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## **Diverse ways of creating classroom communities for constructive discussions of conflict: Cases from Canadian secondary schools**

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### ***Abstract***

*This qualitative study compares the ways in which four teachers, in publicly funded Canadian schools, facilitated dialogue about conflictual issues. Some offered only limited support for the development and exercise of democratic agency, especially for less-confident and marginalised students. Mandated curriculum pressures, and the consequent sense of time scarcity, limited opportunities for agentic, horizontal student-centred dialogue. However, institutional support and some teaching strategies mitigated this challenge. Linking social conflict topics with students' own lives, well-organized small group work, and the explicit teaching of constructive conflict communication norms and skills improved diverse students' opportunities to engage in democratic dialogue with peers.*

**Keywords:** *conflictual issues dialogue, student agency, diversity, secondary teaching, democratic education*

Democratic capacities do not emerge by themselves: agency requires nurture. Publicly-funded schools are uniquely capable of helping to overcome exclusion from democratic processes by providing 'civic learning opportunities' for diverse students — although, unfortunately, they do not always do so (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). How may teachers in schools create *democratic* classroom communities that share authority with diverse students?

A crucial component of any effort to build engaged and capable democratic communities is to address the social conflicts that make democracy difficult and necessary, in open and inclusive classroom climates (e.g. Apple, 2000; Davies, 2005; Gutmann, 2004; Hahn, 2010; Hess & Avery, 2008). However, this can be risky and challenging, due to the diversities and inequities built into the social relations of schools, classrooms, and surrounding societies (also Houser, 1996; King, 2009; Yamashita, 2006). This paper examines case studies of four secondary teachers' dialogic pedagogies about social conflicts, and how each did and did not support students' equitable and inclusive practice of agency in relation to those learning opportunities.

### **Agency**

Agency is essential to democracy, hence to democratic education. It is “the capacity to make and carry out decisions as well as a sense of being agentic” (Gordon, 2006, p. 2). This capacity (and its development) is by no means a simple matter of individual power or confidence: rather, it is contingent within social relations of identity and inequality—tied to what is assumed, discussed, and resisted, by whom, when, why, and how (McKenzie, 2006). Conflictual dialogue pedagogies assume, require, and at the same time attempt to develop student agency — such as the capacities to see and reflect upon the workings of power, to develop and voice one’s ‘own’ views in the face of conflict, to evaluate and re-construct ideas in light of one’s lived experience, and to initiate and critique actions taken in the classroom — yet that agency is constrained by school structures, discourses, and (gendered) social relations. In this project, we have been trying to understand not only how ‘students’ may gain opportunities to develop and practice agency in various classroom contexts, but *which* students, and *how* classroom practices of conflict dialogue impact inclusivity and equity among diverse students.

One may distinguish two broad ideological and pedagogical approaches to democratic citizenship formation: education *for* democracy and education *through* democracy (Biesta, 2007, 2011; Johnson & Morris, 2010; Kerr, 2000). The former views young people as future citizens-in-formation, thus emphasizes inculcation of knowledge, skills, and values understood to be prerequisites for participation. The latter —the standpoint we take in this paper— views young people as already citizens, whose life experiences (in school and beyond) embody practices and struggles for democratic voice. These ideal types overlap in practice, but are useful for directing attention to the different kinds and amounts of agency available to diverse students in various classroom communities, in particular when they encounter conflict.

Inclusive dialogue about conflictual matters is itself education *through* democracy (practicing agency: co-developing understanding and/or making decisions), not merely an instructional method *for* democracy. As Parker (2010) and Bickford (1996) argue, political *listening*, not only speaking, involves exercise of agency: it is *doing* something about a problem of misunderstanding or non-communication, creating a space for potential ‘hearing’ across difference. To achieve classroom community capacity for such difficult dialogue, teachers must explicitly teach and establish norms and relationships for these fledgling attempts at democratic practice (Hess & Avery, 2008; Parker, 2010): in this sense, to be successful and inclusive, educating *through* democracy does require some educating *for* democracy.

