This paper is taken from

Creating Communities: Local, National and Global
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network

London: CiCe 2012

edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as
Parker, C. A. (2012) 'Conflicts and 'Canadian' identities embedded in citizenship education: Diverse immigrant students' experiences', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 623 - 635.

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Conflicts and 'Canadian' identities embedded in citizenship education: Diverse immigrant students' experiences

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Abstract

This paper presents my observations of implemented conflict and diversity infused curricula, with a focus on social studies and language arts, in three publicly-funded elementary classrooms (Grades 4, 5, and 7), and my interviews with diverse immigrant students in those classes regarding their experiences with those pedagogies. The study focuses on the citizenship learning experiences of first- and second-generation ethno-cultural minority immigrant elementary students (ages 9-13) in Southern Ontario, Canada. In particular, this paper probes how these students, in three contrasting classrooms, with peers and teachers who shared similar and different cultural backgrounds and migration histories, responded to lessons and discussions that were or were not apparently relevant to their cultural identities and experiences.

Keywords: *conflict dialogue, immigrant students, cultural identity, diversity, democratic education*

How do diverse elementary students experience curriculum and classroom discussions about diversity, social justice and conflictual issues? What kinds of curriculum and pedagogy create inclusive spaces for diverse young Canadians to find their places in the curriculum and in their world? Ethno-cultural minority immigrant students carry many diverse histories, perspectives, and experiences that can serve as resources for critical reflection and discussion about social conflicts (Banks, 2006; Nieto, 1992). In contrast, teaching students as though they were all the same does not create equitable social relations (*ibid* & Bickmore, 2008).

Addressing social conflicts within diverse settings involves acknowledging and including the diverse identities that may explicitly relate to issues being discussed. Such discussions have the potential to encourage diverse, tolerant, and dissenting viewpoints, but they also risk further marginalizing or silencing diverse students. When social conflict issues were explicitly discussed and connected to students' diverse identities, even the typically quieter students found their voice in classroom discussions. This paper provides insights into how democratic citizenship learning opportunities may be inclusive of immigrant students' diverse and intersecting identities, in ways that facilitate their social and academic engagement.

A curriculum may normalize hegemonic assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, and power, thereby silencing or ignoring Others (hooks, 1994; McCarthy, 1988). Moreover, when such curriculum adopts a so-called neutral stance, treating conflict as something to be avoided, it implicitly invites students to maintain white, male-centered, heterosexual, and middle/upper class norms and values (Apple, 1979/2004; Kumashiro, 2000). This avoidance of conflict limits opportunities for students to engage in discussion and to explore alternative perspectives. In contrast, curriculum that airs conflicting perspectives may invite and support critical thinking, exposing the ideological underpinnings of the existing system.

All curricula include implicit learning opportunities embedded into the classroom and school practices, known as the "hidden" curriculum (Jackson, 1968). While the hidden curriculum in North American schooling typically avoids conflict, it is entirely possible for explicit (and/or implicit) conflict learning opportunities embedded in the curriculum to cut against this grain, and instead to encourage critical, inclusive engagement. Implicit and explicit curricular experiences that purposefully generate conflict dialogue and address issues of power and difference can create spaces for inclusion of multiple histories, experiences, and perspectives (Bickmore, 2005).

The identities of the individuals involved in any conflictual discussion can be expected to play a significant role in the ways they understand and approach social and political issues in classroom settings. Conflict dialogue processes which may create opportunities for students and teachers to engage with their multiple identities and to draw on their diverse lived experiences and perspectives to interpret and respond to particular issues. Diverse students can better navigate their "multiple worlds" between home, school, and community when teachers' pedagogical strategies engage their personal experiences and identities (Parker, C., 2010a; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). To support diverse students' identities as they engage in conflict dialogue, teachers need to be equipped with culturally appropriate pedagogies (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2004). By contrast, when power and difference are ignored, it is possible for conflictual issues pedagogies to be detrimental, particularly for students who carry marginalized identities (Hess & Avery, 2008).

