choosy. I try to pick things that are going to actually inform them on information that we need to know for the class. Sometimes, I don't have time to waste or spend a whole class on something that they don't need to know. The

Electoral College they need to know and it's a tricky subject, a tricky thing for them to learn lots of times.

One has to be creative in how they utilize controversial topics in the classroom and find concrete ways to connect it to the curriculum.

Dominic described a lesson and discussion that took place in his class on the Dakota access pipeline issue at Standing Rock:

There are so many historical aspects that you can work in such as the treaty aspect. Of course they don't know the details and that is where I come in. They start asking questions: How come the US didn't keep their word in none of the treaties with them? How does that happen? What happens to the Native Americans now? Why are they concerned? I tell them water is life but you also have to look at the oil company perspective. I am very honest with them it's a dichotomy.

The questions described by Dominic directly connect to the constitution with the analysis of treaties and the relationship between the United States government and indigenous lands. Mack also connects the constitution to issues of protest and civic action. He stated:

If you don't know your rights then you don't know when someone is taking them away. When stuff was going on in Charlotte we discussed the freedom of assembly. What do an assembly, protest, and riot look like? How are they different? What can you do what can't you do? How are your rights not absolute?

This discussion provides real world context to the understanding first amendment rights. Taylor emphasizes the constitution when incorporating discussion. She feels “They need to understand the purpose of the constitution, to know what the government is supposed to do and what their rights are as citizens.” Taylor described the use of visuals to have a controversial discussion on the first amendment and its limitations. She stated:

I have a set of pictures with first amendment and how it should be used, what it is intended for, where it is abused, and where it is kind of a gray area. One of the pictures is of a Ku Klux Klan gathering. I ask does the constitution allow for this group to exist? Yes, they have a right to gather together but there are some guidelines. They can’t just randomly hold a gathering because of the controversy and the potential for violence.

She has students discuss freedom of assembly and its limitations. She also carved out time to discuss recent political movements, protests and their thoughts on how change is made today. Paul provided a lesson in which he had students examine constitutional amendments by choosing from one of the following controversial topics including the right to bear arms, birthright citizenship and the Electoral College system. In this assignment, students conducted research and prepared arguments on if the constitution needed to be amended or left alone. This lesson provoked discussions on controversial issues such as gun rights and immigration.

Summary of findings for research question 2a. All of the teachers have found creative ways to talk about real world issues by connecting controversial

topics to the constitution or the political process. With it being an election year, debates on the Electoral College and first amendment rights seemed to be the primary avenue through which controversial issues were framed and discussed. Teachers created lessons and used the media as hooks and discussion prompts. However, the students of these six teachers must be equally acknowledged, as they were active participants in bringing controversial topics to the classroom. This creativity of teachers in conjunction with the inquisitive minds of middle school students provides the atmosphere to discuss topics that not only connect to the curriculum standards but also enhance it. The next section will address the findings of research question three, which examines the role of classroom diversity when engaging in discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

Findings for research question 3. How does the demographic composition of the classroom shape the curricular choices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms? The student population of Carter school district is primarily comprised of students of color. The schools vary in their focus from magnet, fundamental, gifted to Title I and each school has tremendous classroom diversity. The findings in this section reveal the relationship between the demographic composition of students in middle school civic classrooms and the benefits and challenges of incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

Who is in the room? How the demographic composition of the classroom shapes the teaching of controversial topics. Teachers were asked to describe the diversity of their school/classroom. Jess described the demographic breakdown of her school as roughly 50% White, roughly 5-10% predominantly Asian and Middle Eastern with the remaining 40-45% African American. Paul described his school as being 50% African American close to 60%, I would say 30 to 40% Caucasian and 10% other including Hispanic and Asian. Taylor, who teaches at the same school also adds the context of that there are “different races, religions and people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Dominic described the shift from 50/50 Black and White to more 70/30 at his school. He discussed the need to look beyond binary descriptions of diversity. He shared:

I really hate talking about these things as long as we talk about these divisions they will never go away. As long as they see you as a Black student, White student or Hispanic you measured just on that. To me that has no issue. Let’s talk about socio-economics. We have about 15 Muslim kids that wear the regalia. However, this school is probably more diverse I would say than others.