### **Equity**

Unfortunately, opportunities for democratic dialogue about conflictual questions are not equitably available to all students (Hess & Avery, 2008). Socially privileged students often “receive more classroom-based civic learning opportunities. Schools, rather than helping to equalize the capacity and commitments needed for democratic participation, appear to be

exacerbating this inequality by providing more preparation for those who are already likely to attain a disproportionate amount of civic & political voice” (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, p. 18). Similarly, in their observational study of 26 teachers’ classrooms in the New York City area, Dull and Murrow (2008) found that dialogic (values and sustained interpretive) questioning patterns were considerably less available in classrooms populated by lower-income or heterogeneous students than for higher-income students.

Although conflictual dialogic education *can* be constructive, it is not *inherently* constructive. Even when less-privileged students get a chance to participate, well-intentioned dialogue in ostensibly open climates may cause harm, in particular to students who are marginalized in the classroom community. Consciously or not, teachers exercise and validate social dominance in the discourses they use, the content they cover and exclude, and the interaction processes they design or allow. Even (apparently) inclusive conflictual conversations almost inevitably marginalize somebody’s realities, and cause pain and confusion as students navigate their complex, intersecting social positionings (Ellsworth, 1989). Probably no pedagogy can completely remove this risk, but certainly some pedagogies are likely to mitigate, while others exacerbate.

Some attempts at conflict dialogue, using rational talk to “bridge” differences by emphasizing commonalities, may unintentionally downplay or avoid addressing deeply-lived inequalities (Schultz, Buck, & Niesz, 2000).

Paradoxically, to be potentially transformative, peace-building talk requires direct attention to conflict, and opportunities for uncomfortable emotional expression (also Bekerman, 2007). Thus in educating *through* democratic conflict talk, pedagogies matter. The default ‘open’ conversation—a few dominant voices in a whole-class format—may neither scaffold the development of democratic skills and roles, nor make space for students’ diverse identities (Flynn, 2009). There are real risks of “unproductive free-for-alls on the one hand, or thinly veiled recitations with occasional student comments on the other” (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 13). The lowest-status students disproportionately risk being further marginalized. However, Hess (2009), Rubin (2012), and others describe skilful teachers using varied, carefully designed pedagogies for relatively equitable, thoughtful interaction.

Skilled dialogic educators construct classroom communities that reduce the risks of such conflictual talk — by helping students to develop caring and respectful relationships, providing multiple platforms for participation (such as small group, fishbowl, role play, seminar, take-a-stand, structured academic controversy, town meeting, or journaling activities), and by progressing over time from easier to more challenging conflict dialogue topics and pedagogies (Flynn, 2009; Hadjioannou, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; King, 2009; Nagda & Gurin, 2007). No teacher is powerless in the face of the social forces infiltrating classroom conversations, because all have some agency they can share with their students, and myriad resources exist to help teachers structure constructively conflictual democratic dialogue pedagogies (North, 2009). Thus this inquiry probes what four urban

teachers *did* do, to engage and include their diverse students in various kinds of democratic dialogue about conflict.

## Method

This paper is drawn from a larger research project, Peace-Building Dialogue in Schools, involving qualitative, constructivist case study analysis of contrasting ways in which dialogue on conflictual issues may be implemented in public school contexts. In particular, we focus here on how each teacher, with her students, created differently ‘democratic’ classroom communities — specifically, how they shaped spaces for agency and equity/inclusion for and with their diverse students.

Data presented here are derived from a total of 34 observations of four experienced teachers’ urban public classrooms (grades 7-12) in three schools, classroom materials related to those lessons, and one or two 30-40 minute interviews with each teacher in these sites. Such qualitative, comparative case study methods facilitate rich description of complex phenomena, juxtaposing the perspectives of diverse participants with a wider perspective on their social contexts (Charmaz, 2000). The case study sites were selected purposively, to represent very different approaches to conflict dialogue in classrooms in one large urban school district. Each teacher had participated in professional development related to dialogue pedagogies, observed in another part of this project. All teachers in these cases are white females, with teaching experience ranging from two to ten years.

