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Using Controversial or Difficult Topics in the Classroom as a Means for Civil Discourse: Are Pre-Service Teachers in Tennessee and Three of its Neighboring States prepared and Confident?

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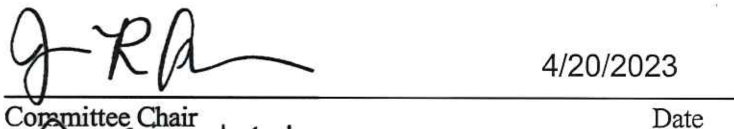
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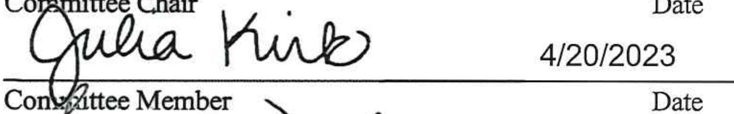
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USING CONTROVERSIAL OR DIFFICULT TOPICS IN THE CLASSROOM AS A MEANS FOR CIVIL DISCOURSE: ARE PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN TENNESSEE AND THREE OF ITS NEIGHBORING STATES PREPARED AND CONFIDENT?

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
in the Carter and Moyers School of Education
at Lincoln Memorial University

by

Stacie M. Shanks

April 2023

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Dedication

For Charlotte:

Look what girls can do!

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my chair and committee. Dr. Archer, you came in halfway through and got me to the finish line with smart comments, useful feedback, and jokes. Dr. Collins and Dr. Kirk, I cannot thank you enough all you have done for me in classes and during the writing process.

Abstract

Sixty percent of college freshmen entering American colleges and universities were unprepared for college level discussion and analytical skills. Though the many researchers I detailed in the literature review showed how effective the use of controversial or difficult topics in the classroom as a means for civil discourse was for imparting the missing skills, they also found teachers largely avoided them. The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to investigate if pre-service teachers training at public colleges in Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina were given the opportunity to learn the pedagogy of and practice using controversial or difficult topics in the classroom as part of their formal programs and to discover how confident they felt about implementing them in their future classrooms. The four participating colleges of Education, one from each state, were among those which annually graduated the highest number of new teachers in their states. Participants were five teaching faculty members - three from Alabama, one from Kentucky, one from North Carolina, and zero from Tennessee, and 23 pre-service teachers from Tennessee. I collected data through the online platform *Qualtrics* using questionnaires which included both scaled and open-ended questions. Though the sample was small, my data analysis showed teacher preparation programs did not offer their pre-service teachers this instruction; additionally, pre-service teachers did not feel confident using controversy in the classroom. One implication was pre-service teachers were not receiving the training they needed to teach their future students most effectively. I recommended further study with a larger sample.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Civil discourse, debate, dialogue, discussion, whatever the appellation, is essential to educating a rising generation of involved, informed democratic citizens (Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Freire, 1970; Hess, 2009; Shor & Freire, 1987; Thelin, 2019; Totten, 2019). America has shown increasing divisions over the last 20 years (Haidt, 2020; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Willis & Kane, 2018), and public-school educators could help bridge this division by teaching students how to look at all sides of an issue, listen to the other, find proof before simply believing, and to present their arguments civilly and productively. It is "vitally important" (Kite, 2013, p. 182) to students' civic development that teachers discuss social change and ways to take part in those changes with their students. The problem was in most American classrooms students were not learning these skills, but were inundated with media - social and otherwise, and were leaving high school without the ability to form, reflect on, or maintain a civil argument (Butrymowicz, 2017; ACT, 2019; Ostashevsky, 2016)

Cowan and Maitles (2012), Hess (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2009), Hess and McAvoy (2015), Parker (2021), and Parker and Hess (2001) investigated and promoted the value of using controversial or difficult topics (CDT) in the classroom to foster civil discourse. My focus on pre-service teachers' confidence and what, if any, training they received in their bachelor's degree programs to prepare them for CDT discussions in their classrooms was original. In the rest of this chapter, I provide a detailed statement of the problem, my research questions, the two theoretical frameworks through which I approached the problem, and an

in-depth account of the significance of the study in relation to the field of teacher training.

Statement of the Problem

In a republic, to preserve democracy, "civic duty beg[an] with education" (Zeiger, 2008, p. 1). Franklin (1750) wrote nothing was more important to "the public weal than to form and train up youth in wisdom and virtue" (p.1). He went on to say wise men were "the strength of a state; much more so than riches or arms, which, under the management of ignorance and wickedness, often draws on destruction instead of providing for the safety of the people" (Franklin, 1750, p. 115). The framers of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 stated, in part, "schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged" (Zeiger, 2008, p. 1). Jefferson (1805) argued America's newly established freedom was "a short-lived possession, unless the mass of people could be informed to a certain degree" (p. 1).

The purpose of education in America had always been "driven by the fact that we need people to be civically engaged, intellectually and educationally well informed or else we were opening the doors to tyranny" (Novak, 1995, p.1). If they hoped to build and keep democracy, citizens needed an education that was "broad based" and "it had to be universal" (Harkavy, 2015, p. 1). Additionally, American education has valued civil discourse, not only as a means of learning, but also as the goal of learning; in fact, colonial colleges used oratory for most all classroom activities and assessments to teach critical thinking and listening skills, analytical skills, and sound use of logic, though, admittedly, also due to a lack of readily available paper (Thelin, 2019). These skills were part of teaching for an

"intelligent citizenship" (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 2) and were only a fraction of the value of using discourse to exchange ideas and further knowledge about CDT.

Around the turn of the 20th century, education became more widespread in America and compulsory for all grade school aged children. By the 1930s, school became compulsory through high school, and educators were tasked with providing American children with a free education which would "instill civic virtues" (Kober & Rentner, 2020, p. 3). The idea of tax-funded public schools was not always a popular one and was one of the first ways education was divisive in America (Poole, 1999) but certainly not the last.

Education in the South, and in Tennessee specifically, has known its share of controversy. After the Civil War, with the cost of Reconstruction, support for a tax funded public-school system was especially low in the South (Thelin, 2019). In Tennessee, even before the war, families who opted to educate their children did so at private schools, often in the North (Fleming, 2017). Post-Civil War, women, who had poured into the workforce during the war earned roughly half what men did, and this held true for teachers, as well; though, teaching was a higher paying job for women than factory or domestic work (Berkeley, 1984). Tennessee's two newly formed public-school systems – one for white children and one for black – continued to hire women because their salaries were easier on war strained state coffers (Fleming, 2017). When equal pay between genders was introduced for Tennessee teachers, male salaries were lowered to the female rate – not exactly the outcome desired by the women who protested for equality (Berkeley, 1984, p. 53); however, black and white teachers were paid the same

rate based on education and years of experience, showing a level of progressivism not before seen in Tennessee (Berkeley, 1984). The new salary schedule removed the monetary incentive for men to remain in the classroom. By 1900, public education was almost 100% a women's field with the few male employees serving as principals, superintendents, or school board members (Berkeley, 1984).

Between 1900 and World War I, education in Tennessee made great strides despite controversy, sometimes because of it. With the formation of the first General Board of Education, whose members would be elected officials going forward, and the passage of the 1902 state law allowing counties to tax specifically to pay for local schools, education became political in Tennessee (Poole, 1999). State support for public education went even further in 1909 with the Public School Law, which made county taxes to support schools mandatory. Tennessee's General Assembly made school compulsory for grades one through eight in 1913. Ironically, it was not until a year later when a law was passed requiring teachers to have formal training and certification; this was not standard practice nationally until well into the 1930s (Bentley, 1984). At the time, only 7% of white teachers and 6% of black teachers in Tennessee had been to teaching college (Poole, 1999), and in 1931, over 1000 new teachers were awarded teaching licenses with "no other preparation than one quarter of college work" (Bentley, 1984, p. 177).

Curriculum was also sometimes publicly debated and decided in court in Tennessee. The 1925 Butler Act outlawed the teaching of evolution in the state (Scoville, 2019). John Scopes, a science teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, famously tested this law and taught evolution in his classes. He was arrested, charged, and

in the first trial broadcast live on the radio in America, shortly found guilty of violating the state's anti-evolution law; he was ordered to pay a fine of 100 dollars (Scoville, 2019). It was not until 1968's *Epperson v. Arkansas* that the Supreme Court of the United States determined all anti-evolution laws unconstitutional. Since 1993, the Tennessee Department of Education has been sued numerous times (Education Law Center, 2022). Tennessee courts have had to force state officials multiple times to fulfill their state constitutionally described duty to fund schools fairly; the complainants were almost always representatives of schools serving poor, minority students (Education Law Center, 2022).

The commonality of all these instances was they unfolded publicly; all were debated in the public sphere whether it was in school board meetings, elections, or in court. The very skills used to establish public education as a right for all were now, according to college professors and managers, eluding Tennessee students (ACT, 2019) I wanted to know why, how pervasive this lack was, and what elements made up the problem.

Gutmann and Ben-Porath (2015) said the goals of civic education included learning "to argue and appreciate…understand and criticize…persuade and collectively decide" on solutions that are respectful to as many citizens as possible "even if not universally acceptable" (p. 5). While civil discourse would never serve to please every American, it could be used to reach solutions or plans which are as fair as possible (Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2015). Notably, when more citizens had a quality education, it paid off in more than just informed voters; "economic growth, scientific innovation, more diverse culture, and lower crimes rates" (Taylor, 2016, p. 12) were all positive effects of an educated citizenry.

To uphold the ideals of democracy and help form citizens who were active in a participatory democracy, some American teachers have attempted to provide students the skills needed to engage in civil discussions of CDT by the time they graduated from high school (Gewertz, 2018; Hess, 2009). These skills, learned and practiced in a planned environment, carried over into college and real-world situations, and the lack of these skills could be a detriment to their participation in civic life as adults (Hess, 2009). The authors of Common Core State Standards listed a variety of skills students needed to be part of such discussions such as posing and responding thoughtfully to questions, using evidence from multiple sources, and addressing other perspectives (National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). These skills provided students the opportunity to go on to become active participants in their communities and help form a more just, democratic nation (Gewertz, 2018; Hess, 2009). Hess (2004b) asserted discussion helped students think "through the complicated dimensions of a complicated world" (p. 153). Harveth and Caulfield (2016) went on to point out discussion skills helped students graduate high school prepared for the work force and with "greater college readiness and less need for academic remediation" (p. 7). Producing these stronger students required strong teachers who required strong preparation.

Unfortunately, up to 60%, or more than half a million, of freshmen entering American colleges from 2000 to 2015 did not leave high school with the skills they needed to join in civil discourse (ACT, 2019; Butrymowicz, 2017; Conner, 2018; Ostashevsky, 2016); in Tennessee, that number was 83% in 2016 (Marcus, 2016, p. 1). These students also lacked the citizenship skills to be active

democratic citizens who could compromise, think for themselves, or even listen to both sides during an election season. Many researchers have promoted the value of presenting CDT in the classroom (Hess, 2009; Newport, 2016; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Starratt et al., 2017). All of the aforementioned researchers and teams found employing topics such as racism, genocide, gender inequity, LGBTQ issues, or for younger students, issues like sharing or including others, in guided discussion, through their emotional and real-world focus, helped students develop deep thinking skills, critical analysis depth, civil discourse skills, and empathy or consideration for others' perspectives (Hess, 2009; Newport, 2016; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Starratt et al., 2017).

The divisions in American society by 2020, the fractured political climate, the riots across the country, and the previous four, ineffectual sessions of a polarized Congress, showed civil discourse and effective handling of controversy were not widely spread practices. This was not a new trend for Congress, or a new example for young Americans, as compromise among them had been declining for more than 25 years with the steepest drop occurring since 2008 (Pace, 2019; Willis & Kane, 2018). Instead of taking steps to discuss and compromise, or at least empathize (Haidt, 2020; Haidt & Hetherington, 2012; Wehner, 2020), national leaders were, and had been for several years, threatening "the prestige of participatory democracy itself" (Leskes, 2013, p. 1). Instead of this "existential threat" to democracy of the left-right divide (Haidt, 2020, p. 4), students - the next generation of citizens, voters, and leaders - needed instruction in these skills and a better example from their teachers than what they were seeing in the media.

Teachers wanted students "to hear multiple and compelling views, and they want to hear them. But we also want them to learn how to evaluate them vigorously" (Hess as cited in Richardson, 2017, p. 19). This was often not easy in practice.

There were some teachers who fulfilled this need and strove to prepare their students for continuing education and entering the political field – if only as an informed voter; however, despite the clear value of engaging with CDT, which lend themselves to debate in the classroom, many teachers have avoided such topics (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Gross, 2013; Hess, 2009; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Sue et al., 2009). Researchers discovered several fears and barriers which prompted teachers to avoid these topics such as lack of pedagogical training, lack of core knowledge, fear of pushback from parents, fear of emotional outbursts from students or losing control of the classroom, and fear of reprimand (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Gross, 2013; Hess, 2009; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Sue et al., 2009). While these fears may have been warranted in some instances, as they later become law in some states in 2021 (Schwartz, 2021), the overall value of CDT should have outweighed fear whenever possible. Without helping students think deeply, analyze critically, discuss civilly, and react empathetically, teachers sent their students out into adulthood ill-equipped to recognize or confront injustice, inform themselves of the facts, or engage in effective debate with the goal of affecting change and finding "common ground for the good" of the community (Conner, 2018, p. 231).

Logic dictated if teachers avoided CDT, then their students were not practicing or developing as effectively as possible the skills needed to participate in civil discourse of such topics. If teachers did not know how to present these

topics, chances were they were never taught the pedagogical practices of doing so. Pre-service teachers should be trained in these practices because researchers have found formal training helped mitigate fears teachers had about presenting and engaging with CDT in the classroom (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Gross, 2013; Pettigrew, 2010).

Civil discussion skills were shown to be valuable and necessary skills for teachers to know how to relay to their students (Brown, 2018; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2010). By asking faculty leaders about any curricula geared toward using CDT and leading discussion and students about their confidence with CDT, both in teacher preparation programs in the Tennessee and three of its neighboring states, I hoped to take a step toward bridging the gap between the need for and the implementation of new curriculum. We would know if, and to what extent, there was a lack of this instruction and where new or altered curricular offerings were needed. If I found preparation was offered, that would prompt the question of why teachers were not translating training into valuable classroom practice.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate if, and to what extent, as of 2023, public teacher preparation programs among the largest in Tennessee and Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, three of its neighboring states, were offering pre-service teachers training on how to discuss and use CDT and discussions in their classrooms and to determine if a relationship existed between confidence of graduating pre-service teachers in relation to the amount of training they had using CDT in the classroom.

Research Questions

I used the following three research questions to guide my study. All three research questions were “clear and focused” (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 138). Asking exactly, and only, what I wanted to know kept the focus narrowed and left no room for ambiguity or misunderstanding of the purpose (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016.

Research Question 1

How prevalent, as of 2023, were opportunities for pre-service teachers, studying at one of the three largest public teacher preparation programs in Tennessee, and its neighboring states Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, to engage in lessons, units, or courses about the pedagogy of presenting controversial or difficult topics in the classroom?

Research Question 2

How confident did pre-service teachers report to be in their abilities to present and lead discussion of controversial or difficult topics in the classroom upon completing their formal training at one of the three largest public teacher preparation programs in Tennessee and three of its neighboring states in 2023?

Research Question 3

Did any trends emerge about the amount of training pre-service teachers received in controversial or difficult topics and their confidence in teaching with leading discussion of controversial or difficult topics upon completing their studies at one of the three largest public teacher preparation programs in Tennessee or three of its neighboring states in 2023?

Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks impacted and supported my study - Freire's (1970) critical literacy theory and Allport's (1954) contact theory. Both theories can be used to guide classroom practices and require teachers to set up a proper environment in said classrooms. Using critical literacy led to true communication (Freire, 1970) and contact theory led to a higher comfort level with controversy (Allport, 1954). Both can be used in any setting and both help to open students' view of the world around them to a more realistic, critical understanding (Allport, 1954; Freire, 1970).

Critical Literacy Theory

Learning to think critically was a major goal of education (Freire, 1970), and the critical development of students was "absolutely fundamental for the radical transformation of society" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 23). Critical literacy began at the Frankfurt School in Germany in the 1930s (Handsfield, 2016) and was expanded by Foucault in France in the 1960s and 1970s into a philosophy which concluded knowledge equaled power (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Freire (1970) took up the mantle to expand this idea into his theory of critical literacy, specifically in adult education. Freire's (1970) idea was education and literacy shaped people's lives and they could use these learned skills to reshape society if focused on issues of power and promoted reflection, action, and transformation.

Critical literacy had been "inspiring educators especially those who stand for human rights" since its introduction (Abidin, 2015, p. 6). Hess (2009) agreed, saying schools should become a place where "change to society began" (p. 22). Critical literacy taught earners to use their knowledge to be actively involved in

society through reflection, dialogue, and action (Freire, 1970; Shor & Freire, 1987). Critical literacy was said to be a "product of a society structured to produce inequality" (Tracey & Morrow, 2017, p. 173). For this reason, Shor and Freire (1987) discussed the necessity of meeting students at their current "comprehension of their daily life experiences" (p. 20), so dialogue was rooted in concrete concepts to help students understand the world they lived in.

Through critical literacy theory, Freire (1970) challenged several generally accepted ideas about education. His ideas negated the idea education should be neutral; instead, education intentionally raised student awareness of the world around them and the ways in which it was unjust or lacking (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Critical literacy theory also went beyond the idea of simply learning to read and analyze; it had the "ethical imperative" of learning, so one could examine the "politics of daily life" (Bishop, 2014, p. 52), recognize what needed to be changed, and change it.

Additionally, Freire (1970) advocated for students to take control over their own thinking, and that this thinking was required as part of action. To this end, Freire (1970) criticized the traditional lecture format, calling it the "banking method" (p. 78-9), and advocated for a "problem-posing" model (p. 79), which relied heavily on dialogue with students as opposed to talking at them and depositing facts. Teachers should have left every course having learned something through the "rediscovery of the material *with* the students" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 15). By changing the roles in the classroom, teacher and students alike became speakers and listeners in their lessons because, as Freire (1970) said, "without communication there can be no true learning" (p. 93). This challenged students'

"learned passivity" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 21) and asked them to reexamine their beliefs and to change their practices in education (Freire, 1970). The goal of adopting a critical view was to become more engaged in their learning and "comprehend at a deeper level" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010, p. 282) when analyzing social ills in the greater world. Additionally, students gained a "sense of empowerment and confidence" through "discussing and challenging" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010, p. 278) topics which aligned with the status quo.

Freire (1970) detailed the effects of leaving the oppressed masses, students for our purposes, ignorant. He started by talking about "horizontal violence" (Freire, 1970, p. 62), the phenomena in which the oppressed struck out in anger or frustration against their fellow oppressed citizens. This was a direct result of having internalized the way a dominant faction looked at them (Freire, 1970). The duality of self-perception versus how they were seen caused the oppressed to begin to distrust themselves and put their trust in those in power (Freire, 1970). The oppressed become emotionally dependent on the very people and institutions which held them back (Freire, 1970). Instead, critical literacy should be an "act of freedom" and must be done in conjunction with "significant changes in the social and political structure" (Abidin, 2015, p. 8).

Freire (1970) said, in using critical literacy, teachers mitigated these effects by transforming people's self-perceptions as they took action to transform their society. Learners would experience a paradigm shift "from individualism to utilitarianism" in which they changed focus from self-interest "and replace[d] it with community interest" (Abidin, 2015, p. 16) and strove to overcome their oppression or ignorance for the greater good; however, Freire (1970) warned

against activism in favor of true action. Freire (1970) argued idealistic activists had the potential of simply replacing the oppressors when they acted instead of empowering citizens to act on their own behalf. Instead of this “activism” or “action for action’s sake” (Freire, 1970, p. 88), real needs existed and had to be identified. After identifying a need, Freire (1970) detailed reflection as a requirement to link theory and practice and develop *conscientization*. How an issue was affecting one’s community and the world at large was the ideal focus lest “theory become simply ‘blah, blah, blah’ and practice pure activism” (Freire, 1993, p. 30); activism without a real goal and concrete plan, he purported, was useless.

Critical literacy practitioners focused on teaching the skills of recognizing injustice, reflecting, discussing, supporting arguments with evidence, addressing opposition rationally, and acting to change one’s society together with their community members as a society (Freire, 1970; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010; Shor & Freire, 1987; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Freire (1970) argued the oppressed must free themselves through education. He also said the oppressed, or the students in the case of public schools, should have been involved in developing their own education in response to needs as they arose (Freire, 1970). Students began to “exert their own power when they [took] a critical view” of the world around them (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010, p. 279). This meant when students felt passionately about something controversial or difficult, teachers should have fostered this interest, helped students learn more and reflect on that new knowledge, and assisted them in preparing for action to change social ills.

