



# Divisive Concepts in Classrooms: A Call to Inquiry

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## Abstract

In this article, I will begin by describing recent divisive concepts legislation, which bans teaching about aspects of racism, sexism, and equity, speculating briefly on the motivations behind it and the implications resulting from it. I will then describe how discussing divisive concepts in classrooms may be a helpful way for students to better understand the particular concepts and for students to take a stand on them. While I will briefly argue for the importance of classroom discussion of divisive concepts, my central claim will be that we must do more than merely discuss these concepts. Instead, we should engage in classroom inquiry about them. Inquiry positions students to not be silent regarding divisive concepts, as some legislation may cause, and inquiry positions students to not just talk about divisive concepts, but to solve social problems related to them in our world today. In other words, inquiry enables us to do something about divisive concepts, rather than just learning about them, as some educators currently advocate in calls for discussion. And inquiry is certainly more effective than banning divisive concepts or pushing them to the background, as recent legislation attempts to do. I argue that rather than excluding divisive concepts or the divisions they may provoke from our classrooms, we need educative spaces where we inquire into what divides us, why we are divided, and how we might respond to such division. Within that inquiry, we can better attend to our divisions while also taking up the specific concepts prohibited in recent legislation.

**Keywords** Citizenship education · Divisive concepts · Inquiry · Discussion · John Dewey · Philosophy of education

What will happen if teachers become sufficiently courageous and emancipated to insist that education means the creation of a discriminating mind, a mind that prefers not to dupe itself or to be the dupe of others? Clearly they will have to cultivate the habit of suspended judgment, of scepticism, of desire for evidence, of appeal to observation rather than sentiment, discussion rather than bias, inquiry rather than conventional idealizations. When this happens schools will be the dangerous outposts of a humane civilization. But they will also begin to be supremely interesting places. For it will then have come about that education and politics are one and the

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same thing because politics will have to be in fact what it now pretends to be, the intelligent management of social affairs. (Dewey, 1922)

In recent years, many states across the country have introduced or approved legislation that bans teaching about “divisive” concepts, including aspects of racism, sexism, and equity, in public K-12 classrooms and sometimes in university courses too (Education Week, 2022; Florida, 2021; LePage, 2021). Problematically categorized as concepts, they might be better understood as political, moral, and sociological beliefs about aspects of race, gender, sexual identity, and oppression. For sake of alignment with the language of the bills, I will stick with the term “concepts.” In some cases, specific concepts have been listed and in others they are left quite vague.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these laws were created in reaction to critical race theory, which emphasizes the enduring and ongoing role of systemic racism, and the 1619 Project, which centers Black Americans in the historical narrative of the United States, including their contributions and their experiences of racism (Delgado, 2012; Hannah-Jones, 2019). In response to the legislation, some teachers and scholars of education have been quick to defend the importance of teaching about the particular concepts banned in the bills, such as systemic racism and privilege, with some of them calling for classroom discussion about these topics (New Jersey Education Association, 2021; Pace & Journell, 2021; Teachers College Newsroom, 2021). Other defenders have focused on critical race theory, arguing that the named concepts really aren’t representative of critical race theory or that critical race theory really isn’t even taught in schools (Greene, 2021a, b, c, d).

While I certainly believe there is value in students learning about many of the identified concepts and the beliefs or phenomena they describe, I want to offer an alternative focus in this article. Here, to the extent one ethically can, I largely set aside the content of the particular concepts and their relationship, if any, to critical race theory or its uptake in schools.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I contend that we should be deeply concerned with banning learning about things that divide us because it prevents us from solving problems in our democracy, perhaps deepening our divisions in ways that impair our ability to take up an array of better ways of living together. The fundamental civic question, “What should we do?” arises whenever we face shared problems or must figure out how to live together (Levine, 2022). Answering it is an aim held across political parties and one aided by inquiry. Rather than excluding divisive concepts or the divisions they may provoke from our classrooms, in order to figure out how to live together, we need educative spaces where we inquire into what divides us, why we are divided, and how we might respond to such division. Within that inquiry, we can better attend to our divisions while also taking up the specific concepts prohibited in recent legislation.

In this article, I will begin by describing recent divisive concepts legislation, speculating briefly on the motivations behind it and the implications resulting from it. I will then describe how discussing divisive concepts in classrooms may be a helpful way for students

<sup>1</sup> For example, while some states have issued long lists of specific concepts, recent legislation introduced in my home state catalogues some key divisive concepts, but then goes on to include “any other concept that the state board of education defines as divisive.” Ohio HB 616.

<sup>2</sup> I worry deeply that this “setting aside” of concepts such as racism conveys that I don’t believe they are of significant importance to our citizens or to education. That is not the case and I hope my argument here will not be misconstrued in that way. I simply am trying to direct attention to the lesser emphasized role of learning about divisiveness and offering a way that we might better take up divisive concepts through inquiry.

to better understand the particular concepts and for students to take a stand on them. While I will briefly argue for the importance of classroom discussion of divisive concepts, my central claim will be that we must do more than merely discuss these concepts. Instead, we should engage in classroom inquiry about them.

