

# Freire's Dialogic Process as a Means of Facilitating the Teaching of Controversial Public Policy Issues

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: June 21, 2022	Educators have long advocated for the pedagogical and civic importance of engaging students in discussions regarding controversial issues. Unfortunately, due to today's polarized political atmosphere, many teachers hesitate to introduce issues that might be potentially contentious for fear of repercussions. The Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire's notion of the dialogic process offers educators a means of pursuing this critical work. In his classic work <i>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i> , Freire described five dispositions that are critical to effective dialogue: humility, hope, faith, love and critical thinking. This article details the findings from a qualitative study of a group of three pre-service teachers that used the Freirean dialogic process to teach about the thorny issue of police reform during their student teaching experiences in urban public school settings. The results of this study, which employed a narrative analysis approach, point to a number of valuable insights resulting from this innovative instructional practice.
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## Introduction

American society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is confronted today with a bewildering number of controversial public policy issues, which present social studies educators with both significant challenges and opportunities (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Krutka, 2017; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016). From foreign policy problems, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and the on-going conflict between Israel and Palestine, to domestic social concerns, such as the response to Covid-19, police violence and reproductive rights, the nation is often split down the middle between seemingly intractable camps (Applebaum, 2020; Hochschild, 2016; Packer, 2021). In a recent NBC News poll, 70% of Americans expressed that American society has become so polarized that it can no longer solve major issues facing the country (Murray, 2022). Klein (2021) noted that, "to appeal to a more polarized public, political institutions and political actors behave in more polarized ways. As political institutions and actors become more polarized, they further polarize the public" (p. xix). He argued that this "feedback cycle" is not natural or inevitable and can be eroded by conscientious efforts to engage in candid discussions about the issues that divide us in order to humanize ourselves and our divergent viewpoints (p. xix).

Unfortunately, we as a society have proven ill-equipped to tackle these issues, with a political system wracked with partisan rancor (Rauch, 2021). Bishop (2009) noted the tendency of Americans to sort themselves culturally, purposely deciding to move to residential areas where their social circles will serve to confirm their ideological predispositions. Compounding this trend has been the increasing inclination toward consumption of siloed, partisan disinformation on cable television and on the Internet (Hasen, 2022). This fragmentation has, unfortunately, also seeped into our public school classrooms, with increasing scrutiny on school curricula and teacher practice (Gabbatt, 2022; Hawkes, 2019; Lepore, 2022). Laats (2022), for instance, reported on recent legislation in states such as Florida and Virginia that, "Politicians who set up 'tip lines' and surveillance plans for teachers are making the job less attractive than ever" (p. 5). It is thus understandable that many K-12 teachers might be reluctant to tackle issues that they see as potentially controversial in their local communities.

Public schools have traditionally provided one of the richest arenas for pursuing democratic discourse (Journell, 2017). (Tyack (2003) argued that, "Above all, it (the public school) was a place for both young and adult citizens to discover common civic ground, and, when they did not agree, to seek principled compromise" (p. 2). Social studies educators have long stressed the civic and political importance of engaging students in effective discussions of complex policy matters (Dearden, 1981; Evans, Avery & Pederson, 1999; Hess, 2002). As Rodriguez and Swalwell (2022) maintained: "Young people in a diverse democracy with a slew of injustices and complex social problems *must* be given opportunities to grapple with all of these issues, to nurture meaningful relationships of mutual obligation, and to develop a skill set that enables and inspires them to build a better world" (p. xiv, emphasis in original). The on-going conflicts over school policies from Covid-19 vaccine mandates, the treatment of transgender students and the responses to tragic incidences of school shootings underscore the pressing need for vigorous dialogues around these issues within public school spaces.