Critical literacy theory is often divided into two schools of thought – autonomous and ideological. According to Tracey and Morrow (2017), people using the autonomous view focused on functional and technical aspects of literacy, saying literacy can be learned no matter the context; conversely, people with an ideological view saw literacy as contextual in response to the greater community. An ideologic perspective said all texts/lesson have the bias of the author/institution who is trying to sway learners (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Learners had to learn to recognize this bias and question it and its goals. Civil discourse in the classroom helped develop this skill (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), and students needed this now more than ever while they were bombarded with media from all sides. The ideologic view said literacy needed context because its goal was to reflect on and change injustice in the community and the greater world (Tracey & Morrow, 2017).

Freire (1970) included several distinct concepts in critical literacy which built on each other. These concepts started with recognizing and disrupting the status quo, then moved on to hearing from multiple viewpoints, focusing on socio-political issues, and acting for justice (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010). This process allowed students go on to "act critically to transform reality" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 13). While pushing for education to bring change, Shor and Freire (1987) admitted American educators tended to be impatient for change; unfortunately, the problems of the world could not "be resolved soon or in a single classroom" (p. 25). They encouraged this impatience as it served as a driving force of change by keeping CDT in the forefront of people's minds. Additional models include a fifth concept of after-action reflection for future

planning (Bishop, 2014). Freire (1970) saw the fifth concept – reflection – as key to affecting change in one's community, asserting "critical reflection is action" (p. 129). To bring this practice into any classroom, teachers had to plan wisely. Robust curricula could be based on literature, for example, but using texts with ties to real-world or current events tied to students' lives outside schools engaged them more (Ainsworth, 2010). Unfortunately, these real-world ties could make the topics uncomfortable because they were so real. Prompting civil discourse around these topics was not easy, and teachers should have been given training opportunities either formally or within their schools (Hess, 2009; Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018).

Teachers should not have been waiting for the *right* time; they should have partnered with their students to help them address issues when students were already curious and ready to engage (Freire, 1970; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010). This timely reaction emphasized the "dynamic nature" of critical literacy and helped build trust; therefore, relationships between teacher and students grew stronger and emboldened students to action (Freire, 1970, p. 78-9). Teachers should have engaged in discussions of CDT as fellow learners in dialogue with their students– even if it was uncomfortable for the teacher. Teachers should also have been planning dialogue which extended over time to be most productive (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010). Freire (1970) also emphasized dialogue should become a "permanent condition in classes... a continuing aspect of liberating action" (p. 139).

Contact Theory

Additionally, I used Allport's (1954) contact theory to explore confidence in pre-service teachers as it related to their level or lack of pedagogical training in how to lead discussions of CDT. In contact theory, Allport (1954) said interacting with a group (or idea) about whom one holds prejudices or negative conceptions lessened those prejudices. It is used in conflict resolution, intergroup dialogue, and to promote the *chameleon effect* in which teachers modeled the behavior they wanted to see in their students without referencing it (Allport,1954; Hattie & Zierer, 2018). Students, when exposed to activities, models, and the opportunity to practice, could change their behavior or beliefs (Allport, 1954), in this case civil discussion of CDT, developing more open minds, and real-world skills. For students to form some level of comfort with civil discourse skills, they needed "interleaved" practice throughout a course (Brown et al., 2014).

Interestingly, contact theory showed to be effective in direct, or face-to-face, contact, in indirect contact through phone calls or video chats, in extended contact in small increments over time, and even in imagined contact (Allport, 1954) which happened when one read a book or watched a show or movie about CDT. Contact theory was used at every level of education and with unlimited topics. Notably, Cameron and Rutland (2006) used contact theory with elementary school students to lessen fears and prejudices against people with disabilities. Using imagined contact because of a lack of diversity in their classes, through storybooks featuring disabled characters, Cameron and Rutland's (2006) students worked through and weakened their negative feelings about disabled

people. This aspect of contact theory allowed teachers to use it even if they could not arrange physical contact between two specific groups.

For contact theory to be most effective, Allport (1954) advised teachers to set up equitable conditions in the classroom. All groups should have been given equal status and a common goal, been supported by the teacher (who saved their opinion for later), and should have cooperated with one another (Allport, 1954). These were also all facets of civil discourse, and CDT gave opportunities to develop these when they were used as discussion topics throughout a course because repeated exposure was key for a student’s thinking or behavior to change (Allport, 1954). Using CDT to prompt classroom discourse throughout the entire course, students reinforced discussion skills, learned to listen to a side different than their own, and conducted research before disagreeing (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). These are the exact skills students were missing when they graduated high school and entered either college or the work force.

Critical literacy and contact theories were threads which ran through the study. First, I used these theories as lenses through which I organized my research. Freire's (1970) critical literacy theory tied directly to the importance of CDT because CDT were often real life issues which students cared about, encountered outside of school, and engaged in more readily than topics which did not impact their lives (Hess & McAvoy, date). Allport's (1954) contact theory tied directly to the need for repeated practice over time. Incorporating the pedagogy of CDT throughout teacher preparation programs would help pre-service teachers practice and hone their skills and prepare them to teach those skills to their students.

Additionally, both theories were "explicit and justified the study" (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 140) by providing "logical and convincing argument[s]" (Johnson et al., 2020 p. 139) for the purposes of this study. Critical literacy theory aligned with the need for and benefits of including CDT in teacher preparation programs. Contact theory showed singular experiences were not enough and supported the need for incorporating practice with CDT throughout a program, so pre-service teachers could build confidence.

Significance of the Study

From Postman and Weingartner's (1969) seminal text on education reform to Zimmerman's (2021) work studying and promoting CDT, researchers have been discussing the benefits of CDT in-depth over the last five decades; however, there were gaps in the research. These gaps, if filled, could affect real change in teacher education. The data I collected in this study helped satisfy several needs and fill gaps in the research about CDT discussion in the classroom. The timeliness, specific focus, originality, and benefits of this study were all significant. Each aspect added to the study's usefulness for pre-service and current teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum planners/coaches.

I investigated teacher training programs to see if pre-service teachers were being prepared to implement civil discussion of CDT in their classrooms. Using critical literacy and contact theories in different ways than other researchers gave my study the benefit of not being compared to others while adding to the existing data. The drawback was not having others to use as reference points, leaving me on my own. This difference made my study unique because I operated at a step removed from classroom students or teachers by investigating how pre-service

teachers were, or were not, prepared and able to help their students with the skills of civil discourse through CDT.

Timeliness

The timeliness of this study was significant. The political climate and unrest in America in 2020-2021 spoke to a great need for more critical thinkers who could convey their ideas peacefully and act to affect change. The division in 2020 America revealed or emphasized the inherent racism in many institutions – both private and governmental. Freire (1970) would have argued the very acts of "enlarging ghettos and normalizing the school-to-prison pipeline" were racist, resulted in "expanding human misery" (Macedo, 2018, p. 6), and needed to be addressed through action.

In May 2021, Tennessee leaders introduced House Bill 580, banning public school teachers from discussing systemic racism or sexism. The bill also disallowed criticizing America or its policies or practices, along with eight other speech restrictions (Spears, 2021). This bill later became law; two bills censoring public school libraries were also introduced in 2021 and voted into law in 2022 (Education Law Center, 2022). Several other states, including Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, New Hampshire, Mississippi, Missouri, and South Dakota had passed laws or had bills in the legislative pipeline to ban the same things (Alvarez, 2021). Given the clear value of CDT (Brown, 2018; Freire, 1970; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2010), the division between political parties and their followers, and the necessity of compromise in a country as large as the United States, discussion of CDT in the classroom must be studied, implemented, and

encouraged to prepare the next generations of American citizens for the world outside the school building.

Specific Focus

Because none of the previous researchers I reviewed, which I detailed in Chapter II, looked specifically at teacher preparation programs and their offerings related to CDT (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Cargile et al., 2019; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Dunn et al., 2013b; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Lukianoff, 2014; Lycke & Lucey, 2018; Nganga et al., 2020; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Parker, 2010; Pettigrew, 2010; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2015; Starratt et al., 2017; Sue et al., 2009; Totten, 2019; Walling, 2017; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017), my specific focus made it significant. There was a very important gap in the research which ignored formal teacher training and left out the southeast region of America. Investigating the specific offerings of teacher preparation in relation to the topic of CDT in the classroom provided an overview of what was being taught in teacher preparation courses and could inform the field and help develop new curricula teachers could use to adapt their practice to make sure students learned needed skills.

Originality

I looked for, but was unable to find, any other researcher or research team who had looked, or was looking, at this topic in the same way. Many studies have been done on both CDT in the classroom and the benefits to students; however, most were done in Europe, on the American west coast, or in New England and looked at classroom practices instead of teacher preparation (Cargile et al., 2019; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Sue et al., 2009). Hattie (2015) and Hattie and Zierer

(2018) also focused on classroom practice; however, their work was singular among the others in that they used meta-analysis to investigate all the practices suggested or used by the others and rated efficacy of each. Instead of specific lesson plans, Hattie (2015) and Hattie and Zierer (2018) presented the efficacy of 195 in-class strategies and outside influences which affected student achievement that teachers could use in conjunction with others to bolster student learning or to mitigate influences which hinder student success. For example, classroom discussion showed to prompt two years of growth in one academic year; however, teachers should also look at the fact teacher credibility prompts two and a half years of growth. Without a trusting relationship within the classroom, discussion was inauthentic and ineffective (Hattie & Zierer, 2018). Other aspects of CDT in the classroom – benefits of, support for, avoidance of, and consequences of said avoidance – have been investigated; however, most researchers who studied it focused on classroom practices, teacher and student perception, or focused narrowly on only one CDT such as racism, LGBTQ issues, or immigration (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Cargile et al., 2019; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Pettigrew, 2010; Starratt et al., 2017; Sue et al., 2009; Walling, 2017).

Yemini et al. (2019) and Nganga et al. (2020) came the closest to my topic when they investigated teacher preparation program curricula; however, their foci were narrowed to global citizenship pedagogy and pre-service, elementary social studies teacher perceptions, respectively. While global citizenship could have incorporated civil discourse, it was too narrow to encompass all CDT; nor did they use critical theory as their lens. Yemini et al. (2019) studied in the northern

states, on the west coast, and in Florida, none of which was the region where I gathered data. Nganga et al. (2020) did use critical literacy as their lens, but they used a small convenience sample of 37 pre-service teachers in only one predominately white university whose location was not specified except that it was in America.

Bromley and Russell (2010); Cargile et al. (2019); Cowan and Maitles (2012); Hess (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2009); Hess and McAvoy (2015); Nowell and Poindexter (2018); Pettigrew (2010); Starratt et al. (2017); Sue et al. (2009); and Walling (2017) all recommended teachers receive better training and support for how and why to present CDT; however, I found no one who had answered those calls and looked specifically at teacher preparation programs – especially in the southeast. This gaping hole in the literature was the perfect niche for me to fill with my study to bolster the support for and add to the scholarship of controversy; it also advances the importance of the idea of teaching pre-service teachers how to handle CDT before they step into their first teaching assignments.

Need

The existence of many and varied outside professional development (PD) institutes or training materials around the country showed the need for my study. *Learning for Justice*, then called *Teaching Tolerance*, sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law Center, developed “Civil Discourse in the Classroom and Beyond” in 2010, to provide teachers the plans and materials they needed to teach their students how to discuss (Shuster, 2010). Additionally, in 2011, the University of Arizona began housing the National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD), partially in response to the shooting of Congresswoman Gabriel Giffords who had

been in discussion with the university about such a program (National Institute for Civil Discourse, 2021). NICD’s best practices and key principles included “empathy instead of vitriol, listening for understanding instead of hearing to overpower, and humility instead of all-knowing” (National Institute for Civil Discourse, 2021). For over 20 years, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) held the Belfer National Conference for Educators every summer with sessions for English, Language Arts, history, and social studies teachers to learn how to handle the Holocaust – becoming one of the most required CDT – in the classroom (J. Parker, personal communication, June 2, 2020).

Based on her cross-national study of teacher preparation for controversy at four universities in Ireland, England, and the United States, Pace (2021) provided a “Framework for Reflective Practice” for teaching CDT. She included strategies for teachers to implement when adding CDT to curricula, varying from ways to protect students from harmful conversations to classroom management to ways to “safeguard the teacher from potential threats” (Pace, 2021, p. 230) such as parental or administrative backlash. Additionally, in 2021, the National Academy of Education released the manual *Educating for Civil Reasoning & Discourse*. This manual was a collection of essays offering tools and advice for fostering civil discourse in classrooms (Lee et al., 2021). These included helping with how to establish the proper culture for effective discussion, class management, and helping students develop their voices (Lee et al., 2021). These are only a few examples of PD and resources offered to teachers to learn best practices *after* they were already teaching. I wanted to change the focus and use of CDT research for

preparation and prevention instead of making teachers play a game of catch-up after they entered their first classrooms.

Benefits to the Field

Conducting this study advanced the topic of CDT discussion in the classroom because I investigated what was being taught, tried to discover where the lack existed, and intended to bring change to teacher training curricula. Are better prepared new teachers more confident new teachers? Depending on what the data show, several more studies could come from this one to add even more to the field.

Description of Terms

Included below, for the ease of the reader, are terms I used throughout my study. Several of them are used interchangeably throughout based on which source material is referenced. CDT is my own compound, umbrella term to include any discipline or grade level.

Controversial or Difficult Topics (CDT) are social, political, legal, sensitive, or taboo policies or issues which cause emotional reactions, disputes, potentially threatening conversations between two or more opposing worldviews; sometimes called divisive or provocative content. Controversial topics are often not settled legally or societally, while difficult topics are facts that are uncomfortable to discuss (Dunn et al., 2013a; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Murray-Johnson, 2019; Nganga et al., 2020; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

Dialogue is any exchange of ideas; conversation with purpose (Used interchangeably with ***Debate, Civil Discourse, and Discussion)***

Pre-service teachers are individual*s* completing their teaching degree or student teaching (Used here interchangeably with ***Teacher candidate***).

Topics are questions about public policy or about how people should live together which cause disagreements (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015) (Used here interchangeably with Issue).

Organization of the Study

Beyond this introductory chapter, this dissertation consists of four additional chapters. In Chapter II, I provided a comprehensive review of the existing literature relating to CDT and its use in the classroom. I detailed the many benefits of using CDT, including CDT's connection to democratic citizenship. I also explain reasons for and barriers to using CDT and the consequences of avoidance. In Chapter III I detailed my qualitative study. Beginning with research design, I listed my process and research questions and explained population and sample. I gave a detailed recounting of finding trustworthy instrumentation and collecting data. Rounding out this chapter, I discussed limitations and delimitations affecting the study, including my own biases and assumptions. In Chapter IV, I provided my analysis of the data collected. This included my coding of the qualitative data and analysis of responses within Tennessee, between the four states, and as a region, answers to each research question, and the results of the study. Chapter V ended the study with conclusions, implications for the field of Education, and recommendations

for future studies to extend this work. In the following literature review, I detailed my research and classified it into themes which I then applied to my study.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Presenting controversial or difficult topics (CDT) in public school classrooms has long been, well, controversial (Hess, 2009; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Zimmerman, 2021). Society at large, parents, administrators, even large numbers of teachers seem to forget or ignore that students were not removed from society; they were citizens and would soon be working, voting, contributing members of the society in which these controversial or difficult topics (CDT) were happening (Hess and McAvoy, 2015; Postman and Weingartner, 1969; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Without preparing its next generation to encounter, confront, discuss, understand, and work through CDT, a democratic society could not expect to function fully (Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2015; Hess, 2009; Leskes, 2013; Martens and Gainous, 2013; O'Connor, 2011).

The large body of research which existed about the value of teaching CDT in the classroom is detailed in this chapter. There were both academic and real-world applications for the civil discourse skills students learned (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015); students needed to be taught civil discourse skills as children and young adults, and school was seen as the ideal setting for developing the skills needed to discuss controversial topics rationally (Brown, 2018; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2010). Unfortunately, in that same body of research, researchers showed how and why teachers have avoided presenting and discussing CDT, the consequences to individuals and society when civil discourse and reasoning skills were missing, and the barriers they faced if they tried to present controversy head-on with their students. Additionally, workshops, institutes, and PD opportunities for teachers to learn how to teach with CDT were

available year-round, all over the country, and they filled up quickly because teachers who wanted to present controversy did not know how (J. Parker, personal communication, June 2, 2020; Shuster, 2010).

Considering the 2020 divisions in congress, rise in racism and violence, and the storming of the capital in Washington DC in January 2021, along with the major galvanizing events in 2020 – the Covid-19 pandemic and George Floyd's murder at the hands of police – it became apparent citizens and their elected leaders were lacking the skills to function properly as an informed and prepared citizenry capable of civil discourse (Willis & Kane, 2018; Zimmerman, 2021). People could not "actively engage in civic life and maintain the norms by which Americans debate and decide their differences" (Winthrop, 2020, p. 6) without becoming violent or falling victim to violence. If teachers did not know how to present discussion of CDT because they had never been trained, they likely could not properly prepare their students to develop and use those skills in the contentious world they were inheriting from their parents and grandparents . No one was investigating this lack of training, how pervasive this lack was, or where/who was directly affected; instead most researchers looked at and suggested classroom practice, recommended better teacher training, and moved on (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Cargile et al., 2019; Hattie, 2015; Hattie & Zierer, 2018; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Lukianoff, 2014; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Sue et al., 2009; Tinberg & Weisberger, 2014).

Support for Discussing CDT in the Classroom

Using Freire's (1970) critical literacy theory and Allport's (1954) contact theory as lenses, the need for new teachers to be trained in and to practice leading

discussion of CDT became apparent. Students should have been taught through guided instruction how to be informed, active citizens in America's participatory democracy, so they could be involved in their communities and the country's decision making (Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2009; Totten, 2019). Researchers showed using CDT to foster civil discourse as a tool for – or target of – learning was not happening in many American classrooms because of fears, real and perceived barriers, or simply because it was easier not to.

Researchers who studied the use of CDT discussions all supported the practice (Brown et al., 2014; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Nganga, et al., 2020; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Sue et al., 2009; Totten, 2019). Totten (2019) said teachers who decided to tackle CDT with their students "in a historically accurate and pedagogically sound manner [were] doing something of the utmost significance" and the practice would eventually "result in *tikkun dam* (repair of the world)" (p. xix). Johnson and Johnson (2009) made similar claims saying, "intellectual conflict is not only highly desirable but also an essential tool that energizes student efforts to learn" (p. 37) and is the "spark that energizes students to seek out new information and study harder and longer" (p. 37). Using a variety of theories from critical literacy or dialogue and democratic education to critical race theory, integration, and citizenship, all found the use of discussion and CDT to delve into learning, or as the learning itself, prompted deeper thinking, tolerance, and civic engagement in students. Unfortunately, they also found educators commonly avoided CDT because they were "afraid to go where the feelings, perspectives, and questions would take them" (Postman, 1967, p. 1161). Freire

(1970) would have said those feelings and questions were at the heart of education.

Many of these researchers have been working with CDT in some form many years (Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2009; Lycke & Lucey, 2018; Nganga et al., 2020; Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2015; Sue et al., 2009). Hess (2009), for one, has spent her career promoting the use of CDT. Lycke and Lucey (2018), in their qualitative case study on democratic education and citizenship found pre-service teachers supported using CDT in their upcoming careers. Nganga et al. (2020) had similar results from their phenomenological interpretive phenomenological analysis of pre-service teachers' perceptions. All participants supported and planned on using CDT; however, 80% had had no previous training in the pedagogy of CDT discussions until the methods course in which participants were observed and interviewed, even though they were entering the second semester of their student teaching year. Cowan and Maitles (2012), in their book, which includes 18 essays by other scholars, analyzed how to implement controversy into the classroom and found 94% of teachers said CDT were important, but only 58% practiced using them regularly. Consistently, Sardone and Devlin-Scherer (2015), in their meta-analysis of recent education studies which asked about controversy, found just 58% of New Jersey vice principals reported their teachers sufficiently implemented CDT even though topics like the Holocaust were part of curriculum mandated by the state. Sue et al. (2009) qualitatively investigated perceptions of 10 white professors employed at a northeast private university towards engaging in "difficult dialogues" in the classroom (p. 1096). Their questions helped participants reveal their fears about

CDT. Sue et al. (2009) concluded it was "essential that educators take the lead in acknowledging and making sense" (p. 1108) of CDT, so they could help their students begin to feel comfortable with, and successfully engage and analyze such subject.

For a variety of applications, Hess and McAvoy (2015), supported using CDT in the classroom. In their text presenting their meta-analysis of studies including totals of 1001 students and 35 teachers across 21 highs schools in Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin, Hess and McAvoy (2015) explored ways teachers should employ CDT in the classroom and listed several benefits they found among the students in their study about how, or if, political issues were used in high school classrooms. Hess and McAvoy (2015) listed political equality, tolerance, autonomy, fairness, engagement, and political literacy among the "aims of the political classroom" (p. 156), showing the variety of influences CDT could have.