Classroom discussion, though a valuable tool, is too often quickly championed as a solution to dealing with controversial issues. Inquiry, which often includes discussion, avoids some of the shortfalls of only doing discussion and goes farther in helping students not just learn about the divisive issues, but also engage them in more richly democratic ways. At the same time, inquiry may head off some of the very concerns used to justify divisive concepts legislation.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, inquiry positions students to not be silent regarding divisive concepts, and inquiry positions students to not just talk about divisive concepts, but to solve social problems related to them in our world today. In other words, inquiry enables us to *do* something about divisive concepts, rather than just learning *about* them, as some educators currently advocate in calls for discussion. And inquiry is certainly more effective than banning divisive concepts or pushing them to the background, as recent legislation attempts to do, insofar as inquiry can reveal the root causes of political, ideological, and sociological division and their implications in our lived experience, while also putting forward solutions than can move us forward.

## Recent Legislation

“Divisive concept” laws label certain understandings of or beliefs about race, gender, and sexuality, as too divisive or inappropriate for classroom curriculum and instruction, or even for the professional development of teachers. Florida, in an approach that drew national attention and served as a model for legislation in other states, forbid schools from using instructional materials that discuss sexual orientation or gender identity to students before grade four. Other states have forbidden teaching the concepts of “white privilege” and “systemic racism.” Rhode Island took a broader approach, prohibiting ascribing “character traits, values, moral and ethical codes, privileges, status, or beliefs to a race or sex or to an individual because of their race” (HB 6070). Still, other states, like Iowa and Oklahoma, have prohibited teaching concepts that cause students to “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress” about their own race/gender (H.F. 802, Sec 2.1.a.8; SB803, Sec.1.A.1.h). In proposed legislation in my home state of Ohio, “divisive concepts” include teaching that the “United States is fundamentally racist” or “assigning fault, blame, or bias to a nationality, color, ethnicity, race, or sex.” (H.B.327 Sec.3313.6027.A.1.b, A.3). In my neighboring state of Indiana, the State Representative sponsoring their bill listed more than three pages of concepts to ban, including some race-related concepts like “intersectionality,” “white supremacy,” and “racial prejudice,” gender-related concepts like “patriarchy,” more general concepts like “critical self-reflection” and “educational justice,” and concepts which may appear to be tangentially related like “social-emotional learning” and “land acknowledgments” (Wichgers, 2021).

Some bills, including one in my state, call for more than just a ban on specific concepts, they actually prohibit assignments, like position papers, or class activities, such as debates,

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<sup>3</sup> I also want to be careful here for I am not meaning to convey that I support the concerns raised by policy-makers who have authored these bills or even to suggest that we should adapt teaching practices to generally attend to the concerns they raise.

that require students “to advocate for or against a specific topic or point of view” (Ohio H.B. 327). This ban applies to all topics, not just those that are controversial or divisive. Finally, lumped in with divisive concepts legislation, some states prohibit “action civics,” where students engage in projects that seek some sort of change in their school or community. In my state, this includes forbidding “any practicum, action project, or similar activity that involves social or public policy advocacy” (Ohio H.B. 322 Sec. 3313.6027.B.3).

## Aims of Legislation

Divisive concept legislation has originated from conservative policymakers. Their motivations can be read in more and less generous ways. These policymakers and their supporters can be understood as trying to improve harmony amongst America’s increasingly contentious citizenry. They aim to do so by stamping out teachings that emphasize differences or hierarchy between racial and gender groups and fend off the emotions that such teachings may raise, including anger and resentment toward other identity groups.

Moreover, they seek to assert the importance of seeing each citizen as an individual, rather than as a member of various groups. Providing a formal statement for such concerns, the National Association of Scholars expressed that curriculum should not engage in identity politics that pits groups against each other and should not teach hostility toward America or its heritage (National Association of Scholars, 2021). Calls to focus on individuals, rather than groups, are common amongst proponents, and some are especially concerned with portraying particular groups as “oppressors” and others as “oppressed,” with these terms also banned in some bills. For example, Ohio HB 327 sponsor, Representative Diane Grendell (2021) said in her testimony:

Teaching our children that they are either victims or victimizers does not inspire change or love, but rather is divisive and creates a conundrum in their minds. America, since its inception, has stood firm on the grounds of individual excellence. In our bill, we promote respect for all.

Later she adds that her bill is “an affirmation, that no matter the color of your skin, the ethnicity your ancestral family calls home, your gender, you are an individual” (2021).

Another shared motivation behind these bills is a concern for indoctrination in classrooms, where content is taught in ways that lead to an unshakeable commitment even if that content is inaccurate or politically biased (Barrow and Woods, 2022). Indeed, citizens from across the political perspective should be alarmed if teachers are indoctrinating students into incorrect interpretations or politically partisan ideologies related to concepts of race, gender, and sexuality. The proponent testimony of Ohio H.B. 322 sponsor, Representative Don Jones (2021), is illustrative:

The purpose of school is to educate students. Classrooms are not indoctrination centers, nor should they be... Whether these points of indoctrination are referred to as divisive concepts, critical race theory, or whatever else may be out there, at the end of the day the name doesn’t matter. Indoctrination is indoctrination. The goal of that indoctrination is to alter how our children view the United States. The goal is to train children to believe the United States is fundamentally racist, and by association our children are somehow inherently racist.

He concludes:

Too often teachers are telling students what to think, and not teaching them how to think. HB 322 is about protecting the integrity of our education system and ensuring our students are learning real facts, and not being told to feel or think a certain way.