Specifically, we examine in each case:

- Context factors that seemed to facilitate or impede conflictual dialogue
- Types of conflictual questions addressed
- Ways each teacher endeavoured to build and guide students’ skills, knowledge bases, and interaction norms for constructive dialogic engagement with these conflicts (educating ‘for’ democratic dialogue)
- Pedagogical task structures with which each teacher initiated, scaffolded and facilitated conflictual dialogue (educating ‘through’ democratic dialogue)
- Observable consequences of the above: how the various pedagogies differently engaged the identities, experiences, and visible agency of diverse students

Our findings are intended to be illustrative rather than generalisable.

## Case studies

### *A8-T1 – Science policy issues dialogue with immigrant high school students*

T1 is a young science teacher with two years’ experience at A8, an urban high school primarily populated by diverse low- and moderate-income immigrant students (4

observations). The school was in its second year of implementing restorative peacemaking and community building practices in classrooms and school-wide; T1 was among teachers trained to facilitate restorative circles. During her initial teacher education, T1 had learned how to integrate social issues discussions in science education, and how to facilitate social inclusion oriented ('Tribes') cooperative learning activities. Like restorative practice, the latter program includes classroom community circles and explicit teaching of respectful, participatory norms for interaction. T1 quite frequently engaged her science students in structured dialogues addressing the conflictual intersections between science and society. For instance, T1 organized a process in which her grade 12 biology students, in groups of four, took turns generating questions and facilitating dialogues on contemporary public policy controversies in genetics. Each student in turn took on the role of discussant, sceptic, recorder, and time-keeper.

One day, T1 engaged her grade 12 general-stream science class (three female and six male students, all ethnic minority immigrants) in a 70-minute discussion of the rights and social responsibilities of HIV-positive individuals, as part of a unit on pathogens and disease. First, T1 arranged students in a circle, taught a dialogue procedure (involving a talking piece), and distributed a rubric that she and students themselves would use to evaluate participation. She encouraged students to disagree with each other in a respectful way, pose their own questions, and support their arguments with evidence.

T1 began by reading aloud a scenario in which one character had infected another with HIV, ending with a series of questions: should HIV-infected individuals have the right to the same type of publicly funded medical care as others? What if some HIV patients continue high-risk behaviour, spreading the disease and/or increasing the costs of their treatment? T1 passed a talking-piece around the circle to give each student an opportunity to speak, but also allowed students to request the talking-piece out of turn to rebut peers' arguments. At the ends of discussion rounds, T1 often briefly paraphrased students' points, expressed her own opinions, and then posed new or revised questions to disrupt consensus and facilitate further discussion. After about 30 minutes of rapid discussion, T1 checked for agreement (students retained opposing views), and then shifted the conversation to problem-solving questions: What do we do about it? How can we help fix this? This provoked another 15 minutes of deliberation about potential ways to raise awareness about condoms' effectiveness in reducing HIV and other disease transmission risks. Students reached consensus to conduct an awareness poster campaign in their school. In the last round of circle dialogue, T1 asked: Do you think that people in the healthcare system (like doctors, surgeons, dentists) should be tested for HIV before they can be hired? Throughout, students continued to constructively but animatedly voice disagreements to peers. About half of the students (male and female) were considerably more talkative than their peers, but every class member spoke on topic more than once.

T1's strategic choice to link the abstract issues to named characters in a real-life scenario, while framing interpretive and values questions as unsettled public policy, offered a scaffold for practicing empathy and for encouraging students' expression of various viewpoints. T1

supported and expected her students to practice democratic agency: to speak persuasively to peers, to listen carefully, to pose questions, to evaluate their own participation and the fairness of T1's assessment rubric, and to work toward a collective decision. Passing a talking piece, and explicit evaluation of participation elements, ensured that all students did bring themselves into the shared dialogue. T1 designed and guided this learning activity, but she did not dominate the conversation. Instead, she encouraged vibrant horizontal democratic dialogue among these diverse students.