The Benefits of Using CDT in the Classroom

The teachers and researchers using CDT for the purpose of civil discourse were demonstrating it worked, but overwhelmingly, the research showed teachers were not using CDT nor were many of them teaching and leading discussions in their classrooms (Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Dunn et al., 2013b; Hess, 2004a, 2004b, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Martens & Gainous, 2013; Parker, 2010; Postman, 1967; Sue et al., 2009; Starratt et al., 2017; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). This was true despite the body of literature which said the use of CDT in the classroom brought many benefits to both students and teachers. The benefits of using topics considered CDT in the

classroom could not be overstated, nor could student interest in them; using topics to which students related and/or were interested in helped keep them engaged and more willing to practice discourse skills (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). It was important that students enter their adult lives as prepared as possible with the skills developed through CDT and discourse.

Postman (1967) pointed out the importance of finding more than just "Great big white Right answers" (p. 1161). He argued a crucial way to help students "manage their lives more effectively" was to "increase their control over language" (Postman, 1967, p. 1162). He warned there was "nothing more dangerous" than stifling student opinion and voice while the "languages of reality [went] swirling, uncomprehended around their ears" (Postman, 1967, p. 1165). Students benefited from discussion and being heard, and Brown et al. (2014) talked about the confidence one could gain from working through vulnerability through the integrated practice of discussion. One unit of one course was not enough for pre-service teachers to become proficient in facilitating activities or civil discourse centering on potentially emotional or intense topics. Hogan et al. (2016) agreed saying engaging students in "substantial debate" over CDT was a "time-tested method of educating for citizenship" (p. 380).

Continuing with support for discussion and CDT, Newport (2016), in his book about reaching and engaging in deep work, discussed the benefits of working past "what's easy" (p. 84) and how when a discussion derailed or someone got upset some people simply shut down or stopped using CDT. Additionally, in his article exploring the relationship between violence and education, Hughes (2020) found discussion-based classrooms, as opposed to

teacher-driven, allowed for some of the "tensions and anxieties... which fester... to be laid out in the open and discussed" (p. 33), and helped students feel heard. The inability to talk topics through could have had potentially deadly effects for children. In their report which sought to discover indicators for school violence and crime, Wang et al. (2020) found in the 2018-19 academic year 30 out of 66 school shootings were the result of "escalation[s] of dispute[s]" (p. 27). Similarly, Alathari et al. (2019) found, in their study of school violence, one main reason for school shootings involved "a grievance with classmates" (p. 50). A classroom culture of open dialogue could also lead to students forming fewer extreme views, in school and later in life (Rokeach, 1971). Learning discussion and thinking skills and establishing a culture of open dialogue could have helped combat these outcomes.

Looking through the critical literacy lens (Freire, 1970; Tracey & Morrow, 2017, p. 172), it was obvious CDT were necessary for students to truly engage, especially if the topics directly affected the students' lives; while contact theory showed the effects of and need for repeated practice.

Thinking Critically

Imparting higher order or critical thinking skills is one goal of education "that educators have striven for so long to impart" (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015, p. 4), and practicing discussion with CDT helped strengthen these skills. In their classic, seminal work on education reform, Postman and Weingartner (1969) said discussion of CDT in classrooms gave students the "opportunity to think about problems openly" and to try to solve them (p. 119). Good teachers, they argued, were "teaching for thinking" (p. 34), so students were to be "truly building

knowledge” (p. 23). Ultimately, students should have been leaving secondary education having learned “to depend on themselves as thinkers” (p. 34). Johnson and Johnson (2009) said without conflict “ideas in the classroom are inert” (p. 37). Additionally, quality teachers intended not to tell students what to think but to “teach them how to think” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015, p. 2). Adding to this idea, in their visionary work on the effect sizes of teaching practices, life circumstances, and internal and/or external influences, Hattie and Zierer (2018) found classroom discussion promoted over two years of growth with an effect size of 0.82 on a scale in which 0.4 indicates one year’s growth for an average student. Handsfield (2016) agreed, emphasizing the importance of students becoming “critically literate” (p. 81). Gould et al. (2011) encouraged educators to “incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues” especially those topics which affected students directly (p. 6). Further, Dunn et al. (2013b) pointed out students’ emotions can prevent them from thinking critically and logically; however, practice with discussion and CDT taught students the life skill of regulating their emotions during disagreements. Parker (2021) added fostering students’ independent thought gave them the confidence to “follow neither the crowd nor the demagogue, but to think for themselves” (p. 11). Critical thinking is a skill which students will use the rest of their academic careers and in their adult lives.

Developing Skills

Exposure to, or lack of exposure to, CDT can directly affect development and growth in learning skills. Lukianoff (2014) pointed out the “human tendency” (p. 5) to live in and seek out echo chambers as adults. Consequently, students

should have been learning, through teacher efforts at “elevating the national discussion” (Lukianoff, 2014, p. 5), to look for this in their daily lives. Because this elevated discussion was not happening, Lukianoff (2014), in his book on education and the state of America, classified this lack as censorship and said the non-practice “has made us dumber” (p. 5). Instead, teachers should have been “equip[ing] students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas they cannot control and full of potential offenses” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015, pp.11-12). By “developing critical minds,” students could more readily figure out their world on their own (Lukianoff, 2014, p. 186). Similarly, Noddings and Brooks (2017) found deeper discussions promoted critical thinking and produced students who could think for themselves. Further they found critical thinking skills helped students “understand not simply win” arguments (p. 158). Martens and Gainous (2013) also found when students were encouraged to discuss the varying viewpoints of a topic, they were becoming more familiar with politics and developing their confidence which “normalize[d] political engagement” (p. 959). Dunn et al. (2013c) noted the physical brain response when one is angered during a debate is lessened if one studies evidence, and this carried over into students' adult lives and influenced their intent to vote locally and nationally.

Practicing Civil Discourse

Civil discourse is a primary tenet of democracy and is a classroom benefit of using CDT. In her popular book *White Fragility*, DiAngelo (2018) promoted the importance of employing discussion in the classroom. It was uncomfortable but was necessary for students to develop civil discourse skills. In discomfort is where true learning happened (Friedersdorf, 2021). In their compilation of 18

essays on using CDT to "foster critical thinking," Dunn et al. (2013c) also agreed in favor of civil discourse. Students needed to know how to approach and present "open, informed, and critical" perspectives (p.4). Classroom discourse helped students understand multiple sides of an issue and formed "just- world" perspectives (p. 18). Teachers should have established classrooms where students felt safe discussing the hard topics. Additionally, Tinberg and Weisberger (2014) continued the idea of class environment and said teachers had to create spaces where students could go "beyond just the facts and examine critically," especially those topics which were "emotionally fraught" (p. 48). Without this practice, students were unprepared to disagree civilly.

Discussion helped students delve more deeply into CDT. While he focused on genocide education, Totten's (2019) work on teaching and learning about genocide and crimes against humanity could be applied to any CDT. He argued it was essential for teachers to reserve enough time for students to discuss any questions they have in order to help them process new learning (Totten, 2019). Totten (2019) advocated not only for discussion but also for more intense debate and reflective thought. Similarly, Hattie and Zierer (2018) found classroom discussion to have a .82 effect size on learning (p. 102) because it "stimulate[d] an extend[ed]" thinking (p. 104). They advocated for having students practice discussion often as the more adept students got through repeated practice the higher the effect size could grow (p. 107). Parker and Hess (2001) also supported this idea encouraging teachers to "loop" concepts in and out throughout a course, so students must recall former lessons and apply skills to current ones. Not only

did this repeated practice support deeper learning, it also allows for more reflection and input from more students.

Reaching an Increasingly Diverse Student Body

A diverse student body needed diverse lessons, and the changing face of the student body in America necessitated the use of a variety of CDT, so all students were reached. Ball et al. (2011), in their meta-analysis of diversity in America's six largest school systems, found there were over 100 languages already spoken in American classrooms. At the current rate of changing diversity among student populations, by 2035 non-white students will no longer be in the minority in American public schools. As of 2022, minorities were not in the minority anymore; they compiled 50% of students across the country. This student diversity made some topics (ex: racism; religion; immigration; genocide) more difficult to present because of the varying viewpoints and cultures represented in classrooms, but it also made it more valuable in terms of exposure. Pre-service teachers were not prepared to reach all of their diverse students or to attempt difficult or controversial subject matter; their perceptions of their preparedness – or of diversity itself – made attempting to reach diverse populations with controversial subject matter undesirable, and, as teachers, they went on to "lack the willingness to publicly challenge the social power structures that guide and censor educational practice" (Lycke & Lucey, 2018, p. 9) and opted instead to present a "safe, though oversimplified and whitewashed, curriculum" (p. 9). Controversial subject matter "represents a power struggle that threatens what can pass as the norm for discourse" (Lycke & Lucey, 2018, p.8). This made teachers, especially new teachers, nervous about presenting material

which could be considered controversial. Additionally, pre-service teachers already felt “under-prepared to teach students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds” (Ball et al., 2011, p. 23). In a mixed-methods study employing surveys, regression, and testimonials from 425 pre-service teachers enrolled in a large, urban, west coast university, Cargile et al. (2019) found “different ideologies often frame how they [teachers] come to participate in, and even resist” (p. 13) attempting difficult dialogue in diverse classrooms. Without training, these ideologies remained barriers, and teachers did not grow.

Ainsworth (2010) encouraged teachers to make course content relevant to student lives in his textbook on creating rigorous curricula. When students related to the curriculum, they were more likely to be engaged. Building teacher-student relationships, which showed an effect size of 0.72, helped students feel more comfortable speaking up in class and helped develop their civil discourse skills (Hattie & Zierer, 2018). Blankenstein and Noguera (2015), in their text on equity in education, encouraged students to form new questions and seek answers in different ways; they promoted discussions because discourse lead to questions that “matter[ed] to students” (p. 109). They also asserted “true learning and readiness” required students to be exposed to multiple subjects, perspectives, and experiences in order to enrich how they saw the world (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2015, p. 139). Brown (2018), in her book about vulnerability and leadership, promoted using CDT because hard conversations and the exposure they brought to students taught them empathy for topics they did not previously know much about.

Because students would encounter a variety of issues in their adult lives, Cowan and Maitles (2012) also discussed using a variety of topics within CDT. Dunn et al. (2013c) argued teachers could and should promote learning through "acknowledging controversy, building rapport, and using narratives" (p. 7) of various types. A teacher's key role, Dunn et al. (2013c) argued, was to engage students in "critical thinking and scientific reasoning" and to "broaden student intellectual horizons" through a variety of topics (p. 9). Naufel (2013) went further, saying the goal should have been to build classroom cultures where students could discuss most any issue "without threat, resistance or awkward moments" (p. 135). Postman and Weingartner (1969) encouraged teachers and students to stop looking at school as "a contest between students and the world" (p. 97); instead, they recommended giving students the opportunity to think about problems "openly and try to solve them" (p. 119). Students felt their voices were more heard and were more engaged in their own learning.

Understanding Other Perspectives

Another valuable skill learned through discussing CDT was the ability to listen to and try to understand others' perspectives. When Richardson (2017) interviewed controversy scholar Diana Hess, Hess said teachers should want students to hear "competing views" but they also had to teach students how to "evaluate them rigorously" (Hess as cited in Richardson, 2017, p. 19). Brown (2018) argued students were learning empathy during discussions through "making themselves vulnerable" in the classroom (p. 136); it was not easy to speak up in front of peers. Cowan and Maitles (2012) argued controversial topics taught students about their rights and the rights of others and helped them develop

social awareness. Nganga et al. (2020) had similar findings and said students learned “cultural awareness of different cultures and areas around the world” (p. 88) when they studied and discussed a variety of CDT in class. Additionally, each of their participants agreed it was their responsibility to help students practice this skill.

Hess and McAvoy (2015) argued that through these classroom discussions, students learned how to be civil when in disagreement with others. This was a skill which carried over outside the classroom and that students would need in their adult lives, too. Postman and Weingartner (1969) asserted an additional benefit occurred when teachers learned how to listen to their students through discussions happening in classrooms, but only if discussion was happening. They said through discussion of CDT, students learned to “balance empathy and critiques” (p. 86). Students who participated in classroom discourse about CDT were learning to understand the “other.” Thinking critically, developing 21st-century skills, debating civilly, addressing diversity through a variety of CDT, and understanding cultures other than their own all proved to be benefits to students when they were taught using discussion of CDT. In addition to this variety of benefits of CDT, public school classrooms were the ideal setting in which to do so.

The Ideal Setting for Discussing CDT

Several researchers (Brown, 2018; Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2015; Handsfield, 2016; Hess, 2009; Hess & Gatti, 2010; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2010) uncovered detailed reasons why the classroom was the ideal setting for discussing CDT. Gutmann and Ben-Porath (2015) argued public school was

the “institutional sector” of democracy that was “most directly and distinctly connected to equal opportunity and democratic citizenship” (p. 4). Students in middle and high schools were in a critical period of life when their political ideas first begin to form (Flanagan, 2013), and it was “not as likely that students [were] going to participate in such discussions in other venues” (Richardson, 2017, p. 19). The public school classroom was the ideal setting for CDT discussions because all schools had several factors in common – diversity concentrated in one place, a captive audience, and teachers’ feelings of ethical obligation.

Diversity

The growing diversity in America, so in the student population, was key to discussing CDT. In the classroom, students were exposed to more variety in people than they were anywhere else after, except college, if they go. In his synthesis of 1200+ studies about what affects learning and factors of achievement, Hattie (2015) found “50% of variance in learning is a function of what the student [brought] to the lecture room” (p. 87). Classrooms were “rich sites for the discussion” due to this diversity brought to the room by “the students who populate[d] them” (Hess & Gatti, 2010, p. 19). This diversity made the “perfect context” for students to “encounter controversy and debate” about perspectives other than their own or their parents’ ideas (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, pp. 6, 174) and said they were more likely to “recognize and appreciate” the diverse ideas among their classmates (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 23). School should have provided students with the tools “to evaluate their world” including the people they interact with (Handsfield, 2016, p. 93). As teachers guided students, drawing on the diversity in the room, students learned how to discuss and disagree

logically, a skill they would need later in life (Ball et al., 2011; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2010). Furthermore, Hess (2009). Said multiple beliefs were an asset to a classroom because of the exposure they allowed to occur naturally.

Captive Audience

Additionally, students were a captive audience. With few exemptions, all school-aged, American children were required to attend at least grammar school by the early 1930s. After teachers had students in the building for seven hours per day, some took advantage of this requirement to reach diverse students with diverse CDT (Hess, 2004a). What better place to practice vital discourse skills than where students all already had to be all day? Hess (2009) added while school was the ideal place for discussion of CDT, and teachers should have been skillful discussion leaders, many were not (p. 23), and a skillful teacher mattered.

Ethical Obligation

Lastly, Brown (2018), Handsfield (2016), and Hess and McAvoy (2015) argued the majority of teachers felt called to the classroom and carried a personal ethical or moral obligation to teach their students the best curricula to the best of their ability. They knew the best learning came from concepts and presentations to which students could relate or which the teacher helped them relate to their daily lives. CDT were perfect to prompt deep discussion in class. “Opting out” of the hard conversations because they were uncomfortable was seen as the “epitome of privilege” (Brown, 2018, p. 195). As white teachers comprised 79% of American educators and 76% of all teachers were women, while only 48% of American students were white, race and privilege could be real concerns (Hussar et al., 2020; Taie & Goldring, 2020).

Moreover, public schools "uniquely position[ed] students to identify and stand up to stereotypes" (Handsfield, 2016, p. 94) or inequity in their immediate surroundings or communities. Hess and McAvoy (2015) added schools have "many deliberate assets" such as texts, social media, or television in place to expose students to other opinions and cultures, and was still the "most likely place in the United States for young people to grapple with" CDT (p. 174). While teachers should have been creating safe spaces for their students, they also had to establish best practices so students could "capitalize as fully" as possible on all school offerings (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 174).

Democratic Citizenship

In 2010, on the civics portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 25% of American students performed proficiently (O'Connor, 2011). In response to these scores Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor released a statement showing her intention to put more time, effort, and funding into raising awareness for civic education by founding iCivics, a non-profit web-based service which teaches children about laws. O'Connor (2011) said, "The habits of citizenship must be learned and our public schools were founded to educate students for democratic participation" (p. 1). Moreover, teaching students to agree to disagree was "essential to securing everyone's basic liberty" through teaching tolerance and the "intellectual skills" needed to assess an issue (Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2015, p. 7). Public schools had a responsibility to prepare students for the political side of the world they would enter when they graduated. To that end, Torney-Purta (2002), in her analysis of data collected by IEA Civic Education Study from 90,000 14-year-olds from 28 countries, found

schools reach their goals of "fostering civic engagement" when teachers establish classrooms with open climates for discussion (p. 203) where students felt they could "safely disagree with each other and the teacher" (p. 209). However, she also found only 45% of American students reported using "debates, discussions, or role-playing exercises" (Torney-Purta, 2002, p. 209).

Civility

Civil disagreement is a core value of democracy and the only way a democratic government can serve its citizenry. Because American leadership is drawn from said citizenry, no student's education is complete without learning civil disagreement (Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2015). The ability for a diverse citizenry "to deliberate about political matters is key" (Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2015, p. 1) in order for people to understand the laws they are bound to follow, to "hold their representatives accountable" (p. 2), and for each side to be able to respect the other during an ongoing disagreement. Gutmann and Ben-Porath (2015) also asserted it was schools' responsibility to make sure all students graduated high school ready to "exercise their rights and fulfill the responsibilities" (p. 3) that came with those rights. Hess (2009) addressed democracy in her work as well; she contended engaging students in "high quality public talk" about CDT was "democracy sustaining" (p. 5). For American students to be more "effective discussants," Hess (2009) said, was an act of "cultivating democracy in the next generation" (p. 29). If teachers simply conveyed knowledge or facts, students were "deprived of learning how to deliberate" CDT at all (p. 42); therefore, discussion should have been both a method of learning and a learned skill or outcome of the lesson (p. 5).

Additionally, Hess (2009) addressed political divisions saying when democracy was "reduced two warring political camps" some teachers avoided and kept political or partisan speech out of their classrooms. However, when CDT were avoided like this, students did not learn "how to deliberate about their differences" (p. 20). In a later interview she also pointed out the example students were seeing from national leadership teachers needed to "model for students the importance of being willing to change one's mind" (Richardson, 2017, p. 18). Hess and McAvoy (2015) detailed the various aims of schools in democratic countries; the list included "skills and knowledge required for living well, promote equality of opportunity, prepare for the workplace, foster academic preparation, advance democratic ideals, and create engaged citizens" (p. 75). They also asserted teachers should use CDT which questioned how citizens in society "should live together" (pp. 161-2). Postman and Weingartner (1969) argued questioning and listening to students, allowing them to flush out ideas, was really developing their intelligence which equated to "developing a decent society" (p. 206). Martens and Gainous (2013) found discussion enhanced "student political knowledge and efficacy" (p. 957) and was positively correlated with students' intent to vote later in life. They advocated for engaging students' input in an open classroom setting. Hunt (2016) conducted surveys and interviews in his mixed-methods study of 30 British secondary classics or history teachers -18 teachers from private schools and 12 from public schools; 15 of the 30 had at least 11 years of experience. There was almost 100% agreement the teachers should have been teaching CDT, with sex and violence being the exceptions. Learning civility in an argument is key to an American student's public education.

Fairness

Equality for all is another core value of America’s constitutional democracy, and students had to learn fair play in order to be fully engaged in their participatory government. Gutmann and Ben-Porath (2015) argued the public school system’s job is to prepare students with the “skills and virtues of true and equal citizenship” (p. 2); they also discussed the values students gain from learning equality. These values included “freedom and nondiscrimination… toleration and basic opportunities for all” and learning the responsibilities of being an active citizen such as “honoring others’ rights” (pp. 3-5). Teaching the values of fairness and equity was important because they were not innate and had to be taught. Schools should have been working for the ideal of equality. Starratt et al. (2017), in their community-based, mixed-methods study, focused on Holocaust education in and out of the classroom. They found adults who had learned about the Holocaust in school classrooms, as opposed to museums, movies, or from survivors, were more engaged as citizens as adults than those who did not. In fact, after running regression and correlation analysis, classroom learning was moderately correlated with citizenship values and was a stronger predictor of these values than the other modes of learning. Walling (2017) argued students at every age and every level should have been “immersed in learning that foster[ed] civil discourse” (p.98) because it is key to running a democracy.

Informed Electorate

Students who learned to live together in the “circulating flow of public discourse” (Parker, 2010, p. 2831) were more likely to be informed citizens later. Hess (2009) agreed and argued engaging CDT and the skills they taught helped

students later to be more active in public affairs or politics. Leskes (2013) claimed civil discourse could be learned and practiced on any topic and was “transferable across the disciplines… [and] to the workplace and civic life” (p. 3). Gutmann and Ben-Porath (2015) encouraged this transition from learning to civic responsibility, cautioning that because teachers and schools needed the support of their communities, schools and their communities needed to foster an understanding among the citizens of the “benefits of democratic practices” to all (p. 10) since education played “the key role” in sustaining established democracies (pp. 10-11). Ultimately, however, Martens and Gainous (2013) found schools all across America were lacking in civic education, civic engagement, and civil discourse and also found “fostering an open classroom climate” through activities and discussion was the “surest way” to improve democratic capacity of the American student (p. 973). Martens and Gainous (2013) also emphasized valuing students’ opinions and input in a democratic way to prompt deeper learning which students carried into their adult lives.

