Preparing student teachers to address complex learning and controversy with middle grades students

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Abstract
This qualitative study explores pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching critical literacy through discussions of controversial issues. Personality questionnaires were given to six classes of pre-student teachers over three semesters in order to gauge interest in teaching methods that incorporate inquiry learning and critical literacy. The results of this study suggest that these pre-service teachers were generally unwilling to discussing controversial issues in their classes. Also some teachers did not necessarily believe that students are capable of directing their own learning. The authors of this study make recommendations for preparing teachers to think about critical literacy through discussions of controversial issues.

Keywords: Critical literacy, Preservice teacher education, complex learning, controversy

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Introduction

Middle school teachers begin each new school year confronted with the task of helping students with diverse backgrounds and abilities further their literacy skills and content knowledge. At the same time, teachers' concern over high stakes tests and in covering content, place limits on time and methods (Lipman,2004; McNeil,2000). In spite of these constraints, researchers have demonstrated that teachers value the teaching of critical literacy using a variety of methods and texts (Byford, Lennon & Russell, 2009). However, new teachers are frequently unclear about how to approach the teaching of critical literacy especially when topics are viewed by teachers and/or students as controversial in nature. Some teachers may avoid teaching controversial subjects even though they believe their students must learn to think and argue critically (Levitt &Longstreet, 2003). This is especially evident when new teachers reflect on the mechanics of leading discussions on controversial issues. Teachers may be unsure how to proceed during controversial discussions and other critical activities, and not all students will readily embrace critical literacy activities (Evans, 2002; Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Young, 2000).

Further, critical theorists and social studies researchers have suggested that curriculum and teaching methods reflect the political and community of the school. In some school districts, administrators and teachers are less influential than parents, students and local politics (Cornbleth, 2001). Cornbleth (2001) recommends research that looks beyond individual classrooms to analyze the cultural, school and political contexts that affect individual teachers. Teaching students to think about and discuss political and social issues can be beneficial if classroom conflict is managed constructively (Avery, 2004). New teachers may be hesitant to initiate classroom discussions, uncomfortable with a perceived lack of teacher control. If the teaching of critical and controversial issues seems problematic for classroom teachers, pre-service and student teachers also grapple with decisions about how—or if—to teach critical literacy skills, at least in terms of subjects that may be perceived as controversial by the students and/or community.

The purpose of this study was to determine pre-service teachers' goals and perceptions of teaching about teaching critical literacy through controversial issues.

These questions guided the research:

1. What are pre-service teachers' beliefs about discussions of critical issues?

2. What are pre-service beliefs about student-directed learning?

Our study examines pre-service teachers' understanding of their school cultures, and explores their reasons for choosing to avoid or include discussions of controversial issues. In teaching students to raise and pursue questions about the ideas one encounters, our pre-service teachers chose a path of least resistance, and some indicated that they would continue to choose this path, depending on the school climate of their future employment. Although we agree that new teachers must be considerate of their school climate, we were alarmed at the passivity and anxiety that our pre-service teachers demonstrated.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Theories

We place our research analysis within critical theoretical frameworks, especially those that address class discussions and critical literacy practices. Empowering students to become effective readers and thinkers is a primary goal of critical literacy instruction, which engages students in analyzing and synthesizing texts and experiences (Pescatore, 2008). Critical literacy also involves teaching students to take a critical stance toward "official knowledge" (Finn, 1999: Kelly,1997; Schor, 1992;). Social studies educators have argued recently that pre-service teachers must be taught to engage students in dialogue on politics and social issues and to not simply cover content (Avery, 2004; Whitson, 2004).

