Preservice Elementary Teacher Views on the Relationship Between Diversity and Democracy

Jason K. Ritter
Duquesne University

This qualitative inquiry reports the ways in which three graduate-level preservice elementary teachers conceived of the relationship between diversity and democracy, and explores how their understandings of this relationship informed their planning for democratic citizenship education with young learners. Findings indicate while the participants exhibited a certain measure of variance in their thinking about diversity and democracy, all of them planned their lessons at a lower level of multicultural support than their views suggested they would. This primarily highlights the ongoing lack of understanding regarding what it might mean to teach democratic citizenship through its practice as well as its study.

Key Words: Social Studies, Multiculturalism, Citizenship Education, Teacher Education, Elementary Education, Professional Development

Introduction

A number of scholars in social studies education express the value of student learning in terms of democratic citizenship (Avery, 2004; Nelson, 2001; Stanley, 2001; Vinson & Ross, 2001). These scholars argue students can learn important civic knowledge, skills, and values through the study and practice of democracy in the classroom. Given the inherent complexities of democratic living in a pluralistic society, proponents further argue it is important for students to learn and to experience its tensions in such ways that compel them to work “at it continually (path), in concert with others (participation), and intentionally with others who are of different ideology, perspective, or culture (pluralism)” (Parker, 2008, p. 68). In this way, social studies education for democratic citizenship appears to pivot on the relationship between democratic education and multicultural education.

Although democratic and multicultural education are often treated as isolated scholarly areas, Walter Parker (2003) described this chasm as “bizarre and miseducative” (p. 2). He explained:

Attending exclusively and defensively to the citizen identity while ignoring, denying, repressing, or trying to “melt” away cultural and racial identities avoids the fact that diversity is…essential to liberty; it causes liberty. Doing the opposite has the same effect: By attending exclusively and defensively to our diverse individual, cultural, and racial identities, we ignore the shared political identity and its context—the commonwealth—on which we rely to secure and nurture our diversity. (emphasis in original, p. 2)

According to James Banks and Diem Nguyen (2008), what is needed instead is to “find ways to foster civic communities that incorporate the rich and diverse cultures of its citizens while…cultivating a shared set of values, ideals, and goals that unify and make structural inclusion into the commonwealth possible for diverse groups” (p. 137). This, at its core, requires an orientation to diversity that is multicultural, participatory, and rooted in social justice.
Despite the relationship between democracy and diversity, Catherine Cornbleth (2001) noted “teaching for meaningful learning and critical thinking that incorporates diverse perspectives and students” is not “widely shared within the teaching profession generally or among social studies teachers more particularly (Cornbleth, 1998; Goodlad, 1984), nor among the general public” (p. 74). Many teachers, rather, seem to have weak conceptualizations of the relationship between democracy and diversity (Michelli & Keiser, 2005; Parker, 2003). A weak conceptualization tends to reinforce insipid notions of social studies as the transmission of factual information and socially acceptable views for student absorption. Research has shown how much of what happens in classrooms is influenced by such traditional understandings (Goodlad, 1984; Thornton, 1994). Research, further, has shown how such narrow approaches are often linked to lower student achievement, especially for students in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Gay, 2004; Irvine, 1991).

Given the important role of teachers and their views in the kinds of learning opportunities provided to students, this study was designed to focus on two interrelated research questions pertinent to social studies education for democratic citizenship:

1. How do graduate-level preservice elementary teachers understand the relationship between democracy and diversity?
2. How do these understandings influence their views on teaching social studies for democratic citizenship?

Research Frame

The research frame for this study was created through blending three existing frameworks from the literature on democratic and multicultural education. Specifically, this research frame draws from Parker’s (1996a, 2003) work around conceptions of democratic citizenship education in the U.S., Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne’s (2004) typology of outcomes for citizenship education, and Sonia Nieto’s (1994) model on varying levels of support for multicultural education. The narrative below attempts to map these frameworks on to each other, with the purpose of describing their implicit connections and highlighting how they might work together to advance certain understandings under the overarching theme of democratic citizenship education.

To begin, it should be noted how social studies education has represented contested academic terrain since its inception as a school subject in the early part of the 20th century (Nelson, 2001; Saxe, 1991; Stanley, 2001; Vinson & Ross, 2001). Although it is generally agreed that social studies should facilitate democratic citizenship, this focus does little to bring greater clarity to social studies instruction because different individuals embrace varying conceptions of democracy. At best, the term represents a “loosely defined genre of political and social community” (Parker, 1996b, p. 1). Such a characterization obscures its function as the primary criterion of citizenship education. For this reason, it seems useful to consider how democracy is commonly understood and treated, at least implicitly, by educators engaged in civics instruction in social studies classrooms. This consideration is much more than a rhetorical exercise because dissimilar perspectives of democratic citizenship education have very different implications for both the curriculum and, presumably, society at-large.