Action for Change

Preparing students to change their world is another tenet of democratic education. Smyth (2012) argued it was the responsibility of teachers to help students “challenge and counter cross-cultural stereotyping” (p. 172). Duckworth (2018), in her book investigating grit, argued because culture had the power to shape reality people had to be taught how to shape their culture. Freire (1970) argued the point of education was to affect change; he said, teachers should “teach for a world less violent and cruel” (p.187). Similarly, Tinberg and Weisberger (2014) advocated for CDT so students could learn to “cope with man’s repeated

inhumanity to man" (p. 41) by going beyond the facts to "examine critically" (p. 41). Pettigrew (2010) surveyed 600 secondary history teachers and found CDT, the Holocaust in particular, proved valuable for raising student awareness of human rights, justice, and citizenship or moral values – the first steps in affecting change in the world. Despite all of the clear benefits of CDT and discussion in the classroom, and in spite of the fact they agreed these topics and these methods had many benefits to students, teachers still avoided using CDT in their classrooms.

Avoidance of CDT

There were a variety of reasons across the country why teachers avoided using CDT to prompt and to teach discussion skills. Researchers (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2015; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Dunn et al., 2013a; Hess, 2009; Hess & Gatti, 2010; Hunt, 2016; Lycke & Lucey, 2018; Newport, 2016; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2015; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017) who studied avoidance uncovered many fears teachers had about CDT and discussion: the most common were student, parent, or administration backlash, emerging laws which prohibited some CDT, and a lack of content and pedagogical knowledge or training. Topics such as politics were "too dangerous, the thinking [went], too divisive" (Hess & Gatti, 2010, p. 19). In fact, Simpson (2012) found while 94% of the teachers they polled said they saw the importance of CDT, only 58% said they actually used CDT regularly (p. 51). Their participants identified five main bases for avoiding CDT – lack of knowledge, lack of good support materials, no PD, no place in crowded curricula, and discomfort with the issues themselves (p. 54).

Avoidance of CDT was first recorded in educational records in 1844 when Horace Mann, often considered the "father of American education" (Winthrop, 2020, p. 3; Zimmerman, 2021, p. 11), censored books used in his common schools to keep community investors, many of whom were religiously affiliated, happy and donating. While he included religion in his early schools, he reassured Catholic and Protestant clergy he would not usurp any of their traditions or values so would present "the lowest common denominator brand of Christianity" (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 11). A glaring current example of CDT avoidance was Holocaust education in American public schools. Jeffrey Parker, director of The USHMM's Belfer National Conference, said 85% of their participants have had no formal training on how to integrate and manage Holocaust lessons in their classrooms, and the teachers who were approaching it were self-taught (J. Parker, personal communication, June 2, 2020). He also emphasized that on average, across the United States, teachers spent two or fewer class periods covering the Holocaust, a CDT which one could spend years with and never finish (Parker, personal communication, June 2, 2020).

Avoidance Was Easier

In books published over four decades, several researchers (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2015; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Newport, 2016 ; Postman & Weingartner, 1969) found teachers were simply taking the easy route and maintaining the status quo. Blankenstein and Noguera (2015) said change was difficult for everyone, and sticking with the status quo was easiest even if that meant lessons shifted "more and more towards testing culture" (p. 26). Teachers went for wide coverage instead of depth even though depth encouraged students

to question their world in ways which truly matter to them. Testing culture did not challenge students to think, but “privilege[d] knowing facts and ideas” while ignoring the “relations and connections between ideas” (Hattie, 2015, p. 80) which precluded applying newly learned ideas in other contexts

The problem with the easy way, without discourse or free flowing ideas, was that in CDT or discourse was where “true learning” happens. Additionally Cowan and Maitles (2012) found their participants felt in the short term avoidance was easiest; however, the more teachers avoided or ignored CDT, especially community issues, the longer they have simply persisted in society. Teachers are supposed to be educating students to go out, evaluate, and make change in their world, and this did not happen if CDT were ignored. Newport (2016) cited the “principle of least resistance” (p. 60) as a primary reason people avoided difficult topics; he said depth was becoming increasingly rare when people should have been embracing it (p. 75) He argued the human brain wanted to be challenged; therefore, people were at their best when they took the challenging route (p. 84). Hattie and Zierer (2018) observed students would “engage in challenging tasks, even very high levels of challenge” as long as they were not boring (p. 71). They went on to advise teachers to devise “optimal lessons,” provide “appropriate tasks,” and make “goals more transparent” (p. 71) in order to best serve students.

Significantly, Postman and Weingartner, as far back as 1969, discussed the “pervasiveness of dogmatism and intellectual timidity” (p. 24) in education; while Blankenstein and Noguera (2015) maintained these were still pervasive. Increasingly, testing culture reinforced dogma and timidity because it assumed teachers were mediocre and asked them for no input and insisted on the status

quo. This negative perception of teachers' value lowered their confidence and drove turnover in the profession (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2015). Postman and Weingartner (1969) also discussed the "vaccination theory of education" (p. 21) in which students and teachers both felt once they had covered a subject they never had to discuss it again, and they were immune from it from then on. Obviously, this did not hold true as many skills were built on prior skills; therefore, those former skills must be revisited and maintained. Postman and Weingartner (1969) also argued students had to learn to depend on themselves as thinkers; this was what school was for; it was not always easy work but it was valuable (p. 34). Maintaining the status quo might have been easier in the short run, but this avoidance led to other lost skills and lost knowledge.

Fears Caused Avoidance

Teachers expressed several common fears about teaching CDT. Fear of backlash from administrators or parents, losing control of the classroom, students' unpredictable responses, and emerging concerns about legislation were the most common fears expressed in any of the studies (Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Dunn et al., 2013b; Gross, 2013; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Hunt, 2016; Nganga, et al., 2020; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2015; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Additionally, Maitles and Cowan (2012) cited ethnic tensions among students and indecision of whether the teacher should have been sharing their opinions within a classroom discussion. Several said they were already "cynical about politics" and did not want to get into them with students (Maitles & Cowan, 2012, p. 228). These fears

prevented teachers from attempting CDT discussions, so their students missed out on skills and knowledge.

Fear of Backlash. Teachers expressed a fear of backlash from administration and/or parents if using CDT in the classroom upset students or topics were deemed inappropriate. Hess and McAvoy (2015) discovered teachers felt they were not as trusted as they needed to be, by parents or the public, to create "politically fair" classes (p. 205) in which all sides were heard, and controversial attitudes, which sometimes disagreed with the community standard, were expressed; teachers feared reprimand. Nganga et al. (2020) found teachers felt pressure to conform to the viewpoints of the community in which they worked. Further, Hunt (2016) found the two types of reprimand teachers feared the most were from administration over breaking "school protocols" and "potential parental concerns" (p. 37). Consequently, Sardone and Devlin-Scherer (2015) uncovered when teacher feared parental or administrative backlash, they did "surface level" coverage of CDT, genocide specifically, if they did CDT at all; no depth was reached (p. 5).

All of these fears were not completely unfounded. From Revolutionary War era teachers having been suspected of being loyalists "hounded out" of town (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 9) to antebellum Southern teachers barred from discussing abolition to McCarthy era trials against free thought to a teacher in 2007 being fired for honking her car horn in support as she drove past a war protest rally, American teachers have historically "engaged controversial public issues at their peril" (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 9). Teachers have been

silenced, especially during wartime, and "enjoined to support the national cause" (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 9) without criticism, or else risk their jobs.

Typically, teachers were "committed to the interests of the children" (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 91) and wanted to share truth with their students; unfortunately, many feared administrators who overreacted to parental or community complaints and used their teachers as scapegoats. Additionally, Noddings and Brooks (2017) discovered teachers were historically silenced for opposing policy or presenting any discussion of "how America has gone wrong" (p. 140). Silencing included banning texts and prohibiting speech. When teachers felt their hands were tied from using CDT by policy or prevailing attitude, students lost out on valuable exposure to and practice with the skills of discussion and deep thinking.

Fear of Losing Control to Unpredictable Student Responses. Another fear expressed by teachers was that they would not be able to control their classrooms if students had emotional responses to CDT or expressed offensive opinions intentionally to insult classmates. Sue et al. (2009) also addressed emotional responses saying teachers were uncertain how to manage "emotionally charged" students (p. 1096), and those emotionally charged discussions often came with CDT. Dunn et al. (2013c) found teachers had encountered students who tried to "explain away racism if they discussed it" (p. 8). They also interviewed teachers who feared discussion becoming too emotional making productive discussion impossible. Teachers did not like feeling as if their students were getting out of control, so they avoided CDT and discussion.

Sue et al. (2009) discovered several of their participants feared discussions might get out of hand and they would not know how to manage it. They also found many teachers thought CDT was “too difficult and emotional” for students (p. 5). Many also expressed fear at simply not knowing if students would become anxious, angry, defensive, sad, withdrawn, or would simply get up and leave (Sue et al., 2009). Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) found the possible variety of reactions from students – emotional, upset, feeling threatened or threatening others, shut down, or expressing racism – was another reason teachers avoided using CDT for civil discourse in the classroom.

Alternatively, Blankenstein and Noguera (2015) encouraged teachers to “honor the messiness of learning” (p. 136), arguing teachers should answer each student question if at all possible. Hess and McAvoy (2015) reminded teachers some issues would be harder than others for different students to open up about. Even political debates which seem removed from most students could hit home for others – students with one or both parents who were immigrants, for example. Teachers had to be aware of students’ life circumstances and be sensitive to individual needs in the classroom while still imparting discussion skills.

Hess (2009) reminded teachers students sometimes resorted to “taunts and put downs” (p. 166). She found high school teachers were seeing many students who had never had exposure to discussion skills or CDT before, and they feared the time it would take to get these discussion skills up to grade level and then use them on CDT. They did not think there was enough time in their loaded curricula that leaned more and more towards testing culture and away from depth. Blankenstein and Noguera (2015) asserted the testing climate assumed teachers

were “mediocre” unless given an outside instrument to focus or work towards (p. 112); this culture gave teachers confidence issues and drove turnover.

Fear of Emerging Legalities. As recently as this writing, teachers across the country were facing an emerging, new fear. Laws emerging in dozens of state legislatures banning a misunderstanding of critical race theory (CRT) included language which prohibited teachers from “including or promoting” a variety of what the GOP called *divisive* topics which criticized America. The problem with this approach was CRT was “more caricatured than understood,” so its basic premise – America had fallen short of its Constitutional ideals of equality and opportunity for all – got lost in the arguments (Stanley, 2021, p. 1). Though the language of the new bills and laws indicated it, CRT was not about holding individuals responsible, but about changing the “structures, practices, and habits” (p. 2) that perpetuated racism for so long in America. While CRT made people consider “more common sense truths about racism in America” (Friedersdorf, 2021, p. 4), these were not new radical ideas (Zimmerman, 2021)

In Tennessee, Education Bill HB0580 (2020) included a list of 11 *concepts* public, K12 teachers may not teach including white privilege, reparations, racism or sexism in meritocracies, or systemic racism in America. Four additional lines specified any discussion must be impartial and based on “textbooks and instructional materials adopted in accordance with present law” or the list of 11 concepts (p. 4). Schools in which teachers “knowingly violate[d]” the new law were to lose their state funding (p. 5). This bill became Tennessee law in early 2022; HB2670 applied the same restrictions to public higher education in Tennessee and became law soon after. In fact, by 2022, every state

included in this study had a policy in place which in some way banned CRT, legislation in deliberations in state houses or senates, or a new law on its books. Notably, Alabama's HB8 listed the same concepts as Tennessee's Education HB0580 but also added public colleges to the list of the restricted institutions ("An act relating to Education," 2021); Tennessee later added higher education institutions, as well. While North Carolina's "Ensuring Dignity & Nondiscrimination/ Schools HB324 (2021) addressed the same concepts as Tennessee's law, concepts were combined into a list of 7, and its language was more vague – which could allow savvy NC teachers leeway. Kentucky's Bill Request 60 "Education Non-Discrimination Act" was similar to Tennessee and Alabama's laws but added personal disciplinary action and specific fines of 5,000 dollars per day to individual teachers (Fischer, et al., 2021).

Ironically, only five years prior, Congress had designated March 15, 2016, as "National Speech and Debate Education Day" (Hogan et al., 2016, p. 377). Instead of encouraging students to think and discuss, states had begun undercutting those processes – the very teaching strategies and topics which engaged students the most (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017) and which most related to their lives were under attack. Teachers were caught up in a political storm, threatened with losing their jobs if they did not comply, but they also felt compelled to teach their students the truth.

Consequences of Avoiding CDT and Discussion

Logically, if using CDT in the classroom promoted the skills needed in an informed electorate, avoiding CDT took away the opportunities for students to practice discourse skills about topics they really cared about. The consequences of

avoiding CDT were partially polar opposites of the benefits. Results of avoidance included students who were not prepared for college or civic life and who had missed learning skills they would have gained by engaging CDT; already minoritized groups of students became more marginalized and the citizenry became more divided. Teachers had to be bold in the face of backlash or emotional responses, and not teach students to give in to the fear of being wrong in a discussion or expressing an unpopular view. Striving for "perfection" and the "fear" that caused (Brown, 2018, p. 9) were keeping teachers and students from growing their skills and preparing for adult life.

Uninformed Electorate

If engaging in discussion of CDT helped prepare students for civic life, avoiding CDT potentially left students uninformed about the world around them. Hess and McAvoy (2015) argued without CDT in school students were not likely "to build the political literacy needed" to participate if called on to make decisions about their world (p. 1). Leskes (2013) warned almost a decade ago that "breakdown in public discourse [wa]s eating away at the very core of the United States' democracy" (p. 1). Lukianoff (2014) argued if students were not taught to engage CDT in some rational way they learned to "think like censors" (p. 225) and went on to say without debate, new ideas were not tested and developed thoroughly, which he deemed "danger to original thought" in the very place [the classroom] students were supposed to learn to think (p. 244). Additionally, Walling (2017) argued "public education must be civic education" (p. 98) and without learning how to engage in CDT discussions students not only missed out on skills they missed the chance to help build and become invested in a future

“less mired in discord of recent years” (p. 96). One key skill – self-evaluation – went without reinforcement without CDT in the classroom and was necessary to “participating meaningfully “in effective debate on social issues” (Walling, 2017, p. 98). Regrettably, Haidt (2020) found one outcome of teachers avoiding CDT in classrooms was students going on to avoid politics and voting altogether as adults.

Lost Skills

Without CDT in the classroom students lost other skills in addition to discussion. First, students did not learn how to have civil disagreements. Hess and McAvoy (2015) argued banning CDT in class did nothing to address how students speak to each other in the hallways or off campus (p. 175). It did not, Hess and McAvoy (2015) said, serve society to avoid engaging these topics because students lived in the world where the problems were (p. 216).

Having learned to discuss CDT in class predicted if students went on to be to be engaged or involved citizens as adults in Starratt et al.’s (2017) study investigating citizenship values in 301 US adults living in Florida. They found a moderate correlation between learning about the Holocaust in school and citizenship values (defined as respect for diversity, belief in justice/rule of law, social cooperation, and personal responsibility), with the strongest predictor being learning about the Holocaust in school above museum visits and survivor lectures (pp. 185-186); discussion helped students learn. Starratt et al. (2017) said Holocaust education gave teachers and their students a chance to “examine fundamental moral and ethical issues related to diversity and human behavior in society” (p. 190).

Postman and Weingartner (1969) warned against setting students up to experience “future shock” which occurred when individuals were confronted by the real world which was not the world school taught them to believe in. CDT helped get closer to the truth, and discussing them with a teacher there to guide them, students had a safe place to dig more deeply. Dunn et al. (2013a) held never challenging students’ existing beliefs sets up “confirmation bias” or false confidence in which students essentially shut down to new information and rely only on sources which back up what they already think (p.16).

Citizens were also losing, and students were not learning, other 21st century skills such as collaboration, adaptability, initiative, and curiosity (Ainsworth, 2010). College professors and hiring managers alike found their candidates lacking. Cowan and Maitles (2012) additionally argued behavior in society would never change, and people would never progress past current problems, without new learning which saw the next generation educated and more open-minded on how to do so. CDT had been mostly included in the curricula of specialty classes instead of integrated throughout a student’s education (Cowan & Maitles, 2012). Logically, if CDT and discussion were not consistently practiced, the skills never became ingrained.

Further Alienation of Minority or Minoritized Groups

Avoiding CDT such as race, politics, or LGBTQ concerns told minoritized students that their issues were not even worth discussing, and left them even more alienated than they already felt. Halberstam (2016) claimed “immense damage” (p. 55) was done when casual avoidance was employed. Ignoring CDT failed “to account for the differences that race and class make to experiences with trauma,

expectations around protection, and exposure to troubling materials" (Halberstam, 2016, p. 55). Adhering only to dominant ideologies "silence[d] and devalue[d]" the life experiences of marginalized peoples (Waterman & Bazemore-James, 2019, p. 154), so teachers had to be sure they allowed for "other" voices to be heard. Hughes (2020) advocated for "pedagogies of inclusive dialogue" which "place[d] an emphasis on respect…and how to create inclusive classroom cultures and relationships" (p. 33). He also encouraged training teachers in techniques to "ensure discussions [were] productive and made up of respectful, active listening" (Hughes, 2020, p. 33). Teachers had to remember students' life experiences outside the classroom in their planning.

Classrooms should have intentionally been places students could discuss current arguments which surrounded them out in the world. Additionally, avoiding CDT actually "condescend[ed] to students" under the "guise of protecting their delicate psyches" (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 99). However, teachers needed to be trained to implement CDT because, as Sue et al. (2009) reported, "many emotional dialogues [were] triggered by well-intentioned whites who unknowingly engage[d] in racial microaggressions" (p.1091-1092) because they had not been trained. Teachers have always faced some uncertainty when presenting CDT in the classroom and have had to be taught how to choose what to include and how to "be instructionally effective" by tempering the inclusion of CDT through the application of proper pedagogical strategies and exhibiting them "in ways that their students can understand" (Floden & Clark, 1988 p. 521), no matter their skill levels or prior, challenging life experiences. Simultaneously, teachers had to be sure students learned the skills they needed.

Students wanted to discuss issues and teachers had to be up to the challenge of managing it all.

Zack et al. (2010) discovered four types of reactions in teachers if CDT were presented in class – avoiders, confronters, integrators, and hesitators. The goal of all teachers should have been to become integrators, so they fully served their students eventually helping them to connect ideas and think on their own. Many pre-service teachers were willing to engage CDT as integrators, but they did not know how because they were "lacking the necessary skills and confidence" (Zack et al., 2010, p. 99) to enter the classroom presenting controversy.

Barriers

In their studies about a variety of CDT classroom practices, teacher perceptions, and discourse skills, many researchers (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2015; Bromley & Russell, 2010; Dunn et al., 2013b; Gross, 2013; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Nganga et al., 2020; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Parker, personal communication, June 2, 2020; Pettigrew, 2010; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2015; Tinberg & Weisberger, 2014; and Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017) came to the same two conclusions about the most common barriers which stand in the way of teachers using CDT in the classroom to foster discourse skills. The first barrier was a lack of content knowledge, which was not only concerning on its own – and may be worth investigating, but this lack also came with its own set of worries. The second barrier was a lack of pedagogical training which affected new teachers' confidence and willingness for using CDT as they entered their careers.

Lack of Content Knowledge

Teachers who participated in many studies cited a lack of specific content knowledge as causing their fear about using CDT. Pettigrew (2010) found large gaps in content knowledge among the teachers in her study; these gaps, of course, caused the quality of instruction to suffer (p. 54). Nowell and Poindexter (2018) also found teachers who lacked basic content knowledge were unable to relate topics to current events or to students' lives. Hess and McAvoy (2015) said teachers without content mastery stumbled on landmines during instruction and also were not able to answer student questions or know if a source was a truly reliable source providing reliable evidence. Hunt (2016) also found teachers were afraid students would be able to sense their discomfort and become uncomfortable themselves. Consequently, Torney-Purta et al. (2005), in their analysis of data reported in 1999 IEA Civic Education Study, showed there was a direct relationship between a teacher's education and students' civic achievement.

Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) asserted because of poor preparation, some teachers did not have "the background knowledge or the pedagogical skills or both" to do CDT discussions (p. 4-5). Similarly, the director of the Belfer National Conference for Educators at the USHMM said because of the lack of knowledge an average of only two or fewer class periods per academic year were spent in classrooms across the country on the Holocaust. 80% of Belfer participants were never taught CDT in school; additionally, those teachers who were self-taught lacked confidence in their skills (J. Parker, personal communication, June 2, 2020). The Belfer National Conference for Educators and

many others similar to it existed because there was interest among America's teachers in obtaining knowledge and training.