Eli also discussed race and class, he described the diversity of the school as 70% Black, 25% White and 5% Hispanic, Asian and Native American. In his words, “Being that this is a Title I school everybody gets free breakfast and lunch.” Mack mentioned growing religious diversity that is rarely discussed. He stated, “There doesn’t appear to be a lot of religious diversity in the city but in the schools we

are seeing it more.” Based on the descriptions from the teachers interviewed in Carter school district the school populations are predominantly African American or students of color equaling half the populations of the schools with growing class and religious diversity.

The six teachers in Carter school district were asked to share the benefits and challenges of teaching discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in these settings. All six teachers cited multiple perspectives as being a primary benefit to incorporating discussions in diverse class settings. Dominic stated, “We have a lot of diverse opinions and I can tell from the discussions.” Mack agreed by stating:

You get a lot of perspectives with the high diversity of cultural experiences that these students have. To be able to share that and draw on all of them in discussion helps you to get all those different aspects in the classroom.

Similarly, Taylor found diversity to be important. She said, “If you have a room where everyone is coming from the same situation. They don’t always offer a different perspective. It is good that they can truly appreciate and see the differences among them.” However, this doesn’t negate that there are challenges when engaging in discussion with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

Even though Paul explained, “It shouldn’t be a challenge it should always be a benefit to have diversity in the classroom. I don’t see why that would ever be a negative.” Some teachers did cite challenges to incorporating discussions with

diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in their diverse classroom settings. Taylor shared, “The biggest challenge is to be careful that some students are not offended at times and not taking things personally during tense discussions.” Paul shared his main challenge involves ensuring the tone during discussions remain serious and respectful. He tells his students, “If you are not trying to be silly or rude, your opinions are cool with me.” He went on to say, “The most important thing for any kid in my opinion is to show respect.” Both Mack and Dominic agree that respect is paramount and the initial challenge becomes a benefit of teaching controversial topics. Discussions of controversial topics helps students develop respect for each other and their opinions. Mack stated, “It actually helps out you get to see all the different viewpoints.” Dominic agreed, “Its all about respect. They keep telling me that the way you treat us and the way you talk to us makes us feel like we can express our opinion. It is very simple, it really nothing to it.” Paul talked about showing respect to students and how it has benefitted his classroom management. Eli suggested an entirely different challenge to teaching controversial topics and it was high teacher turnover. He stated, “You have good teachers but they are getting burned out.” With high teacher turnover it is difficult to establish a classroom culture where discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics can be conducted. The benefits of teaching controversial topics in diverse settings allow for an emergence of cultural perspectives and experiences. The challenges involve keeping students on task and ensuring that discussions remain respectful. Overall, the teachers expressed that the benefits

outweighed the challenges when incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in diverse school settings.

Summary of findings for research question 3. The demographic composition of the schools and classrooms of the six teachers are comprised of majority students of color, predominantly African Americans. All teachers noted an increase in socio-economic and religious diversity. Teachers were asked to share their insights on the benefits and challenges of teaching discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in this setting. The general consensus among the teachers about the benefits of teaching in a diverse classroom setting involves the multiple perspectives that arise during discussions. They describe the value in providing students an opportunity to be exposed to different opinions and learning to respect the ideas of others.

Some teachers also discussed the challenges of teaching controversial topics. They cited building a positive classroom climate and the need to explicitly teach the skills for students engage in respectful dialogue. One teacher also highlighted the more systemic issue of teacher turnover. High teacher turnover could be an impediment to fostering relationships and classroom practices that allow for discussion. All of the six teachers that were interviewed are mid-career and veteran teachers, which perhaps teacher turnover doesn't prove a challenge but it is important to note. Overall, the six teachers of Carter school district utilized discussion to teach discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in diverse middle school civics classrooms. This was cited as

a benefit as opposed to an impediment to facilitating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

Teacher insights on controversy, curriculum and policy. The six teachers were asked to share their perspectives on teaching controversial topics and policy decisions involving middle school civics curriculum. Their voices provide insight from the field on controversy, curriculum and policy.