Three conceptions of democratic citizenship education in the United States are identified and described by Parker (1996a, 2003) as: traditional, progressive, and advanced. The first two
conceptions represent approaches to teaching social studies that can be found relatively easily in the schools while the third conception represents something more of an ideal that has not been actualized in classroom practice. Each of the conceptions of democratic citizenship is described in more depth in the sections below.

**Traditional Conception of Citizenship Education**

The traditional conception of citizenship education meshes with the approach of teaching social studies commonly referred to as cultural or citizenship transmission (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977). Although not generally held in high regard in university settings, it is probably the most common approach to teaching social studies in actual classroom practice (Goodlad, 1984; Thornton, 1994). This approach “intends to impart traditional core knowledge, skills, and values to students. The emphasis is on teaching that content, sets of behaviors, and attitudes that reflect standard and socially accepted views” (Stanley & Nelson, 1994, p. 267). Proponents of the traditional approach generally view democracy as an accomplishment (Parker, 2003). Their adherence to cultural or citizenship transmission suggests they believe democracy has been accomplished in this country, at least to the degree it is possible, and that their job as teachers is to protect that accomplishment by transmitting the core knowledge, skills, and values that contributed to the formation of society as it currently exists. An important objective of traditionalist instruction is to produce personally responsible citizens. Such citizens are described in Westheimer and Kahne (2004) as those who: act responsibly in their communities, work and pay taxes, obey laws, recycle, give blood, and volunteer to lend a hand in times of crisis. This conception of democratic citizenship values citizens who are honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community.

In terms of Nieto’s (1994) model of multiculturalism, the traditional conception of teaching social studies often aligns with the monocultural or tolerance-oriented levels of support for diversity. Monoculturalism is characterized by a curriculum that is largely reflective of the dominant group, and seeks to treat all students the same regardless of differences. The tolerance level accepts differences, but only if they can be modified. The ultimate goal is assimilation to prevailing social norms. The curriculum here mostly incorporates an additive approach to occasionally include material on groups outside of the dominant culture; however, no serious attempts are made to overhaul what is taught, or how it is taught, in the classroom.

**Progressive Conception of Citizenship Education**

The second approach to social studies, rooted in the progressive conception of citizenship education, is consistent with the traditional conception regarding the importance of the aforementioned core values-knowledge-skills; however, it differs significantly in the degree of emphasis it places on civic participation in its various forms (Engle, 1960/1996; Newmann, 1975; Oliver & Shaver, 1966). The progressives essentially advocate for a more participatory and direct form of citizenship than what is implied by the traditionalist focus on personal responsibility. The progressive conception of citizenship “emphasizes the many ways people can behave in the citizen role other than by voting, campaigning for a representative, or running for elected office” (Parker, 2003, p. 19). Such, participatory citizens, were described by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) as those who are active members in community organizations and improvement efforts. They additionally claimed participatory citizens understand how government agencies work and can employ strategies for accomplishing collective tasks within existing social structures. To demonstrate the importance of participation and collaboration,
progressive instruction tends to be less mimetic. Nonetheless, to the extent that progressives are only interested in facilitating citizens actively working together within existing social structures, similar to the traditionalists, they appear to mostly view democracy as an accomplishment that needs only to be sustained through the inculcation of traditional values-knowledge-skills and practice in civic participation. The progressive conception of teaching social studies often aligns with the acceptance-oriented level of support for diversity (Nieto, 1994). Under this level of multiculturalism, differences are acknowledged and their importance is neither denied nor belittled. There typically are more opportunities to learn about material and individuals outside of the dominant culture, along with a greater focus on connections between the curriculum and the surrounding community. In terms of the pedagogy employed by the teacher, some less traditional teaching approaches, such as student-centered or service-learning projects, are incorporated in an attempt to help all students learn.