Meaning, for students, is created through discussion and analysis with the assistance of a knowledgeable teacher, and research suggests that active class discussions can improve understanding of content (Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 2001; Almasi et al., 2004; Hess, 2009). For teachers who want to encourage lifelong interest in social issues and critical literacy, open discussions about texts are important components of some classrooms, primarily in social studies and language arts (Allen, Moller & Stroup, 2003; Applebee et al, 2003; Byford, Lennon & Russell, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995; Smith, 2006). However, state requirements, and other school factors, may affect teacher decision making about critical discussions and activities. Politics and values leak into classrooms and affect the teaching and learning of literacy, sometimes in unexpected ways (Apple, 2004; Cornbleth, 2001; Finn, 1999; Giroux, 2002; Kincheloe, 2004). Critical theory addresses the politics surrounding school, learning and teacher control.

Although critical theorists currently view schools and classrooms as products of politics and economics, Apple (2004) emphasized the potential for teachers and students to become agents of change. Some critical theorists recommend teaching students to improve the cultures and communities where they live and work (Delpit, 1995; Kincheloe, 2004; Lewis, 2000; Street, 1995). However, as a result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), preservice teachers thoughts lean more toward "survival teaching"—covering state-mandated content so students will perform well on state tests (McNeil,2000; Smith, 2006).

Social studies researchers Winston & Ross (2001) point out that recent social studies curricula reflect a growing conservatism. Winston and Ross write, "The paradox of social studies curriculum practice is that it is marked by both the appearance of diversity (e.g, the various 'traditions' or categories proposed for social studies curriculum and instruction) and the *appearance of uniformity* (eg, stable curricular scope and sequence entrenched patterns of instruction" (p. 51). In their view, the nature of some social studies curricula reflects our society's emphasis on the memorization of content so students will produce high test scores. However, critics of our present test-obsessed culture also remind educators that students can learn content at the same time they are learning how to think, write and speak critically and analytically. Required and elective courses in public schools allow opportunities for a more democratic education through class discussions guided by teachers. Schools are places in which young people can be taught how to discuss critical and controversial issues (Hess, 2009).

Cornbleth (2001) extends Winston & Ross' (2001) analysis by suggesting that the focus of social studies education tends to reflect the school and community. Parental pressures indirectly or directly inform teachers' choices of how to teach social studies content. However, teaching social studies by "selective information transmission" demonstrates' teachers' acceptance of social and scientific content and limits the possibilities of teaching students to think critically and to question texts, social conditions and politics (Cornbleth, 2001; Santora, 2001). In a study conducted by Wilson et al. (2002), social studies teachers were able to facilitate students' discussions on current controversial issues, unconcerned about parent and administrators' reactions. If the experienced classroom teachers in Wilson et al.'s (2002) study actively engaged students in controversial issues, perhaps their school climate was open to critical learning and discussion, and the teachers practiced effective methods for teaching students to critically discuss issues without unnecessary conflict.

Pre-service teachers in all content areas would benefit from further research that addresses the methods used by experienced teachers in addressing controversial issues and towards teaching students critical literacy skills. Our study attempted to determine what pre-service teachers believed about how they should teach controversial issues, and why some pre-service teachers, along with their mentors, chose to avoid teaching such issues.

Methods and Data Analysis

The data collected was derived from undergraduate pre-service teachers' written responses to a questionnaire about their beliefs of teaching. These students were enrolled in the middle grades program at a university in the southeastern U.S. The questionnaire was handed out during Sean Lennon's (second author) middle grades education senior block classes, and students were told participation was optional and that the questions were designed to examine personality profiles of pre-service teachers for research purposes. To maintain anonymity, completed questionnaires were labeled with numbers, and students' names were not included. The questionnaire was given to three classes of students over three semesters from August, 2008 through December, 2009. The questionnaire consisted of four Likert Scale response questions plus a prompt asking students to write a paragraph responding to the four questions (see appendix A). Class discussions about the questions occurred during the block classes after the students returned from a month-long apprenticeship, and these class discussions were audiotaped.