All teachers shared their final thoughts on incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school classrooms. Eli highlighted the importance of discussion in creating a student-centered classroom. He enthusiastically shared, “Everyone should do it. It gives the kids a chance to share their ideas rather than me standing there saying this is what it is.” Taylor and Mack reiterated the importance of discussion as a skill for life. Mack stated, “Discussion is not a tested area but it’s a life lesson. They get out of their comfort zone, get involved and energized.” Similarly, Taylor shared, “These children need to talk, share and really think things through to form their own opinions. Paul believes that good teachers encourage discussion and stated, “It is a very healthy thing if managed correctly.” Jess also thinks that discussions must be done carefully. She shared, “Materials for discussion should be appropriate and they should always be given materials such as readings from both sides so that their ideas don’t come from an emotional standpoint.” These teachers value discussion as tools for engagement and empowerment but also understand the need for balance and structure.

All teachers enhanced the Carter school district middle school civics curriculum through discussion. Taylor shared, “She makes sure to always cover the topic but will add a real world example for students.” Paul agreed, “We are very much on point as a system with sticking to the curriculum. If you just teach the curriculum it will be a short class you have to design activities to enhance it.” Mack shared, “Yes I adhere to the curriculum but not word for word. I try to explain it in more of a 21st century way.” Due to the context of the school, Jess clearly stated, “There is an expectation to enhance the curriculum to meet the needs of students.” Dominic shared a sense of fluidity. He said, “You have to do it and it just becomes organic. You just flow with whatever is happening in the world and make a connection to what you need to teach them.” These teachers highlight the level of autonomy experienced within Carter school district. Discussion is one of the ways in which these six teachers enhance the middle school civics curriculum.

The six teachers were also asked to share their final thoughts and recommendations to policy makers on incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. Taylor was direct and stated, “Discussion is needed to get them to become active citizens.” Most of the six teachers focused on the nature of standardized testing as a potential impediment to incorporating discussion of controversial topics. Dominic suggested that changes should be made to the way questions are framed for students. He stated, “With multiple choice there is no room for interaction. We should treat it like college by giving

students a blue book and have them write about their point of view on what we are studying.” Eli shared his concerns about standardized testing as well and made a pitch to keep discussion in the curriculum. He stated:

It is a powerful tool. Everything is so test driven. Sometimes there are topics in the news that the kids want to talk about it. We may not have time because we may have one week to cover the something. That’s when class becomes boring to them. When you discuss topics they’re more interested and willing to learn the content.

Paul recognizes the challenges with writing a curriculum for a large system but also advocates for the inclusion of controversial topics. He shared:

You can’t obviously write the topics into the curriculum that will change from year to year but we shouldn’t shy away from it. Of course writing this into the curriculum would be kind of hard but something should be done.

Jess said, “Those types of decisions should be left up to the teachers.” She argues for teacher autonomy and believes that discussion should be left out of the curriculum and kept on the frayed. Mack issued a challenge to policy makers and curriculum developers. He suggested:

Go sit in a classroom and immerse yourself in a student body not for one day but for an extended period of time. I have always thought we have too much information to go through. I think that if a lot of topics were cut out

of our curriculum we could go much deeper and give them a better understanding of the information as a whole.

Their insights are poignant and reveal the varied perspectives on incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. The voices of the six teachers provide insight on the value, power and responsibility of incorporating discussion as a tool for cultivating citizenship with middle school students.

The next chapter will provide a summary of all of the findings for this study. Implications for educational practices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics will be provided. This information along with the voices of the six teachers was used to develop recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five

This study involved the analysis of messages embedded within a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum regarding the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. In addition, the voices of six teachers in Carter school district revealed their influences, perspectives and instructional practices when facilitating discussions of controversial topics. This chapter will summarize the literature review and methodology; present the major findings of the study, and provide implications for educational practices. In addition, limitations of the study, implications for educational practice and recommendations for future research are delineated.

Summary of Literature Review and Methodology

This study extended research in the field of civic education in a few ways. First, examining middle school civics curricula from both a state and local perspective through a CRT framework. Second, this study garnered teacher voices to investigate how teachers defined controversy, if and how they incorporated discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial issues, and the role of classroom diversity on their curricular choices. By coupling document analysis with semi-structured interviews the study revealed the norms and values embedded within a middle school civics curriculum and how six teachers

navigated those curricular messages. Lastly, elevating the voices of civics teachers is paramount to understanding instructional practices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics with middle school students.

The literature review explored the varied definitions of citizenship, discussions of controversial topics in classrooms, civics curriculum and diversity, and teacher implementation. Throughout the literature, discussions of controversial topics and current events are situated as a critical need in the preparation of students to be active citizens. However, there is scant research in discussion with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics at the middle school level. This study offers an opportunity to extend previous literature in the field with the voices of six middle school civics teachers.