This paper shows how the teachers in the three classroom sites used curriculum content to bridge and connect to students' experiences and identities. The study of different settled and unsettled historical and (controversial) political issues provided opportunities for diverse students to relate to and build on the topics their teachers presented (Hess, 2001, 2009). The presentation of various conflictual issues (historical, religious, political, identity-linked) influenced how students participated and responded during classroom discussions. Diverse students articulated their experiences with learning in classroom environments where their peers, of both similar and different cultural backgrounds, influenced their learning and, at times, expanded their repertoires of cultural knowledge and understanding. The teachers positioned issues as conflictual to develop connections to students' experiences and background knowledge, such as the dichotomy between rural and urban communities, immigration patterns, citizenship, and social structures and power. The contentious and sometimes sensitive topics (e.g., religious identities, 'democracy' in home countries) raised

in the classroom allowed some more confident students (and some quieter students) to voice their perspectives. In some instances, it also led to the silencing of other, less vocal, and perhaps marginalized voices (e.g., when discussing personal familial patterns of immigration). Ultimately, teachers' choices of texts, activities and discussion topics provided opportunities, as well as impediments, for students to (critically) reflect on their diverse identities and cross-cultural experiences within local, global and historical contexts. When the curriculum connected to students' lived experiences and cultural histories it stimulated more opportunities for the participation and inclusion of diverse student voices.

Methodology and Data Sources

This ethnographic study is a critical examination of issues based discussions and activities in grades 4-to-7 social studies, history, and language arts curricula, in classrooms with students who were ethno-cultural minorities, mostly from East Asia and South Asia ancestry. Ethnography with a critical perspective pursues a *political* purpose (Gérin-Lajoie, 2003), by describing and analyzing cultural contexts with the intent to reveal "hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain" (Thomas, 1993, p. 2). This research involves in-depth study of three different elementary school classrooms, in two different schools to study students' experiences with conflictual dialogue pedagogies throughout different units of study over the course of one school year. I studied three classrooms (Grade 4, 5, and 7), two within one school and another within another school, within the same urban city in Southern Ontario, Canada. Data collected included 110 classroom observations, ranging from 30 to 120 minutes each; two 1-hour formal interviews with each teacher; 29 student group interviews, each 30 to 45 minutes long, with groups of two to seven students at a time; classroom documents, including students' work samples and teachers' planning materials; and a researcher journal.

The data gathered through these extensive classroom observations and interviews and through the collection of classroom documents illustrate how teachers in three classrooms facilitated democratic learning opportunities for diverse students. In this paper, I present data from each of my three cases, to show how dialogic pedagogies supported students' learning about conflict and diversity and provided them with the greater opportunity to transcend their identities through dialogue.

Historical and identity connections: Conflicts across time, space, and culture

In the following vignettes, I illustrate how teachers embedded various types of conflicts in curriculum content and pedagogies, and how these influenced diverse students' engagement and inclusion in each classroom. I begin with Mr. Hiroshi's Grade 7 class. Mr. Hiroshi frequently presented conflicting perspectives and ideas in his open classroom climate, predominantly in his history and literacy lessons. Mr. Hiroshi introduced historical topics as issues, thus including conflict in his implemented curriculum. For instance, he invited

students to discern causes and outcomes of conflict, by guiding his class to compare past and present wars during classroom activities.

Next, I discuss Ms. Marlee's Grade 4 class, showing how she addressed an interpersonal conflict about religious difference or intolerance that came up between two girls, a Muslim and a Christian, in her classroom. Ms. Marlee guided students to contextualize this conflict by asking her students to research and present stories from their various religions. By inviting these disclosures linked to the identities of diverse students in the classroom, Ms. Marlee embedded conflictual religious content in her implemented curriculum. Ms. Marlee, a Catholic turned atheist, told me in my first interview with her that she was confident in her ability to entertain beliefs from different religions, and she demonstrated this self-assurance when she led the discussion of creation stories students brought in from their various cultures.

Lastly, I discuss Mrs. Amrita's Grade 5 class, and show how she introduced conflictual issues that directly related to students' family experiences. She invited her students to share personal immigration experiences orally in class, and compared and contrasted these with fictitious and historical immigration stories from the textbook. Mrs. Amrita invited critique and feedback from students. In doing so, she invited conflicting narratives into the classroom in ways that apparently encouraged the engagement and participation of all students; they felt connected to these issues, motivated by the topic, and safe to talk about their and their peers' diverse lived experiences.