Research setting

The pre-service teachers in our study attend a state university in a predominantly rural area, and the public schools survive on Title I funds and a lower tax base in comparison to some of the more affluent public school districts farther north. In 2008, the city where we conducted our research had a consistent seventeen percent poverty rate (http://ens.uda.gov). The unemployment rate for this county and surrounding area is currently at 5.8% (http://explorer.dol.state.ga.us). This area also contains a high percentage (relative to the country as a whole) of fundamentalist Christian denominations, which lean toward literal interpretations of the Bible. Membership in Baptist churches, for example, was reported to be more than 50

percent for most counties in this area of the US (ASARB); however, not all Baptist churches interpret the Bible literally or define themselves as "fundamentalist."

Participants

The participants were undergraduate seniors enrolled in a middle grades teacher preparation program (N=167). During their senior year, pre-service teachers take a semester of block classes before a semester of supervised student teaching. This pre-student teaching semester also includes a four-week apprenticeship in a public school during which these teachers work with a mentor teacher and teach classes individually for a minimum of one week. The purpose of this apprenticeship is to prepare students for their student teaching semester, which usually occurs with the same mentor teacher in the semester following the apprenticeship. After four weeks the students return to senior block classes.

One hundred forty six students completed the questionnaires (see Appendix A).   Applying what Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to as "theoretical sampling," we chose to focus the analysis on students' responses to questions B and D because these questions refer more directly to critical literacy issues and responses to higher order thinking. For example, Question B states:

> A class discussion is beginning to branch into a controversial area or subject and some students appear to be getting concerned and/or agitated. Which of the following best describes your thoughts? (1) Stop discussion immediately (2), Steer discussion away from subject (3), allow discussion to continue (4), Encourage discussion with limits (5), and fully encourage students to discuss. Explain your thoughts/feelings and the actions you would take in a short paragraph. This question asks students to think about how they plan to approach controversial issues during class discussions.

> Question D is directed toward future teachers' comfort or discomfort with student questions and knowledge:

> Students are asking you complex and/or higher order questions in a field or subject you are not knowledgeable about. Which of the following best describes your reaction? (1) Ignore the students' requests, (2) move away from the subject, (3) make little attempt at answering, (4) Try to find information, and (5) research to augment the discussion.

For this question, pre-service teachers not only acknowledged in writing how much authority they were willing to assign to those students who sought higher learning, but also how comfortable they were in encouraging students to move beyond state-mandated content.

We also discussed the pre-service teachers' responses to questions B and D during class after each group had returned from their apprenticeships to resume their senior block classes. Sean (second author) led the class discussions. Discussions were audiotaped, and tapes were transcribed and coded. The purpose of these discussions was for the authors to further interpret the reasoning behind some of the pre-service teachers' written responses. These pre-service teachers were asked to

provide examples from their apprenticeship teaching experiences during the class discussion; as a result, the class discussion was an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their classroom experiences. This also helped us as researchers to "clarify the participants' ways of describing and interpreting" their beliefs about teaching (Stringer, 2008, p.49).

Data Analysis

Three sets of data were analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). First, we examined the numbered responses on the questionnaires, calculating a percentage for each descriptor choice (one through five) for questions B and D (see appendix A). Next, we read the written paragraph responses and class discussion transcriptions and both authors participated in a process of individual, open coding. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the process of open coding, both authors underlined words and phrases in the transcripts, then wrote Invivo code words, which were words and phrases spoken by the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Our next step included writing code words and phrases in the margins of written paragraphs and discussion transcripts to illustrate concepts, such as the idea of "teachers responsibility for student learning," which is a concept that emerged during our analysis of question B responses and written paragraphs. After discussions about codes and concepts, we considered the research questions and agreed on three themes that we believe synthesize the data. These themes are explained and analyzed in the next section along with the results from the questionnaires.