This study addressed three research questions employing document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Document analysis was used to both analyze curricular messages of the state and local middle school civics curriculum and framed the semi-structured interview questions. The state mandated and local middle school civics curricula were analyzed through the five tenets of CRT in education. This framework provided insights on what civic expectations and knowledge is privileged involving the discussion of diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. In addition, the study included semi-structured interviews with six middle school civics teachers within Carter school district. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed through a sense making theoretical

framework to understand how teachers navigated and implemented the policy expectations of a middle school civics curriculum. The understanding of curricular messages and teachers' voices provided a wealth of knowledge on the role of curriculum policies and how teachers implement discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school classroom spaces.

Summary of Major Findings

The major findings for this study revealed:

1. The state mandated middle school civics curricula are ambiguous. The five tenets of CRT expose an invisibility of both historical and contemporary civic experiences and barriers for people of color.
2. The middle school civics curricula of Carter school district provide more opportunities for discussion than in the state mandated standards.
3. The six teachers of Carter school district found creative ways to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics into the middle school civics curriculum.
4. Discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics were often student driven in the six middle school civics classrooms in Carter school district.
5. In four varied middle school settings, with classrooms comprised of majority students of color the six teachers found engaging in discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics to be a benefit.

The first two major findings of this study address the first research question. The findings reveal the ambiguity of a state mandated middle school civics curricula with a stronger presence of incorporating discussion as an instructional strategy in Carter School district. The state mandated civics curriculum though designed to be vague to allow local school districts more autonomy silence the civic experiences and barriers of people of color. There is no mention of civil disobedience, voting rights act, or voter suppression. Potential learning experiences are provided but discussion in the form of Socratic seminar is only mentioned once. Carter school district has a policy memorandum that encourages the teaching of controversial topics as long as it connects to the curriculum, teachers remain impartial, provide balanced multiple perspectives and appropriateness is gauged. In addition, the district mentions discussion as a potential learning experience four times. The directive to incorporate discussion in middle school classrooms is more explicit in the Carter school district curricula than in the state mandated curriculum.

The last three major findings of this study address the final two research questions. The findings reveal the creativity of middle school civics teachers in navigating curricular expectations and incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. All six middle school civics teachers in the study incorporated discussion as an instructional practice. Five of the six teachers facilitated discussions of controversial topics at the time of the study. The six teachers in Carter school district found meaningful ways to connect discussions

with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics to civics curriculum. However, how controversy was defined and the topics selected for discussion varied by the teacher. This demonstrated the willingness of the teachers to engage in controversy. For some teachers, there were no boundaries and for others there was an intentional stifling of topics due to beliefs of appropriateness and relevance as defined by the teacher. Yet, all teachers valued discussion as a skill for democracy and an effective engagement tool. Their perspectives provide an example for how civic engagement is being cultivated in middle schools. Students must also be recognized and valued as teachers noted they were the primary drivers of discussions involving controversial topics. The inquisitive spirit of middle school students, eager to grapple with current events in our society allowed opportunities for teachers to facilitate discussions.

Carter school district is comprised of majority students of color, primarily African Americans. However, there is class and religious diversity as well. The demographic composition of the classrooms in the four schools appeared to serve as a benefit to facilitating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. Discussions often evoked a range of perspectives on varied issues. The six teachers shared that the challenges to discussion focused less on diversity and more on age of students. The major findings for this study unveil the ingenuity of civics teachers regarding discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. The next section will discuss the limitations of this study.

Limitations of the Study

This study provided insight on a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum. In addition, the voices of six middle school civics teachers within Carter school district were highlighted. Although, the findings from this study are not generalizable the voices of the six middle school teachers shed light on the teacher decision-making process involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. The six civics teachers in the study only represented four of the eight middle schools in Carter school district. While their insight is invaluable it is not representative of all of the teachers within the school district or the state. The role of students in driving discussions of controversial topics emerged as a theme in this study. The study was designed to capture the voices of teachers, however the voices of students are valuable and should be considered in future research studies.