Battling identities in war: Deconstructing historical and political issues

In Mr. Hiroshi's class, students frequently engaged in discussion about diversity and social conflicts. The issues discussions led by Mr. Hiroshi encouraged students to reflect individually and in small groups on connections between lesson topics and their own experiences and histories. Mr. Hiroshi taught his students about the War of 1812 as both a historical and political conflict. He did not ask "Who won the war of 1812?" Instead, after stating the typical Canadian historical contention that it was a war that no one won, he asked his students to consider what the causes of the war might have been, after *settling* the (predominantly) Canadian historical contention that it was a war that 'no one won.' Mr. Hiroshi's open-ended questioning invited students to think about the causes of a present-day war. Akmed (a Muslim male) and two other Sri Lankan males said that they thought 9/11 was the cause of the war in the Middle East.

Mr. Hiroshi's mathematics lessons were as dynamic as his social studies lessons; the engagement level and participation patterns were equally high, and many students called out answers to his information-gathering questions. In social studies and language arts, Mr. Hiroshi did not spend as much time speaking and writing on the board at the front of the class as he did in mathematics class. Instead, giving lessons on debates, reflective writing, and making inferences, he consistently posed questions that provided opportunities for

students to reflect on their values and to interpret content. During many history lessons, Mr. Hiroshi sat off to the side on a bar stool, sharing information and facilitating discussion about historical and present-day conflicts. He taught history through multiple stories that extended across time and space; he connected current and past conflicts in order to help students reflect more critically on the present.

Mr. Hiroshi's students were aware of his practice of including current world issues in the curriculum. For instance, in an interview, Crystal and Anita (higher social status females) both said they believed that they were knowledgeable about the world and confident in their preparation for participation in society because of the ongoing world issues discussions that Mr. Hiroshi had implemented. The following snippet illustrates how Mr. Hiroshi compared the Rebellions of 1837 to his students' lived experiences:

> Mr. H: I was thinking about how people were rebelling in 1837 and how you were all connecting that to what's happening in Egypt and one thing I want you to be aware of is what's going on in the world. (*asking students directly*) Does it affect any of us? Right here and right now as we're sitting here, does it affect us? Can I use you as an example, Mona?
> Mona: Yes. . . . My neighbours and my family are still there.
> Mr. H: So it may not affect a lot of you now directly, but in a quest to make us think about things in our schema [here on the current events board] we want to recognize what's happening in the world.

While most students initially may have felt disconnected from this conflict, it seemed to become more personally relevant when Mr. Hiroshi posed the question "Does it affect us?" and their classmate, Mona, shared her personal connection to it. This is an example of how a social conflict was connected to students' personal experiences and identities.

Mr. Hiroshi believed that modernizing historical conflicts (e.g., the Acadian expulsion) by relating them to the present (e.g., war in Sri Lanka) would contribute to a deeper understanding of both past and present conflicts. Through the study of current events in relation to historical events, a range of diverse students, including quiet ones and those of lower social status, were given opportunities to individually and collectively shape their perceptions of their world. Mr. Hiroshi presented issues that he found fascinating (war-related games, facts, and news) and it appeared, from the students' level of engagement, that most agreed with their teacher's positions on the conflictual issues he presented

Overall, the multitude of connections amongst students, and between students and Mr. Hiroshi, meant that there was little or no open disagreement about alternative perspectives on some conflictual issues. Mr. Hiroshi expressed this awareness himself during our interview: "The stuff I didn't agree with, they didn't agree with either." It is possible that some students did not concur with their teacher's position, and their response may have been to self-silence.

Religious conflicts and Canadian identities

I observed Ms. Marlee, in her Grade 4 class, facilitating a lesson motivated by an openly expressed religious conflict she had observed erupting between two girls in her classroom: Fatima, a Muslim, and Tina, a Christian. This was the first time Ms. Marlee had experienced such an incident in her teaching career, she said in her initial interview. In the classroom, Ms. Marlee voiced the perspective that people should all practise acceptance and understanding of other cultures to maintain a harmonious community. Fatima and Tina, who were both usually vocally dominant in class, did not reply aloud to Ms. Marlee after she said this; they self-silenced. The topic appeared to be closed, settled.