Similarly, he argues against action civics, largely because it is seen as putting indoctrinated views into action:

Our children absolutely need to learn our government processes, but not because they are pushing an agenda from a teacher or school, or even potentially being dinged by a teacher for advocating for the ‘wrong position.’ Coursework should be about learning, not advocating and lobbying (2021).

A more generous take on these laws, then, emphasizes the longstanding value of individualism in America, the desire for citizens to get along, and the goal of schooling free from political indoctrination.

A more nefarious interpretation of these policies suggests that they are trying to restrict how concepts of race, gender, sexuality, justice, and equity are defined and taught in schools, prohibiting alternative, often more complex historical accounts that portray systemic injustice. These restrictions silence the voices and experiences of minorities, who may view matters of race, gender, and sexuality in ways that differ from the definitions held by proponents of divisive concepts legislation, many of whom are straight, white men. Prohibiting talking about these issues may also prevent discussions of responsibility for past and ongoing harm as well as, arguably justified, feelings of guilt or shame that may arise from them, especially within students who are white.

Additionally under this less generous interpretation, the harmony and consensus sought seem to be more aligned with assimilationist goals of *e Pluribus Unum*, where we aim for a citizenry united as one. While being “one” may sound like an admirable goal, the drive toward oneness may expunge differing opinions and ignore or deny the experiences of minorities. It actually runs counter to the values of liberty and pluralism central to democracy. Instead, we might pursue a more democratically justified form of harmony by promoting wholeness, best described by political theorist Danielle Allen (2004). Wholeness seeks a cohesive community that is tied together by political friendship, shared fate, and commitment to democratic principles. It does not homogenize or erase differing views as oneness does.<sup>4</sup>

## Implications of Legislation

While these proposed and approved laws are quite new and their impacts are not yet fully known, some practical and theoretical implications are already becoming clear. First, more practically, divisive concept legislation not only outlines what should not be taught in schools but also has given rise to mechanisms where citizens can report teachers for perceived infringements of the law and to punishment, from loss of school funding to loss of jobs to suspended teaching licenses (Greene, 2021a, b, c, d). This has led some

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<sup>4</sup> While I focus more on legislative action on the Right, it should be noted that some on the Left have made more informal suggestions that also chill classroom environments and limit the ability to teach divisive concepts well. These include calls for rather extreme forms of safety, where it is argued that students should be protected from topics that might upset them. It also includes silencing or “canceling” people who make some contentious claims, rather than working through the conflict they cause or dialoguing about or inquiring into the substance of their claims.

commentators to describe these as “teacher gag laws” (Greene, 2021a, b, c, d). Teachers, fearing repercussions, may resort to teaching to the lowest common denominator, teaching only material or views that are unlikely to be seen as objectionable to anyone. As a result, teachers will likely avoid taking up real matters of equity and identity that students and families are struggling with both in and outside of schools.

Second, in a matter of both practice and theory, divisive concept legislation also precludes classrooms from taking up what Diana Hess describes as “open” issues. These are issues where multiple reasonable positions can be taken on a topic (Hess, 2009). Open issues offer learning opportunities where students engage with an array of differing perspectives on a topic and analyze the merits of competing positions. They can come to better understand how others view an issue and may reach a stance themselves. While it can be hard to distinguish which issues should be seen as open, and therefore worthy of classroom consideration, one criterion for doing so asks whether the issue is politically authentic. One way to determine this is by looking to see if the topic is being openly debated in public legislation. Obviously, this is the case with the concepts leading to the bills themselves, but is also evidenced in other public policy debates around related matters like transgender athletes in schools and school racial integration programs.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the effect seems to contradict the call of some proponents, such as Indiana Representative Chuck Wichgers (2021) who argues in his proponent testimony:

the problem is that critical race theory and its related ideas form a closed system. It is a perspective that leaves no space for anyone, no matter how well-intentioned, to see the world differently. When presented as the singular valid worldview, it is not a productive way to engage with students, groups, or with one another.

Unfortunately, banning discussion of these concepts further prevents multiple interpretations of them from being considered in schools or from challenges being raised that might work against a singular and entrenched view. These laws, then, bar discussion of concepts that should be seen as open issues worthy of engagement.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, I offer a more theoretical implication. Disagreement about important social and political matters is a source for making better decisions about how we live together in a democracy. Yet, divisive concept legislation forecloses not just opportunities to do so in classrooms, but also the ability of young citizens to see and value disagreement as a benefit to democracy. Drawing on the work of political theorist, Chantal Mouffe, proponents of this legislation seem to fear antagonism in their quest for harmony and oneness.<sup>7</sup> As a result, they miss out on antagonism as a source for different ways of thinking about, and potential solutions to, our shared problems. They stop short of fulfilling Mouffe’s call to “transform antagonism into agonism,” a more productive way of using disagreement to improve democratic life (Mouffe, 2000). Within an antagonistic view, those who disagree with us are seen as moral enemies or competitors that we seek to destroy. But within an

<sup>5</sup> I’m not saying that all concepts listed in “divisive concept” legislation are open issues. This list is long and some things on it may more appropriately be understood as settled.

<sup>6</sup> I draw here on a distinction that is common in the literature on controversial discussions in classrooms, most notably shaped by Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy. I recognize, however, that the depth of recent contestation over matters such as the 2020 U.S. election suggest that the distinction itself may be problematic or even no longer fully valid or useful. Perhaps part of what inquiry does is to expose that the distinction is not easily drawn and yet inquiry also provides us a way for working through and even past it.