## Freire's Dialogic Process

The late Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire has long been and continues to be a source of inspiration for educators around the world invested in critical theory and transformative pedagogical methods (Abdul-Razzak, 2020; McKillican, 2019; Suoranta & Tomperi, 2021). In his introduction to

Freire's last significant publication, published posthumously, Stanley Aronowitz assessed Freire's influence: "Freire stands firmly in the tradition for which the definition of science is critical and not positivistic. Educational formation becomes 'scientific' when the learner grasps the link between theory and practice through a process whose assumption is that the individual is, in every respect, 'unfinished'" (Quoted in Freire, 1998, p. 14). Freire's revolutionary pedagogy, thus, holds great promise for novice teachers who wish to tread the precarious terrain of engaging students in discussions of potentially controversial public policy issues in today's climate of extreme partisanship.

In his classic work *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970), Freire outlined a revolutionary pedagogical framework involving teachers adopting five key dispositions in order to engage students in effective dialogue: humility, hope, faith, love and critical thinking. Freire summed up the promise of this dialogic process in the classroom: "Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence. It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue – loving, humble, and full of faith – did not produce this climate of mutual trust, which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in the naming of the world" (p. 72). It is precisely this emphasis on trust among the learning community that contains the potential for discussing openly (in Freire's terms, "the naming of the world") social problems that are difficult to consider among the participants in these dialogues (p. 72).

A critical component of this dialogic process is the assumption of a horizontal relationship – that is, a democratic discourse among equals - within the participants in the dialogue. Freire (1973) describes this practice as a "relation of 'empathy' between two 'poles' who are engaged in a joint search (p. 45). This radical paradigm rejects the commonplace vertical relationship that exists in most high schools in the United States, with the teacher acting as the content expert imparting (or "banking," in Freire's terms) information that is hierarchically determined to be the official curriculum of the school (1970, p. 53). It requires educators to develop within themselves a liberatory consciousness that Freire refers to as *conscientização* ("conscientization" in English), in which they engage in a critical praxis (1973, p. 41).

Ultimately, Freire's dialogic process affords social studies educators the ability to address an area that scholars have often found missing in many K-12 classrooms – discussions of controversial public policy issues (Hess, 2009, Misco & Patterson, 2007; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). In his 1985 monograph *The power of education*, Freire added to this dialogic process the concept of the "culture circle," in essence, a group of people invested in the process of learning basic literacy skills that transcends this praxis in order to address matters of political and social interest. Donaldo Macedo, Freire's frequent collaborator and translator, commented on the method: "In culture circles, reading demands more than decodification of linguistic symbols. It is viewed as a social and political 'reading' of the world" (Quoted in Freire, 1985, p. viii). This strategy has the potential of allowing teachers who are involved in presenting contentious material to take the emotional heat out of difficult discussions by employing a strategy that Freire refers to as the "Socratic theory of learning" invested in culture circles (p. 55). It is precisely this process that I sought to investigate in this study.

Freire's dialogic process continues to inspire educators today. William Ayers (2019), for instance, noted that, "A pedagogy of dialogue – beginning with a question, and then asking the next question, and then the next – is the basic teaching gesture in and for a free and democratic society" (p. 8). The following article will present the findings of a qualitative study of the experiences of three pre-service teachers who completed their student teaching practicum

requirements within urban public school settings. Through a series of individual interviews and archival collections, these teacher candidates shared the ways in which the Freirean dialogic process affected the use of discussion-based modes on controversial topics within these classes.

The study was driven by the following research questions:

- \* What are the challenges for pre-service teachers in using traditional classroom methods in order to teach controversial public policy issues?
- \* How are the experiences of teacher candidates with using the Freirean dialogic process in order to facilitate class discussions?
- \* What meanings do pre-service teachers draw from their experiences with using Freire's methods in order to teach controversial public policy issues?

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

Given the reflective nature of the research questions listed above, I settled upon a qualitative research design based on the principles of the cognitive constructivist paradigm; this seemed to me the most appropriate framework with which to explore the pre-service teacher participants' experiences with the use of Freire's dialogic process (Crotty, 1998). According to Hatch (2002), qualitative research is about understanding the meanings that individuals construct in order to participate in their social lives. He commented: "It is axiomatic in this view that individuals act on the world based not on some supposed objective reality but on the perception of the realities that surround them" (p. 7). The cognitive constructivist approach has particular strength in allowing participants to make meaning of their experiences, especially those working with innovative pedagogical approaches. In this case, the research subjects were encouraged to share the meanings that they had constructed from classroom experiences with discussing potentially controversial policy issues that are culturally relevant to the urban research setting with their students.