### *A2-T6 – Municipal issues simulation in middle school social studies*

T6 is a middle-aged teacher of grade 7-8 geography, language arts, and social studies (and cooperating with math/science co-teacher T7) at A2, an alternative public school in a mixed, fairly affluent urban area (12 observations). This school setting allowed curriculum flexibility, encouraged innovation, and explicitly emphasized social justice education. Like T1 above, T6 had received 'Tribes' cooperative learning training, and recently had participated in a (different) one-day professional development workshop on peacemaking circles. However, T6 chose not to implement any circle dialogue process during seven months of our observations, telling us she felt her current students were not mature enough for circle work.

We observed T6's global geography units on hunger and clean water issues, but focus here on *Town*, a one-month integrated unit simulation of conflictual municipal decision-making, organized by T6 (with assistance from co-teacher T7) for their 46 combined grade 7-8 students. Each student submitted a resume, to apply for their role in the simulation (mayor, banker, coroner, doctor, etc.). *Town* included 'business' periods, during which students worked in small committees (4-5 students) conducting research, discussing proposals and drafting motions, in preparation for twice-weekly whole-class 'town meetings.'

T6 (and T7) did not explicitly teach process or skills for dialogue, but instructed small-group 'business' committees to "debate" issues, and then to reach "consensus" (voting if necessary) on proposals to present at 'town meetings:' this provided potential space for autonomous peer dialogue about conflicts. For example in one observation, four students in the 'mayor's office' discussed a proposal to reduce taxes on electric cars. One student argued, instead, for reduction of taxes on all cars, but was not able to persuade the other vocal member of his committee, so the negotiation stalled. T7 encouraged the group to do more research to substantiate the proposal (survey the community on the proposed tax reduction, conduct a vehicle inventory to determine how many electric cars there were), and to ensure that everyone present could voice their opinion.

In 'town meetings,' the combined class sat around the perimeter of the room, with T6 moderating, following parliamentary procedure. These meetings addressed such matters as development of the public transportation network, waste pick-up schedules, what to do about a nuisance bear in town, and sustainable sources of energy. Meetings consisted of proposal

presentations by student ‘committees,’ question/answer period, and vote. T6 began meetings by reviewing parliamentary procedures using recitation questions, and reminding students that everyone’s voice should be heard. Most girls (except for one acting as mayor) remained silent throughout entire meetings, compared to more vocal boys, until T6 introduced bonus marks as an incentive to speak in the large group. A wider range of students, including girls, had opportunities to engage in conflictual conversations in the small group ‘committees,’ compared to the large-group ‘town-meetings.’

The *Town* case shows various ways students could practice democratic agency and skills such as debating and decision-making. First, students had input into the simulation roles they performed, although teachers made the final role assignments. In role, they became ‘experts’ taking initiative in their committee work, which in turn influenced ‘town meeting’ agendas. Further, students sometimes brought their lived experiences into discussions, although not foregrounding personal or unpopular perspectives. For example, when discussing development of a public transportation network, students drew examples from the transit system in their ‘real’ city. Whereas students in some small ‘committees’ engaged in conflictual dialogue among themselves (sometimes competitively with some dominating), large ‘town meetings’ were more teacher-regulated. Students expressed divergent viewpoints (in proposal and question periods), but time scarcity and meeting procedures prevented ‘horizontal’ (student-student) back-and-forth dialogue on these issues. In many of T6’s lessons, including *Town*, students were directed to identify, substantiate, and voice divergent viewpoints on issues, without having much opportunity to engage in dialogue about these issues, especially in whole-class formats.

#### ***A2-T5 – Middle school language arts on social exclusion, The Staircase***

T5, a middle-aged teacher with ten years of experience, taught grade 7/8 language arts, drama, health, and social studies at A2, the previous year (12 observations) at the same alternative public school as T6. T5 had implemented classroom community circles in the past, and had participated in the same professional development workshop on peacemaking circle dialogue processes as T6. Like T6, T5 felt that this school setting was supportive of student-centred, dialogic pedagogies about social justice issues. Although she still felt that pressure to cover prescribed curriculum narrowed her opportunities to implement such pedagogies, she did implement dialogue activities with her students.