<sup>7</sup> Again, I’m giving a more generous read here to the motivations behind some policymakers and backers of divisive concept legislation.

agonistic view, those who disagree with us are seen as adversaries, where we recognize that we share some common ground with them as citizens committed to principles of democracy who experience a shared fate. Rather than annihilate them or their views, we must learn how to live with them and even engage with them in ways that may change our own stances. In their effort to stamp out the wars of antagonism between citizen enemies, proponents of divisive concepts legislation may also stamp out opportunities to productively engage with adversaries.

## Discussing Divisive Concepts

The call to discussion in our classrooms is often quickly raised whenever political controversies are on the table (Kauppi & Drerup, 2021). And, typically, that's well-justified. Discussion, as well as related approaches like deliberation and debate, are important avenues for enacting democratic life, and students should practice pursuing them. The benefits of classroom discussion are well-supported in the theoretical literature and some benefits, such as producing respect for those with differing opinions and increasing the perspective-taking abilities of students, have also been affirmed in empirical studies, though some findings are mixed (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Saetra, 2021). The 2003 "Civic Mission of Schools" report was the first to strongly push two related classroom practices: discussing current events and debating current events and controversies. These have since been shown to have positive effects, including on NAEP Civics scores (Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2013). The call to discussion has grown in the decades since, but is one that we should heed carefully in light of some potential issues.

Importantly, when discussing open political issues—those with multiple reasonable positions—the discussion should be taught "non-directively," where the teacher doesn't try to impart a particular belief or position. This differs from teaching about settled issues, where there is only one reasonable position and that position should be taught directly (Hand, 2008; Levinson & Fay, 2019; Tillson, 2017; Warnick & Smith, 2014; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Even the best teachers, however, sometimes struggle to teach in these genuinely open ways, without bias or unintentionally favoring some positions over others. Their shortcomings may be perceived as indoctrination, though I believe wrongly so in many instances. Nonetheless, such potential is aligned with the concerns raised by policymakers authoring these bills.

Additionally, discussion emphasizes stating one's opinion and giving reasons for it. Again, this helps instill important citizenship skills, especially in more deliberative accounts of democracy that rely upon rational argument exchange. But, emphasizing reason-giving and one's personal stance may not focus enough on learning how to gather evidence to better initially understand the topic and to support the reasons one gives for one's developing stance on it. Teachers and students may also fall short of the more rational, non-emotional discussion that is described in the literature, in part because it requires skills students have not yet developed in school or may not be appropriately expected of students at their age. Discussions can become heated.<sup>8</sup> And, when they are, they may reify divisions between students. Relatedly, studies show how debate, for example, may further entrench

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<sup>8</sup> To be clear, it is okay for some discussions to get heated and for emotions to play out in the classroom. My point here is only about how those instances may exacerbate problems of polarization and division. See my discussion of the value of emotions in civic reasoning in Stitzlein, 2021.



people in their positions, reduce diversity of views within a group, and exacerbate polarized views (McAvoy & McAvoy, 2014; Schkade et. al., 2010).

The sweeping call to discuss controversial issues, then, is not itself often well-justified and may foreclose other useful approaches. As Kauppi and Drerup (2021) argue:

As soon as it is established that an issue should be taught as controversial, it is usually regarded as rather uncontroversial that discussion of some type is the natural way to proceed. Thus, despite the significant variation in what counts as a controversial issue and what makes an issue controversial, in educational discourse, a uniform solution to approaching these issues has been presented (p. 220).

Indeed, we have been inundated with calls to discuss controversial issues in recent years. It is an approach that is reflected in studies of best practice in social studies education and an approach that I generally endorse and have even called for in a recent national citizenship education report (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017; Stitzlein, 2021). However, what I want to suggest here is that inquiry may be an even better way to approach controversial issues like divisive concepts. It may achieve the benefits of discussion while avoiding some of the shortcomings and may offer other educative experiences and outcomes. So, rather than responding to bans on teaching divisive concepts with a call to discussion, I respond with a call to inquiry.

## Pragmatist Inquiry

When I speak of inquiry, I am referring primarily to pragmatist inquiry which traces its roots to the work of John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce in particular. Inquiry begins when we find ourselves in, what Dewey calls, an “indeterminate situation” (Dewey, 1938, p. 108). These are moments when we struggle to make sense of the world around us and aren’t sure how to proceed. They are genuine moments of puzzlement and uncertainty. Often these moments aren’t just confined to individuals, but rather relate to issues or problems that we share with those around us, especially in classrooms where we are surrounded by people from the same community and members of our peer groups. When it comes to children who are developing their own identity and encountering issues related to it in larger society, aspects of their lives related to race, gender, sexuality, and equity may pose genuine moments of uncertainty and struggle.

In the second phase of inquiry, we pause to reflect so that we can better understand the problematic situation and how it is impacting ourselves and others. We then begin to investigate the world around us so that we can better understand the problem. This entails seeking out empirical information as well as the opinions, experiences, and values about the problematic situation from an array of stakeholders. While pragmatist inquiry is most known for its empirical focus on understanding and reconstructing the natural world, it also uses a similar approach to questions of value and political life—the sorts of matters at stake in divisive concepts. In that context, moral claims are offered as hypotheses about which ways of understanding social and political concepts will prove to be most satisfactory. In both cases, we use evidence and feedback to construct potential solutions that we then test to determine whether or not they are effective for alleviating our problem and helping us move forward smoothly, thereby helping us to grow as individuals and flourish as a society.