Results

The numbered responses on the questionnaire provided initial information in response to our research questions: 1. What are pre-service teachers' beliefs about discussions of critical issues? 2. What are pre-service beliefs about student-directed learning? To examine the numerical data from the questionnaire, we first calculated the percentage of students who responded using each descriptor for both questions B and D (N=167). Tables 1 and 2 show the percentage of students who responded according to each descriptor number (one through five) for questions B and D.

Table 1: *Percentages for each numbered response on questionnaire*

Question B	A class discussion is beginning to branch into a controversial area or subject and some students appear to be getting concerned and/or agitated. Which of the following best describes your reaction or thoughts?

Percentages for each numbered response on questionnaire

Response

1	Stop discussion immediately	1%
2	Steer discussion away from subject	33%
3	Allow discussion to continue	12%
4	Encourage discussion with limits	50%
5	Fully encourage students to discuss	4%

Pre-service teachers responses to question B indicated that they avoided discussions of critical issues with their students, especially if these discussions were controversial in nature. For question B, fifty percent of the teachers responded with descriptor number 4, "encourage discussion with limits" and thirty-three percent of the students responded using number 2, '"steer away from the discussion" (See Table 1). Less than 20% suggested continuing without restrictions or concerns. These results suggest that most pre-service teachers are generally uncomfortable with class discussions of controversial issues unless clear discussion rules or parameters are set ahead of time; these results are consistent with research on practicing teachers (Byford, Lennon & Russell, 2009; Levitt &Longstreet, 2003).   Our pre-service teachers, perhaps like other pre-service teachers in U.S. universities, need strategies for leading discussions on controversial and critical issues; they also need opportunities to practice these strategies. However, the extent to which the surrounding community's value systems affected the students' reasons for choosing to avoid discussions of controversial subjects became clearer only during the class discussions.

Table 2: *Percentages for each numbered response on questionnaire*

Question D	Students are asking you complex and/or higher order questions in a field or subject you are not knowledgeable about. Which of the following best describes your reaction or thoughts?

Percentages for each numbered response on questionnaire

Response		
1	Ignore the students' requests	0%
2	Move away from the subject	2%
3	Make little attempt at answering	7%
4	Try to find information	55%
5	Research to augment the discussion	36%

For question D, which states, "Students are asking you complex and/or higher order questions in a field or subject you are not knowledgeable about. Which of the following best describes your reaction or thoughts?" fifty-five percent of the students surveyed answered using descriptor 4, "try to find information," which suggests that these pre-service teachers believed they were responsible for conducting research to respond to their students' interests beyond their content specialties (See table 2) This percentage could be read in several ways. Pre-service teachers could believe that all students should be encouraged to learn. Another interpretation of this percentage is that only the state and school-sanctioned texts are acceptable producers of knowledge, and even more alarming is that we suspect the teachers believed they must serve predominantly as interpreters for the state curriculum. Descriptor 5, "Research to augment the discussion" was marked by thirty-six percent of the students (See Table 1). Although descriptor 4 is stated similarly to descriptor 5, respondents interpreted these descriptors in a variety of ways, depending on who the pre-service teacher believed was responsible for knowledge construction.

In summary, the numbered responses created more questions than answers because we were unsure how the pre-service teachers interpreted the descriptors. We discovered ambiguities in respondents' interpretations of the descriptor choices as we read students' written paragraphs following the questions. As a result, we found it necessary to carefully read the written paragraphs that pre-service teachers wrote below each descriptor in order to compare and contrast these written explanations with the descriptor choices. Finally, our analysis of class discussion transcripts led us

to refine codes and concepts, then translate these concepts into themes during our final stage of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Themes: Written paragraphs and class discussion transcripts

The pre-service teachers' written paragraphs, and the themes that we wrote to incorporate in-vivo codes and numerical data were developed from a process of memo writing by the first author, and conversations about themes between the first and second authors. Table 2 contains a list of themes and the data coded to support these themes.

