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# Democracy & Education

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## How Social Studies Teachers Conceptualize Civic Teaching and Learning in 2020 Insights from a Research-Practice Partnership

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### Abstract

High-quality civic learning opportunities remain the exception, rather than the norm, in public schools across the country. The health and future of the American democracy is dependent on all its public schools to foster democratic classrooms and prepare informed citizens—a reality far from realized in this third decade of the 21st century. Through an inductive analysis of in-depth interviews, this article makes visible how educators conceptualize civic teaching and learning in the political moment of the year 2020. Because of the known link between teachers' conceptualizations, instructional visions, and their practice, it is necessary when engaged in any district change effort to first understand how teachers understand the existing phenomenon—in this case, civic teaching and learning. In shedding light on teachers' contemporary conceptualizations of civic teaching and learning, this article contributes to the necessary and timely conversation on how to support civic teaching, even in politically contentious times, so that all students can experience high-quality civic learning on a routine basis.

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### Introduction

**T**HE HEALTH AND future of the American democracy is dependent upon the strength and vitality of its public institutions to develop and sustain an informed citizenry. Public schools in particular have long had an important role in preparing future generations of citizens (Dewey, 1916; Hess, 2004; Journell, 2011; Parker, 1996, 2002, 2010). Yet substantive research has shown that high-quality civic learning

opportunities remain the exception, rather than the expectation, in public schools across the country (Gould et al., 2011; Levine & Lopez, 2004). There is also evidence that white students and

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students from high-income families receive such opportunities more often than their peers from minoritized and low-income communities (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). High-quality civic learning opportunities matter because they enable young people to develop social identities that embrace an orientation toward civic and political participation in democracy, wherein they can both feel agency within and a responsibility for their community (Erikson, 1968; Youniss & Yates, 1997). According to Kahne and Middaugh (2008), what makes for high-quality civic learning is that these opportunities include experiences where students can develop the capacity to be effective civic actors, feel connected to groups who share their commitments, and form commitments to social issues. With the current landscape of civic education plagued by too few opportunities and a lack of equitable distribution, there is cause for concern for those interested in the health and sustainability of the American democratic project.

At the same time, public schools are continuously shaped by the people who inhabit them—the teachers, administrators, families, and students who are the lifeblood of these public institutions. In this way, there remains reason to be hopeful in their capacity to change—and for instructional practices to shift in ways that enable more young people to be and become informed, educated, and engaged in their world. After all, schools in the United States were once conceived as both “the great equalizer” and the mechanism for social integration into democracy<sup>1</sup>—and yet context and time have also long mediated efforts toward equity (Oakes et al., 1998). But because American public education remains largely state determined and locally controlled (Howe, 1997), it is still within classrooms themselves where perhaps the greatest instructional changes are possible.

In this context, then, how teachers think about civic teaching and its role in public education is of great importance. Indeed, there is a well-documented link between teachers’ conceptualizations, instructional visions, and their practices (Munter, 2014; Sherman, 2009). And yet little is known about how teachers themselves conceptualize civic education today, particularly in an era shaped by increasing and dramatic partisan divides (Klein, 2020). Through an inductive analysis of in-depth one-on-one interviews, this article examines how social studies teachers conceptualize civic teaching and learning in a hyper-partisan political moment. In shedding light on their conceptualizations, we contribute to the necessary and timely conversation on how to support civic teaching, even in politically contentious times—with the hope that more students can experience high-quality civic learning on a routine basis.

### **Varying Conceptualizations of Civic Education and Its Impact on Practice**

To situate the study, we briefly review existing literature that speaks to various conceptualizations of civic education. Of note, few of the following studies focus explicit empirical attention to teachers’ perspectives on civic teaching and learning, but they do

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1 As articulated by 19th/20th-century American educator and philosophers Horace Mann and John Dewey.