We observed a three-month integrated language arts (including drama) and social studies unit based on a story about a racism-related school bullying situation, *The Staircase* by William Bell. We observed a class of 26 mixed grade 7/8 students (11 females and 15 males, including 9 visible ethnic minorities). The unit’s overarching theme was social exclusion. In the story, Akmed, a Muslim student new to his school, was ostracized and harassed by a “clique” of popular white students. In addition to the story, T5 taught about social status inequality, inclusion/exclusion, distinguishing human needs and wants, critical reading, speaking and writing in role, and the peacemaking circle process — later applied in



discussion of story characters. T5 invited students to draw upon their experiences to list their own needs and wants, then she led the class through a consensus-building process in which students deliberated and agreed upon a whole-group list of ‘most important’ human needs. She assigned students to write reflective journals, probing links between the conflicts in the story and their personal lives. For instance, near the end of the unit, T5 asked students to reflect on how they had been socially excluded, how they had excluded someone else, and how they felt about it.

Throughout the unit, T5 explicitly modelled, taught, and had students practice skills and norms for communication in the context of conflict, such as to respect each other, say things appropriate to the roles they were playing, listen carefully and ask questions, and support their characters’ attributes with evidence from the text. T5 used a wide variety of pedagogical structures, including pair and small group work, whole class discussions, on-line blog discussion, role playing, simulation games, reflective writing, and peacemaking circles, that provided students with various opportunities to exercise agency. For example during one lesson, T5 invited students to choose a story character and to imagine and act out their role in their own ways — which later encouraged diverse responses to T5’s debriefing questions. In other instances, T5 invited students to work in groups, for example to invent details of a new character’s life and then to create and perform scenes about her. At the same time, as in T6’s class, status inequalities among the students became especially evident during small group work. For example in the lesson just mentioned, dominant members in some groups rejected peer suggestions and imposed their own viewpoints, while in other groups students worked collaboratively. While T5 gave students group assignment guidelines and taught critical thinking and communication skills such as asking open-ended questions, she did not evidently teach or guide norms for small group work that might have mitigated status imbalances.

In the unit’s culminating sessions, students engaged —playing character roles— in peacemaking circle dialogues about social exclusion. Although the sequential passing of the talking piece and the limited time available for dialogue meant that the conflicts aired were not fully discussed, students performed their roles in ways that surfaced deep insights about social exclusion, which appeared to reflect their personal experiences of their society. For example, a popular white male student in character as an ethnic minority said, “I did not get a job because they were racist.” A peer in role shared her own experience: “I exclude people every day. A new girl wanted to hang out with us and I said no.”

In sum, T5 led her class to investigate aspects of bias-based relational social aggression. Her explicit skills instruction and varied pedagogies supported a wide breadth and depth of student engagement. While participating in these dialogue activities, some students apparently changed their viewpoints about Akmed (the character targeted by bullying in the story whom they had initially rejected as a ‘loser’), and gained some awareness of their own implication in actual patterns of social inclusion and exclusion. Most students evidently developed empathic awareness and practiced agency (decision-making and voice).

***A6-T12 – High school discussions of social exclusion and Holocaust history***

T12 is an experienced history teacher at A6, a public high school of primarily university-bound students in a fairly affluent part of the city (6 observations). She had taken part in one-week professional development course on teaching Holocaust and genocide history, and implemented some of these strategies and resources in lessons we observed. T12 felt that her school department had been supportive of her student-centered, dialogic pedagogies. Her grade 10 world history university-stream class included 25 students (11 girls and 14 boys, including 5 ethnic minorities). Her unit on the Nazi Holocaust period, presented historical content and opportunities to discuss conflictual topics such as identity-based exclusion including racism, socioeconomic marginalization, and anti-Semitism. T12 supported all her lessons with powerpoint slides and study questions (available online to students) in order to free up time for a subject matter discussion. At the beginning of each academic year, T12 took time to teach norms of mutual respect, listening skills, and how to disagree in non-offensive ways.