Lack of Pedagogical Training

Presenting CDT to classes of students requires certain skills and pedagogical knowledge. Nowell and Poindexter (2018) found all of their survey takers had been encouraged in coursework to "teach with social justice in mind" (p. 4); however, they also felt they needed training on how to do so effectively. Gross (2013) uncovered a fear among teachers that if they taught CDT ineffectively, they could do more harm than good possibly evoking "racist and bigoted reactions" (p. 140). He also cited this fear as proof more teacher training was needed. Totten (2019) agreed saying teachers who taught CDT, genocide in his studies, did more harm than good if they did it poorly. He worried about false information being passed from an unqualified instructor to students who did not know better. Focused on the Holocaust, Bromley and Russell (2010) found teachers who felt ill equipped to present the subject simply did not teach it (p. 154). They also did not seek PD or even self-educate. Sardone and Devlin-Scherer (2015) found with CDT, teachers found they lacked know-how saying their teacher prep program had not covered how to present CDT or to manage it. Postman and Weingartner (1969) found 89% of teachers said they lacked "the competence to discuss controversial issues with students" (p. 37). Dunn et al. (2013b) found many teachers who simply felt unprepared to engage students with CDT. Hess (2009) discussed lack of "sufficient preparation" (p.163) causing teachers to teach only low-level skills and basic knowledge of facts. Totten (2019) argued teachers without pedagogical training could potentially have done more

harm than good and were better off not doing CDT at all instead of doing it poorly. Tinberg and Weisberger (2014) found teachers were afraid of the questions students might ask, saying sometimes CDT, here the Holocaust, left a class with more questions than answers and this was not a comfortable place for teachers who had not had training on how to deal with this. Clearly teacher training programs were not providing adequate preparation for teachers to enter the field ready and confident to engage students in discourse using CDT.

Pre-service Teacher Confidence

Pre-service teachers' level of confidence as they entered their first classrooms made a difference in what they chose to teach and how they chose to teach those topics. Torney-Purta et al. (2005) found a teacher's confidence in teaching "political topics relates to student civic knowledge" (p. 32). Unfortunately, Hess (2009) found many times that teachers who were not confident in either content or pedagogical approaches avoided CDT as much as possible. Simpson (2012) spoke with many teachers who simply lacked confidence, felt uncomfortable, or felt "unable to tackle" CDT (p. 54). Further, Maitles and Cowan (2012) discovered a willingness among pre-service teachers, even a desire, to teach and engage CDT; however, only 35% felt confident enough they actually did it (p. 229). When teachers lacked confidence in their own mastery of CDT, the "content [was] likely to be excluded" (Maitles & Cowan, 2012, p. 229), leaving students without opportunities to engage and practice CDT skills. Without teacher confidence, work with CDT was simply not happening.

Hattie and Zierer (2018) suggested because “learning means making mistakes and so does teaching,” teachers should set up and engage with a culture of mistakes (p. 92) along with a culture of confidence while constantly reassessing. Hattie and Zierer (2018) also discussed the importance of collective efficacy saying if everyone on a faculty bought in and collectively thought their practice was relevant and effective for student growth, this brought confidence to teachers, helped them overcome barriers, showed growth in their students; further, they found teachers’ collective thoughts, as a faculty or staff, about their practice was among the most relevant factors in pedagogy to student outcomes overall (p. 26). Importantly, Hattie (2015) added, because “20 – 25% of the total learning variance” in a classroom was “in the hands of teachers” (p. 87), the confidence to follow through with this culture of mistakes was key.

Summary of the Literature Review

The practical value of CDT in the classroom has been investigated numerous times and found to be great and varied (Brown et al., 2014; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Nganga, et al., 2020; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Sue et al., 2009; Totten, 2019). From critical thinking and abstract thought to learning to listen to other perspectives on real life problems, CDT drove student understanding and supported involved citizenry (Gutmann &n Ben-Porath, 2015; Hess, 2009; Leskes, 2013; Martens & Gainous, 2013; Parker, 2010; . In theory, most teachers supported using CDT, but the reality was most often most of them had not been practicing or applying this belief (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Nganga et al., 2020; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Pettigrew,

2010; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2015; and Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Even though researchers agreed the classroom was the ideal setting for CDT, they also found teachers avoided CDT for a variety of reasons. Finding this lack was ubiquitous, every researcher or research team in this chapter, without exception, advocated for or recommended teachers be trained or better trained on effectively using discussion of CDT in their classrooms (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2015; Bromley & Russell, 2010; Dunn et al., 2013b; Gross, 2013; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Nganga et al., 2020; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; J. Parker, personal communication, June 2, 2020; Pettigrew, 2010; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2015; Tinberg & Weisberger, 2014; and Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). What if they were just better trained in the first place and entered the profession ready?

I found no one who had furthered the topic by looking specifically at training program curricula to see if pre-service teachers in Southern states were prepared to use CDT. No one I could find was looking at this topic in the same manner as I. Even those who looked at CDT focused on best practices, and none went any further than recommending said classroom practices and further research. As I followed the literature, I wanted to know if teacher preparation programs were evolving to address CDT as more than 20 years of researchers had recommended (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Postman & Weingartner, 1969). I wondered who was training their pre-service teachers in the pedagogical strategies behind discussing CDT and if that training was thorough enough for pre-service teachers to enter their new careers confident in using CDT to promote practice of civil discourse.

Chapter III: Methodology

In this study, I attempted to discover the amount, or lack, of training using CDT in the classroom pre-service teachers in Tennessee and three neighboring states received and how this impacted their confidence with implementing CDT. Information discovered in this study could hopefully get to one root of the question of why America was more divisive than ever and why its citizens and leaders had lost the skill of civil discourse. By 2022, college professors were seeing students without the proper skills to address, discuss, and support controversial topics in class activities or writing; employers complained of the same lack in new hires (Winthrop, 2020). The lack of civility and compromise among America's leaders had become more and more apparent in legislative sessions. Willis and Kane (2018) pointed out the rate of the votes in Congress had dramatically dropped as civic education had dropped over the previous 25 years, and there had been more stalemates than compromises among both the House and the Senate over the previous 20 years.

I originally wanted to see if teachers could educate civil discourse skills back into the public by explicitly teaching discourse using CDT. As I reviewed the literature, I realized researchers found we could educate civil discourse skills into students and prepare them for adult and civic life, but overwhelmingly, it was just not happening in classrooms across the country (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Nganga et al., 2020; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Pettigrew, 2010; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2015; and Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). I wondered if the reason for this lack was new teachers, entering classrooms directly out of training programs,

were not being taught how to engage students in civil discussions and analysis of CDT. As there was no better way to know what went on in classrooms or programs than to ask the people working or enrolled, I went to them. The United States Department of Education's Title II website showed which institutions were training the largest number of pre-service teachers in Tennessee and in three of the neighboring states from which the most people moved to Tennessee – Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina (Lockridge & Reyes, 2021). Drawing from two existing instruments, Blum's (1994) *Classroom Discipline Survey* and Nganga's (2019) *Posttest*, I compiled a four-item questionnaire for faculty about what specific CDT training was offered in their teacher education program. Drawing from Nganga's (2019) *Posttest* and three more existing instruments - Guyton & Hoffman's (1983) *Teaching of Controversial Issues Survey*, Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy's (2001) *Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale,* Woolfolk-Hoy & Burke-Spero's (2005) *Teacher Confidence Scale*, I compiled a six question questionnaire for pre-service teachers investigating how confident and prepared they felt with using CDT and leading discussions in their upcoming classrooms and if they could tie that confidence to a certain course, unit, or activity in their program.

Research Design

I used a basic interpretive qualitative approach, using questionnaires, at multiple sites to investigate perceptions of the connections between formal training and confidence. A qualitative research design using multiple sites was appropriate for this study because the purpose was to investigate perceptions and confidence. Qualitative research allowed me to learn about individual and

collective perceptions which were not necessarily quantifiable. Queiros et al. (2017) asserted qualitative research was concerned with meanings and motives and helped to look more deeply into "phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables" (p. 370). Another aspect qualitative researchers were interested in was "understanding how people interpret their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015, p. 6). Qualitative methods allowed researchers to "unpack these differing perspectives within a community" and "probe for underlying values beliefs and assumptions" (Choy, 2014, p. 102) to produce "in depth and illustrative information" (Queiros, et al., 2017, p. 370). Njie and Asimiran (2014) asserted an essential interest of qualitative research was "the revelation of meaning buried in the nature of reality as understood and interpreted by people" (p. 35). This made qualitative research relative to how educators' experienced the classroom in their daily lives.

Additionally, Choy (2014) said the inquiry in qualitative research was broad and open-ended allowing the participants to raise issues that mattered the most to them (p. 102); the comments sections on the questionnaires left room for participants to do just this. Njie and Asimiran (2014) also argued qualitative research was worth the effort and the large amount of data to be culled through because it could reveal "rich details that cannot be amassed through research methods that rely on figures and absolutes" (p. 35). Merriam and Tisdale (2015) added qualitative research provided the audience or the reader with the research steps and scenarios in "enough detail to show the authors' conclusions make sense" (p. 238) or follow logic.

Qualitative methods should also be used when looking into a phenomenon about which little information was known or available (Njie & Asimiran, 2014, p. 35), and the goal was to advance a field's knowledge base, or fill a gap in knowledge, of a certain subject. The use of CDT in the classroom was where I found this gap in the literature I reviewed for my study. Qualitative research was appropriate for developing "rich and comprehensive understandings" of issues which revolved around people (Zucker, 2009, p. 6); they also mentioned the value of "emphasizing the participants' perspective as central to the process" (p. 14). Merriam & Tisdale (2015) supported using qualitative methods when one wanted a "study of a bounded system" (p. 294), in this case four individual bounded systems – teacher preparation programs within four institutions; further, using multiple sites could result in themes or trends which "conceptualize[d] the data from all the cases" (p. 234), here, a regional view. In addition, using non-random criterion sampling for purposeful selection of one type of student also makes qualitative methods the appropriate format here (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015)

There were, of course, weaknesses in qualitative research. Queiros et al. (2017) mentioned qualitative research could be hard to generalize. Choy (2014) also pointed out qualitative researchers ran "the risk of improper interpretation" and, even more problematic, had "the lack of the power to randomize" (p. 102); this could lead to an inability for the study to be repeated or generalized. These were not significant detractors for me. I wanted to focus specifically on what preparation teachers were taking in Tennessee schools, so replication was not necessarily a concern. Additionally, I tried to use the largest concentrated numbers of participants in each state who met the inclusion criteria, and the

sample was focused on one specific group, area, and discipline – education of pre-service teachers in this specific region. Using CDT ultimately came down to the comfort and confidence level of each teacher (Maitles & Cowan, 2012), and as this cannot be quantified, qualitative research was the best choice.

Role of the Researcher

When I trained to be a classroom teacher, I had some professors who were open to discussion and controversy, but I was not formally trained in the pedagogy of CDT in my teacher preparation program in East Tennessee. My upper division English courses did provide plentiful opportunity to practice discussion but never focused on how to lead them. I have sought out PD to help me with this throughout my career with the most impactful for using CDT in my practice being the Belfer National Conference at USHMM. Knowing I had to seek my own training, I wanted to know if that was typical for most public-school teachers in this region.

I considered teaching a moral calling and always tried to teach my students the facts, to the best of my ability, even if a topic was uncomfortable. Brown's (2018) philosophy of leaning into vulnerability if a topic was uncomfortable and Allport's (1954) idea of repeated exposure building comfort were applied in my public-school classroom. I also felt ethically bound to discuss social justice and change for the better. My personality is such that I wanted to confront CDT, so students could do better than the previous generations at mitigating social ills and changing their communities for the better.

Additionally, I have taught in suburban, urban, and rural schools in East Tennessee and have seen CDT energize and engage students no matter which

setting. I have also seen many teachers in those settings avoid CDT. Having taught 9th grade English for over a decade, I saw the effects of using CDT on my own students, specifically when studying the Holocaust. Over the course of the unit, classes of 9th graders transformed into groups of more thoughtful students who liked discussing the hard things. Studies investigating a variety of practices within Holocaust education were already prevalent, so I wondered about the efficacy of other CDT. Next, I had to find instruments to collect data and participants from the American Southeast to provide that data. This chapter continued with a discussion of the participants in the study, my data collection process and method of analysis. I concluded this chapter with a discussion on the trustworthiness, limitations, delimitation, assumptions of the study, and a summary of the chapter.

Participants in the Study

I narrowed the list of public colleges in each state to the three institutions in each state where the teacher preparation programs graduated the highest numbers of teachers, based on the largest mean number of program completers over the past three years according to U S Department of Education data ("Title II Reports," 2020). Interestingly, the included institutions did not always have the highest enrollment numbers. North Carolina and Kentucky both had programs at private institutions which had the highest enrollment in teacher education in those states.

By focusing on Tennessee and neighboring states Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, my research and results were specific to the southeast region of America and to what teachers trained in border states could potentially bring in to

affect public education in Tennessee and presented a clearer view than existed from the previous literature I reviewed. Because Tennessee afforded almost full reciprocity to teachers who obtained their licenses in any other state and waived the test score requirement in favor of positive performance evaluations from a previous employer (Evans et al., 2019), it was an attractive place to move. Tennessee also did not have a state income tax, stopped taxing interest and dividend income in 2020 (Loughead, 2020), and was "very business-friendly. There [were] plenty of jobs. People and companies [were] taking note. Places like Nashville…[were] attracting new residents" (Lockridge & Reyes, 2021, p. 2). Further, Tennessee's "fiscal health rate[d] among the best of all states," attracting even more people (Richardson, 2020, p. 1). All four states included in this study had some form of reciprocity as outlined in the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) Interstate Agreement for Educator Licensure. All 50 states and DC updated their commitment to the agreement in 2020 and renew it every five years. Crossover between states and teachers trained in other states, especially neighboring states, was common (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 2021). Including Alabama to the south, North Carolina to the east, and Kentucky to the north provided a regional view of training of potential teachers for Tennessee public schools. The NASDTEC agreement allowed teachers who moved states to obtain employment without completing a degree program in their new state. Each public school district and each state could add additional requirements such as years of experience, testing, and current licensure level of applicant.

Notably, when Americans moved in 2020, 16% of them moved within 100-150 miles of their hometowns (Patino et al., 2021, p. 3), and in 2019 14% of moves were across state lines (Frost, 2020, p. 2). Tennessee's long east-to-west geographical shape made it one of two states with the most border states. These border states were all training teachers in their colleges, and teachers from neighboring states had a greater potential for entering the educational work force in Tennessee than from states farther afield. In fact, in 2020, Tennessee was the seventh most common place to move to from North Carolina, fourth most common from Alabama, and third most common from Kentucky ("States sending the most people to Tennessee," 2021).

The College of Education dean at one of the two highest producing teacher preparation programs in Tennessee agreed for their teaching faculty and pre-service teachers to participate. Deans at one of the three highest producing programs in each border state, Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, agreed. These agreements narrowed the population of the study to four institutions. The institutions were assigned codes and were known as TN1, AL1, KY1, NC1 for data collection and reporting purposes. Ultimately 5 faculty members – three from Alabama, one from Kentucky, and one from North Carolina, and 23 preservice teachers from Tennessee submitted questionnaire responses.

Faculty

Faculty participants were teaching faculty members actively teaching courses in each school's bachelor's degree teacher training program. They had to be teaching during the current academic year. This requirement ensured they could report on what was happening in the classrooms of their programs.

Pre-service Teachers

I limited the pre-service teacher participants to bachelor's degree seeking pre-service teachers in their last year of undergraduate coursework or completing their student teaching. While there were a variety of programs offering teacher licensure in each state – Post-Bac, add-on certifications, Master's programs, etc., I chose only public Bachelor programs. These programs were where the majority of teachers in Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee were trained – 78%, 87%, 71%, and 79%, respectively (Evans et al., 2019).

Additionally, the demographics of the four institutions varied quite a bit, which helped make sure all types of students had representation in the data. TN1's student population was 53.2% male and 46.8 female, 83.1% white, 4.4% black, 4.3% Hispanic, and 8.2% other. AL1's student population was 35.2% male and 64.8% female, 53.1% white, 32.1% black, 4.5% Hispanic, and 10.3 other. KY1's student population was 43.1% male and 56.9% female, 74.9% white, 7.1% black, 5.8% Hispanic, 3.5% Asian, and 8.7% other. Lastly, NC1's student population was 41.2% male and 58.8% female, 63.2% white, 17.1% black, 8.7% Hispanic, 2.5% Asian, and 8.5% other.

Data Collection

To obtain participants, I emailed requests for participation to deans and department heads of colleges of Education at the three institutions in each state which had the highest prior three-year average number of pre-service teacher graduates ("Title II Reports," 2020). I sent them a summary of my study (see Appendix D) and asked for both faculty and pre-service teacher participants. While waiting for responses to this request for participation, I began piloting the

questionnaires (see Pilot Testing section). Administrators at one school in each state agreed to participate and emailed me this affirmation. After this assurance and obtaining pilot test responses, I applied for LMU's IRB approval, and the IRB granted it. To begin the data collection process, I used campus email addresses to send the deans of Colleges of Education, who had already agreed for their departments to participate, a cover letter (see Appendix C), including the links for both questionnaires and a copy of the study summary to distribute with the links.

Deans then disseminated the links and summary information to their teaching faculty and to pre-service teachers studying in their Bachelor's programs in their last semester of coursework or completing their student teaching. This distribution method allowed participants to complete questionnaires at their convenience. I chose the online questionnaire format hoping the ease of access would prompt greater numbers of participants, but also for several other advantages the format provided such as efficiency and ability to reach a large sample (Evans & Mathur, 2005).

The two questionnaires had similar components and procedures for completion and submission. Questionnaires remained open for four weeks, and I sent reminders to the deans at the end of weeks two and three. Evans and Mathur (2005) found this type of reminder could help increase response rates. Additionally, the self-paced aspect of online questionnaires allowed pre-service teacher participants time to reflect on answers and the ability to respond from anywhere. Implied consent statements were included on both questionnaires along with statements advising participation was strictly voluntary; pre-service teachers were not obligated to complete the questionnaire just because their administrators

agreed to the department's participation, but by submitting their responses they implicitly agreed to participate. There was no compensation or penalty levied against pre-service teachers for any answer or for nonresponse. Each questionnaire took less than 10 minutes to complete and submit.

I had no direct contact with participants, only deans. All participants submitted responses directly to *Qualtrics*, the online site used to collect data, so all data were collected in this manner. These measures ensured the anonymity of responses, encouraged honesty, and I hoped would bring a large response.

All comments were reported verbatim, but with any identifiers removed, and were coded by state and submission number; for example, pre-service teacher questionnaire submission number 25 received from T1 would be known as T1S25. Questionnaire responses were submitted directly to *Qualtrics*, so anonymity was maintained. While online questionnaires seemed impersonal, Minaar and Heystek (2013) found this impersonality to be an advantage which "afforded respondents an opportunity to respond to questions freely, without feeling threatened in any way" (p. 169). Participants were reminded on the questionnaires that submitting responses implied consent for their answers to be included in the data analysis. I received 5 faculty responses - three from Alabama, one from Kentucky, and one from North Carolina - and 23 pre-service teacher responses all from Tennessee.

Pilot Testing

Even though each of the questions I used to compile *Faculty Course Offerings Questionnaire* (see Appendix A) and *Pre-service Teacher Confidence Questionnaire* (see Appendix B) had been validated many times over, both within

each original study (Blum, 1994; Guyton & Hoffman, 1983; Nganga, 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001; Woolfolk-Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005) and when utilized in later studies, they had, of course, never been deemed trustworthy together as one specific compiled instrument with the topic changed to CDT. For all these reasons, piloting the newly compiled instrument was necessary.

A pilot study preceded the main study to analyze aspects of it including how trustworthy its specific instruments were and helped bolster "the quality and efficiency" of a research study (In, 2017, p. 601). Because of the time and money required to develop entirely new questionnaires, researchers often “adapt existing questionnaires to better fit the purpose of their study. However, the effect of such adaptations is unclear” (Sousa et al., 2017, p. 1289). I could not find an instrument which asked exactly what I needed it to to answer my research questions, so I compiled my questionnaires from existing validated instruments.

I ran a pilot test to ensure the different styles of individual questions and differing answer scales were not altering the clarity or accessibility of the other questions and “indicate readiness for implementation” (Perry, 2001, p. 107). I sent the pilot to 14 teaching faculty members at a small East Tennessee College where I was granted permission to pilot my instruments, provided participation was 100% voluntary and no identifiers were collected. After two weeks, I received five responses in which faculty answered and reviewed both the faculty questions and the pre-service teacher questions based on their own training experience. Additionally, I obtained permission to ask a sample of my own students to answer and review the questions and provide comments about the format and clarity.

There were five students who responded. Both faculty and pre-service teacher responses were on par with what I expected based on the original studies and the literature regarding CDT and classroom discussion.