Our first theme, *Teachers are ultimately responsible for student learning*, emerged from a close analysis of Question B written paragraphs and class discussions. In the written responses, most pre-service teachers read descriptor four and five similarly, which was that they, as teachers, were responsible for responding to students' questions by conducting research themselves or asking the students to search for the answer. A couple of responders who chose number 5, "Research to augment the discussion," explained that they would turn this question into a learning opportunity by asking all of the students to conduct research and report back to the class as a class assignment. One student explained, "I could answer the question to the best of my ability, but if I didn't know the answer, then I would make it an educational experience for students by having them find the answer." This pre-service teacher's response, along with one other written response, suggested that at least two pre-service teachers believed their students would become more engaged in learning if they were provided with inquiry or research opportunities.

Table 3: *Themes and Data Sources*

Themes	Data Sources
Teachers are ultimately responsible for student learning	• Question B written paragraphs • Class discussions
Class discussions about controversial subjects Should control learning experiences for students	• Question D written paragraphs • Class discussions
Teachers' personal beliefs and values should be kept out of the classroom	• Class discussions

However, most pre-service teachers appeared to believe they were the ultimate providers of academic knowledge. Although a few pre-service teachers mentioned that they practiced inquiry learning with their mentor teachers, most responses implied that direct instruction was the primary method of teaching. During class discussions, students were asked about their responses to Question D, and if they agreed with our theme, that t*eachers are ultimately responsible for student learning*.

Although there were some exceptions, most pre-service teachers indicated that they believed "the teacher" is most responsible for student learning. Pre-service teachers commented that mentor teachers expressed anxiety about ensuring that students were instructed primarily on content that was certain to be on the state exams. In many school districts in this state, teachers are reprimanded in a variety of ways if students do not perform well on state tests, so this may explain why pre-service teachers believed they must ensure that students learn the content. At the same time, pre-service teachers described methods beyond direct instruction that they used to teach students required content. Students actively participated in their own learning in some pre-service teachers classrooms, such as a group lab in which students discovered the science behind electricity using light bulbs, wires and battery. According to the pre-service teachers, although there were a variety of means to teach students content, the responsibility for learning rested on the teachers, simply because the teachers are accountable to the community and state for student learning.

Not all pre-service teachers believed that student learning should focus only on content state explicitly in the required curriculum.   If a student raised a question, the pre-service teachers agreed that this was a "teachable moment" and one that encouraged both student and teacher to conduct research for a later class. In fact, two pre-service teachers described experiences in which student engagement took precedence over keeping on track with the curriculum. For example, one pre-service teacher described how her students became more engaged in learning because she encouraged students to raise questions or propose discussion topics. "My students knew so much about health care reform. After one class discussion, I did more of my own research on health care reform so I could guide class discussions better." One pre-service teacher, Michael, gave an example of one of his students asking an historical question that he did not know the answer. Michael said, "I required everyone to do research, I did research, then we all had a great discussion the next day because of this student's question." There were only two pre-service teachers who provided examples in class discussion for which students became agents of their own learning, and one or two written responses that did not place responsibility for learning directly onto the teacher.

Pre-service teachers' concern for the state vs. what they thought students should learn bothered us at first, because this suggests pre-service teachers already view themselves as lacking agency in public schools; and second, because these responses demonstrate that we, as teacher-educators, are not preparing our teachers to both work within curriculum parameters and teach students to become critical and creative thinkers.   Although the nature of high stakes tests and high teacher unemployment in this state may contribute to many pre-service teachers' anxieties about responsibilities to their students to make sure they learn content, teacher educators here and elsewhere must prepare pre-service teachers more effectively for teaching students to both learn content and think critically. Otherwise, if state tests continue to include questions that call for rote memorization of content and limited higher, analytical thinking, pre-service teachers will become public school teachers who continue to "present" content and discourage discussion and critical thinking strategies, focusing essentially on helping students memorize content for state tests (Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2000).