offer insights that helped frame the current inquiry. From their analysis of programs and practices aimed at promoting civic education, Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) seminal work identified three primary educator ideas about what constitutes *citizenship*: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. Personally responsible citizens are concerned mostly with following laws and rules, participatory citizens are those who often seek to get involved in community development, and justice-oriented citizens are those who often take a critical-thinking stance and identify root causes of social issues.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004)’s variation in ideas about citizenship are somewhat reflected in Bennett et al. (2009)’s models of the differences between dutiful citizenship (following typical civic duties such as voting) and actualizing citizenship (participating in action-oriented and participatory civic engagement). While it is possible to hold more than one of these ideas about what constitutes citizenship, it is worth considering the implications of varied teachers’ conceptualizations for both their instructional vision and practice in classrooms. One could imagine, for example, that a teacher with a personally responsible view or dutiful view of citizenship might prioritize the importance of youths’ adherence to rules and laws—versus a teacher with a justice-oriented or actualizing conceptualization of citizenship, who might focus more on how students can be change-agents within their communities. And indeed, this is what the Anderson et al. (1997) study found—that social studies teachers often differed with respect to what they emphasize in their classrooms: (a) laws and rights, (b) critical thinking, (c) cultural pluralism, and/or (d) patriotism, duty, and American values. Of interest, a recent study of social studies teachers in a school district in California found that nearly two decades from when Westheimer and Kahne (2004) put forward their typology, the justice-oriented citizen conceptualization remains the least common whereas the personally responsible conceptualization of citizenship remains the primary (DiGiacomo et al., 2021).

Today, the political ideology of the American public varies greatly (Pew Research Center, 2021). This matters because ideological orientation often impacts what teachers emphasize in their classrooms (Farkas & Duffett, 2010; Knowles & Castro, 2019). For example, teachers with conservative ideology tend to emphasize existing societal patterns, encourage a sense of nationalism, and promote typical civic duties like voting. Teachers with liberal ideology tend to support multiculturalism, tolerance, and open-mindedness among individuals. Finally, teachers who embrace a critical ideology tend to expose injustice and focus on activism and informed action. In summation, then, previous research points to the important variation in conceptualization in civic education that exists, while simultaneously recognizing that teachers may well shift in their own adoption and stances over the course of their teaching career and even across classroom contexts.

### **Difference for (Rather than against) Democracy: A Way Forward**

But should difference in political or ideological orientation matter to such a degree for civic teaching and learning? An emerging

strand of civic education scholarship suggests not. Several decades ago, the study of Anderson et al. (1997) showed that while conceptualizations of citizenship vary, social studies teachers do tend to share commitments to a set of civic priorities that include tolerance, civic involvement, and engaging with social values and current and controversial issues. While there has been little work between then and now to test that claim, more recently, the study of Mirra (2018) posited that teachers should teach civics in a way that is responsive to the diversity of students' lived realities and experiences. To do so, according to Mirra, teachers must recognize themselves as political beings and embrace teaching as a political act, which then allows them to develop forms of empathy that can invite civic-related experience into their classrooms. This work makes a strong case for urging teachers not to leave their big-*P* politics at the door—a sentiment also recently echoed by Journell (2020)—but rather to center politics with a little *p* through the cultivation of critical civic empathy. Critical civic empathy, in practice, is about “imaginatively embodying the lives of our fellow citizens while keeping in mind the social forces that differentiate our experiences as we make decisions about our shared public future” (Mirra, 2018, p. 7).

To be sure, leaning into political or ideological differences in perspective and identity in the classroom is now similarly well-documented in the literature as both a healthy and necessary practice of civic education. According to Allen (2004), purposefully seeking out and cultivating “political friendships,” especially among different racial groups, is precisely what is needed to increase interracial trust and reinvigorate public education's ability to promote equality of opportunity through democratic institutions and interactions (Allen, 2016). Allen's call to center differences in lived experience and various forms of social identity in educational settings is echoed in Hess's body of work, which identifies classrooms as the ideal forum in which to teach and practice democratic deliberation and discussion of controversial issues. This is because, according to Hess, classrooms are invariably spaces where young people from various backgrounds are together in a scaffolded, teacher-guided space (e.g., Hess, 2004; Hess & McAvoy, 2014). When difference is utilized “as a source of civic generativity and creativity” (Mirra & Garcia, 2020) and youth stories are prioritized and leveraged for greater meaning making, teachers can in fact support the project of mutual humanization and a greater democratic future through their classroom instruction.