I received two recurring suggestions regarding format or clarity of the questions. The first suggestion addressed that one of the scales read the opposite of the others. '1' appeared as a negative answer choice such as "not at all" or "disagree" in the first 4 questions on the pre-service teacher questionnaire, but question 6 used 1 as a positive "strongly agree." I anticipated this reaction as Woolfolk-Hoy and Burke-Spero (2005) gave permission for the scale to be reversed if a study would be comparing numbers. Because this study was qualitative, I did not change this; I wanted to compare actual responses, so the directions of the scales was inconsequential. Additionally, I wanted to keep the original question as intact as possible. The second suggestion from reviewers was to add some definitions of terminology to the questionnaire; however, these two people had not read the accompanying study summary (see Appendix D) which provided those details. Combined with the literature, pilot responses supported moving forward with the main study.

Faculty Questionnaire

To compile the four-item faculty questionnaire, I drew from two existing instruments – Blum's (1994) *Classroom Discipline Survey* and Nganga's (2019) *Posttest*. Items one and two on the *Faculty Course Offerings Questionnaire* asked about the amount of specific class time dedicated to the subjects of controversial or difficult topics and discussions throughout their program. The original questions from Blum's (1994) survey asked about class time spent specifically on

learning about discipline in the classroom; however, I changed them so the questions still measured the amount of specific class time but asked about CDT.

Item one answer options were “One Semester, Two Semesters, Other,” and item two options were “Less than 1 Week, 1-3 Weeks, 4-6 Weeks, 7-9 Weeks, 10-12 Weeks, Other.” Item numbers three and four were pulled from the Nganga’s (2019) study and mirrored pre- asking about perceived level of preparedness for CDT – “Not at All,” “Somewhat,” and “Prepared,” with item four being a space for explanation of that perception. All four of these items informed Research Question 1; however, items three and four also partially informed Research Question 3. The items’ answer scales were taken directly from the original sources.

Pre-service Teacher Questionnaire

The six items included in the *Pre-service Teacher Confidence Questionnaire* came from four sources. Question number one came from the *Teacher Confidence Scale* (TCS) (Woolfolk-Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005) and asked if preservice teachers were confident they could facilitate discussion in the classroom. Question number two was drawn from the *Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale* (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001) and asked about pre-service teachers’ ability to respond to difficult questions. Questions number three and six came from Nganga’s (2019) *Posttest* in her study of teacher preparedness. These questions asked about perceived level of preparedness and about any coursework which impacted that preparedness, respectively. Question number six had no answer choices but asked for narrative answers. Providing space for personal explanation of their answer to number three, question number four also

came from Nganga (2019). Lastly, I took question five from Guyton and Hoffman's (1983) *Teaching of Controversial Issues Survey*; it asked directly if pre-service teachers felt competent to teach about controversial topics in their future classrooms. Answer options were numbered 1-5 strongly agree – strongly disagree. Again, answer scales were taken directly from the source original questions. Data collected from these six questions addressed Research Question 2. Questions three and four were directly compared with answers from faculty questionnaire questions three and four and applied to Research Question 3.

Methods of Analysis

I used an inductive coding by hand method. This step-by-step coding process began with open coding where I read for and marked main ideas or could-be themes. I wrote these main points individually on index cards. These were posted to a cork board for easier viewing. The second pass through was axial coding; I categorized the common responses to larger groups. I grouped index cards by similarity of topic or wording, looking for themes to emerge. Themes could be larger umbrella terms or specific, focused concepts; as these emerged from the data, I color-coded common themes, again for ease of viewing. The third pass through was what Merriam and Tisdell (2015) call "selective or theoretical coding" (p. 229), and I made larger 'umbrella' groups if groups from axial coding were linked in a broader way relevant to CDT. Coding was done for each question which asked for comments and across questions from both faculty and pre-service teacher questionnaires. Between subject analysis was conducted for comparison of similar questions between faculty and pre-service teacher questionnaires. I directly compared responses to questions three and four from both questionnaires

to see if there was a difference between faculty perception of teacher candidates' preparedness and pre-service teachers' perception of their own preparedness for using CDT in future classrooms. *Qualtrics* tabulated the portions of the data from the scaled items upon submission to the site. I used both comments and scaled responses to answer the research questions. Because of the limited response rate, data was compiled as a whole, but not within each state, and provided a limited regional view of CDT training and pre-service teacher confidence.

Trustworthiness

I compiled and used two online questionnaires, one for pre-service teachers and one for teacher preparation program faculty. Questions on both questionnaires were derived from five existing validated instruments, related to student perception of their academic programs and faculty perception of curricula; links to the questionnaires were distributed to faculty and pre-service teacher participants through campus email systems. The questions I chose were intended to gather data on confidence levels for using CDT in future classrooms and perceptions of preparedness from pre-service teachers and from the faculty training them. The student questionnaire was drawn from four existing instruments - *Teacher Confidence Scale* (TCS) (Woolfolk-Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005), *Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale* (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001), Nganga's (2019) *Posttest*, and Guyton and Hoffman's (1983) *Teaching of Controversial Issues Survey*. For the faculty questionnaire, I drew two questions from Blum's (1994) *Classroom Discipline Survey* and one question I split into two, one with an answer scale and one with space for comments, from Nganga's (2019) *Posttest*.

Woolfolk-Hoy and Burke-Spero (2005) created the TCS by adapting Gibson and Dembo's (1984) instrument measuring teacher confidence. They validated TCS by testing it against existing instruments and found the TCS had higher reliability for the total measure than all of the others (Woolfolk-Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005, p. 350). Their 2005 study detailing the development and validation of this instrument has been cited 2,769 times in the years since, according to a Google Scholar search. Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk-Hoy (2001) developed the TSES with the intention of providing a better instrument for measuring teacher efficacy than existed. This instrument was validated in their 2001 study and has been cited 9,782 times since. Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk-Hoy (2001) examined the construct validity of the new instrument by analyzing the correlation between TSES and existing instruments; they determined the TSES was "reasonably valid and reliable " (p. 801). Additionally, TSES asked about a broader range of teaching tasks than the existing instruments at the time. Nganga et al. (2020) investigated teacher preparedness and perceptions about teaching controversial issues, specifically in social studies. They developed their pre-service teacher questionnaire to ask about confidence with CDT and about coursework or activities which may have contributed to pre-service teachers' views of or confidence with using CDT. They ensured validity by asking participants to review and verify their own responses then to compare them to the overall results of the study; additionally, they analyzed data individually as researchers and "cooperatively" as a team (p. 81). Nganga et al.'s (2020) study used the participant questions validated in Nganga (2019) and has been cited 19 times in less than two years according to a Google Scholar search.

Guyton and Hoffman's (1983) *Teaching of Controversial Issues Survey* was "designed to measure teacher competency and willingness to teach controversial issues" (Byford et al., 2009, p. 167). The instrument was validated in their 1983 study and has been cited 10 times since. Lastly, Blum’s (1994) national survey about training in classroom discipline in teacher preparation programs was validated through that study. It has been cited 25 times in Google Scholar.

After compiling the instruments and conducting the pilot test, I implemented additional measures to help ensure trustworthiness not only of the instruments but also of the study itself. I included multiple states in the study to help obtain a broad view of what was offered in teacher preparation programs and, therefore, in classrooms in the southeast region of The United States. I asked for input from both faculty and pre-service teachers, so I gathered data about both perspectives and avoided bias towards either.

The anonymity measures I put in place also added to the trustworthiness. Because the deans distributed the links for the questionnaires, I had no contact with any actual participants. I was always one step removed from them and never knew who they were. I hoped this anonymity would encourage open, honest responses. Additionally, I offered no compensation, and no extra credit was offered to pre-service teachers, for participation in the study. This ensured I, as the primary and only investigator, did not influence participants through contact. Using the online data collection site *Qualtrics* also added to the security and anonymity of responses as all completed questionnaires were submitted directly to a password protected account. Together, these measures established transparency and lent to the study’s trustworthiness.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are "potential weaknesses in [a] study and are out of [the researcher's] control" (Simon, 2011, p. 1) which may affect results. As with any study, limitations were present in this study. As participation was completely voluntary, the sample was limited to those faculty and pre-service teachers who chose to respond to the questionnaire. Deans agreed for their departments to be part of the study, but this did not mean all members of those departments participated. Additionally, only one institution agreed to participate in each state, further limiting the pool of potential participants. Next, low enrollment numbers at each institution meant even fewer participants. Lastly, the four participating institutions had policies dictating how questionnaires from outside researchers were distributed. Deans sent the link for the faculty questionnaire to their faculty members and emailed the link to the pre-service teacher questionnaire to their students who met the inclusion criteria. While this was out of my control, it helped assure pre-service teachers of the anonymity of their responses and encouraged honesty.

Despite these limitations, conducting this study was still valuable because of what could be learned from it and the next steps it prompted. This was a good place to start to get a snapshot of what pre-service teachers were learning and how they were equipped going into the classroom. Classrooms were the ideal setting where students started to learn and practice how to civilly disagree, how to listen to understand others, and when they started forming their political identity (Flanagan, 2013; Hess, 2009). CDT provided great material to help foster skills including discussion and understanding other views and help students develop

into productive citizens. Knowing if pre-service teachers were able to impart these skills was an important piece of the larger issues of curriculum properly preparing new teachers, improving the quality of public education, and producing productive citizens.

To refine the parameters and focus of a study, delimitations were "those characteristics that limit the scope and define boundaries of [a] study" (Simon, 2011, p. 1) researchers intentionally put in place. I set delimitations to provide boundaries for my study and to maintain manageability of the data. I limited my population to inviting the two public teacher preparation programs in Tennessee which trained the highest numbers of pre-service teachers; however, only one of those institutions ultimately participated. To obtain a robust sample, teacher preparation programs with the top three highest number of graduates in Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina were invited to participate; one from each state agreed. These border states were chosen because teachers who relocate to Tennessee were more likely to come from them than other border states (Lockridge & Reyes, 2021). Collecting data from four states allowed for robust data representative of each state and of the region's public colleges and universities.

Other delimitations included criteria for inclusion in the study and measures to ensure anonymity of responses. I included only students who were seniors in their last semester of coursework and those who were completing student teachers; pre-service teachers who fit these criteria were better able to reflect on the quality of their teacher preparation programs in comparison to other students who had not experienced the program in its entirety.

Assumptions of the Study

Assumptions in research are the beliefs and biases a researcher holds when approaching a new study which "have a reasonable chance to influence or impact findings but for which [researchers] cannot obtain solid data, specifically quantify, or cannot (or explicitly chooses not to) control" (Simon, 2011, p. 2). They were unavoidable if human beings were involved in conducting research. Based on my 18 years of classroom experience, my own formal training and PD, and the literature, I had several assumptions as I entered conducting this study.

To begin, I was a strong advocate for the use of both discussion and CDT in the classroom. Additionally, I placed my faith in classroom teachers to use all the tools they had to reach their students. If they were trained, certainly, they would be using CDT more. I assumed formal training with CDT was not happening in teacher preparation programs. There was no training on CDT in my teacher preparation program, therefore, I assumed most teachers-were not exposed to CDT and its use for discourse. Among the hundreds of teachers I have worked with over the years, most said they were not given formal training in CDT either. I assumed teachers avoided CDT out of fear because I saw that in the literature and amongst my colleagues. New laws governing topics allowed in classroom and which threatened punitive consequences caused more fear which could produce more avoidance as more and more of these laws were passed across the country. Of course, it was also an assumption training impacted confidence, but, logically, if teachers were more familiar with a concept or practice, they would be more comfortable discussing or practicing it in their classroom.

I assumed educators and those who trained them wanted to constantly improve and stay current in pedagogical skills and social issues which affected their students. The thousands of teachers who voluntarily spent time during their summer break taking classes or seminars, (Lee et al., 2021; Pace, 2021; J. Parker, 2020; National Institute for Civil Discourse, 2021; Shuster, 2010) served as the basis for this assumption.

Counting on academic integrity, I assumed the honesty and knowledge of deans, faculty members, and pre-service teachers; furthermore, I helped ensure this assumption by reminding participants their answers would remain anonymous. Because they were the ones doing the work, deans, faculty, and pre-service teachers should know what their program consists of. I also assumed the deans distributed the questionnaire links when and how we agreed upon because they determined how to distribute these things. This was also an additional safeguard of anonymity as well. I assumed or hoped using four institutions would give me if not a generalizable picture, a representative picture, of the region because the included institutions trained the largest number of teachers in their states. I hoped using one of the largest teacher preparation programs in Tennessee would provide closer to a complete picture of teacher training within the state than using smaller programs.

The accuracy or honesty of the studies I used in researching was indicated by their peer-reviewed and published status. Based on 18 years of experience with student-teacher dynamics, I also suspected pre-service teacher perception of preparedness for using CDT in the classroom could be significantly different from

faculty perception of that same preparedness. All of these assumptions had the potential to affect the study.

Summary of Methodology

I investigated if, and to what extent, as of 2023, public teacher preparation programs among the largest in Tennessee and Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, three of its neighboring states, offered pre-service teachers training on how to discuss and use CDT and discussions in their classrooms and to determine if an impact existed between the amount of training they had received using CDT in the classroom and confidence of graduating pre-service teachers using a qualitative study design at four separate sites. This design allowed for personal comments from participants in order to obtain depth in both topics. I previously sought my own training in CDT and advocated for using CDT because I had seen the effects on students and the vital skills taught most effectively through CDT.

I narrowed the focus to Tennessee and neighboring states, and to the public schools with the largest number of graduates, to obtain a regional view. I included the neighboring states which had the most people move from them into Tennessee over the five years prior. I sought agreement from deans of the top three programs in each state, and four institutions ultimately agreed to participate - one each in Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, and Tennessee. Immediately after IRB approval, I began data collection using two questionnaires managed through the online platform *Qualtrics*. Questionnaires were open for four weeks, with two reminder emails sent to the deans. Anonymity was maintained through the deans' distribution of the links to the questionnaires

through campus email systems to their teaching faculty and their last year students.

To analyze the data, I used an inductive, by hand coding method in three stages, using a cork board with color coding for easy viewing. Prior to data collection, I assumed training in CDT was probably not happening. I also assumed faculty of teacher preparation programs and their students would be truthful and open in order to contribute to their chosen field. The results are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter IV: Analysis and Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate if, and to what extent, as of 2023, public teacher preparation programs among the largest in Tennessee and Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, three of its neighboring states, were offering pre-service teachers training on how to discuss and use CDT and discussions in their classrooms and to determine if a relationship existed between confidence of graduating pre-service teachers in relation to the amount of training they had using CDT in the classroom. Teaching faculty and pre-service teachers finishing their bachelor's program responded to online questionnaires about course offerings, levels of preparation, and confidence with CDT. The number of responses I received was limited. Five faculty responses came from the four institutions - three from Alabama, one from Kentucky, one from North Carolina, and zero from Tennessee. Ironically, all 23 pre-service teacher responses came from Tennessee. While all responses were anonymous, I did collect limited demographic information about the pre-service teacher participants. Eleven of these participants were 18 to 21 years old, nine were 22 to 25; one was 26 to 29; and 2 were 30 or older. Eighteen (78.26%) were female and five (21.74%) were male.

Data Analysis

The first step in analyzing the data was to export it from *Qualtrics* to an Excel spreadsheet for my own ease of use. I printed all comments in large font and posted them on cork boards. All comments were labelled with assigned faculty or student ID numbers based on state, faculty or student status, and order received. For example, the first pre-service teacher from Tennessee who

responded was called TNS1. This was done for both pre-service teacher questionnaire items four and six which asked for commentary and for faculty questionnaire item four. I read through the comments multiple times before I began coding. Once multiple readings provided me with an overview of the general concepts or themes contained there, I used a hand coding method to organize the comments into positive and negative response groups. Then, I color coded like answers, grouped color coded comments into trends, then applied those trends to answering the research questions. Responses to the scaled questions were tabulated by *Qualtrics,* and I also employed that data to answer the research questions. Figures one through three show the comments submitted by participants and the coding process through which I classified them into themes.

Figure 1

Faculty question 4 coding process

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
To my knowledge, the only course that covers controversial/difficult issues is one that is an elective and therefore optional for students. However, I do not teach all teacher prep courses and am not familiar with the entire curriculum, so other courses may cover this.	**Yes, but singular:** One elective and therefore optional for students In the Social Studies course	**Training** for pre-service teachers **in CDT is not part of teacher preparation programs** unless offered singularly or as an elective
Limited course discussions occur regarding difficult issues. Differences in opinion are seldom explored. A tragedy.	**No:** Limited course discussion…differences of opinion are seldom explored. A tragedy	**Notable** Testing culture mentioned here and by student Lack of training is called “tragedy”
We do not have ample time per the prescribed curricular constraints to prepare candidates for licensure exams and additional content	We do not have ample time…licensure exams	
In the Social Studies course, this is address, but I am unsure of others.		

Figure 2

Pre-service teacher question 4 coding process

Open Codes

I feel like I can try

I am nervous to approach issues deemed controversial...I am scared on how to approach these topics

Never been included in any of my preparatory courses

I have been prepared

Coming from a diverse background, getting my degree at a greater age, and having worked as a teacher aide for years have given me more preparation than other pre-service teachers

I feel as though it is hard for me to discuss issues that are controversial because it makes me very anxious... hard to put some of those things into student-friendly language...I am somewhat confident....as I have done some before

I just don't feel as if I could do it....we have never discussed this

Program at **** is kind of awful at preparing teachers to work in the field...a few wonderful individuals that helped me prepare.

I have had similar discussions

Need a bit more education on multi-cultural affairs...I feel I can teach controversial issues

Not something we discussed

No formal training to assist me in my ability to teach controversial issues

I believe I can teach issues that are developmental appropriate

Well prepared

If an occasion arose where a student asked me a controversial topic or I was required to teach it. I would try to refrain... certain things and discussions that I do not feel prepared to discuss and/or would worry about my own bias

Discussing a lot of controversial topics is comparable to walking on eggshells...You never know how students will interpret your words... Because of so many harsh beliefs in the south, it is difficult to feel confident.

I was not trained to teach global and controversial issues...I feel like I could facilitate conversations and debates well with my teaching experience.

Get rid of edtpa

Have not been prepared to teach global or local controversial issues... I stay up-to-date on current events and feel confident that I can address the topics in class on a limited level since it is elementary.

Axial Codes

Avoid CDT/negative comment about preparation by program: I am nervous; I am scared; never been included; hard for me to discuss...makes me nervous...hard to put into student friendly language; don't feel as if I could...never discussed; program kind of awful a preparing; need a bit more education; not discussed; no formal training to assist me; I would try to refrain...do not feel prepared...worry about my own bias; comparable to walking on eggshells...never know how students will interpret your words...it is difficult to feel confident; was not trained; have not been prepared

Report feeling prepared by program: have been prepared; a few wonderful individuals helped me; well prepared

Feel prepared or confident based on outside factors: diverse background...greater age...having worked as a teacher aide for years have given me more preparation; somewhat confident...have done some before; have had similar discussions; could facilitate conversations and debates well with my teaching experience; stay up-to-date on current event and feel confident that I can address the topics

No explanation given for confidence: I can try; I feel I can; I believe I can

Themes

Most pre-service teachers **do not feel prepared** to address or discuss CDT in their future classrooms

Few pre-service teachers **feel prepared based on their coursework**

Confidence pre-service teachers feel with using CDT in their classes is **attributed to factors outside their preparation programs**

A few report **confidence or preparedness** but offer **no explanation**

Figure 3

Pre-service teacher question 6 coding process

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Little to none… focused on teaching the subjects at hand It has influenced me that teaching should be performed without any biases. Global and political issues can have a place in the classroom but it must be in a certain way that does not disrupt, divide, or marginalize My coursework has not influenced my decision about teaching global and local controversial issues in my classroom…it was not something I had ever spent much time considering being as it had never been addressed in my courses… my decision to involve that conversation in my classroom will be entirely my own. In my field of mathematics there are not many opportunities to teach on such issues, though I do think my coursework has well prepared me to address such issues in a respectful manner [Program] is very proactive and informative when it comes to teaching its students how to handle controversial topics. There hasn't been much instruction in discussing controversial issues in the classroom. We are taught to appreciate and represent diverse backgrounds and be inclusive to all students… could help… no coursework has really touched too much on discussing controversial issues I just don't feel as if we have discussed this and how to deliver it Just one upper level course even addressed the controversial issues Taught me that comparing historical events to modern global issues provides a way for students to learn new information. I was able to take an ESL class that greatly prepared me for some global and local controversial issues My program did not really discuss how to deal with controversial issues, but based on life experience I believe I could I have had no formal professional response training… there have been multiple local controversies… University has made no effort to teach us upcoming educators how to react or facilitate discussions concerning these issues… professor …has made efforts to ensure that we are prepared, however, that is one teacher… there should be a set of guidelines that all education majors have access to. We have been taught to not just teach the standards or issues, but to teach the students…This will prepare me… None of the coursework: Class discussions with professors has prepared me. I am not sure that I have had significant exposure in order to engage in these issues within my future classroom. Only had one professor who discussed global and local controversies.. If we do not discuss these in an educated and open environment, change will never happen in our society. We have not been introduced to much global and controversial issues in the classroom. We haven't really addressed them at all really. I would be interested in learning how to teach these subjects. Not been taught to teach global and local controversial issues.	**Respond to the negative:/no coursework** Have not been taught We have not been introduced…haven't really addressed them at all Was never addressed in coursework Little to none Coursework has not influenced…never been addressed in my courses Did not really discuss how to deal with controversial issues Hasn't been much instruction…no coursework really touched I just don't feel we have discussed this I am not sure I have had significant exposure in order to engage in these issues I have had no formal professional response training…University has made no effort to teach us upcoming educators how to react or facilitate discussions concerning these issues None of the coursework has prepared me **Responded positively/coursework or aspect of program** One professor who discussed in their course It has influenced me that teaching should be performed without any biases I do think my coursework has well prepared me to address such issues in a respectful manner [Program] is very proactive and informative when it comes to teaching its students how to handle controversial topics Was able to take an ESL class that greatly prepared me A professor…made efforts to ensure that we are prepared; however, that is one teacher Discussions with professors has prepared me Taught me that comparing historical events and modern global issues provides a way for students to learn new information **Teaching Philosophy** Taught to appreciate and represent diverse backgrounds and be inclusive to all students Taught to not just teach the standards or issues, but to teach the students…this will prepare me Teaching should be performed without any biases. Global and political issues can have a place in the classroom but it must be in a certain way that does not disrupt, divide, or marginalize **Notable** I would be interested in learning how to teach these subjects There should be a set of guidelines that all education majors have access to If we do not discuss these in an educated and open environment, change will never happen	No coursework addressed CDT Singular experiences within program Pre-service teachers want to be taught how to use CDT or think it should be part of program Overall teaching philosophy

Research Questions

Unfortunately, there were not sufficient data to conduct within program comparisons between faculty responses and pre-service teacher responses. Therefore, any subsequent comparison between faculty response and pre-service teacher response was based on the data as a whole and gave a regional view. The data sets were related because Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina were the most likely to train teachers who could then move into Tennessee later in life based on the data from a study which tracked where Americans moved to and from.