Our second theme, *Class discussions about controversial subjects should control learning experiences for students* first emerged from the questionnaire and written paragraph data specifically from question D (see Table 2). Table 2 results, described earlier, suggest that the pre-service teachers were concerned that discussions of controversial issues would drift toward offensive language and/or content, and subvert teachers' educational purposes as discussions turned into attacks instead of intellectual debates. Written responses supported this theme, containing the words "feelings" or "anger." For example, one responder wrote, "Further discussion would upset and anger them more than anything." Another pre-service teacher wrote, "I would tell the students to consider the feelings of others." These comments suggested to us that these future teachers were concerned about their students' maturity for participation in controversial discussions. The notion that teachers must ultimately be in control of the classroom was also a concern for these pre-service teachers, who were beginning to practice strategies for classroom management with their mentor teachers.

Some responders who chose the number 4 descriptor, "discussions with limits," explained how they would "limit" the discussion for their students. Some interpreted this literally as "limiting" while other respondents seemed to read past the "limiting" idea by explaining why the discussion should continue and under what conditions. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote "When you discuss topics like these, it helps everyone establish how they feel about the topic when they know all the facts and rumors." Another responder offered advice on how to make the discussion more productive: "Calm the class down to a controlled level and get students to take turns speaking in a respectful way that will not offend any other students. Make the conversation into a learning experience not a shouting match." Although it was not clear what language should be used or how ground rules could be set up ahead of time for productive discussions, these written responses implied that some pre-service teachers view open conversation as valuable learning experiences. Analysis of classroom discussion transcripts provided further details concerning the reasons for respondents' discomfort with class discussions on controversial or critical subjects. Class discussions supported the written responses that these pre-service teachers were cautious, but not necessarily opposed to leading class discussions on controversial issues. During the audiotaped class discussions the week after students returned from their apprenticeships in the schools, some pre-service teachers mentioned that classroom management meant that one must at least create the appearance that the teacher is in control. One student explained it this way, "the principal at our school wants the teachers to discipline the class and not send the kids to the principal to be disciplined." Inability to control the class is viewed as a sign of teacher incompetence in most local public schools, according to these pre-service teachers.

Discussions concerning relationships among people of different races continues to be problematic in southern states (Carlson & Schramm-Pate, 2005; Lambeth & Smith, 2011). One African American pre-service teacher described a day during her apprenticeship when a school fight occurred between African American and Caucasian students. This pre-service teacher explained, "There are some race and class conflicts in the school. The students seem to be reacting to their parents' racist beliefs." Although this pre-service teacher was at first wary of discussing racial conflicts, she set boundaries for appropriate behavior, then encouraged students to

voice their opinions about the problems that were occurring. "I was afraid at first, but the students were polite in my class, and expressed their beliefs about why they thought some students were so angry." During our class discussion, the pre-service teachers agreed that teachers students should be taught how to debate respectfully through a class discussion of rules and guidelines. According to Carlson & Schramm-Pate (2005), "Too often, teachers silence themselves and decide not to take risks, even when their fears are not well-founded" (p. 219). We suspect that pre-service teachers will only begin to take risks with their future students if they are supported by the school administration.

In our class discussion, some pre-service teachers generally agreed that they plan to avoid discussing critical or controversial issues until they know their students and school climate even though they themselves were not opposed to class discussions about controversial issues. One pre-service teacher said, "I wouldn't want issues to be brought up and someone get extremely offended which would lead to me being fired." Another pre-service teacher agreed, then added, " Since I am in the social studies field. . . there are some issues, such as abortion, immigration, the first amendment, etc. that I will have to discuss. It is very important to teach the students about these concepts without taking sides. . . " The one thing that our pre-service teachers generally agreed on was that the teacher must remain objective and not express personal opinions in class. This belief that one's personal opinion should not be raised in public school class discussions seemed to be a form of self-protection. This underlying self-protection went beyond beginning teaching anxiety, and implied a concern for giving over the private self to expression in a public forum. We explore this more in the next section when we discuss our third theme (see table 3).