She began by asking students to probe their own intersecting in-group and out-group social identities. When one boy's comment suggested disrespect for a student club he considered "nerds," she disclosed that when young she had been targeted as a "nerd" by peers. Throughout the unit, T12 conducted presentations and activities followed by open-ended interpretive questions. Debriefing an allegorical film about in-groups and out-groups, *The Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss, T12 asked questions such as: "How were different identity groups formed? How were low-status group members treated? Can you draw analogies to school peer relations?" These generated a broadly inclusive whole class discussion, during which students drew analogies between social inclusion/exclusion in school peer relations, the *Sneetches* cartoon, and the Nazi Holocaust. Poignantly, a student recently immigrated from an inter-ethnic war zone mentioned that war as an instance of social exclusion 'othering.' During another lesson, T12 showed a World War II Canadian newspaper headlines, as evidence that Canadians knew a mass extermination of Jewish people was taking place, and drew analogies to other genocides in Cambodia, Darfur, and Rwanda. By relating historical events to current events and students' personal lives, T12 engaged virtually all her students in exploration of Holocaust history topics, and increased their awareness of the local and global persistence of social exclusion and oppression.

At the end of the unit, after students had created and presented their own memorials commemorating the Holocaust, T12 showed a controversial YouTube video in which a Holocaust survivor and his grandchildren had danced to the tune, "I will survive," on the Auschwitz grounds. T12 told students, "A lot of people disagree over this," and elicited responses with a series of interpretive and values questions such as: Was anybody annoyed or upset? What was he [the Holocaust survivor] saying [by producing this video]? Do you think this could be seen as offensive? When some students, who had begun by feeling offended by the video, evidently changed their opinions through this discussion—deciding it was a legitimate celebration of a family's survival— T12 asked them to explain what had

changed their minds. After about the half of the students had contributed to the discussion, T12 concluded by affirming the legitimacy of conflicting views, leaving open the question of whether this was an appropriate Holocaust memorial: “I am still torn about what to feel about this.”

Throughout the unit, T12 fostered democratic agency, for example by inviting students to express their viewpoints, including those contrary to her own, and usually not providing a ‘correct’ answer to contestable issues. She also offered anonymous ways for students to have input, such as distributing ‘sticky notes’ for submission of questions or confusions. Although T12 presented the basic human rights issues emerging from the Holocaust as ‘settled’ (not themselves controversial), she opened various conflictual questions about what students and governments should *do* about these problems.

### **Cross-case analysis discussion**

#### ***Context factors facilitating and impeding conflictual dialogue***

Even in these purposively-selected cases, in which each teacher believed she was facilitating classroom dialogue about conflictual questions, the teachers tended to leave limited space for student agency in the sense of developing and voicing their own views about conflictual questions, critiquing the workings of power, initiating or critiquing actions or influencing decisions. This was especially visible among the more marginalized and less confident students in each classroom. Although they were exposed to the ‘same’ curriculum, differently positioned students enacted different amounts of agency — some were confident, dominant speakers; others’ views were unpopular or never aired.

At the same time, the diversity among these four teachers’ styles and climates for conflict dialogue suggests that each teacher retained some agency, and had the power to enhance or impede the agency of their various students. As mentioned in the method section, each of the four took part in a professional development mini-course, intended to support implementation of classroom dialogue about social conflicts. Only three of the four evidently implemented pedagogies taught in those workshops, affirming the consensus in scholarly literature that professional development (while necessary) is insufficient to cause pedagogical change. T1 (science/HIV issues) and T5 (language/*Staircase* drama) implemented unusually inclusive, horizontally dialogic circle processes evidently learned in their (two different) restorative circle trainings. T12 (Holocaust history) implemented pedagogies of reflection and anonymous student input opportunities from her training. T6 (social studies/*Town* simulation), in contrast, chose not to implement the student-centred, horizontal dialogue pedagogies presented in her professional development workshops.