In the final stage of inquiry, solutions are continually assessed, always remaining open to revision and to the potential of being falsified as new evidence comes to light or changes



occur in the environment. Moral and political hypotheses and solutions, for example, are tested through lived experience to determine whether the moral claims hold, for whom, and to what extent (Dewey, 1939). Notably, the criteria used to evaluate moral claims in pragmatist inquiry is more than just utilitarian, affective happiness. Rather, the criteria of satisfaction, personal growth, and societal flourishing encompass many different types of goods, including freedom, justice, community, and more (Fuerstein, 2021).<sup>9</sup>

The goal of inquiry is to get out of indeterminate situations by reconstructing the world around us and restoring coordinated action amongst members of community. Inquiry, then, is a form of problem-solving central to democratic survival. While it may be more celebrated by those with a bent toward change, even conservative citizens typically support how inquiry brings about the solutions needed to deal with current struggles. Progressives and conservatives may differ, however, in whether they believe children should actually undertake inquiry into contemporary social and political problems or whether they should just learn the knowledge and skills needed in order to do so later on as adults. I side here with the importance of practicing inquiry with children, which provides an opportunity to nurture their developing citizenship skills while still in an educational setting, while also acknowledging that children are capable of far more sophisticated contributions to citizenship than they are often given credit.<sup>10</sup>

Inquiry is a key part of a democratic way of life both informally in the way we interact with fellow citizens and formally through our civic and political processes. The inquiry process translates into the method of democracy like this:

1. Identification of the problem (agenda setting): to this phase belong formal practices such as electoral consultations, informal practices such as opinion polling, meeting with citizens, public hearings, social surveys, forms of social protest, NGOs campaigns but also practices of whistleblowing that aim at raising awareness about critical aspects so far underestimated;
2. Formation of the public: to this dimension belong the activities of political parties and social movements, but also of all forms of civic non-political association (churches, recreational associations, solidarity movements, etc.) which aim more concretely at producing organized forms of response to collectively perceived problems;
3. Determination of solutions: to this dimension belong formal and informal political practices of political decision-making, including parliamentary debate, expert committees, practices of public deliberation, participatory practices, public hearings etc.;
4. Implementation of solutions: the realm of public policies, but also of actions carried out by administrations, public and private agencies;
5. Evaluation and feedback: to this dimension belong the formal political work of oppositions, voting, the work of journals and media, of NGOs and other formal and informal ‘watchdogs’ and more generally the activities by which individuals manifest their agreement or disagreement with the results of a political action (Frega, 2019, p. 96).

Inquiry and democracy are activities, where we face problematic situations and determine for ourselves our desires and our means for achieving them while providing

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<sup>9</sup> Notably, how we understand those goods, such as what freedom means, continues to shift based on our experiences.

<sup>10</sup> See my response “Children as Citizens” to Tony DeCesare’s paper “The Future is Now: Rethinking the Role for Children in Democracy,” at the Philosophy of Education Society Conference, 2022, in press. I’m taking up his challenge here.

mechanisms for citizens to identify problems with the status quo and to hold others accountable for harmful outcomes. Learning how to engage in inquiry helps to prepare growing citizens for using and navigating democracy both now and in the future.

## Inquiry in the Classroom

So, what would a call to inquiry, as opposed to discussion, look like when it comes to divisive concepts? I will present just a brief sketch here. To begin, inquiry is a conjoint undertaking and is based in a community setting where students work together, drawing upon their shared experiences and relationships. Such inquiry starts with real problems and uncertainties that students face. These might be moments of prejudice they encounter in their school, moments of doubt about their gender identity as they mature, moments of questioning mascots representing their local team, or moments of confusion as students witness protests over police brutality against people of color. Typically, these are not problems that need to be artificially introduced in the classroom, rather they arise on their own.<sup>11</sup> These problems should then be taken up carefully as matters of reflection that prompt the gathering of related evidence and the seeking out of relevant experiences amongst a host of stakeholders. Students might share personal narratives about their own experiences with identity and discrimination. They might search for the stories of their classmates or peers in other communities to determine differences and similarities in their experiences. Evidence can take multiple forms (scientific, political, artistic) and should be identified using multiple sources.

This phase of inquiry necessarily entails unearthing and including a diverse range of opinions on a topic and even possibly conflicting beliefs or facts about it. In Dewey's words:

The plurality of alternatives is the effective means of rendering inquiry more extensive (sufficient) and more flexible, more capable of taking cognizance of all facts that are discovered (1938, p. 500).

This should be a slow, deliberate, and outward-oriented process, rather than a rush to assert one's own stance, as is too often the tendency in discussions about controversial issues. It entails discussion, which, Dewey says, "will bring out intellectual differences and opposed points of view and interpretations, so as to help define the true nature of the problem" (1933, 329–30). It is aimed at getting a rich and thorough understanding of the situation and the stakeholders.

Rather than identity politics or a pitting of identity groups against each other, as some legislators detest, Deweyan inquiry proposes a way to solve problems that begins with those experiencing them most directly as individuals. This sets up more of what Iris Marion Young would call "a politics of difference" that moves past the essentialism that the legislators abhor and moves toward the situated knowledge of particular individuals as well as the groups to which they may belong.