In summary, pre-service teachers may need to teach their students rules of debate or formal class discussion and practice formal and informal discussions early in the school year. Respondents did not comment on specific guidelines or rules they would set up. This suggests that our pre-service teachers require more guidance for how to direct and encourage whole class or small groups discussions in which students are taught to show respect and argue intelligently. Leading class discussions is difficult for most beginning teachers, so perhaps pre-service teachers may need examples of guidelines and strategies for teaching students how to debate and discuss effectively. Pre-service teachers may also need to plan how they will handle problems that emerge during classroom discussions.

We derived our final theme, *Teachers' personal beliefs and values should be kept out of the classroom*, from the pre-service teachers' comments during our class discussions about controversial issues. In Hess' (2009) research, teachers demonstrated a variety of beliefs about whether or not they should disclose their political beliefs. For our pre-service teachers, however, the question of whether or not teachers should disclose personal beliefs was not discussed. The automatic assumption was that teachers should definitely refrain from disclosing their political beliefs, and teachers should definitely not disclose religious beliefs or values. Pre-service teachers expressed some anxiety specifically over religious issues. In fact, most pre-service teachers involved in the discussions suggested that they were uncomfortable with the political and religious environment of the schools, sometimes for reasons that surprised us as researchers. For example, some pre-service teachers are devout Christians, but understand that religion does not belong in public schools

because it violates the separation of church and state. This is interesting considering that many of the schools in the area allow—and even encourage—public prayer before school athletic games and meetings.

Two pre-service teachers explained that they were uncomfortable talking about religious beliefs, values and personal lives outside of class, so they avoided controversial subjects.   One student, Erin, explained her views this way:

> I am a very religious person. I have been told in the past that my religion may cause problems for me when I am teaching in a public school. I am not comfortable talking about my own beliefs in public or with my students, so I don't want to bring up any subject that is connected to religion.

Erin's anxiety about "getting into trouble" was shared by other pre-service teachers who suggested that they felt uncomfortable if students learned personal information about them. Religious beliefs in the southern part of Georgia lean predominantly toward fundamentalist Christianity and political beliefs lean toward conservative Republican. This culture of fundamentalist Christianity may create personal conflicts for teachers who are required, by the state of Georgia educational standards, to teach evolution as a "scientific, non-controversial theory" (NCSE); however, this study did not explore this issue in depth. Generally, pre-service teachers in our program seemed to believe that teachers' personal lives and beliefs must remain outside of the classroom. We question how this will play out for pre-service teachers as they develop their professional roles as public school teachers. For now, however, this separation of the private self from the public role of the school teachers seems to be a logical reaction because, at this point in these pre-service teachers' careers, they are constantly being evaluated and observed by mentor teachers who may or may not share their political and/or religious beliefs.

Another pre-service teacher, Michelle, was uncomfortable mentioning her own religious beliefs   to her students. However, Michelle indicated that she was comfortable allowing the students to discuss their religious beliefs within the context of a science class. Michelle described her class discussion on the Big Bang theory:

> One student kept on saying, "I don't believe in that. I don't believe in that." He explained about his belief in God and the other students talked about their beliefs. When they asked me what I personally believed about the Big Bang Theory, I told them, "I believe that we have alot of scientific theories and these theories change over time."

Michelle avoided the science vs. creationism issue by focusing the class discussion on scientific theories, which was the purpose of her instruction on that day. This scientific focus allowed the students to share religious beliefs, and analyze scientific theories and the changing nature of science. Michelle also taught students that scientific theories are clearly defined and supported with published research. The other pre-service teachers commented positively to Michelle's reply to the students' questions. Michelle's class discussion demonstrated to the pre-service teachers that it was possible to encourage students to express their personal opinions; at the same time, teachers can redirect class discussions so that they are meaningful and relevant to the class content.