Research Question 1

How prevalent, as of 2023, were opportunities for pre-service teachers, studying at one of the three largest public teacher preparation programs in Tennessee, and its neighboring states Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, to engage in lessons, units, or courses about the pedagogy of presenting controversial or difficult topics in the classroom?

Several trends emerged within the limited comments submitted by faculty to question four. All who answered said their candidates were “somewhat prepared" to teach or discuss CDT. The literature showed discussion and civic skills were best learned through repeated practice over time, those who quantified this gave three weeks or less, throughout the program, as time spent, if any, on CDT within coursework. ALF3 said they addressed CDT in a teaching social studies course.

To obtain a wholistic view within each program, I originally intended to collect data from the professors conducting classes in teacher preparation

programs about what their courses offered and base the analysis on that. The data I received were not sufficient to do so; however, pre-service teachers were asked to comment about specific coursework that influenced, or would influence, their decisions to use controversy in their classrooms, and they gave rich, detailed commentary and details about their program offerings or experiences.

When asked about coursework which influenced their stance on using CDT in the classroom, 10 of 19 pre-service teachers who responded to this question included the words “none,” “never,” “have not been/had” or “did not.” Even those four whose answers were positive each included the words “just,” “only,” or “one” as qualifiers to emphasize these as singular experiences with CDT within their program. Another four left comments a bit off topic, giving strategies or beliefs towards teaching in general that they had formed over their time in their program. For example, TNS16 said they were prepared because they had been taught “not to just teach the standards or issues, but to teach the students.” TNS9 said they were “taught to appreciate and represent diverse backgrounds and be inclusive to all students.” TNS22 referenced the licensing exam edTPA as prohibiting her from maintaining “focus on the students and the[ir] needs.” No information about specific coursework which had influenced these beliefs was included.

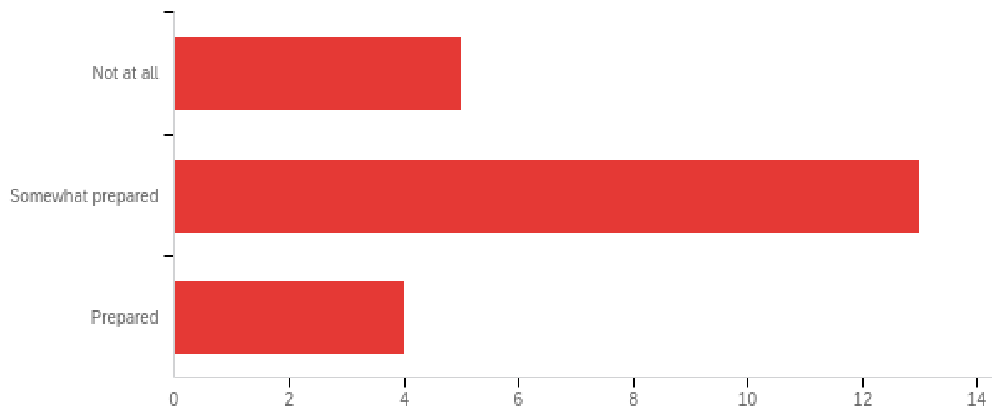
Professors who did respond agreed CDT instruction was not offered; though, ALF3 did mention a social studies course which included CDT, and KYF1 mentioned an elective course. ALF2 went so far as to call it “a tragedy" that CDT gets limited course time and that diverse opinions are “rarely explored" in their program. KYF1 pointed out that because they do cover CDT in an elective

course, not all or even most of their pre-service teachers are exposed. NCF1 cited testing culture and “curricular constraints" as leaving them without “ample time" to cover “additional content" such as CDT. Interestingly, each faculty member had responded they felt their candidates were “somewhat prepared" despite going on to comment about not offering preparation.

Additionally, when asked to rank their level of preparedness to teach CDT, 59.09% of pre-service teachers answered that they were “Somewhat” prepared; 22.73% said they were “Not at all” prepared for this specific addition; only 18.18% responded with “Prepared,” at the highest level of that scale.

Figure 4

How would you describe your level of preparedness to teaching global and local controversial issues?



Note: Figure 4 reports pre-service teachers’ levels of preparedness with CDT, with 59.09% saying they were “Somewhat Prepared.”

While comparison between professor perception of what was presented and pre-service teacher perception of what they learned about instruction handling CDT was not possible to do within any program, faculty responses were related to Research Question 1. While limited in number, these comments supported the

literature showing formal training in using CDT in the classroom for discussions was not happening in many teacher preparation programs. Though a few students said they had taken elective classes which addressed CDT, and there were several who made mention of one professor who talked about CDT in and out of class, these things were not actually part of the curriculum. Finally, though, two participants did say their coursework prepared them for CDT; however, they did not offer explanation beyond TNS7 commenting they intended to teach mathematics where they would “not have many controversial issues to teach.”

Trends in the data showed pre-service teacher programs as a whole, were not offering formal training for their pre-service teachers in the pedagogy of how to handle, facilitate, introduce, or discuss CDT in their future classrooms. And while there is no data from Tennessee faculty members, 50% of the Tennessee pre-service participants said no, there was no coursework covering CDT; those who did cite the program, mostly cited one professor and mainly conversations or discussions outside of the curricular lesson of the day or even outside of class. Several others cited factors other than their schooling for teaching them about CDT such as life experience, previous employment, or being older than a traditional student, but they were not getting this instruction in their formal training programs. Overwhelmingly the answer to Research Question 1 was opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn and use CDT were not prevalent.

Research Question 2

How confident did pre-service teachers report to be in their abilities to present and lead discussion of controversial or difficult topics in the classroom

upon completing their formal training at one of the three largest public teacher preparation programs in Tennessee and three of its neighboring states in 2023?

When asked to respond to the statement “I feel competent to teach about controversial issues," responses varied. Eight respondents (36.36%) agreed, another eight (36.36%) were neutral, three (13.64%) disagreed and two (9.09%) strongly disagreed. Again, the majority, in this case 18 of the 22, provided detailed comments.

More than one level of confidence was evident in the data collected, and some pre-service teachers reported feeling confident based on other factors than coursework. Confidence with facilitating discussion in general was high among pre-service teachers, with 68.1% agreeing at level “6” (on a 6-pt scale on which “1” meant disagree and “6” meant agree) when asked if they were confident in their ability to do so. The remaining participants responded on the high half of that scale with 18.2% answering “5” and 13.6% answering “4;” not one answer fell on the low half. When asked if a student prompted a discussion by asking them a difficult question, a lower 40.91% said they felt they could help students “quite a bit.” Similarly, though, 77.27% answered above the neutral level of this scale, 68.1% in the top third. In contrast to 100% reporting some level of confidence in leading discussions in general, 22.7% of those who responded said they did not feel like they could answer difficult questions very well.

When asked specifically about their competence level of teaching CDT, the answers were varied but skewed towards the low end of the scale. Only 4.5% “strongly agreed” they were confident with CDT; 36.36% “agreed;” 36.36% answered neutral; 13.6% “disagreed;” and 9% “strongly disagreed.” Additionally,

when asked to rank their level of preparedness to teach CDT, 59% of pre-service teachers answered they were “Somewhat” prepared; 22.72% said they were “Not at all” prepared for this specific addition; only 18.2% responded with “Prepared,” at the highest level of that scale.

Several themes emerged from the comments left by pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers TNS6, TNS8, TNS9, TNS12, and TNS21 reported feeling “Somewhat Prepared” or “Prepared,” and all referred to classroom experience during their student teaching or in previous positions as the basis for any confidence they felt. Alternately, other responses referred to several common reasons pre-service teachers did not feel confident. TNS4 said because of “the state I live in right now, I am scared on how to approach issues deemed controversial.” TNS19 also mentioned living in the South and the “harsh beliefs” which made it “difficult to feel confident” when “you can see the discomfort [among their classmates] when controversial topics were brought up.” TNS9 added discussing CDT made them “very anxious” and that it was “hard to put some of those things into student-friendly language.” TNS5 and TNS18 both feared their own biases getting in the way. This data further reinforces the idea that pre-service teachers were not being fully prepared and were avoiding CDT; therefore, students in their future classrooms would not have the benefit of the high-interest, engaging, efficient way CDT had been shown to teach, develop, and reinforce discussion, deeper thinking and better listening skills, instill more tolerance and, subsequently, prompt civic engagement as adults.

Figure 5

Pre-service teacher confidence in leading classroom discussion

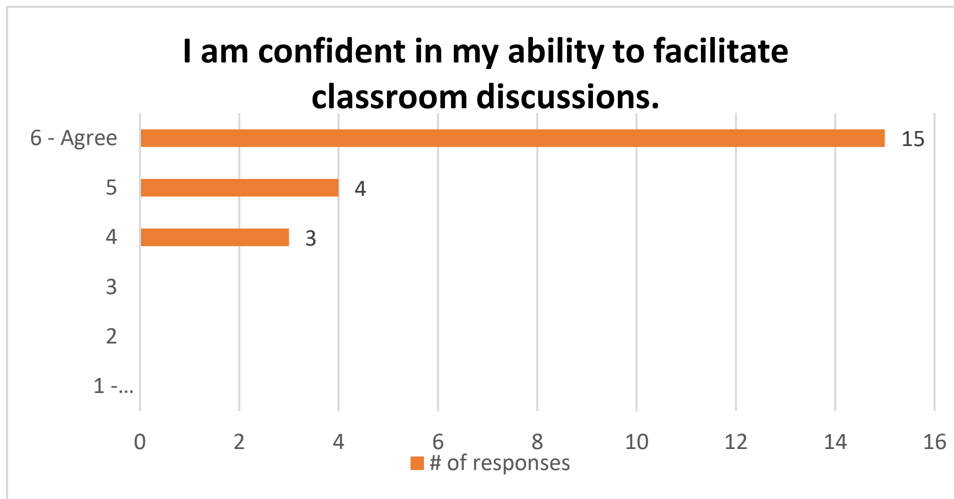


Figure 6

Ability to respond to difficult student questions

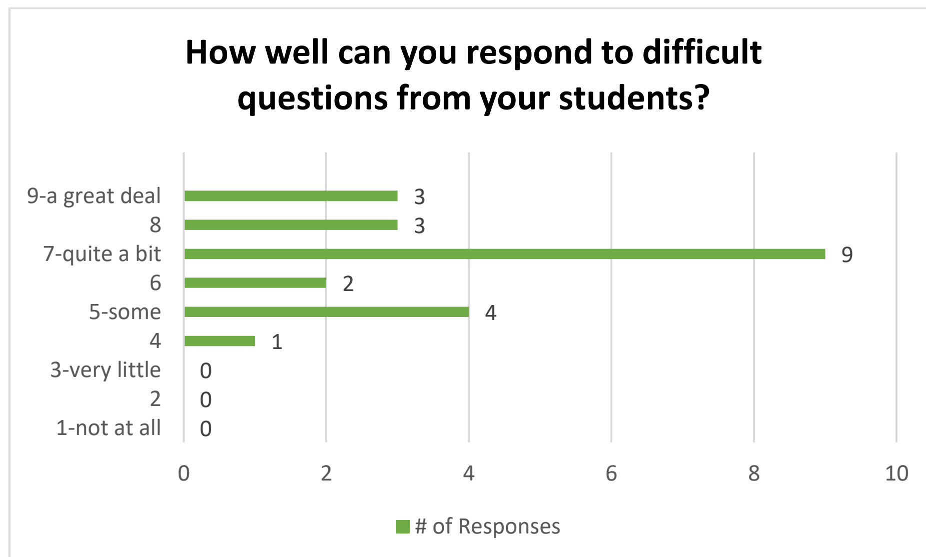
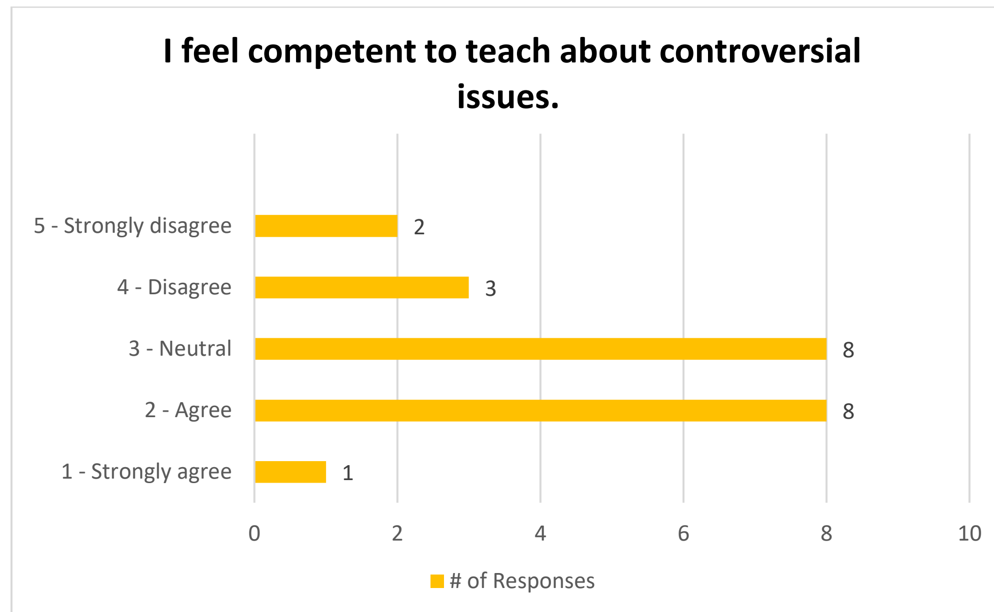


Figure 7

Competence felt for teaching controversial issues



Note: Figures 5, 6, and 7 show pre-service teachers' three levels of confidence. Figure 7 presents pre-service teacher perceptions of their competence in teaching CDT. Confidence levels were important for CDT because the literature showed if teachers were not confident, they simply avoided employing CDT in their classrooms (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Maitles & Cowan, 2012). Notably, 59.09% of responses fell between neutral and strongly disagree, which is the same percentage who reported feeling "Somewhat Prepared" for CDT. Only 4.55% reported strongly agreeing they were competent with CDT.

Three levels of confidence emerged when analyzing the data. Pre-service teachers reported feeling confident in their ability to lead discussions in general and mostly confident in their ability to answer difficult questions asked by a student, but they were much less confident when asked about teaching with CDT in their future classrooms. Co-occurrences in the comments showed fear and

anxiety, lack of exposure, and lack of training in the pedagogy of CDT were obstacles to implementing them in future classrooms. Those pre-service teachers who were confident attributed that to things such as conversations with one particular faculty member, being older than the rest of their cohort, or previously working in the field.

Research Question 3

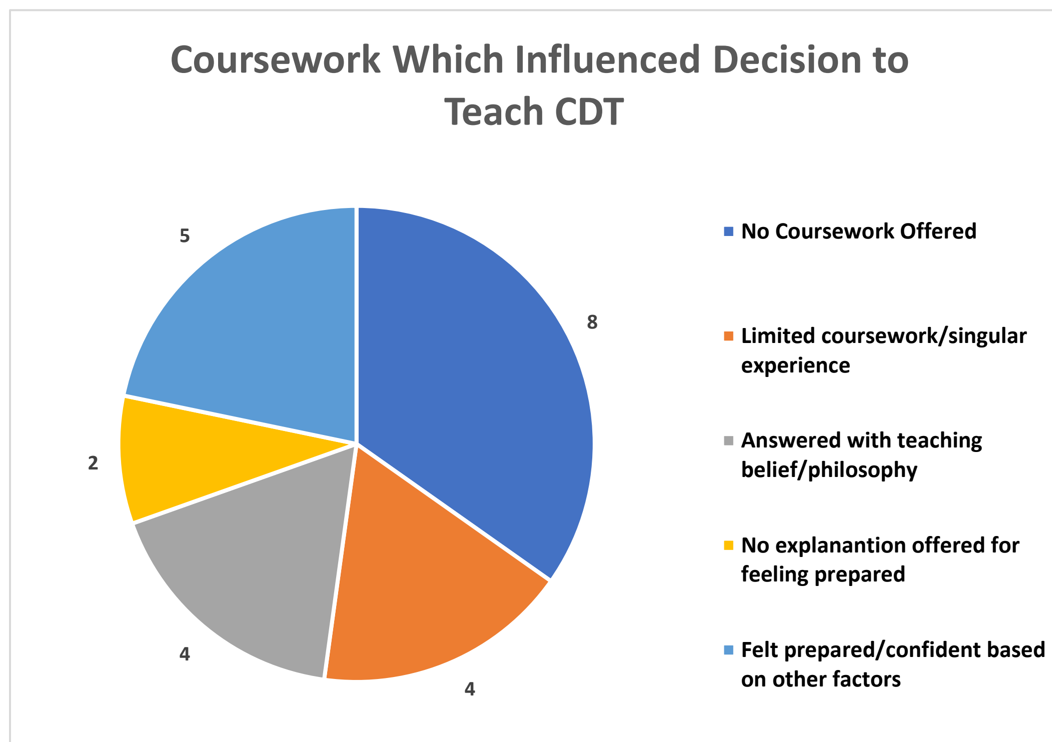
Did any trends emerge about the amount of training pre-service teachers received in controversial or difficult topics and their confidence in teaching with leading discussion of controversial or difficult topics upon completing their studies at one of the three largest public teacher preparation programs in Tennessee or three of its neighboring states in 2023?

I was unable to analyze and apply the data to this question in the way I had proposed due to the limited number of responses collected. The intent was to compare faculty data sets to pre-service teacher data sets within each program to investigate any relationships between training faculty said they offered and confidence levels pre-service teachers reported. Within school or within program comparison was not possible; I was, however, able to do this for the data as a whole. Additionally, though from different programs, faculty responses were still important. Pre-service teachers studying under these respondents were living and training in the states that were most likely to have their citizens move to Tennessee at some point throughout their lives (Lockridge & Reyes, 2021). Because of these constraints, the main comparisons were based on analyzing pre-service teacher responses only.

When asked if they were confident facilitating classroom discussions all answered on the affirmative side of the 6-point scale with 15 answering six, four answering five, and three answering four. 77.27% answered on the high half of the 9-point scale when asked how well they could respond to difficult questions from students. The 22.73% who answered at or below the median mark answered either four or five. 59.09% described their level of preparedness for CDT as "somewhat;" 18.18% said they felt "prepared;" and 22.73% answered they felt "not at all" prepared. All but two of these answers were followed by in-depth explanatory comments.