<sup>11</sup> On some occasions, students may fail to detect problems related to divisive concepts or to experience them as problems, especially if the situation serves them well. In these cases, teachers may need to help some students understand why a given problem is indeed a problem for themselves and/or others, and help them to see how students different from themselves may experience it as such.

Inquiry is content-rich; it is not merely a skill. Historical and political knowledge is often required to make sense of indeterminate situations and propose solutions to move forward. Knowledge of what has been tried and accomplished in the past and historical consciousness (Clark and Grever, 2018) can help students make wiser judgments for the future. Skills of historical interpretation may be needed to distinguish facts from stories or myths and to reach conclusions based on evidence from multiple sources and the contextualization of texts (Barton & Levstik, 2015; Monte-Sano & Reisman, 2018; Reisman, 2012; VanSledright, 2015; Wineburg, 2002). These include identifying legitimate sources, attributing the source to an author contextualized historically, understanding that author's perspective, and corroborating the source to assess its reliability (VanSledright, 2015).

During the next stage of inquiry in a classroom community, students might put forward potential ways to understand, confront, or eliminate identity-based struggles or injustices they encounter in their schools or lives. This could include developing language or locating terms that best describe their findings, including determining whether some of the banned concepts are a useful fit. Finally, they should test and assess those proposals to see if they bring about better ways of living together and as individuals. This evaluation phase foregrounds the shared fate of participants as they face together the benefits and risks of their hypotheses.

## Benefits of Inquiry

Discussion may certainly be a part of inquiry, especially when reflecting on the significance of a situation, one's personal experience of it, and potential approaches to improving it. But inquiry goes well beyond discussion, offering some additional perks and heading off some of the shortcomings of discussion.

Importantly, inquiry is a collaborative process—one that brings students together around a problem in a spirit of shared fate. In this regard, even as divisive concepts may give rise to contention between individual students or identity groups in the classroom, the process is undertaken as one seeking to achieve and preserve wholeness. Inquiry doesn't pit one interpretation of a concept against another as merely right or wrong, good or bad, as a classroom discussion might or a classroom debate most certainly would. Neither does inquiry simply juxtapose the views of dueling political parties and their takes on divisive concepts. Rather, inquiry engages collective effort to sort out the issues. Inquiry, with its close pragmatist connection to the empirical method and scientific fallibilism, assumes (and sometimes even reveals) that any of us can be wrong about our opening stance on an issue. It urges us to remain open to competing views and to the evidence gathered before reaching a conclusion about it.

In this way, inquiry encourages intellectual humility and works against further entrenching polarized positions, as classroom debate tends to do (McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021). When facilitated well, teachers can help students identify that it's okay to change one's mind, especially when the evidence indicates shortcomings in our views. Such a spirit of humility and self-criticality seems especially valuable right now given that our citizenry appear to have a range of ways of defining and experiencing divisive concepts. That is not to say that inquiry champions relativism about them, however, for decisions must be made and hypotheses must be tested and assessed to determine how well they work to help us move forward and flourish. It is, however, a call to slow, informed, and careful exploration and judgement-making.

In a post-truth age where “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief,” inquiry helps us to foreground the value of honesty as truth-seeking and truth-telling (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). Good inquiry demonstrates that honesty helps us get a fuller and more accurate account of problematic issues. If we foreground the pursuit of truth (especially within a pragmatist framework for inquiry where truth is what works to enable us to thrive), inquiry is an apt process for determining what is true (Stitzlein 2022). It pushes us to investigate our world, empirical evidence, and the consequences of our beliefs more thoroughly than mere discussion does.

Relatedly, while discussion may reach moments of consensus or compromise, too often it doesn't offer an avenue for assessing or revising that agreement once the discussion ends. Inquiry builds in assessment and revision as key steps, recognizing that the process is always ongoing. Finally, participating in inquiry can help students see how knowledge and truth are arrived at. This metacognitive aspect of inquiry is valuable because it helps students understand how they think and believe, not just what they think and believe.

The best forms of classroom inquiry, much like the best forms of classroom discussion, encourage students to be openminded and to listen to each other well. Inquiry entails learning not just to speak out when one disagrees with others, but how to listen to and respond to the disagreeing views uttered by classmates. But unlike discussion, inquiry intentionally opens spaces for minority views because they offer insight into problems and possible solutions, and foregrounds the democratic commitment to pluralism. Facilitated inquiry can also help students learn how to be responsive to and be moved by others, a conjoint experience of encountering and responding to a shared problem that may change the student in terms of their identity, the reasons they give regarding the problem, their position on the problem, or how they view other people impacted by the problem (Warnick et al., 2018). Inquiry can even lead to “civic epiphanies,” where students can be surprised by each other and come to see the world, our shared problems, and the divisive concepts related to them in new ways (Yacek, 2019). Students, then, can come to better understand “the other side” and to shape middle ground or more inclusive alternatives as a result. In inquiry, more so than discussion, students don't just learn how to live with disagreement, but figure out how to use it to arrive at better-informed solutions.

These skills can help budding citizens better learn how to work across lines of division in society today. Inquiry offers opportunities to learn how to be political adversaries and disagree, yet come to better understandings and to guide their shared fate together. While not necessarily a goal held by all citizens or political groups today, inquiry builds relationships, and by doing so, may help us work across our points of difference because those relationships help us to better understand others and perhaps even care about them. During classroom inquiries, teachers can encourage and support civility as a way of forming and sustaining relationships and communication across political and other divides. This foregrounding of relationships emphasizes that new divisions and new “divisive concepts” may arise, but we must continually come together in a spirit of wholeness to continue communicating about them.