This study was conducted in a school district with a demographic composition comprising of majority students of color. This echoes the current shift in public schools nationally but may not reflect the demographic composition of all middle schools across the state. Observations of middle school teachers facilitating discussions with diverse topics and/or controversial topics were not conducted. The findings relied solely on semi-structured interviews and teacher provided artifacts describing lessons involving discussion with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. Despite the limitations, the major findings of this study yielded implications for educational practice.

Implications for Educational Practice

Based on the major findings of this study, there are several implications for educational practice involving curriculum development and teacher practice.

There are four main implications for educational practice:

1. State mandated standards must include the civic experiences of people of color from both a historical and contemporary standpoint.
2. The amount of content standards in the state mandated civics curriculum should be slightly reduced to allow more time for civic learning experiences such discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.
3. Professional development should be provided in local school districts to allow teachers to discuss and learn practical strategies on incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school settings.
4. There are many benefits to incorporating discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics with students in early adolescence as it provides opportunity for critical thinking, developing skills for respectful dialogues and understanding of multiple perspectives.

The document analysis revealed an omission of people of color and their civic experiences in this country. A state mandated civics curriculum should include historical and contemporary references to the civic experiences of people of color including an examination of oppression and resistance. There should be more

explicitly stated examples in the curriculum addressing the diverse civic experiences of people of color. There should also be opportunities to examine democracy, citizenship and civic ideals from a perspective of power and privilege. Many of the teachers in this study found the amount of standards for the middle school civics curriculum to be cumbersome. This can impede discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. A slight reduction of the civics content would be beneficial for middle school students. This will allow teachers more flexibility to meet content objectives with varied civic learning experiences such as discussion.

The six teachers interviewed found creative ways to incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. School districts should provide professional development to share best practices by teachers and relevant research on facilitating discussions at the middle school level. This instructional support could provide teachers with new ideas to regularly incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. There are many benefits for middle school students to engage in discussion including increased participation, critical thinking skills, and the tools for respectful debate and dialogue. This study highlights the ability for students to grapple with the complex issues of society. Middle school students are emerging citizens and can discuss controversial topics. This study extends research in the field by elevating the voices of six middle school civics teachers and their instructional practices regarding teaching discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial

topics. However, due to the limitations of this study further research is needed.

The next section will outline recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is needed to understand middle school civics curriculum through a CRT in education framework. In addition, more voices of teachers and their instructional practices should be central in future research studies. There are several recommendations that address the limitations of this study. First, more civics curricula in middle school and younger grades should be analyzed through the five and other tenets of CRT in education. This insight produces a systematic review of the civic norms and values privileged in the curriculum. This study examined a middle school civics curricula of one state. Future studies, should analyze middle school civic curricula across states. This would provide critical knowledge of the norms, values and messages embedded within civics curricula nationwide. Second, future research studies should “center the voices of teachers” to understand their influences and curricular choices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. Teacher voices are powerful and their ingenuity sheds light on how curricular messages are interpreted in classrooms.

This study found that middle school students prompted many of the discussions involving controversial topics in their classrooms. Future studies should include to voices of students to understand their perspectives on the discussions of controversial topics. This study relied on semi-structured

interviews and teacher provided artifacts, however observation would be a useful tool for future studies to provide insight on how discussions are facilitated in real time. These recommendations for future studies will build on this study and extend research in the field of civic education regarding the discussion of controversial topics at the middle school level. The next section will offer the conclusions developed from this study.

Conclusion

This study employed the five tenets of CRT in education to evaluate the civic knowledge and experiences privileged within a state mandated and locally designed middle school civics curriculum. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted and teacher provided artifacts collected of six middle school civics teachers in Carter school district. This study was designed to understand the curricular messages embedded in a state and local middle school civics curricula, and how teachers interpreted those messages to implement diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in civics classrooms. This qualitative study extended research in the field by incorporating the interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks of CRT in education and sense making theory. The centering of teacher voices in this study elevates the work of teachers in education research and in the field of civic education.

The findings of this study reveal three conclusions. First, the ambiguity of a state mandated civics curriculum can also silence the civic experiences of people of color. There is an apparent invisibility of the historical and

contemporary oppression of people of color regarding citizenship and civic experiences in the United States. Second, discussion is mentioned more in the middle school curriculum of Carter school district. This shows the value placed on discussion to meet content objectives by a local school district. Third, teachers are engaging in discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics in middle school classrooms comprised of majority students of color. All six middle school civics teachers in the study incorporated discussion as an instructional practice. Five of the six teachers facilitated discussions of controversial topics at the time of the study. This study elevates the voices of teachers by highlighting their ingenuity when navigating curricular messages from both the state and local school district. In a political climate in which controversial topics are prevalent the six teachers in this study show that meaningful connections can be made to the curriculum to facilitate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics with middle school students.