Taken together, the recent literature on civic education suggests that while teacher ideology and conceptualizations of citizenship do indeed vary and may well shape instructional emphases and priorities, difference in perspective and identity—in both teachers and students—should not stand in the way of a high-quality civic education where students are provided with opportunities to build their civic capacities, connections, and commitments (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Rather than be brushed under the table or left at the door, difference in lived experience and perspectives amongst teachers and students should be centered in the design of civic teaching and learning through pedagogy that both honors youth stories and is mutually

humanizing (Mirra & Garcia, 2020). To be sure, teaching within this political moment makes this pedagogical imperative more challenging and yet even more necessary. According to Klein (2020), the hyper partisanship on display today has created extreme polarization in which citizens are often unwilling to change their minds even as they encounter new information. Clearly, this current state of citizen affairs will not serve the longevity of the American democratic project, because “at its best, democracy is full of contention and fluid disagreement but free of settled patterns of mutual disdain” (Allen, 2016, p. 1). In this way, better understanding teachers' contemporary ideas about citizenship and civic education—including what it means to teach civics and how to teach students to become engaged citizens—is a well merited inquiry for educational projects, designed to support innovative research and improvement in practice.

## Research and District Context

The broader context for this study was a research-practice partnership (RPP): a commitment between a university research partner and a school district to a long-term investigative, improvement-oriented collaboration on a jointly negotiated educational “problem of practice” (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). In this case, the collaboration (in its third year of partnership at the time of writing this article) was between a university-based team and a large public school district in the Southeast of the United States, hereafter called LPSD. The problem of practice, or the “key dilemma and challenge that practitioners face” (Coburn & Penuel, 2016, p. 49), as defined by the RPP, was the inconsistency in high-quality civic learning opportunities in a district with a commitment to racial equity and a vision to graduate students “prepared, empowered, and inspired to reach their full potential and contribute as thoughtful, responsible citizens.” This problem of practice emerged through ongoing conversations with the social studies instructional leadership team, workshops with teachers, and interviews and focus groups with teachers and students. In the spirit of RPP work, improving the quality and consistency of civic learning then became our joint object of broader inquiry and improvement. There were many dimensions to the RPP, including ongoing student and teacher focus groups and interviews, professional development, network building, and planning for future research. For the purposes of this study, however, analysis is restricted to the social studies teacher interview data.

LPSD is the largest and most racially diverse school district in the state. In this district, over 125 languages are spoken, and over 50% of the student population has access to free and reduced lunch. Regarding the landscape of social studies teaching and learning in the district, the *C3 Framework*<sup>2</sup> is the instructional paradigm encouraged to be used by teachers both locally and in the state more broadly, and a focus on teaching to the state's academic standards is paramount. The *C3 Framework* centers use of an inquiry cycle that includes questions, tasks, and sources and

2 See [https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky\\_Academic\\_Standards\\_for\\_Social\\_Studies\\_2019.pdf](https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky_Academic_Standards_for_Social_Studies_2019.pdf) for more on the *C3 Framework*.

culminates in students taking informed action. Of note, adoption of the *C3 Framework* by a district does signal that there is an important foundation laid for social studies teaching that foregrounds students as active learners who can and should be able use primary sources to generate claims based on evidence and robust reasoning. Similar to what is known about new standards implementation studies within and across disciplines, however, the extent to which LPSD teachers are actually using the *C3 Framework* and centering inquiry and taking informed action in their social studies teaching varies by classroom and school context (see New et al., 2021; Penuel et al., 2015). While not required, many students in this district take a specific civics/government course in their 11th-grade year—but the instructional vision of the department in this district is clear: every social studies classroom is a democratic classroom.

The time and place in which this research was conducted is also significant: The year 2020 was characterized by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, nationwide and global protesting of racialized police violence, and elevated levels of polarization and partisanship at the national level regarding a historic presidential election. Each of these events invariably shaped the nature of data collection, discussed in detail now.