Advanced Conception of Citizenship Education

Both the traditional and the progressive conceptions of citizenship education are too narrow and detrimental to democracy because of the skewed way in which they attempt to negotiate the tension between unity and diversity (Parker, 2003). Both conceptions err on the side of unity by privileging commonalities as Americans and downplaying existing social and cultural differences amongst the citizenry.

diversity of the political kind is sanctioned to a greater extent than diversity of the social and cultural kind. For example, differences of opinion on matters of common concern (i.e., public policy questions) receive some attention while differences of religion, language, race, ethnicity, and gender are moved off to the sidelines in the name of an official policy of “color blindness” and neutrality. (Parker, p. 17, emphases in original) Parker suggested downplaying the social and cultural heterogeneity of the populace in this manner has several adverse consequences, including facilitating a narrow outlook, an unwillingness to participate, and intolerance to difference.

In an attempt to more fully articulate a conception of democratic citizenship education that is responsive to social and cultural differences in the general populace, Parker (2003) suggested and discussed a couple of advanced democratic ideas that should be implicated in social studies educators’ efforts to rethink their approaches to teaching. First, Parker pointed to the importance of viewing democracy as a path or journey. This view fits with John Dewey’s (1916/2004) notion of democracy as “more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 83). According to this view, democracy is not something that is already accomplished. Democracy, instead, is an ongoing social process that “contains the possibility of continuous change and enlargement of ‘culture’...[and] the potential for its own transformation” (Beyer, Feinberg, Pagano, & Whitson, 1989, p. 12). The other advanced democratic idea put forward by Parker (2003) concerns the pluralism/assimilation dilemma. Parker suggested:

Liberal democracy’s basic tenets of human dignity--individual liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty—need to be preserved but extended and deepened within a new sense of citizenship that is not subtly or overtly hostile to pluralism. This is a citizenship that embraces individual differences, multiple group identities, and a unifying political community all at once. (p. 25)
Thus, for a democracy to maintain its utility, if not its very essence, the advanced conception of citizenship maintains that all citizens must commit to engaging in an ongoing process of wide-ranging participatory and deliberative practices across public and private spheres.

Proponents of the advanced conception tend to agree with Jack Nelson’s (2001) claim that “education in a democracy demands access to and examination of knowledge, freedom to explore ideas, and development of skills of critical study” (p. 30). Similarly, most would emphasize critical thinking “designed to promote a transformation of some kind in the learner” (Thornton, 1994, p. 233). In stark contrast to the traditional and progressive conceptions of citizenship education, William Stanley and Nelson (1994) suggested that the emphasis here might be more on “teaching the content, behaviors, and attitudes that question and critique standard and socially accepted views” (p. 267).

Rather than treating citizenship as an entity to be acquired by students, the focus is on getting students to engage with their own interpretations of citizenship and to communicate their interpretations with others who have different backgrounds. The resulting citizens from this approach were identified by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) as justice-oriented, and described as those who critically assess social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes, seek out and address areas of injustice, and know about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change. Additionally, these citizens understand that they must question, debate, and change established structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time.

With respect to Nieto’s (1994) model of multiculturalism, the advanced conception of teaching social studies seems to best align with the respect-oriented, or possibly the affirmation, solidarity, and critique level of support for diversity. Under the respect level, diversity is admired and held in high esteem. Indeed, respecting differences provides the basis for much of what goes on in the school. The curriculum reflects a more antiracist and honest focus connected to the community, and the teaching approaches accommodate different student abilities through a variety of mediums. The affirmation, solidarity, and critique level holds that powerful learning occurs when students work and struggle with one another, even if that is difficult and/or challenging. The curriculum is interdisciplinary and students are encouraged to understand issues from multiple points of views and to detect bias. Lastly, the teaching is very flexible and its structure and style will vary according to the topic at hand. The next section describes why preservice teachers’ beliefs about the issues discussed in this section matter.

**Micro-Theory on the Importance of Preservice Teacher Beliefs**

A model to describe the professional learning and development of teachers was articulated by Karen Hammerness and her colleagues (2005) who said:

- teachers learn to teach in a community that enables them to develop a *vision* for their practice; a set of *understandings* about teaching, learning, and children; *dispositions* about how to use this knowledge; *practices* that allow them to act on their intentions and beliefs; and *tools* that support their efforts. (emphases in original, p. 385)

This model places vision, or the teacher’s “sense of where they are going and how they are going to get students there” (p. 385), at the center of the process of learning to teach. It is this vision that informs the development of teachers’ understandings and dispositions, and guides their practices and use of tools; a view that finds credence in current conceptions of the relationship
between beliefs and actions. The body of research on this relationship, was summarized by Virginia Richardson (1996) as: “beliefs are thought to drive actions; however, experiences and reflection on action may lead to changes in and/or additions to beliefs” (p. 104).