Whereas many proponents of “divisive concept” laws are concerned about potential indoctrination from teachers, inquiry is the best pedagogical rebuttal.<sup>12</sup> Whereas indoctrination positions students passively, receiving dogma without question, inquiry is an active process that should largely be student-generated and student-led. While teachers facilitate inquiry and may help students by posing key questions, providing needed resources or evidence, and more, students are at the helm. This heads off the potential for substantial intentional and unintentional bias or distortion on the part of teachers. Moreover, when inquiry is conducted with the critical, democratic spirit endorsed by John Dewey, it necessarily investigates bias, ideology, and other factors influencing problems and our understanding of them. Rather than foreclosing open issues or indoctrinating predetermined answers to them, inquiry keeps the questions open for exploration and the door open for returning to them for future revisions. It empowers students to take on this questioning role, even in their exchanges with teachers. As guides rather than experts on matters of divisive concepts, teachers can model ongoing learning and open-mindedness for students.

While the sort of inquiry I promote here is not activism, it may lead to action. As such, it may fall under the category of “action civics” when explicitly paired with citizenship education that encourages using the formal democratic system or informal processes like coalition building to bring about change. Activism of the sort that concerns legislators and has led to bans on action civics is primarily charged with being politically partisan, emphasizing protest, and encouraging students to lobby for matters that arise from or serve the interests of teachers. Stanley Kurtz (2021), in a piece that has influenced some conservatives, warns, “Action Civics, to the contrary, skips a step, moving uncritically to turn grievance and anger into protest and lobbying. Too often this has the effect of forestalling self-examination and dampening tolerance of alternative perspectives. Critical self-examination and thoughtful debate are easily avoided in the heat of collective political action.” While pragmatist inquiry may grow out of emotional turmoil and may lead to political action, the process I have outlined and advocate is slower, more careful, and more reflective than the rash picture Kurtz paints.

Instead, inquiry raises hypotheses about how to understand and act upon divisive concepts in ways that alleviate confusion and provide useful pathways forward for students and their communities. This may mean making small changes to the ways they live together with peers in the classrooms or larger proposals for changing policies in their schools or neighborhoods. Importantly, the particular action is not defined in advance; rather it arises from the solutions generated by the students in response to particular indeterminate situations. Additionally, the solutions posed by students may take on any political slant, regardless of the personal views of the teacher. Protest may be one tool for raising awareness about the issue and potential solutions to it, but is not the only or preferred approach. In these ways, while it can be aligned with action civics, inquiry actually prevents many of the problems lawmakers fear.

Finally, while inquiry into divisive concepts may be pertinent to an array of subject areas, it is most relevant to social studies classes, which are most overtly tasked with helping students understand society and prepare for citizenship. Notably, the College, Career,

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<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler makes a similar case for who to best head off allegations of indoctrination by using critical inquiry in “A Dissenting View from the Humanities on the AAUP’s Statement on Knowledge,” Spring 2020. [https://www.aaup.org/article/dissenting-view-humanities-aaup%E2%80%99s-statement-knowledge?link\\_id=7&can\\_id=fb137a3a2886fcb32a0fae4ea42bc&source=email-the-politics-of-knowledge-2&email\\_referrer=email\\_794220&email\\_subject=the-politics-of-knowledge#.Yc4nevHMJTZ](https://www.aaup.org/article/dissenting-view-humanities-aaup%E2%80%99s-statement-knowledge?link_id=7&can_id=fb137a3a2886fcb32a0fae4ea42bc&source=email-the-politics-of-knowledge-2&email_referrer=email_794220&email_subject=the-politics-of-knowledge#.Yc4nevHMJTZ)

and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards is an inquiry-based approach. While different from pragmatist inquiry, there are many similarities to the four dimensions of inquiry outlined in the C3 Framework: “1 Developing questions and planning inquiries; 2 Applying disciplinary [civic, economic, geographical, or historical] concepts and tools; 3 Evaluating sources and using evidence; and 4 Communicating conclusions and taking informed action.” This suggests that there may be an opening in social studies classrooms to a more Deweyan take on inquiry, as it encompasses and goes beyond these four dimensions.

More recently in 2021, the Educating for American Democracy Roadmap developed by a massive team of scholars and K-12 teachers has reaffirmed the value of an inquiry-based approach to social studies in general, though it largely reasserts the 2003 “The Civic Mission of Schools” report’s call for discussion, debate, and deliberation about controversial issues in particular (Educating for American Democracy, 2021, p. 31). The Roadmap also asserts goals of civil disagreement and civic friendship that are fostered within the inquiry approach outlined in this paper. Co-authored by Danielle Allen, the report draws upon her earlier work on political friendship which argues that such friends recognize their shared life (rather than a common one) and try to be trustworthy to each other because their shared flourishing depends on it (Allen, 2004). Here, friendship is a relationship based on equal recognition and sharing power, not to be mistaken with merely being kind to or getting along with others. Friendship is what calls citizens back into conversation again if trust is damaged or the results of inquiry prove to be inequitably burdensome or harmful to one party over another. This spirit is reflected in the pragmatist emphasis on both individual growth and mutual flourishing as the criteria for determining whether or not an indeterminate situation has been successfully resolved through inquiry.