### *Research Settings and Participants*

The research study examined below was conducted in two settings: a College of Education at a small, state university in Western New York and a secondary school serving an urban population in a nearby city. The university is located within a conservative, predominantly rural county, which voted three-to-one for Donald J. Trump in both the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Elections, along the rural/urban divide explored by Wuthnow (2018). All of the participants were full-time students in the College of Education at the university. Founded in 1826, the university has a population of approximately 4,000 students, a quarter of whom study in the university's Professional Education Unit. The College of Education has undergraduate and graduate programs in different certification and content areas, with around 25 full- and part-time faculty members and a dozen full-time support staff members.

The three research participants introduced below completed their student teaching practicum experiences within classrooms at "Chadwick Bay Secondary School," a school serving Grades 7-12 within an urban public school district in Western New York State. The school includes a student population of 453 students, 57.4% of which identify as Latinx, 34.4% identifying as White/European, 4.4% of which identify as African American, 3.5% identifying as Mixed Race, 0.2% of which identify as Asian American and 0.2% identifying as Native American. The community that Chadwick Bay Secondary School serves is a post-industrial city with a disproportionate number of families living under the official United States government poverty line and thus, under the provisions of Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

(EASEA), 67.1% of students attending the school are eligible for its free/reduced breakfast and lunch program.

A purposeful sampling approach was used in order to identify three pre-service teachers completing their undergraduate studies within the College of Education (Patton, 2014). The criteria for participation in the study included:

- \* All participants are full-time students within the College of Education at the university.
- \* All participants have chosen a social studies concentration and a middle school extension on their certification programs.
- \* All students are engaged in teaching units on police violence and reform during their student teaching practicum experiences.

### *Data Collection*

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and archival collections of curricular materials during the Fall 2021 semester. The interview protocol followed the framework developed by Holstein and Gubrium (2003), in which respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences using Freire's dialogic approaches in teaching lessons regarding incidents of police violence and the policy issues related to police reform in urban spaces. Throughout this process, I used a relatively informal, conversational interviewing style, as recommended by Maykut and Morehouse (1994). Participants were asked for their candid views on their teaching/learning experiences with the pedagogical approaches related to Freire's dialogic process. Confidentiality was guaranteed during the study, with pseudonyms used for interviewees; these pseudonymous identities are employed throughout the Results section below. Transcripts of all interview sessions were provided to subjects for clarification and approval.

In addition, as a second data point, I collected archival materials from the participants' unit plans, including lesson plans, class handouts and various other work products. This referent use of this archival collection was consistent with the insights of Raulston and deMarrais (2021). I had initially also planned to observe the three participants as they taught the principal lessons; however, due to the interference of the Covid-19 pandemic, this was not possible, as College of Education faculty and supervisors were not granted access to the local public schools in which our students were completing their student teaching practicum experiences due to obvious safety concerns.

### *Data Analysis*

In analyzing the data collected from this investigation, I employed a structural narrative analysis procedure based on the approach of Bamberg (2004). From the beginning of the data collection process, this analytical framework, which centers on the stories that are told by research participants in the course of interviews, seemed the ideal analytical tool for the project. As Reissman (2008) pointed out, narrative analysis has particular power within constructivist studies in that it gives voice to the meanings drawn from the experiences of participants. She stated that, "narrative analysts interrogate language – *how* and *why* incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers. For whom was this story constructed, and for what purpose? Why is the succession of events configured that way" (p. 11, emphasis in original)? Narrative analysis, thus, assumes that people often use stories in a deliberate manner, structuring them in a specific way, in order to construct particular meaning from their life experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Before the analysis, I decided that all the data collected (verbalizations/notes taken) would be transcribed before analysis in order to save time. Inductive analysis was employed throughout the analysis process. I began the analysis of the data by conducting an open coding of all interview

transcripts. According to Coffey & Atkinson (1996), coding fractures the data and opens interpretation to higher levels of abstraction. This process is conducive to discovery of core categories, promotes integration of analysis, and yields desired conceptual density. Once the open coding was completed, I identified overarching themes and then developed sub-categories within the data, applying the coding process throughout. Next, the data set was checked for validity and reliability. Finally, inferences were drawn based on the codes and categories, and these are presented in the findings section below. Rather than attempting to describe a reality or truth, the constructivist researcher describes individual human subjects engaging with objects in the world and making sense of them (Crotty, 1998).