Appendix A

George Mason IRB Approval Letter



Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-5445; Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: September 6, 2016

TO: Marjorie Haley
FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [953115-1] Classrooms matter: Understanding the curricular choices of teachers involving controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: September 6, 2016

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Office of Research Integrity & Assurance (ORIA) has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be submitted to the ORIA prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Katie Brooks at (703) 993-4121 or kbrook14@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB's records.

Appendix B

Teacher Informed Consent

Classrooms matter: Understanding the curricular choices of teachers involving controversial topics in middle school civics classrooms

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

IRBNet ID: 953115-1

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to analyze the curricular messages in state mandated and locally designed civics curricula and understand if and how curricular messages are interpreted and implemented by middle school civics teachers regarding the discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics with students in early adolescence/middle school. The aim of this research is to understand what knowledge and civics messages are privileged by state mandated and locally designed curriculum documents and garner teacher voices on curriculum implementation involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign this consent form, participate in a face-to-face interview lasting 35 to 45 minutes and provide one artifact (lesson plan or activity) on how you incorporate discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

The interviews will be audio recorded digitally and take place at a time and location most convenient for you. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed, which means it will be typed exactly as it was recorded word-for-word, by the researcher. Should you decide to participate you will be asked to review the transcription to ensure that your thoughts and words were captured correctly. The audio recording will be destroyed within 30 days of transcription and the transcriptions will be destroyed up to 5 years after the final dissertation study is complete. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used to protect your confidentiality. The only identifying information will be your printed name and signature on this consent form.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this research.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you other than to further research in the field of civics education by highlighting the voices of middle school civics teachers in one school district on their curricular choices involving discussions with diverse viewpoints and/or controversial topics.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. You will be given a pseudonym for your interview and teacher provided artifact to include lesson plans and activities. Selected information from teacher provided artifacts (lesson plans and activities) such as standard, objective, resources utilized and activities will be analyzed in the study to understand classroom practices. Your interview information including the teacher provided artifact may be used for reports, presentations or publications. Verifying information including personal, school and school district will be removed and not used in this study. Only the researcher and principal investigator of this dissertation study will have access the audio recordings of this study and teacher provided artifacts, which will be placed in a secure location on the property of George Mason University and a password protected Dropbox folder until transcribed. All audio recordings will be transcribed within 30 days and deleted immediately following transcription. Transcriptions and teacher provided artifacts will be placed in password-protected

software (NVivo and Dropbox folder), in a locked file cabinet in the student researchers' office and in a locked file cabinet of the principal investigator's office on the campus of George Mason University. Verifying information will be removed from all transcriptions and teacher provided artifacts. All transcriptions and teacher provided artifacts will be destroyed up to 5 years after the completion of the dissertation study. While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to the protect the confidentiality of your transmission.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw them from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you, or any other party. Upon completion of the 35-45-minute interview you will receive a \$5.00 gift card. If the participant completes the validation of the interview transcript the participant will receive an additional \$5.00 eGift card by email. If you decide to just complete the interview and not the validation of participant transcript you will receive a Starbucks gift card in the amount of \$5.00. Again, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

CONTACT

Tiffany Mitchell will be conducting this research through the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. She may be reached at [REDACTED] tmitch12@masonlive.gmu.edu for questions or to report a research related problem. The principal investigator for this doctoral research is Dr. Marjorie Hall Haley from the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. Dr. Haley can be reached at [REDACTED] mhaley@gmu.edu for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form, all of my questions have been answer by the research staff, and I agree to participate in this study.

_____ I agree to audiotaping.

_____ I do not agree to audiotaping.

Printed Name

Signature

Date of Signature



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Biography

Tiffany Mitchell graduated from Phoebus High School Hampton, Virginia, in 2001. She received her Bachelor of Science in Political Science and Communications from Old Dominion University in 2006. She earned her Master of Arts in Teaching in Elementary Education from American University in Washington, D.C. in 2010. She has nine years of teaching experience and is a certified educator in Elementary Education and Secondary Social Studies Education.