Conclusion

As state standards change, pre-service and experienced teachers' beliefs may change about what and how to teach. We have yet to follow up on these pre-service teachers as they move from student teaching into the public arena of paid teaching positions. Time for class discussion on pre-service teachers' written responses was limited, and our results may or may not change if we implemented more time for class discussion or individual interviews.

In the end, our study indicated that pre-service teachers perceived class discussions about controversial issues as necessary for students' intellectual growth, but problematic at this point in their careers. If class discussions are to be effective, pre-service teachers believed students should be guided by clear parameters or rules for intellectually healthy debates. Our results are generally consistent with other recent scholarship on teachers' opinions of teaching controversial issues in which there was an underlying fear of displeasing students, parents and administrators (Byford, Lennon & Russell, 2009; Rogers, Mosley & Kramer, 2009). However, our research went further to explore the reasons why pre-service teachers avoided or did not avoid discussing controversial issues with their students. We suspect that the cultural environments of local schools contribute to our pre-service teachers beliefs about controversial and critical classroom discussions.

As our study results illustrated, there may be a connection between what pre-service teachers believe about their responsibility for student learning and their willingness to initiate class discussions. If teachers believe they are the main source for student learning, then allowing discussions about controversial discussions may put teachers in the position of accidentally leading students to think "the wrong way" or develop values or beliefs contradictory to the dominant local cultural and religious norms. Pre-service teachers priorities mirrored their mentor teachers, which was to ensure that all students learn the content so they will perform well on the state tests.

This preliminary study of written responses opens up questions of how to best prepare pre-service teachers for addressing controversial issues and class discussions. Although some of these pre-service teachers acknowledged the importance of questioning, discussing and searching for individual truths, few articulated what this should look like. Further questioning of these and other pre-service teachers is needed to determine their specific concerns about allowing students more control over their learning through questioning texts, inquiry, and service learning. Also, pre-service teachers need opportunities to learn about how effective teachers both "cover" the state standards and teach students how to think, read and write critically (Lipman, 2004).

Perhaps further research is needed with experienced teachers as they reflect on their thinking and planning processes when preparing to teach critical thinking. Moving beyond required state mandates may be interpreted as risky for early career teachers; however, teacher- educators must accept the responsibility for preparing pre-service teachers to help students think beyond content knowledge to a critical questioning of texts through critical thinking and multiple literacies. Eventually, No Child Left Behind, with its emphasis on state mandated curriculum and standardized tests, may be replaced by national standards. States will possibly face a different set

of challenges as new criteria for student learning and teacher evaluation are established.

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Appendix

Scenario Questions

A.   A student yells profanities at you, insulting you in front of a class of fellow students. Which of the following best describes how you would feel?

Extremely Angry	Angry	Not care	Try to be understanding	Empathetic to the student
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Explain your thoughts/feelings and the actions you would take in a short paragraph:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

B.   A class discussion is beginning to branch into a controversial area or subject and some students appear to be getting concerned and/or agitated. Which of the following best describes your reaction or thoughts?

Stop discussion immediately	Steer discussion away from subject	Allow discussion to continue	Encourage discussion with limits	Fully encourage students to discuss
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Explain your thoughts/feelings and the actions you would take in a short paragraph:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

C.   Your principal is asking for volunteers to create a new curriculum and program to be developed. The work is to be done on your own time and with no resources. Which of the following best describes your reaction or thoughts?

Not interested	Probably wouldn't do it	Would do it only if forced	Probably would do it	Immediately volunteer
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Explain your thoughts/feelings and the actions you would take in a short paragraph:
_____
_____
_____
_____

D.   Students are asking you complex and/or higher order questions in a field or
        subject you are not knowledgeable about. Which of the following best
        describes your reaction or thoughts?

Ignore the students' requests	Move away from the subject	Make little attempt at answering	Try to find information	Research to augment the discussion
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Explain your thoughts/feelings and the actions you would take in a short paragraph:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____