## Results

The narratives that emerged from the interviews and archival collections gathered as data points for this study spoke powerfully to the potential of the Freirean dialogic process when engaging students in discussions of public policy issues deemed controversial within school communities. Broadly conceived, I will refer to these narrative themes as *Trust within the Community*, *Tolerance of Diverse Views* and *Evidence of Critical Thinking*. While each of the participants spoke to these overlapping themes in their narratives, I will present these findings through the voice of the individual participant who most profoundly exemplified the theme.

### *Trust within the Community*

The first study participant, “Abigail Schiller,” is a Childhood Inclusive Education major with a social sciences concentration and a middle school extension in social studies studying within the College of Education. Abigail is a 21 year-old white female who grew up in the suburban Southtowns area outside of Buffalo. She described her childhood experience as “very sheltered,” as she went to school with and socialized with white, middle-class suburban children very much like herself culturally. She felt that her childhood and grade school experiences were idyllic, with very few material or social struggles. Abigail enjoyed her classes, and especially studying English literature, and participated in extra-curricular drama clubs and performed in theatrical productions. She referred to herself as “quite conservative” and someone with “strong Christian values.”

Abigail approached her student teaching assignment in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classroom at Chadwick Bay Secondary School with a good deal of trepidation, as she felt somewhat unprepared to work with students that were very different in their cultural makeup from those with whom she associated in her own childhood. In one previous early field experience in an elementary school with a similar urban demographic profile, Abigail felt that she struggled to relate socially with the students in her group; however, she also attributed some of that to the “weirdness” of working exclusively through a remote instructional platform during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic period.

For her major instructional unit corresponding with her required portfolio collection of curricular materials during her student teaching practicum experience for the edTPA New York State certification assessment, Abigail decided to use the a “Socratic Seminar” approach modeled on the Freirean dialogue in order to teach about the myriad issues surrounding police reform. This involved choosing a provocative reading in order to focus the discussion, in this case a *New York Times* editorial by Mariame Kaba (2020) titled, “Yes, We Literally Mean Abolish the Police,” written in the aftermath of the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis, Minnesota police officers.

Hewing to the Freirean principle of Humility, Abigail understood that, as someone who had grown up with race and class privilege, she might have a very different perspective on the issue of police from her students. "When I first brought up the topic with students, I noticed a really intense atmosphere in the classroom," she said. "It was clear that they had had dealings with the police that I hadn't. I knew I had to build up the trust." Working with her cooperating teacher, Mr. Ellison, she designed a number of lessons in order to allow her students to explore less fraught issues where they might be able to come to a satisfactory and workable consensus. For example, taking advantage of an upcoming Grammy Awards ceremony that many of the students had expressed an interest in watching, Abigail developed a questionnaire about the major awards categories and then asked students to survey each other. "During that class," she commented, "I noticed that some students who had never talked to each other before were all of a sudden bonding on their love for, say, Doja Cat or DaBaby." On the Friday before the ceremony, she hosted a "Karaoke Party" during the class' regular Friday afternoon current events session, which she described as "really fun."