Tina, the one Black female in the class, who Ms. Marlee told me came from an observant Christian family, had told Fatima, the only one in the class who wore a hijab, that her God was not the real God because her faith didn't believe in Jesus. The classroom was silent as everyone listened to their teacher's 15-minute speech. Ms. Marlee, clearly upset, began by saying: "When you have conflict in the playground, it shouldn't be over religion." She pleaded passionately with the students to "Fight for those who don't have food to eat, fight for those who are violated or oppressed, but don't fight with each other about religion and about whether or not someone else's God is better than yours." The two girls who had been in conflict during recess were friends and both normally volunteered to speak frequently during whole-class discussions. However, in this episode they did not speak to each other, nor to the class, during this teacher-led recitation.

A few students raised their hands to ask questions, such as Who is Allah, What is Catholic, Who is Jesus. Ms. Marlee responded by offering matter-of-fact responses, such as "Allah is another word for God." The students did not respond to each other's questions. This religious conflict was a critical incident in this Grade 4 class. It interrupted the regular social studies program and invited an alternative implemented curriculum that stimulated the opportunity to learn through and about diversity.

The next week, during the same social studies unit, students were reading aloud from a textbook about the Arctic Lowlands. In a sidebar of the book, there was an Inuit creation story. Ms. Marlee stopped the class read-aloud to reflect on this text and asked her students where they had heard similar kinds of stories and what kind of story it was. "A true story," offered Tina. "A fiction story," said Fatima. Ms. Marlee then went to the board and wrote "Creation Story." She told the students: "Every culture in the world has a creation story. A creation story tells how "man came to be on the planet." As she said this, many students began making noises while they raised their hands, "Oh, oh, oh, I know, me, me, me," indicating affective engagement with this idea; they wanted to speak. Ms. Marlee continued, telling students that this was an Aboriginal creation story, and it said that people came out of the ground. She continued saying, "The creation story I was taught in school was about Adam and Eve," Tina enthusiastically responded, without raising her hand, "I know that one!" Ms. Marlee didn't invite any further comment from Tina. Instead, she directed her questioning to Fatima: "Fatima, is there a creation story in the Muslim culture?" Fatima,

unsure of how to answer the question right away, began to converse with another Muslim student in the class, Farat, to think of a proper response. After conferring, she announced with a quiet giggle, "We have one, but it's too long."

Ms. Marlee gathered her students' attention as she announced their homework, "Tonight, you're going to go home and ask your parents what your creation story from your culture is and then you're going to write it out and bring it to class to share with all of us." When Ms. Marlee stopped the class lesson to extend her implemented curriculum content beyond the textbook to make it relevant to students' diversities and conflicts, she integrated some of their perspectives and identities into the curriculum. Many students were excited to share; many simultaneously spoke over each other. At the same time, Ms. Marlee maintained her authority, by directing the questions and responding on behalf of some students.

Interviews about this religious conflict conducted with Tina and Fatima separately, and with other Grade 4 students, support my interpretation that this critical incident served to identify cultural and religious difference in a way that perpetuated marginalization of some students, and increased the confidence of other students who had their identities affirmed and recognized during this discussion.

The lesson in which students shared their different creation stories opened a discussion about diversity within and among religions. It provided opportunities for many students to share their familial beliefs, which seemed to foster a sense of social and identity inclusion for diverse students. None of the students in Ms. Marlee's Grade 4 class identified with Aboriginal Canadian culture. However, the Aboriginal creation story had served as an example of difference, and created a space for Ms. Marlee to affirm that all students had different—and valid—cultural and religious identities. While only about eight students came prepared to tell their stories in front of the class, many others engaged in the discussion of those stories, feeling free to voice perspectives similar and different among their peers as they asked and responded, to both their teacher and peers' questions, about their religious beliefs. For instance, when Fatima shared her version of a Muslim creation story, the typically quiet Farat added to Fatima's story by providing additional details about followers of Islam. Fatima's collaboration with her Muslim peer helped her to respond to Ms. Marlee's request. It also illustrated how other Muslim students in this class, such as Farat, had become engaged in the lesson when asked, also by the teacher, to reflect on their personal religious identity. Creationism was a topic that sparked considerable interest in Ms. Marlee's Grade 4 class, and seemed to help students develop a greater appreciation for the diversity that existed among their classmates.