Figure 8

Coursework Which Influenced Decision to Teach CDT

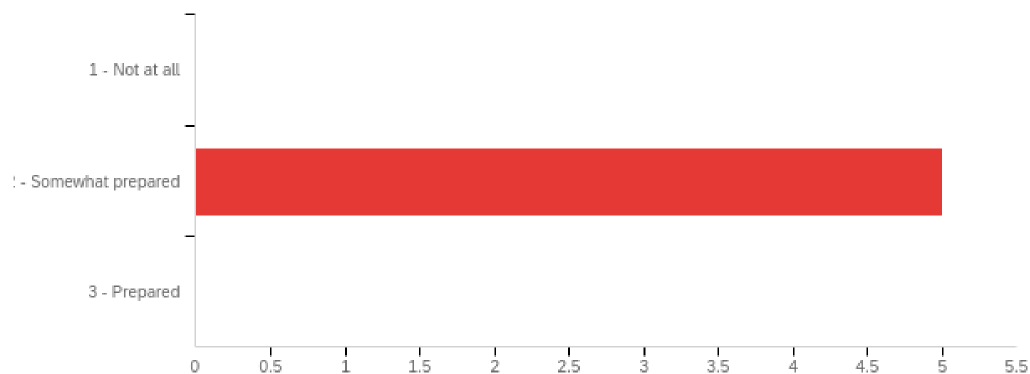


Note: Figure 8 shows trends in comments about coursework pre-service teachers reported receiving which influenced their decisions about including CDT in their

future classes. Of those who commented, 34.78% said they had had no coursework addressing CDT; 21.74% attributed any confidence they felt to factors other than coursework; 17.39% talked about limited coursework or singular exposure to CDT; 17.39% responded off topic with an overarching belief or philosophy about teaching in general that they had formed over the life of their programs, but they listed no specific coursework;; lastly, 8.7% said their program had prepared them but gave no explanation of specific coursework.

Figure 9

How would you describe your pre-service teachers' level of preparedness to teaching global and local controversial issues?



Note: Figure 9 presents the data from question three on the faculty questionnaire which asked about their teacher candidates' level or preparedness with CDT and can be compared to pre-service teachers reported levels of preparedness (see Figure 4) for a regional view.

Interestingly, 100% of faculty said their students were "Somewhat Prepared," while pre-service teacher responses showed a much lower 59.09% felt they were "Somewhat Prepared," and 22.73% said they were "Not At All Prepared." While these are overall numbers, and not from within the same

programs, they showed CDT training was not prevalent in American teacher training programs and was only happening in singular instances and/or for minimal time. Pre-service teacher confidence that they were prepared was much lower than professors'.

Additionally, I coded all the comments submitted by pre-service teachers into overall categories – fearful, confident, and off topic. Of the 41 total comments, 64% of responses expressed fears about using CDT in future classrooms. Of these fearful comments, 100% expressed fears which fell into the same trends or categories of fears listed in the existing literature – fear of backlash, fear of loss of control or unpredictable reactions from students, lack of content knowledge, and lack of pedagogical knowledge. These trends further showed how the data collected here fit into the body of research on using CDT in the classroom.

Figure 10

Classification of All Comments

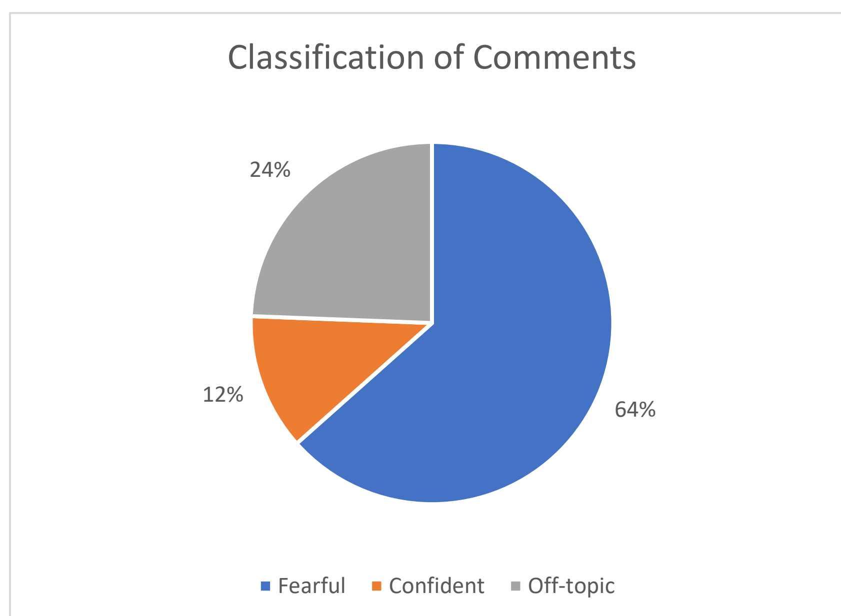
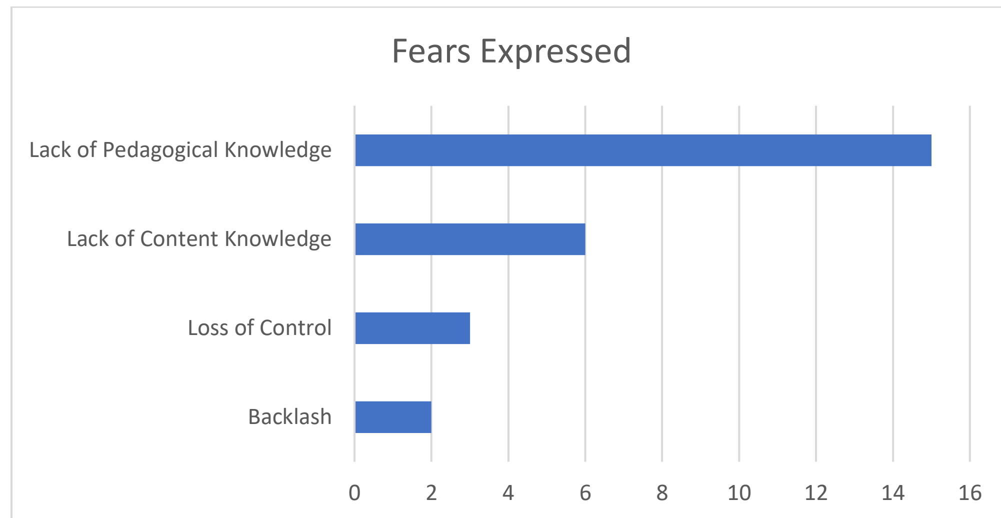


Figure 11

Fears Expressed by Pre-service Teachers



Summary of Results

All three research questions were answered by the data collected. The answer to Research Question 1 showed pre-service teachers were not given opportunities in their training programs to engage with CDT. Research Question 2 showed confidence was fairly low but was reported at different levels depending on the type of discussion, the topic at hand, and whether a student initiated the discussion by asking a difficult question. The data applied to Research Question 3 showed relationships between how much exposure pre-service teachers felt they had with CDT and how confident they felt with introducing and teaching discussion or other skills using CDT with their future students. Lastly, trends did emerge among the responses and revealed different levels of confidence.

Chapter V: Discussion of the Study

The existing body of literature showed the need in other parts of the country to add CDT training into pre-service teacher programs, so new teachers would be able to engage with their students in CDT discussion effectively. This study filled a gap in that research investigating the American Southeast. Unfortunately, 64% of the comments pre-service teachers submitted showed pre-service teachers did not feel ready and were fearful in some way. While analysis within each program would have been ideal and provided more data, the data here was large enough for trends to emerge. Of the 64% who were fearful, 100% of the fearful comments fell into the categories already established by that same body of existing literature.

Many pre-service teachers' comments expressed fears of and plans to avoid CDT. For example, TNS18 said even if addressing CDT were required, they "would try to refrain" and they did "not feel prepared." TNS4 said they were "scared on how to approach those topics;" while TNS19 similarly said discussion of CDT was "like walking on eggshells" and "you never kn[e]w how students [would] interpret your words." TNS10 simply said, "I just don't feel as if I could do it effectively." Lastly, TNS11 said their program was "kind of awful at preparing teachers to work in the field." The same fears - backlash, loss of classroom control, lack of knowledge - existed for many in the profession and had for decades (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Nganga et al., 2020; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). This further emphasized that pre-service teachers were not being taught how to tackle the hard topics with their future students.

The three levels of confidence which emerged were interesting to see. CDT caused a drop in the rate of responses at or above neutral from 95% to 77.3%, even though they were essentially the same questions, but with the former prompted by a student asking a difficult question. This seemed to indicate the topics themselves and introducing them could both have been obstacles. Additional research into the decline between the second and third levels of confidence which emerged here could be interesting and informative to the field.

While there were a handful of extremely positive comments such as TNS7 and TNS17 saying their coursework left them "well prepared" and TNS16's "I believe I can," more attributed their confidence to other sources. While TNS11 said they had taken "just one upper-level course" which included CDT, they said there were "a few wonderful individuals that helped [them] prepare." TNS23 said they "stay[ed] up-to-date on current events and fe[lt] confident" they could use CDT, and TNS15 said their confidence was "rooted in [their] own personal experience." TNS8 said, "coming from a diverse background, getting [their] degree at a greater age, and having worked as a teacher aide for years have given [them] more preparation than other pre-service teachers." While there was some confidence among participants about their levels of preparedness with CDT, most did not credit their teacher training program as having prepared them.

Two distinct issues stood out from the pre-service teacher comments. First, one student repeated that they were going to teach mathematics so did not see the need to know the CDT skills. They felt prepared for CDT because they would not have to encounter them. The second came from elementary education majors. They repeated that they would need to learn developmentally appropriate

practices and only to a certain extent because of the age group of their students. However, USHMM advocates for introducing difficult topics in kindergarten through second grade and in any discipline. While the topics needed to be level appropriate, the skills of approaching CDT could start here. For example, accepting a new student or a classmate with a new difference such as race, religion, or disability can be difficult for young students. Fears are often born out of ignorance so exposure is key to opening minds (Allport, 1954), and tolerance can be taught at any age (Handsfield, 2016) .

Oddly, two faculty participants (one from KY and one from TN) began the questionnaire but only answered which state they were in and listed their school's name. The questionnaire was only four questions and was not time-consuming or difficult, so I was left wondering if they were, ironically, simply avoiding CDT. This was an interesting idea to consider because if faculty could not engage with CDT on a questionnaire, of course, they would not teach their pre-service teachers how to engage with or introduce CDT to their own students. In the face of 'woke' and 'cancel' cultures and 'don't say gay' laws, it was incumbent upon educators to help the next generation be better communicators and more effective citizens. While they expressed fears, several pre-service teachers left comments recognizing the importance of CDT and/or expressing interest in knowing how to approach CDT in their own classrooms. For example, TNS21 said they "would be interested in learning how to teach these subjects." TNS15 thought there "should be a set of guidelines [for using CDT] that all education majors have access to," and went on to refer to "multiple local controversies" in the community in which they taught; their program offered no guidance to navigate this.

Additionally, 95% answered at neutral or above when asked how well they could answer a student's difficult question. This indicated that they were at least willing to try if a student showed an interest or expressed a need by asking a hard question. These two things were encouraging because “teachers are the backbone of our democracy” (U. S. Department of Education, 2023); ultimately, as Hattie (2009; 2023) found, one of the best, most effective, resources for any student, in any classroom, was a good teacher.

Implications for Practice

Several implications resulted from this study. First, the data collected confirmed Tennessee and its neighboring states Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina aligned with the literature in two ways: there's a significant lack in preparedness among pre-service teachers, and training in CDT was not occurring for pre-service teachers in their formal training programs. Pre-service teachers' ignorance of the pedagogy of CDT left them avoidant, anxious, and fearful; this was significant because it showed the need for changing teacher preparation program curricula still existed, not only in Tennessee, but in its neighboring states. Moreover, this study was timely, original, and partially filled the gap in the research because it addressed the Southeast region of the country.

The literature showed training for CDT was often relegated to singular social studies methods courses and practiced in social studies classrooms (Nganga, 2019; Nganga et al., 2020; Nowell & Poindexter, 2018; Parker & Lo, 2016). The literature also showed discussion and civic skills are most effectively mastered when they are practiced often and over time (Allport, 1954; Hattie & Zierer, 2018), so there were multiple reasons to include CDT in pedagogy classes

and across disciplines. Not only did students need the discussion and civic skills, but they thrived in class environments where they could voice their opinions and ask honest questions they knew would be answered (Freire, 1970; Martens & Gainous, 2013; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Tinberg & Weisberger, 2014; Torney-Purta, 2002). The implication was if using CDT was shown to be so effective, but it was not occurring, then it should have been and should be added going forward.

Another aspect of education which could be positively affected by using CDT in the classroom is school violence. Because CDT helped foster a culture of open dialogue (Rokeach, 1971), using CDT could "help to prevent violence in individuals and groups" (Hughes, 2020, p. 34) and lower the rate of school violence. In the 2018 calendar year, 836,100 public school students13-18-years-old reported being victimized at school (Wang et al., 2020, p. iv), and of students who became violent, "most attackers were victims of bullying" (Alathari et al., 2019, p. 51). Furthermore, students could also be "damaged, emotionally and psychologically, not just by bullying but also by subtle social acts of exclusion" (Hughes, 2020, p. 30). With proper training, teachers could build a culture of open dialogue in which students felt heard, and they were better able to "develop management strategies that can redirect the student away from violent choices" (Alathari et al., 2019, p. 50). Open dialogue could help mitigate both bullying and violent choices. Employing CDT had been shown to help students feel heard, less marginalized, and happier; happy students did not perpetrate violence in their schools.

Lastly, the high annual rate of teachers leaving the field could also be mitigated by making CDT a staple of teacher training programs. Every year 200,000+ teachers quit the teaching profession with "nearly two out of three leaving for reasons other than retirement" (Podolsky et al., 2016, p. 1). New teachers cited "inadequate preparation" and were two and a half times more likely than their prepared peers to leave the profession after only one year (Podolsky et al., 2016, p.1). Training pre-service teachers in the pedagogy of CDT would better prepare them to step into their classrooms with confidence.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are several paths down which this study could lead. Because response rates were so low, running the same study but on a larger scale, with added measures to encourage a better response rate, would be valuable. Including all the public colleges and universities in Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee, or even just the flagships from all four states, would provide more robust data. The same basic study could also be run but altered to include Tennessee and all eight border states to get a true regional view.

It could also be valuable to conduct a similar study in which the same questionnaire is sent to the pre-service teachers to maintain their anonymity, but interviews are conducted with the deans or department heads to get a fuller, more in-depth look at the curricula. Adding to the methodology to follow a sample of volunteer pre-service teacher participants into their first-year classrooms tracking their confidence would be interesting as well. The main stumbling blocks they encountered when using CDT could also be investigated as well as investigating

the tools veteran teachers use to prevent them therefore mitigating some of the fears reported by pre-service teachers,

Additionally, gathering much more demographic or personal information from participants would allow for the same study to answer different research questions. Comparing confidence between genders or age groups could inform where pre-service teacher confidence originates. Comparisons between races or socioeconomic statuses - of pre-service teachers or of the students they intended to work with - would have added depth to the results obtained here. Private and alternative licensure programs could be included, and it could also be valuable to look at confidence levels between new, traditional teachers and nontraditional students who enter teaching as a second career.

Any of these methods would provide larger numbers. With more faculty responses from each program, comparisons between faculty perceptions and pre-service teacher perceptions could be made within programs and within or between states to truly inform and adapt curricula. If the response rates were high enough, a true representative sample of teacher training program curricula and pre-service teacher perceptions could be obtained and the results generalizable to the Southeast as a whole. CDT training and use in the classroom had been studied in other regions of the country, and while I obtained data sets smaller than were ideal, the results aligned with and added to the existing research. Because the literature showed confidence was one main factor in whether or not teachers used CDT in their instruction, any added data which addresses how teachers gain confidence with CDT is valuable.

Conclusions of the Study

Employing CDT in classrooms had shown to be effective for fully engaging students in discussions, so teachers needed to know how to facilitate and respond when these topics arose. Some CDT, such as the Holocaust or genocide, needed special handling of graphic information, and handled poorly could do more harm than good by passing on false information or traumatizing sensitive students (Totten, 2019), so teachers needed to be up to the task and able to serve their students. For students to better know their world, participate in their communities, and transform societal ills, they needed to be taught how (Freire, 1970). For teachers, CDT were not always easy or comfortable to discuss, so training new teachers how to handle these topics was paramount.

Teachers in the Southeast were not being trained in CDT. Even though the literature showed how effective CDT were in classrooms, teachers were fearful, avoidant, and forced, or felt forced, to 'teach to the test' instead of using CDT to reflect, connect with, and teach students using topics affecting their lives in the world outside of school. American students deserved instruction better than this if they were to become fully engaged, civic-minded citizens as adults. If pre-service teachers were not given the formal training to address all manner of situations and topics, including CDT, they could not best serve their students. One purpose of free, public education in America was to produce citizens ready to assume their roles in a participatory democracy. Classrooms were the perfect places for students at all levels to practice these skills. Discussions based around CDT were among the most effective ways to do so. Public school classrooms were the ideal setting for students to learn to fight – fairly; however, without properly trained

teachers, these students, the next generation of supposed informed, involved citizens might be neither.

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Appendix A:

Faculty Course Offerings Questionnaire Questions

1. If a specific Controversial Issues or Difficult Discussions course if offered, how much class time is devoted to it? (one semester/two semesters/other)
2. If the topic of Controversial Issues or Difficult Discussions is covered within another course, how much class time is devoted to it? (Less than 1 week/1-3 weeks/one semester/other)
3. How would you describe your pre-service teachers' level of preparedness to teaching global and local controversial issues? (Prepared/Somewhat/Not at All)
4. Explain #3.

Appendix B:

Pre-Service Teacher Confidence Questionnaire Questions

1. I am confident in my ability to facilitate classroom discussions (Select degree of agreement on 6pt scale: 1=Disagree/6=Agree)
2. How well can you respond to difficult questions from your students? (Choose from 9pt scale:1=not at all/9=a great deal)
3. How would you describe your level of preparedness to teaching global and local controversial issues? (Choices: not at all/somewhat/prepared)
4. Explain.
5. I feel competent to teach about controversial issues. (Select degree of agreement on 5pt scale: 1=strongly agree/5=strongly disagree)
6. Talk a little about how your coursework at this institution has influenced your decisions about teaching global and local controversial issues in your future classroom.

Appendix C:

Letter Sent with Questionnaire Links

February 1, 2023

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for participating in my research study.

The purpose of this study is to investigate if pre-service teachers in Tennessee and its neighboring states are getting proper training in using controversial and/or difficult topics (CDT) in the classroom as a means of fostering civil discourse and the higher thinking skills involved in civil debate. First, I want to know if pre-service teachers studying at institutions among the top three largest public teacher preparation programs in Tennessee and three of its neighboring states – Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, are taught how to present these skills, and to what extent? A secondary purpose is investigating if there is a relationship or if any trends emerge when comparing teacher candidates' confidence with CDT and the amount of formal training they receive? I will collect data through online questionnaires.

The attached page provides more detailed information about the study, what participants will be expected to do, and the time it may take to complete.

The link for the teaching faculty questionnaire is

https://corexmsbcsyknwj9wl7n.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5jxv4RDfF9cNlwW

The link for the pre-service teacher questionnaire is

https://corexmsbcsyknwj9wl7n.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cwh9l54CQE2DIPQ

Thank you for your time,

Stacie Shanks

Appendix D:

Study Summary for Potential Participants

Study Summary for Potential Participants

Investigator: Stacie Shanks; Carter and Moyers School of Education, Lincoln Memorial University; Knoxville, TN; 865-776-4813; stacie.shanks@lmunet.edu

Reviewed and approved by Lincoln Memorial University IRB, February 2023

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate if, and to what extent, as of 2023, public teacher preparation programs among the largest in Tennessee and Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina, three of its neighboring states, were offering pre-service teachers training on how to discuss and use CDT and discussions in their classrooms. A secondary purpose was to determine if a relationship existed between confidence of graduating pre-service teachers in relation to the amount of training they had using CDT in the classroom.

Participants: Teaching faculty in bachelor teaching preparation program and pre-service teachers in their senior years currently in their last semester of course work or completing student teaching.

Study Procedures

Steps: Using campus email systems, I will send deans the links to the faculty and pre-service teacher questionnaires. Deans will send the links to teaching faculty and seniors. Teaching faculty and seniors will complete the questionnaires and submit them online.

Time Required of Participants: 10 minutes or less

Risks: No risks to either participating individuals or institutions.

Benefits: There is no direct benefit, besides helping add to the body of research in their chosen field, or compensation, not even extra credit, offered to participants.

Confidentiality: All responses will remain confidential and will be held by the primary researcher (Stacie Shanks) until destroyed/deleted. Please do not include readily identifiable information in comments sections.

Voluntary: Participation is 100% voluntary. Departmental participation does not require participation of its students.

Implied Consent By completing and submitting their questionnaires, participants consent to add their responses to the data in this study. Anyone may opt out at any time.

Thank You

Participation in this study is greatly appreciated. As fellow or future educators you know the importance of well-prepared teachers. As social media and instant communication will continue to bring news – both real and not – to students, it is vital to train the next generation of classroom teachers to handle any topic, including controversial ones, with their students. For further information, please contact me at 865-776-4813 or stacie.shanks@lmunet.edu.