In anticipation of the Socratic Seminar lesson, Abigail assigned students to read the Kaba (2020) editorial, to take detailed notes on it using a note-taking template that she had designed for the lesson, and to develop some questions to ask classmates during the subsequent discussion. This scaffolding, Abigail, noted, "helped students to concentrate on the issue brought up by the article and not get sidetracked." On the day of the principal lesson, which she had decided to videotape for her edTPA submission, Abigail formed two circles in the classroom space based on the Socratic dialogic model described by Freire (1985): those assigned to the inner circle were the principal discussants at the beginning of the dialogue, while those assigned to the outer circle were asked to take notes on various elements of the discourse, including the number of people who offered comments, turn taking and incidents of students talking over each other. At the beginning of the Seminar process, Abigail invited one student to read aloud the first two sentences of the editorial and then prompted another student to ask one of her prepared questions in order to initiate the discussion. "After that, I tried to stay out of the way of the conversation," she reported. At the mid-way point of the article, the groups switched places, so that those who had been discussing the article took a note-taking role in the outer circle and vice versa.

At the culmination of the exercise, Abigail reminded the students that she would be "debriefing" the students on her next teaching day – the following Tuesday – and assigned them to write reflective journals on the experience over the weekend. In her interview, Abigail noted that the main advantage of the Socratic Seminar process was that "it allowed me to take a backseat in the dialogue." As Freire (1970) had encouraged in his seminal writings, Abigail had merely facilitated the exercise, which then took on a horizontal character, with all participants on the same status level, without any undue influence or pressure on students from their instructor as the supposed content "expert" in the classroom. Abigail expressed that she "learned a tremendous amount" from the exercise, as her students put forward perspectives based on interactions with law enforcement that were very different from her own.

### *Tolerance of Diverse Views*

Like Abigail, the second participant, "Breanna Summerhouse," is a Childhood Inclusive Education major with a social studies concentration and a middle school extension in social studies studying in the College of Education. Breanna is a 22 year-old African American female who transferred to Fredonia from a community college near her hometown on Long Island, New York because "my best friend was going here." Despite developing a group of close friends with ties to Long Island

while studying at Fredonia, Breanna confided that she had often felt “really lonely” during her time at the university, which has a predominately white, suburban student population and is located in a largely white, rural, small-town community. This sense of isolation was then compounded during the 2020/2021 academic year, during which students experienced mostly remote coursework.

Breanna also found it personally difficult to absorb the complex feelings that she felt in response to the highly-publicized police killings of African American citizens during this period and to the large protest movement that it generated during the summer of 2020. She reported that “I was totally ripped up by what happened to Breonna Taylor,” a 26 year-old Louisville, Kentucky woman who was shot to death in March 2020 by a group of seven police officers who forcibly entered her apartment in the middle of the night in order to conduct an arrest of her boyfriend (Oppel, Bryson-Taylor & Bogel-Burroughs, 2021). During the summer break in 2020, Breanna took part in several Black Lives Matter demonstrations in New York City while visiting family on Long Island. She was also a principal organizer of a small vigil organized on the university campus at the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester in order to compel the university president to make a statement in support of police reform measures. She referred to this experience as “awesome” and “really inspiring.”

When it came to designing a unit to implement in her 7<sup>th</sup> grade student teaching practicum assignment at Chadwick Bay Middle School to correspond with her data collection process for the edTPA teacher certification assessment, Breanna decided to focus on the Breonna Taylor case, using a journaling mechanism consistent with Freire's dialogic process. At the beginning of the unit, she distributed small notebooks to students, instructing them to keep a nightly journal of their thoughts about the case. She then used a number of resources that introduced her students to the case and deepened their understanding of the context of Breonna Taylor's death. This included a detailed timeline of the events leading to the fatal raid on Taylor's apartment published in the *Louisville Courier Journal* (Duvall, 2020). On the day before her videotaped principal lesson, Breanna played a video produced by *The New York Times* that detailed the circumstances of the case and the various lawsuits that followed it (Browne, Singhvi, Reneau, & Jordan, 2020). After this presentation, Breanna assigned students a final journaling assignment and informed students that she would be leading a wide-ranging dialogue based on their journal comments during the next day's class session.

On the day of the filmed lesson, Breanna arranged the student desks in a horseshoe formation in order to facilitate the discussion among students. Anticipating some reluctance on the part of students to begin the dialogue, Breanna noted that, “I knew that someone would have to kick off things so I asked two of my chattier students to be prepared to read their journals. Once they did that, everyone else just jumped in.” Referring to Freire's conception of “faith,” Breanna commented that she was “amazed by the faith that these kids had in each other not to tear each other apart.” The students dealt with some “hard issues” and ended up producing a detailed ten-point advocacy plan for police reform that they intended to share with the local newspaper and in municipal meetings. “They were totally fired up – I couldn't believe it. I was so proud of them,” Breanna concluded from the experience.