## Methods

The following research questions guided this study:

- RQ1. How do LPSD teachers conceptualize civic education?
- RQ2. What difference, if any, does the contemporary political moment have on LPSD teachers' conceptualizations and/or understandings about civic teaching and learning?

To answer these questions, teachers were recruited for one-on-one interviews through support from the district's leadership team, in particular through an invitation in their monthly newsletter. While all K–12 social studies teachers were invited, 15 voluntarily responded to a Zoom interview and received a \$25.00 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation. The teachers who did respond reflected a variety of ages, genders, racial identities, courses taught, years teaching, and schools. Two of the teachers interviewed had recently assumed instructional coaching positions but still spent a large portion of their special assignment time in classrooms. It is important to note that the invitation to participate was during summer 2020 (height of the COVID-19 pandemic), therefore likely limiting the number of teachers who felt they had the bandwidth to participate in the study.

The interviews typically lasted about one hour and were designed to solicit teacher perspectives on and experiences with civic teaching and learning in this political moment.

Interviews were carried out via Zoom and recorded by the first author and transcribed by the coauthors. All teachers quoted in this article are identified using pseudonyms. These semi-structured interviews were exploratory and included questions that targeted teachers' understandings, definitions, and beliefs about civic teaching and learning, including perceived barriers and desires for support and how this political moment has impacted

their teaching. See Appendix A for the full interview protocol. Because the purpose of this study was to directly capture teachers' own conceptualizations and understandings, data was inductively coded through a process that included developing a broad descriptive coding scheme to segments of text (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After coding each teacher response, we looked for patterns and emerging frequencies in conceptualization. These patterns and higher-level frequencies are what constitute the following findings on how teachers conceptualize civic teaching and learning in the year 2020.

## Findings

Inductive analysis of interview data revealed several patterns in teachers' contemporary conceptualizations of civic teaching and learning, which centered on the need for students to learn how to become informed, connected, and contributing citizens. Of note, the "current political moment," however they conceptualized it, was understood by LPSD teachers as a chance to reenergize social studies teaching and learning—underscoring Mirra and Garcia's (2020) argument that difference can be used as a source of civic generativity and creativity in the provision and experience of high-quality civic education.

### *Contemporary Conceptualizations of Civic Teaching and Learning*

When teachers were asked what civic learning meant to them, their responses ranged in scope, detail, and emphasis, but several similar emphases did emerge: becoming *informed*, *connected*, and/or *contributing* citizens. Of note, responses often included more than one of these three foci, as a result of the low-inferential descriptive coding process. The most frequent (7 mentions across 15 interviews) definition teachers gave for *civic learning* was students learning how to become informed citizens. Social studies teacher Ashley's response, following, is illustrative of this predominant category of teachers' responses:

*To me, civic learning is about learning to be a good citizen and a strong citizen, and that of course entails many things from speaking your mind to being well studied, and in times of elections to vote, and just all the things you need to do to be aware that you're not just one person alone on an island and you impact others.*

In this response, teacher Ashley equates civic learning with exercising one's voting rights and civilly interacting with others in educated ways. Several other teachers also equated civic learning with direct explanations of what it means to be a citizen, including learning "how to exercise rights and responsibilities" (interview with teacher Tom). While somewhat similar to earlier conceptualizations of the "personally responsible citizen" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) or "dutiful citizen" (Bennett et al., 2009), LPSD teachers often went beyond the notion of civic learning as following the rules and voting—and embraced a broader notion of what an informed citizen does.

Indeed, the idea of learning how to connect with others and contribute to one's community/the society also emerged as a theme in teacher conceptualizations. One-third of LPSD teachers named

civic learning as interacting with and being involved in one's neighborhood and community, including learning about and acting on issues of interest (5 mentions across 15 interviews). The following teacher responses are illustrative of this pattern of connection and contribution:

*To me, civic learning and kind of all social studies learning is learning about the world around us, why it is the way it is, and how we interact with it and identify things that we can improve, and identify things that need to stay the same. (teacher Mark)*

*For me, being in a social studies class, it's making sure my students understand the world as far as government, their communities, how to take action in their communities, and when they see a problem, how to address it. (teacher Brian)*

In both responses, the teachers expressed the sense that civic learning is not only about learning about societal phenomena but about taking informed action on some aspect of those issues. These types of responses are broadly reflective of the participatory/actualizing models of citizenship (Bennett et al., 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) but again appear to blend and extend the prior paradigmatic models of what is meant by citizenship.