Building character and strengthening values: Immigration and Canadian citizenship

Mrs. Amrita encouraged all her students to raise their hands whenever she posed a question. Mrs. Amrita often called on students who didn't have their hands up, which reinforced participation of all students. She often said things like: "Everyone, look at me, I want

everyone to participate here, all hands go up," or questioned students publicly: "Why don't you have your hand up?" Mrs. Amrita also used a show of hands to poll her class about their experiences. During a discussion on immigration, for example, she asked students to raise their hands if their parents were immigrants. All except three students raised their hands: Quda, Nimi, and Frank had themselves immigrated with their parents. Mrs. Amrita's direct questioning invited students to share their identities (in this instance, that they all had immigrant parents). In Mrs. Amrita's immigration unit, she asked the Grade 5's: "What are some of the reasons to move to Canada?" Frank, who had recently immigrated from Kenya, readily responded, "War. It's too dangerous." Mrs. Amrita then asked, "What does 'refugees' mean?" Kevin, a Chinese male whose mother had been initially denied entry into Canada, responded, "It means they don't feel safe, and then decide to come here as a refugee to live here." At the beginning of the unit, Mrs. Amrita told her students to question their parents about immigration experiences, such as, why people moved to a new country and why they immigrated to Canada. Using the textbook Mrs. Amrita also taught rules and laws for immigrating to Canada, discussing the differences between family and refugee classes. Many students in this class were personally familiar with the latter.

In a follow-up lesson, the next day, Mrs. Amrita asked them again, "Why do you think people immigrate to Canada?" Eleven hands immediately went up:

Kate:	War.
Jess:	Better job.
Sugriva:	Education.
Nita:	Better opportunities.
Quda:	They want peace.
David:	(*EA)* They want new things.
Frank:	Maybe the place they live in, the government is not treating them well. *(He raises his hand again right after he says this response, indicating he has more to share.)*
Kate:	Freedom to practise their religions.
Frank:	Canada is a free country.
Kevin:	They want freedom.
Uma:	A multicultural country where everyone is respected.
Mrs. A:	You know, boys and girls, when you come to Canada they don't ask you to leave your religion or your culture behind: *They want you to bring everything with you* so that you can practise your own religion, culture and beliefs and embrace it within Canada.

Mrs. Amrita reinforced liberal multiculturalism throughout most of this Grade 5 unit. For instance, she proudly told them: "Canada is everyone's country" she encouraged students to share with each other their stories about their ancestors. None of the students raised their hands in response: perhaps they were unsure of whether they had the right answer (i.e., that Canada was "everyone's country").

Six other students raised their hands to share their stories. All of them reinforced the idea that newcomer immigrants face challenges in Canada. One South Asian male said, "When my dad first came to Canada, he had a lot of challenges speaking English. . . . He wanted to go back." Resonating with this idea, Jess said: "My parents came from Vietnam and there was a war there and they came here on a boat across the ocean. They didn't know how to speak English and they missed home."

Mrs. Amrita adapted her usual norms for engagement, in assigning students the task of sharing their or their parents' experiences of immigrating to Canada. She explained that she would not force anyone to share. She would give students the choice of whether to voice their experiences by calling only on those who raised their hands. Students shared and heard peers' diverse perspectives during this sharing period, but did not ask each other questions as they usually did in this class. Instead, Mrs. Amrita provided comments and often related the students' stories to her own experience. Mrs. Amrita asked her students to collect information from a variety of sources (family, peers, and texts), which encouraged their reflective interpretations of the immigration topic, which they found personally relevant. Overt conflict did not erupt in this class session. The process of researching cultural histories in collaboration with students' families and then engaging in sharing with their peers illustrated Mrs. Amrita's views that students' cultural resources were valuable material for discussions about citizenship and integration in Canada.

Mrs. Amrita felt the need to present prescribed content in conjunction with students' personal narratives; she encouraged students to read the chapter in their textbook that provided the dominant narrative about immigration in Canada. During the whole-class reading of the text, it appeared that the textbook narrative was perceived by many students to not relate to the experiences shared in the class. Mrs. Amrita did not initially introduce the topic of immigration as a controversial or political issue. But an implicit issue was raised: How does the textbook depiction represent or distort immigration histories in Canada? ? In an interview with two students of Chinese origin in this class, I asked what they thought about reading about immigration from their textbook.

Jas: I would say that the author should rewrite it just a bit, so she or he could add a bit more to it.