### *Evidence of Critical Thinking*

The third study participant, “Kevin Padrone,” is a Childhood Education major with a social studies concentration and a middle school extension in social studies studying in the College of Education. Unlike the other two study participants, Kevin is a non-traditional undergraduate student in his

mid-thirties who decided on a career change from his initial choice of accountancy because he was “bored” with the work that he was doing and wanted to “give back” while his children were attending local public schools. In his interview, Kevin admitted that he had often felt isolated from his peers in the Childhood Education program, as he felt “so different” from the rest of the cohort comprised primarily of “single women in their early twenties.” Unlike many of his classmates, he enjoyed the pandemic period when many of the courses that he took were administered remotely, because it helped him to avoid the commute to campus and “gave me more time with my family.”

As someone who grew up in a small town in a rural area of the country with “conservative values,” Kevin recalled that he had some difficulty understanding the outrage surrounding the incidents of police killings of African-American citizens that were so prominently reported in 2020. In the high-profile cases such as those of Manuel Ellis, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and Casey Goodson, Jr., Kevin “assumed that these were accidents where things went wrong with procedure.” Kevin explained that his framework for viewing and these events came from his “small-town” background and that his judgments regarding police behavior emerged from his experiences with police during his childhood and his close relationships with friends and family members in law enforcement. “The police were always seen as the good guys in my community,” he commented. “Now, they’re seen as the villains. I don’t get it.”

That said, Kevin acknowledges that he was deeply troubled by the law enforcement response to Black Lives Matter protests in the aftermath of these incidents in the summer of 2020. “I’m a patriot first and foremost,” he stated. “And in this country, citizens have the right to peacefully assemble, even if I might disagree with them.” He thus decided to focus his primary unit during his student teaching experience in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade placement at Chadwick Bay Middle School on methods of policing incidents of public unrest, particularly in urban spaces. Based on the Freirean principle of critical thinking, Kevin developed a mock trial exercise around a civil suit in the case of Martin Gugino, a 75 year-old man who sustained head injuries after being shoved to the ground by Buffalo, New York police officers during a demonstration in June 2020 (Desmond & Fetouh, 2020). At the outset of the exercise, students chose roles (e.g., plaintiff, defendant, judge, attorneys, witnesses, jury members, court officers) from lots in a bag – “that was the only fair way to do it,” Kevin said. Kevin then assisted individuals and groups in preparing for their roles in the trial.

At the culmination of this process, Kevin reserved three days of instruction for the simulation – one day for opening statements and the plaintiff’s case, one day for the defendant’s case and closing statements and a final day for deliberations and verdict, during which Kevin filmed the class as part of the requirements for his edTPA assessment. “The kids really took their roles seriously,” Kevin commented. “Not a single one, not even those in what might be considered minor roles, sloughed off their responsibilities. They were great!” Kevin was concerned that his views might enter into the deliberations, so he was especially stringent in observing a distance from the actions in the “courtroom,” mainly observing alongside his cooperating teacher and field supervisor at the back of the classroom. This stance was consistent with Kevin’s understanding of the “horizontal” nature of the Freirean dialogue process, in which the teacher/instructor is a participant/observer on the same level as the students/actors. In the end, the success of this lesson and those of the other pre-service teacher candidates involved in this study was largely due to their openness and trust in the dialogic process suggested by Freire in his seminal work on pedagogical methods.