In addition to assuming that preservice teacher beliefs are important because they hold the potential to drive their actions, this study further operated from the assumption that aspiring teachers are not blank slates upon their entry into teacher education programs. Instead, aspiring teachers enter their professional studies already laden with a cache of beliefs about teaching that contribute to their visions. These beliefs are derived from their personal experiences, experiences with schooling, and experiences with formal knowledge (Richardson, 1996). In the case of many preservice teachers, particularly white preservice teachers, rarely do their previous experiences enable them to bring substantive cross-cultural knowledge and understanding to their teaching (Howard, 2010; Sleeter, 2001). This lack of experiences is obviously problematic; but especially problematic in terms of teaching social studies for democratic citizenship. In a 2001 article, Kevin Vinson and E. Wayne Ross noted, “determining the boundaries of what is taught in social studies requires decisions about what social knowledge is most important, which skills and behaviors are most valuable, and what values are most significant” (p. 39). The inability or failure of social studies teachers to bring substantive cross-cultural knowledge and understanding to their teaching may be connected to how they make such determinations (Castro, 2013; Castro, Field, Baumü, & Morowski, 2012; Irvine, 2003; Ross & Marker, 2005; Sleeter, 2001; Stanley, 2005; Vinson & Ross, 2001). Herein lies the importance of the research questions, designed as they were to explore if the ways in which graduate-level preservice elementary teachers understand the relationship between democracy and diversity influences their views on teaching social studies for democratic citizenship.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

A Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Approach

This study was initiated and influenced via my participation in a Scholarship of Multicultural Teaching and Learning Faculty Learning Group at my university from 2010-2011. The purpose of the group was to bring together trans-disciplinary faculty to systematically examine issues of multiculturalism within our own teaching and our students’ learning, and to publicly share and review our work. We used tenets drawn from Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) to think more deeply about multiculturalism within the context of our courses. A rationale for SoTL was argued by Lee Shulman (2000) that focused on professionalism, pragmatism, and policy. Further clarification, provided by Kathleen McKinney (2007), follows: it is our professional obligation to be scholars in our disciplines and as educators. In addition, SoTL is practical and will help us and others (as it is made public) improve teaching and learning. Finally, SoTL can help us provide evidence for important discussions about policy decisions. (p. 13)

In light of these rationales for SoTL, all of the participants in the Faculty Learning Group were encouraged to think of questions related to our students’ learning that we wanted to formally and systematically explore.

After discussing the purpose of SoTL and deciding on our respective research questions, the members of the Faculty Learning Group decided to use the remainder of our monthly
meetings to actually devise and implement plans of action for our individual studies, and to think aloud with other group members about our process and any issues we may have encountered, or were currently experiencing, with our individual projects. My study benefited from this prolonged collaboration as my colleagues helped me to frame my research by pushing my thinking on such necessary aspects of the research process as delimiting the scope of inquiry, engaging in a literature review, identifying sources of data, and distilling the information through analysis (Stringer, 2004).

Given the tenets of SoTL and the research questions I was interested in exploring for my inquiry, my study ultimately consisted of a convenience sample of students enrolled in my graduate-level teaching elementary social studies methods class during the Summer of 2010. Students took part in the course as they normally would any other semester. And, as the instructor of the course, I made assignments as I normally would any other semester. Only after the semester was completed and grades had been reported did I solicit volunteers to participate in this study. Participation was voluntary and in no way tied to their grades. For the three who agreed to participate, I asked to use the various assignments they completed as part of the class as data sources, and I further solicited them to take part in short interviews. A research assistant, using an interview guide designed around questions of democracy and diversity, conducted the interviews. These steps were taken in order to encourage the student participants to openly and honestly share their views.

Data Sources

The data sources for this study mostly consisted of the assignments the participants completed as students in my graduate-level teaching elementary social studies methods class. First, each of the participants wrote a reaction paper for select course readings (Au, 2010; Segall, 2010; Stanley, 2005). These reaction papers asked them to reflect on their time in school as students, to make connections between those experiences and the content of the articles, and to describe how both were informing their developing ideas on teaching social studies. Next, each of the participants taught a lesson to the class. Following this teaching demonstration, all wrote a reflection in which they addressed how their lesson fulfilled the five criteria of powerful social studies established by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The third assignment involved each of the participants in writing critiques of at least two of their peers’ teaching demonstrations. These critiques were written on the same form the state mandates university supervisors to use when evaluating student teachers, and covers competencies related to content knowledge, pedagogy, classroom environment, and professionalism. Finally, all of the student participants created unit plans containing at least three individual lesson plans. At the end of the unit plans, each also had to include a philosophy statement in which they clarified their beliefs about teaching social studies, and described how their units were planned to help them achieve their objectives.