In fact, the third category of conceptualization of civic learning that emerged from LPSD teacher responses was perhaps the most hybridized and contextually emergent. Teachers' responses in this last category stated that civic learning was about connection across difference—which requires developing perspectives outside of one's own and reflecting on one's own biases and ways of thinking. As Hess (2004) and Parker (1996, 2002, 2010) have long argued, discussion across difference emerged as a key feature of civic learning with the potential to support a healthy American democracy. Teacher Jake's response is illustrative of this conceptualization:

*Part of being civically minded is stepping back and actually having communication with somebody who may have an opinion that is different than our own—there's probably a lot more we have in common than not, but we tend to focus on those differences.*

In this response, teacher Jake is naming that differences in perspective and opinion exist, but that it is fundamental to our democracy that students learn how to have civil discussions with those with whom they disagree. Of import, these teachers also noted that their job required them—as teachers—to become informed, become involved and connected, develop cultural competence and manage biases, and facilitate classroom conversations that allow students to see things from multiple perspectives and contribute to their worlds.

### ***Discord as an Opportunity to Dive Further into Difference and Elevate Student Voice***

Recall that these interviews took place in the summer and fall of 2020—the year of a tumultuous presidential election and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—and in a city that gained national spotlight because of continued racialized violence by police. When asked about how “this political moment” (however they conceived of it) impacted their instructional practices related to civic

teaching, LPSD teachers expressed that they saw it as an opportunity to reenergize social studies instruction, elevate student voice and diversity of experience, and focus on the teaching of sourcing and information literacy. Rather than an insurmountable obstacle, the majority of teachers (10 out of 15) reflected on how the current events further energized their passion for high-quality civic teaching and learning that supported students' development of knowledge, connections, and commitments. The following two excerpts from interviews with teachers Kylie and Olivia, respectively are illustrative of this sentiment:

*Several things have happened that make it a great time to talk about the labor movement, the idea of collectivism v. individualism, why people in the U.S. are so hesitant to wear masks or talk about what is a monument, why people put up monuments, or if or how we remove them? It's a great chance to talk about what it means to have something that is history.*

*[This political moment] has brought into focus how consequential our failure in social studies has been over the past century . . . It renewed an entire sense of urgency. My thinking is to try to just really emphasize looking at things from all perspectives, looking at it all critically and using inquiry . . . I'm now running in the direction I was already walking.*

Different from previous findings in other district contexts (see DiGiacomo et al., 2021), teachers in LPSD demonstrated their desire to lean into this political moment to enhance their civic teaching and learning practices.

Leaning into this political moment, for these teachers, included elevating and further integrating student voice and encouraging meaningful dialogue across difference, as illustrated by the following two exemplar responses by teachers Ken and Kylie, respectively:

*I think even more in this political moment, I want to try to invite the kids into the classroom, so they have a voice. Before the protests started, I was already reading Teaching for Joy and Justice, but really, it's about talking about how you build a community, in a room, so everyone is safe. You're not going to get kids to learn if they're not part of the room.*

*I want to make sure our students understand and appreciate other people's perspectives and realize that they are in a position where they can make a difference for other people.*

In both responses, the sense that this political moment has encouraged them to consider how to make their classrooms more inclusive and inviting to their students emerges, in ways that enable their students to use their voice, appreciate the voices of others, and civically engage in their classrooms and the world.