Mike: Also, the sheets that Mrs. Amrita gave us didn't talk about *real people.* They were *fake people.* So it wasn't *real.*

Jas: The book was pretty old. It was written a long time ago and we still use that textbook.

Typically, Mrs. Amrita openly acknowledged social power structures during classroom discussions. During one of the discussions on immigration, she encouraged the three students in the class who had only recently immigrated to Canada to voice their experiences. These particular newcomers all responded to her invitation. Clearly, they felt safe enough to share this part of their identity. Mrs. Amrita and many of her students expressed the belief that they

were free in this classroom to engage in discussion about conflictual and sensitive issues, such as immigration and current events.

Discussion: Contextualizing citizenship in diverse classrooms

In this paper, I have discussed how three teachers presented curriculum content to facilitate and impede the process of strengthening connections between historical and current issues in relation to students' diverse identities. When the three teachers developed connections between the curriculum content and students' cultural identities, they increased their engagement and opportunity for learning. Mrs. Amrita in Grade 5 and Mr. Hiroshi in Grade 7 frequently facilitated various historical and identity connections across time, space and culture. Ms. Marlee, in Grade 4, moderately integrated some opportunities for such connections. Overall, these teachers used diverse pedagogical processes in conjunction with local, global, and historical content to facilitate culturally sensitive and responsive learning environments for diverse students.

Conflict was taken up differently in three different classroom contexts, all within social studies, history and literacy implemented curriculum. I argue here that any topic, both settled and unsettled, can be made into a conflictual issue. Clearly, the issue of Canadian immigration is unsettling when students' divergent histories contest generic textbook success stories. Within the context of this study, conflict is inescapably tied to diversity. Thus, the discussions about diversity and conflict provoked further opportunities for learning about divergent or conflicting perspectives.

These three teachers presented and "played" with conflict to varying levels. Mr. Hiroshi saw the value in using current events to connect to his students' diversities and to teaching them about (similar and different) historical events. Ms. Marlee, at first, passively presented information based on her perspective, that religious intolerance was wrong, and then she asked students to research their personal stories in collaboration with their families and peers, in order to engage in a more meaningful reflection and dialogue about difference and religion. In this way, the initial interpersonal conflict between Tina and Fatima was reinvented to create a powerful learning opportunity for diverse students. In a similar way, Mrs. Amrita's students collected information from a variety of sources (family, peers, as well as texts), which encouraged their reflective questioning and interpretation of at least one topic (immigration) they found personally relevant. While an overt conflict did not erupt in Mrs. Amrita's class, the similar process of researching about cultural histories in collaboration with students' families and then engaging in sharing with their peers, both illustrated how students' cultural resources are valuable material for discussions about citizenship and integration within Canada. Mr. Hiroshi opted to draw on current events to compare the past and present and invite a global perspective and cross-cultural understanding among his diverse students. When *invited*, many diverse students, and even typically quieter students, appeared to *want* to discuss conflictual issues both by sharing their experiences and by expressing their desire to learn and talk more about current events occurring around the

world. In all three cases, the students' identities and teachers' identities played a major role in how different conflictual issues were grappled with and responded to. All three teachers used a variety of dialogic pedagogies to encourage their diverse students to study how conflicts had historically been approached and could be resolved peacefully by exploring and including multiple perspectives, evident in current events and students' experiences.

The ways in which students interpret curricular subject matter would be shaped by their personal identities, histories, and experiences (Banks, 2006; Delpit, 2006). Differential opportunities to engage in multicultural and transformative conflict dialogue learning might lead some students to be better mobilized than others for success (Dull & Morrow, 2008). Teachers' skills for encouraging and facilitating identity-linked or sensitive conflicts are an integral element for ensuring the safety and inclusivity of all students' diverse experiences.

These experiences illustrate what Walter Parker (2011) called "wiggle room," a process that allows for movement within institutional constraints. Wiggle room to infuse dialogue across and about difference can be found in prescribed curriculum content. The classroom teacher carries the important role of continuously mediating and leading the positioning of conflict in the classroom. However, in this study, when conflictual talk was closely attached to students' identities, the various students' responses in each context, and their high level of engagement when conflictual talk did closely relate to their identities, were clear indicators of how curricular content can be made to relate and connect to students' past, present, and future experiences in their diverse world.

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