To supplement the data contained within the course artifacts, the three students who agreed to participate in this study also took part in a semi-structured interview. The interviews occurred in October of 2010, two months after the course was over and grades had been posted. The interviews were conducted by a research assistant using an interview guide created by the primary investigator of the study and author of this manuscript. This approach was chosen to minimize the conflict participants may have felt being interviewed by the same individual who had just taught them a methods course dealing with similar topics. With that being
acknowledged, the purpose of this study was not to uncover what, if any, understandings student participants took away from the class. The purpose was simply to shed light on how each participant thought about the relationship between democracy and diversity, and how those understandings seemed to influence their views on teaching for democratic citizenship. This is an important distinction for the purposes of this manuscript.

**Data Analysis**

The first stage of the data analysis process involved reading all of the data sources multiple times, and pulling excerpts for each of the participants as they related to the research questions. The excerpts were grouped together under five broad categories reflecting the focus of the study. These categories included the participants’ views on the purpose of social studies, the importance of diversity in educational settings, the importance of democracy in educational settings, the relationship between diversity and democracy, and how to enact elementary social studies for democratic citizenship. The final category included excerpts on how the participants claimed they would enact elementary social studies for democratic citizenship, as well as examples from their unit and lesson plans on how they actually planned to enact elementary social studies for democratic citizenship.

The next stage of the data analysis process involved applying codes derived from the research frame across the categorized excerpts for each of the participants. In her article discussing the “natural, healthy and complementary” relationship between democratic and multicultural education, Geneva Gay (1997) noted how “neither genuine educational excellence nor social and political democracy can be achieved without consciously dealing with ethnic and cultural diversity” (p. 10). Hence democracy and multiculturalism are mutually dependent on one another. Following this point, Gay went on to write how “multicultural education facilitates the translation of principles of democratic living into practice for a society populated by people from many different ethnic, racial, cultural, and social backgrounds” (p. 10). Given the integral place of multicultural education in helping students to negotiate the tensions of democratic living in a pluralistic society, I focused on the levels of support for multicultural education embedded in the research frame of this study to guide the analysis. The purpose here was both to clarify and to classify how each of the participants was thinking about the key concepts of democracy and diversity, as well as to gain insight into how each of the participants thought they might address those concepts in their teaching.

**Findings**

The findings from the analysis are presented for each of the participants in the following three sections. Each section is labeled according to the respective pseudonym (Angela, Linda, and Morgan) assigned to the participant. All three of the participants were enrolled in an initial licensure graduate elementary education program and had completed their social studies methods course immediately prior to this study. Although far from ideal, this is the only social studies methods course required of candidates during their time in the program. Also of considerable importance, all three of the participants were members of the mainstream culture and indicated having little to no exposure to diversity as students themselves. Such a lack of meaningful exposure to diversity mirrors a longstanding, and what many would claim regrettable, trend within the profession at large (Howard, 2010; Irvine, 2003; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). The narratives for each of the participants are presented in separate sections below.
Angela: From Tolerance to Monoculturalism

Participant one is a 24 year old, white, female student whom we shall call Angela. After earning a B.A. in English from a local mid-sized university, Angela immediately enrolled in the Master of elementary education program. In these ways, she is similar to a majority of the other students drawn to this program. Like many of her peers in elementary education, Angela also seemed more interested in teaching children than in teaching social studies. When asked during the interview what she saw as the purpose of social studies, she provided a response lacking specificity, claiming how it was important for students “to understand their roles as citizens, where they live, and understand what they are supposed to do to be a good citizen; [like] participating with voting and just general things like that” (interview). When asked how she might then characterize good social studies teaching and learning at the elementary level, Angela responded, “it’s just about giving kids a good foundation. You don’t want to go too much into detail about any one topic; but just give a good overview of most of the topics” (interview).