Teachers further articulated the connection between student voice, diversity, and democracy for civic learning and the sustenance of a healthy democracy. Teacher Kevin's response captures the essence of this pattern:

*I think the big thing is kids knowing they have a voice. I don't think kids see the connection of what civics is and I also don't think they think they matter sometimes. Letting them know about just how many*

*movements were started by teenagers. We think of it as being adults, but really, it's kids. That's where change is happening.*

In this response, teacher Kevin is saying that the charge for educators is to create learning opportunities for students to see themselves as powerful civic actors—that precisely through the use of their voice (and their vote, which others named explicitly), students can incite change in society, and in so doing, enhance democratic culture (Balkin, 2004). Such an emphasis on the power of all student voice, especially in a time of political discord and hyper-partisanship among the adult citizenry of the republic, is reflective of Mirra & Garcia's (2020) argument for the civic generativity and creativity potential within educative spaces where difference is leveraged in humanizing ways.

## Discussion and Limitations

Consistent with previous related studies into teachers' conceptualizations and visions of civic teaching and learning (Anderson et al., 1997; Farkas & Duffett, 2010; Knowles & Castro, 2019), LPSD teachers had a variety of ideas about what civic learning meant, and how to design for it in their classrooms. Building on previous paradigms of citizenship that ranged from the personally responsible or dutiful to the justice-oriented or actualizing, LPSD teachers expressed the desire for their students to become informed, connected, and contributing citizens. While some might see the continued variation in teacher conceptualizations as a constraint, we see it rather as reflective of life in a healthy democracy—that is, the collective dialogue and action that ensue from the embrace of difference and diversity of perspective and experience is indeed a marker of healthy civic participation and the pursuit of a democratic culture (Balkin, 2004).

In contrast to earlier studies that have found increased teacher reticence to center civic learning in times of extreme partisanship or increased general public reticence to discuss controversial issues in times of extreme polarization (see, respectively, DiGiacomo et al., 2021; Klein, 2020), LPSD teachers expressed that that this challenging and rapidly changing political moment was an opportunity to reenergize social studies instruction through the amplification of student voice and through humanizing difference in perspective. They recognized the need to expand routine access to civic learning within their curriculum and instruction and argued that civic teaching should emphasize student voice, dialogue across difference, and focus on the depolarization and localization of civic and social issues. Indeed, LPSD teachers articulated an instructional vision quite aligned with Mirra's (2018) critical civic empathy in that they sought to organize civic learning opportunities that would allow their students to come to understand and appreciate the lives, experiences, and perspectives of others. They articulated an understanding of how important their role was, as teachers, to connect the community to their classroom by, for example, using local events to ground historical inquiry, and inviting local civic leaders into their classrooms. LPSD teachers recognized, too, the need and desire for their classroom efforts to be supported by more and more contemporary civic-specific professional development and resources, as well as consistent

top-down district guidance that built upon their diverse voices and expertise.

There are important limitations to this study. First and foremost, the teachers who participated in interviews were a self-selected group of LPSD K–12 social studies teachers. That is, while the invitation was sent out widely to the LPSD social studies network, teachers were not required to participate, and therefore, no claims of representation can be made based on those that did choose to volunteer. Of note, while the authors' informal conversations with LPSD teachers in the context of routine instructional meetings suggests a great deal of political diversity, teachers were never asked to self-identify along political lines and therefore claims about the range of ideological diversity within this data set remain limited. Next, these data reflect teachers' reported beliefs about their civic teaching and learning, and do not necessarily represent their *in-situ* practices. Additional ethnographically informed studies would do well to investigate the relationship between social studies teachers' instructional visions and conceptualizations of civic learning and their *in-situ* practice. Lastly, student voice and experience are a key dimension of this research and would strengthen any inquiry into everyday classroom-based civic teaching and learning practices. While constraints due to the onset of COVID-19 limited student data collection, further studies should take seriously and incorporate the perspectives that youth bring to this conversation and conceptualization.

## Implications for Practice and Concluding Remarks

The purpose of research-practice partnerships, such as the one that surrounds this study, is to collaboratively generate new insights into problems of practice through iterative reflection, intervention, and ongoing research. In that spirit, we offer a set of suggestions and questions to consider for those seeking to pursue change efforts related to improving the quality and equality of civic learning and engagement opportunities.