Perhaps most interesting, the Roadmap proposes that, through “design challenges,” classrooms take up many of the sorts of questions that underlie lawmakers’ motivations for recent legislation, including concerns with alternative histories that emphasize the role of racism and a “more plural and therefore more accurate story of our history” (Educating for American Democracy, 2021, p. 17). The Roadmap argues:

Rather than thinking that it is possible to solve up front all the challenges of how to deliver effective history and civic education, we argue that the nation’s community of educators—and indeed our students—should be brought into the work of experimentation and discussion necessary to build solutions.

Thus, I follow suit in arguing that in a country torn over what divisive concepts mean, how they relate to the history of America, and how to teach about them, if at all, the proposed approach should be one that invites students and citizens to the table for inquiry and experimentation, rather than an outright ban.

## Limitations to Inquiry

I have drawn a sketch here of inquiry at its best, and there are certainly many classroom efforts at inquiry that fall far short of the depiction I’ve offered. Before closing, I want to touch on just some of them potential limitations of inquiry, even when completed well. Most notably, schools are increasingly segregated along lines of race, class, and even political ideology relative to the communities where they are located. This situation makes it increasingly hard for a genuine plurality of opinions and experiences on social and political

issues to arise on their own. As a result, teachers may have to introduce additional perspectives through narrative accounts, polling data, and more so that students have a fuller and more accurate picture of the issue. When doing so, teachers must be cautious about providing limited or biased accounts that might distort the investigation or bias the findings of students.

Inquiry also does not escape the forms of dominance that are also seen in classroom discussions, where some members, especially those who tend to speak from or use the rational and linguistic approaches of educated white masculinity dominate (Young, 2002). Teachers must work to detect and right these imbalances, in part by foregrounding relationships, civility as a call to ongoing communication, and civic friendship in particular. Balances of power and perspective are also exacerbated by increasing polarization, with the political views of some citizens moving farther to the extremes. This can create challenging classroom dynamics where extremist positions may increasingly be endorsed. Often good inquiry will reveal these perspectives for what they are, but teachers may have to play a more active role in helping students identify them as such.

Additionally, inquiry requires time, money, and clarity as a pedagogical approach. Preparing teachers to guide inquiry would require substantial training to understand what pragmatist inquiry is and how it is invoked as a pedagogical practice that goes beyond the sketch I have offered here. They must learn how to overcome tendencies to be teacher-focused, shifting their role toward facilitation, and empowering students to lead. They must be aware of the age-appropriate expectations of what students can handle, while being willing to scaffold and challenge students to take up the difficult tasks of citizenship.

Similarly, classroom inquiry into divisive concepts must be undertaken with careful teacher oversight, drawing upon knowledge of the proclivities, strengths, and weaknesses of the students. While inquiry can be undertaken with students of any age, taking up divisive concepts in thorough ways may best be reserved for older students in high school or college who have more sophisticated moral and reasoning skills as well as broader real-world knowledge to better traverse this contentious terrain.

Teachers must also be prepared to attend to media influences and an array of emotional and psychological phenomenon that distort inquiry, such as motivated reasoning, echo chambers, confirmation bias, and backfire effect—influences that limit exposure to alternative accounts and encourage doubling down on one's original stance or that of their political tribe (Garrett, 2019; Kraft, 2019). Developing skills of critical media literacy, especially within the finding and evaluation of evidence will be key.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, carving out space for inquiry within the school day will be challenging when social studies is rarely tested and has increasingly been cut from school time and budgets (Educating for American Democracy, 2021, p. 19; Hodgin & Kahne, 2019).

Finally, inquiry offers wonderful opportunities for “deep dives” into particular content and situations, often drawing upon interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and addressing them. It also models how to engage in similar investigations and experimentations in the future, thereby showing students how to continue to learn and engage when novel situations arise in the future. It does not, however, move quickly, enabling teachers

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<sup>13</sup> The work on critical media literacy coming out of the Stanford History Education Group is especially promising. See, for example: McGrew, S., Ortega, T., Breakstone, J. & Wineburg, S. (2017). The challenge that's bigger than fake news: Teaching students to engage in civic online reasoning. *American Educator*, 41(3), 4-9.



to cover a breath of material or long lists of standards. Inquiry takes considerable time and focus, a privilege available in too few classrooms today.

## Conclusion

Inquiry is a way of *doing* democracy. Matters of diversity and equity are already present in students' lives both in and outside of schools. Engaging in inquiry into them enables students to take up and shape pressing issues in their communities. In this way, learning to engage in inquiry is more effective at preparing and presently engaging citizens than merely talking about democracy in a traditional civics course or even discussing controversial issues. Inquiry enables students to actually interact with and impact the world around them in more tangible and significant ways than mere discussion provides.

Inquiry better prepares citizens for the messy world of democracy outside school walls—one where citizens are increasingly divided. Engaging in inquiry can help students learn how to work across those divisions, arriving at better understandings of contentious issues, developing better-justified stances based on evidence and multiple perspectives, and crafting stronger solutions to shared problems, including how we understand and define terms related to identity and justice. Democracy thrives when citizens, even those young enough to still be in school, wrestle with open controversies and solve public problems about them, including how to understand race and gender, and how to alleviate racism and sexism. Rather than banning divisive concepts from our schools, let's encourage classrooms to inquire into them.

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