## Discussion

Several important insights emerged from the data collected during the interview and archival data retrieval portions of the study detailed above that add significantly to the scholarship on Freirean studies and social studies curriculum and instruction. First, the teachers interviewed for this study such as Abigail Schiller found that their use of elements of the Freirean dialogic process greatly enhanced the sense of trust and camaraderie within the educational community of the classroom. Her lesson, which employed a Socratic Seminar technique in order to explore the complex and controversial issues surrounding the policy proposals for either reforming or abolishing altogether existing police organizations produced a rich and wide-ranging conversation among students who otherwise might not have been able to conduct themselves civilly when discussing these issues. This finding is consistent with those of McKillican (2019), who concluded that, "Through dialogic human beings emerge out of their submersion and gain the faculty to intervene in their reality" (p. 91). In the middle school context, Abigail Schiller's students were able to use the dialogic process of the Socratic Seminar in order to investigate the implications of police reform in an urban setting.

Next, the teachers who participated in this study such as Breanna Summerhouse reported that her use of the Freirean dialogic process helped her to engage her 7<sup>th</sup> grade students in a discussion of the Breonna Taylor case. In the cultural context in which, as D'Angelo (2018) has noted, any acknowledgement of racism and white supremacy is considered an unpatriotic betrayal of the foundational principles of the nation, Breanna's students were able to conduct an effective discussion of the legal ramifications of the Breonna Taylor case in a manner that respected their diverse viewpoints. A key element in this experiment was Breanna's strategic use of journaling in order to facilitate students' ability to reflect on the details of the court proceedings. This result corresponds with the experiences of Abdul-Razzak (2020) in observing the Freirean dialogic process at work in the educational context of schools in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Breanna related that she was particularly impressed by the level of student reflection on the nuances involving cases of police violence and murder.

Finally, the pre-service teacher candidates who took part in this investigation such as Kevin Padrone described an increased level of critical thinking among his 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at Chadwick Bay Middle School. In his lesson about the case involving police violence toward an elderly Buffalo, New York anti-racism activist Martin Gugino, students were able to take part in a complicated, multi-day mock trial simulation, improvising their roles based on their understanding of the case and the legal process. This finding parallels the observations of Conklin (2021) who noted that, "Students engaged in this kind of learning have opportunities to develop deep understandings of concepts and solve new problems, rather than learning fragmented, discrete pieces of knowledge. This kind of learning gives students the opportunity to talk with one another to develop shared understandings, rather than merely responding to teachers' questions" (p. 288). In the end, the experiences of these three pre-service teachers from diverse backgrounds shows the promise of the Freirean dialogic process in conducting effective discussion-based lessons in urban public school settings.

## Conclusions

As the data that emerged from this study of three pre-service teachers carrying out their student teaching practicum experiences in an urban setting attests, there is great potential in using the Freirean dialogic process in order to facilitate discussions of controversial public policy issues. In many ways, these findings reinforce the latent possibilities that scholars have noted for several years (Thiesen-Homer, 2021).

That these teacher candidates were able to conduct effective lessons employing the Freirean dialogic process during sporadic moments in leading classes as guests in their cooperating teacher's classroom is the testament to the power of this process. Given more time and the authority that is assumed with a full-time teaching position in a school, these novice teachers might have had even more success in integrating the five principles of the Freirean philosophy involved in organic and democratic dialogue - humility, hope, faith, love and critical thinking – into their everyday instruction. As it is, though, their lessons provided students in the Chadwick Bay Middle School setting where they practiced with powerful opportunities to discuss the issues surrounding policing and racial injustice in a safe and conducive space.

In order to realize this potential fully, public schools must make a commitment to creating the time and space for social studies teachers and teachers of other disciplines to engage in this process. As Freire himself acknowledged in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), the dialogic process takes time. It requires teachers to build trust among the educational community over a lengthy period. This would mean refiguring the standard curriculum in order to prioritize the revolutionary possibilities of discussing controversial topics that are salient to the experiences of students and the wider community rather than maintaining the traditional curriculum that prefigures what Foucault (1990) referred to as “knowledge-power.” It would also necessitate a shift away from the current neoliberal, corporate education reform paradigm of “accountability,” which ultimately measures the quality and efficaciousness of public schools, teachers and students in terms of scores and improvement on standardized tests. A turn toward a more authentic and meaningful curricular and instructional practice focused on the needs of students and communities rather than institutions is the best way of celebrating the work of Paulo Freire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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