### Suggestions for Practice

The following suggestions are starting points for discussion of improvement, routinization, and even scale, because without shared understanding, collective vision, and teacher buy-in, instructional reform efforts are likely to fall short of their intended outcomes (see Cobb et al., 2020; Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). To be sure, conceptualizations about situated phenomena (such as civic learning) are invariably shaped by context, so the first and perhaps most important step is to create a space that honors and makes visible these conceptualizations and understandings. Questions to begin a shared stakeholder conversation among teachers and district instructional coaches, for example, might include the following:

- How do teachers in the school/district conceptualize what it means to be a civically engaged or prepared citizen?
- What is the instructional vision for high-quality social studies for teachers in the school/district?
- If and how do contemporary current events impact or shape teachers' instructional practices and visions?

- Where are the district spaces and places for teachers to share their own lived civic experiences and perspectives with others?

In engaging meaningfully in these types of questions, district stakeholders might well be able to make visible similar and divergent perspectives and experiences that inform the organization of classroom learning opportunities and experiences. For example, if a preponderance of teachers' conceptualizations within a district are more oriented toward one spectrum of dutiful vs. actualizing citizenship, laying this variation bare could serve as a productive starting point for ensuring the collective alignment of curricular and standards-based priorities with a range of democratic priorities for civic learning. Or, if through these types of conversations and collective sense-making it becomes apparent that teachers within a district are aligned in their desire to support high-quality civic learning through elevating student voice and making visible political or ideological difference (as was found to be with the case within LPSD), then the charge for instructional support might look like a strategic focus on professional development in which teachers learn strategies for safe and brave discussion of current and controversial issues. To be sure, context-specific understandings, experiences, and perspectives should shape the type of professional learning and support that is provided to teachers—but in any case, the telos of that learning should be teachers' ability to provide high-quality civic learning that enables the development of students' civic connections, capabilities, and commitments.

### Concluding Remarks

If we truly want to incite change at the district level, we need to build on teacher's lived experiences and perspectives, rather than leave them at the door. Teachers' practice-related expertise should be leveraged and used for the purposes of improving, extending, and routinizing civic learning opportunities for all students. After all, teacher co-design and buy-in is known as one of the key elements of larger, successful district level instructional change efforts (Camburn & Han, 2015). We know this to be the most justice-conferring practice for students' learning too. Diversity in teacher perspective and expertise should not stand as an insurmountable barrier to instructional change, but rather should be approached as an opportunity for democratic deliberation and consensus building. Democracy, if anything at all, is messy. To engage meaningfully in a district-wide change effort toward the more equitable and systematic provision of high-quality civic learning opportunities, teacher perspectives and visions must be prioritized. We hope that in sharing some of these perspectives in this article, we can contribute to building that collective understanding necessary to cultivate transformative, equitable civic learning and engagement experiences for more K–12 students.

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## Appendix A: Teacher Interview Protocol

- Please describe your role within LPSD.
- What does civic learning mean to you?

- What role, if any, do you think you as a public-school educator have in preparing students for participation in our democracy?
- If you had to choose just one or two civic-related learning goals that are most important to you, what would those be?
- What role does civic learning play in your school's curriculum and broader culture?
- Please describe the types of civic learning opportunities available to students at your school. Please include both those that you know of inside the classroom (such as those occurring in particular courses or undertaken by particular teachers) and outside of the classroom (such as through clubs, councils, etc.). In what ways does your school (or you) encourage these opportunities?
- What are the most effective/successful strategies that enable students to participate in high-quality civic learning opportunities at your school?
- Think about a time in which you felt your school was exemplifying what it means to be civically engaged/prepare youth for participation in a democratic society. What types of activities were going on?
- Think of a student you know who is a good example of a young person at your school who is very civically minded/engaged—can you tell us a little bit about the types of activities that person does? And the opposite, for example, what does not being civically minded/engaged look like in their context?
- In your view, what are the primary challenges/barriers to ensuring that all students have access to high-quality civic learning opportunities at your school?
- What kinds of support do you think would make it possible for you and your colleagues to provide more civic learning opportunities for students in the classroom and the school as a whole?