All four settings were public schools with mixed student populations. T12’s high school and T5’s and T6’s alternative middle school each attracted somewhat more privileged and Anglophone students than the district average, while including substantial ethnic minority

populations. T5 and T6 enacted remarkably different pedagogies, teaching the same grades at the same school (in consecutive years). The case of T1 shows that critical, student-centred interpretive dialogue is possible in science classrooms and in a non-affluent, 100% ethnic minority environment.

Time scarcity for student-centred dialogue —due to curriculum mandates— was noted by all teachers. However, T5 spent a long time on her *Staircase* unit, and T12 mitigated time constraints by providing detailed slides that ensured student access to history content and reclaimed time for classroom discussions. Paradoxically, T1 (science) told us she felt more constrained by curriculum demands in her university-stream classes, and freer in her general-level classes, to take time for dialogue: this appears to buck the trends in access to dialogic learning opportunities suggested by Kahne and Middaugh (2008) and Dull and Murrow (2008), pointing to an area for further study. Although they were very different environments, school commitment at (T5 & T6's) A2 and (T1's) A8 to restorative peacemaking processes (compared to T12's A6 and other schools in the wider Peace-Building Dialogue study) seemed to support the teachers' encouragement of student voice and dialogue.

#### ***Types of conflictual questions addressed***

All four teachers addressed questions of human needs and rights and social inclusion/exclusion. T1 (science) and T6 (in her geography units and to some degree in the *Town* simulation) offered opportunities for students to discuss what are typically considered 'unsettled' controversial public policy issues. T5 (language/drama – *Staircase*) and T12 (Holocaust history) opened human rights questions (that some would consider 'settled') for conflictual conversation, by foregrounding questions of individual social responsibility – what students and society members should do to resist aggressive social exclusion, whether interpersonal or society-wide.

Our findings, particularly in the T5 and T12 cases, reinforce the idea (Freire, 1970; Hemmings, 2000) that probing analogies between conflictual issues and diverse students' lives implicated them as actors, thus decision-makers (agents). While T6 allowed, and T12 explicitly encouraged, students to reflect upon links between introduced conflicts and those in the students' own lives, only a few of them evidently took up this opportunity. Students seemed to treat T6's and T12's subject matter as abstract 'school' knowledge, distant from their own experience.

#### ***Educating 'for' democratic dialogue***

Although all four teachers 'told' students expectations for how to interact, only T1 (science), T5 (language – *Staircase*), and sometimes T12 (Holocaust history) took time to 'teach' students *how* to speak and listen constructively about conflict. By teaching drama techniques

for going into role and improvising, T5 engaged her students in imagining and voicing divergent perspectives. By involving students in circle dialogues, T5 and T1 engaged them in the agency of listening intently to challenging viewpoints, in order to respond. T5 and T1 also were most explicit in guiding and scaffolding diverse students' skills for conflict talk.

Four teachers (not T1 in her lesson on HIV, although she did in her lessons on genetics) asked students to ground their conflictual discussions in understanding of subject matter. In each instance, the subject matter enriched the 'conflictualness' of these discussions, by highlighting divergent human perspectives. All four used interpretive questioning (making sense of the subject matter, sometimes linking selves to it). T5, T1 and T12 also used values questioning, placing students explicitly in the role of decision makers. T1 also gave students decision making responsibility in deliberating about community action to help prevent HIV transmission.

### *Pedagogies for educating 'through' democratic dialogue*

T5 and T6 assigned students roles that required them to take conflicting perspectives in dialogues, but in different ways. T6 assigned adversarial positions (in the geography lessons mentioned briefly above) or (municipal simulation) job roles that implied divergent interests and priorities. She did not spend time scaffolding students' capacities to imagine how and why those viewpoints really differed, and students often seemed to take on these roles rather shallowly. In contrast, T5 guided her students to probe human characteristics and to imagine in detail (as well as to voice) the perspectives of character roles. Thus T5 encouraged emotional engagement with conflict, yet reduced the risk of such engagement through role-play.

In contrast, T1 (science) and T12 (Holocaust history) invited students' emotional and vocal engagement in their 'own' voices—a different practice of agency. T1 balanced inclusion (passing a talking piece and establishing an assessment rubric requiring each student to voice their opinions) with freer choice (allowing more confident and motivated students to take the floor more often, to 'rebut' peers' views). T12 left it 'open' to (usually more confident) individual students to decide when, whether, and how to speak up in conflictual moments.

Unsurprisingly, small group work offered opportunity for more (diverse) students to engage in horizontal dialogue with peers. However, only T1 and T5 explicitly structured small groups' membership and dialogic procedures to alleviate status inequality among students. So, more students spoke during group work because the 'air time' for doing so was more open, but more students overtly dominated peers in small group work than in teacher-guided full-class activities. T1 had an unusually small class, which allowed her to both guide students directly and leave enough time for all students to speak up in conflictual dialogue.

In whole-class dialogues, only the talking-circle processes facilitated by T1 and T5 encouraged much direct, horizontal exchange among students. Since her class was much

bigger and she kept the talking piece circulating sequentially, T5's circles involved more 'sharing' of divergent viewpoints than engaged 'arguing' between opposing views. The more heavily teacher-led discussions of T12 and T6 shaped more vertical conflict talk (between teacher and students): although students did respond to one another, their voices were addressed to, and explicitly mediated by, the authority figure.

## Conclusions

Teachers *can* create fairly inclusive classroom communities, in which diverse students enact democratic agency in constructively handling difference and conflict, even under existing conditions of centralized curriculum mandates and minimal resources for student support or teacher professional development. Publicly funded classrooms are by no means completely democratic (equitable and jointly-governed) communities, but they are public spaces that bring together diverse people who can indeed try out some aspects of working together as citizens.

Surfacing conflicting perspectives —recognizing and problematising the assumptions and perspectives underlying 'school' knowledge— cracks open spaces in which students may gain opportunities to exercise some democratic agency. Even when dialogic pedagogies do not directly invite students to make decisions in the classroom, they make visible the acts of interpretation and judgment with which social knowledge is continually reconstructed. Conflicts make implicit social codes, values and viewpoints more explicit, thus potentially more accessible to learners. Even when these teachers communicated explicit value stances on human rights challenges, they 'unsettled' these conflicts by placing students in the role of decision makers, responsible to *do* something about these on-going problems.

However, when these teachers taught *through* democratic dialogue without also educating *for* democratic dialogue —teaching, guiding and scaffolding skills and processes for constructive, inclusive participation— they seemed to leave some of their students marginalized. When the teachers moderated discussions directly themselves in whole-class formats, most were somewhat able to invite and support agentic participation from diverse students. However, some teachers dominated the floor themselves and, given 'air time' scarcity, most allowed many students to become spectators rather than vocal participants.

'Open' dialogue formats (especially in autonomous student group-work) tended to reinforce the domination of some voices and exclusion of others. Where teachers had first developed respectful, inclusive classroom climates, and then assigned (and helped students prepare to play) particular roles that implied divergent viewpoints, more students evidently practiced agentic participation in conflict dialogue. That is, in those instances students took and explained perspectives on problematised issues, and responded dialogically to contrasting perspectives. As in the role plays, in talking circles every student was given turns to speak: circle processes slowed down dialogue, compared to typical back-and-forth arguments. This strategy (assigning *some* agency to *all* students) constrained the freedom of the confident to

dominate, but also may have constrained the agency of students (in general) to engage in direct disagreement and exchange. Assigned roles and passing a talking piece were two ways to make visible the *processes* and *communicative strategies* embedded in democratic discussion — to make space for diverse voices, and to make visible the making of space. These case studies illustrate several ways in which teachers' pedagogies can make space for, and tangibly support, diverse students' agentic voices.

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