Given the nature of Angela’s comments, it may not be surprising that she never clearly articulated her views on democracy in any of the data sources. Even when provided with an explicit opportunity to express her views in the interview, she declined, claiming “I don’t really have a great answer for that one. I can’t even comment on it” (interview). Nonetheless, she did provide a glimpse into her thinking on the topic in one of her reaction papers. She wrote:

In an ideal situation, the students would start thinking about what they like and dislike about their own democratic system so that they could focus on smaller, easier to process issues that they could possibly have some influence on in the future when they are old enough to vote and participate in society a bit more. Although cultural diversity can exist in the classroom, it is important to remember that focusing on our own democratic system is going to be the most beneficial for everyone who is participating in it. (reaction paper)

With its focus on “voting” and “participating a bit more” within the current system, this except from Angela would seem to indicate a narrow and imprecise understanding of civic participation. It privileges, moreover, a conception of democracy exclusively as the existing political system. The notion of democracy as an ongoing social process was not addressed.

Angela also provided very little explicitly in terms of her views on diversity. Still, similar notions that concepts in school are meant to be studied rather than experienced extended to the way in which she discussed the importance of diversity. In her interview, she claimed:

It seems like we tend to focus on certain cultures that have just been traditionally gone over in classes, but it’s important to include all of the other ones that are also important and just let students know that everything’s equally important. (interview)

This quotation suggests that Angela views the importance of diversity mostly in terms of the content itself, and seems to favor an additive approach as a method to enhance her instruction. In this way she believes she can supplement her regular teaching with additional material on other cultures to perhaps make the learning less Euro-centric and somewhat more balanced.

When reflecting on her own views regarding the relationship between diversity and democracy during the interview, Angela stated, “I’ll look at it in terms of democracy just in the classroom, as far as all students have an equal part in what we’re going over and equal understanding no matter what their backgrounds are” (interview). While this statement shows Angela believes it is important to be sensitive to her students and their needs, it also shows she has little interest in overhauling the curriculum to better accept, respect, or affirm and critique.
the cultural diversity that permeates pluralistic democracy. Taken as a whole, the data portray Angela as a preservice teacher who mostly falls in line with the tolerance level of support for multiculturalism.

Even though tolerance is not a particularly high level of support for multiculturalism, Angela’s mini-unit plan on “Rules and Laws” for 1st grade actually seemed to back away from that stance, appearing more representative of monocultural education than it did having anything to do with the fertile relationship between democracy and diversity. The unit included a lesson on school rules, community rules, and leaders. Each of these lessons contained objectives that rested on students recognizing why rules or laws are important, and how students might learn to recognize and respect leaders. Although the unifying theme centered on the potentially powerful concept of authority, none of the complexity inherent in governance type relationships was explored. Instead, the lessons focused on facilitating student recognition that rules are important, that there are consequences if rules are broken, and that it is important for us to respect, and in the future to vote for, people who do the most to keep us safe and secure through rules. In these ways, the unit very much fit within existing patterns of curriculum and instruction that primarily serve to reify the status quo.

Linda: From Acceptance to Tolerance

Participant two is the only non-traditional graduate student amongst the participants. Linda is a 46 year old, white, female student. After a long foray in an unrelated field, Linda became a career changer interested in making teaching her profession. When asked about the purpose of social studies, Linda provided a fairly specific answer:

The first thing that comes to mind with social studies is history and the old saying that people who don’t learn from history are doomed to repeat it. So I think there’s some validity in teaching children about our past just so they can learn from others’ mistakes and also learn how we got to where we are today….And the other aspect of social studies I see as being important is geography. I mean, we live in a global marketplace these days, very different than when my parents were growing up. Considering that our students are going to have to compete in that global marketplace, I think it’s very important for them to understand aspects of geography. (interview)

Her response is a fairly typical one often given by preservice teachers describing why social studies might be important. In one of her reaction papers, Linda wrote it was her job to ensure her students would be able “to participate in a democratic classroom; to facilitate the development of their ‘method of intelligence’ by making the content relevant; and to reject the temptation of taking any text or writing as an absolute truism” (reaction paper). The relatively lofty constructivist goals expressed by Linda in her reaction paper were revisited in the interview at the end of the semester. When asked how she viewed the importance of democracy in educational settings, Linda replied:

I think it’s important to make sure that children as early as kindergarten understand what the democratic process is all about. And I think most importantly out of the democratic process is that it’s not always fair. You know, just because you want to win something may not mean you are the person who gets to win…it’s not fair and sometimes it doesn’t make sense. But then also to make sure that you stand up for what you believe in and have the children be comfortable in their beliefs and have the ability to make comments without fear of retribution. (interview)
Her response highlights Linda’s belief in the importance of getting students to understand the democratic process. The importance, however, seems to almost exclusively be framed as an understanding of our existing democratic process as opposed to how our democratic process ought to be. This sentiment is further reflected later in the interview when Linda remarked that she would like to be able to introduce “the democratic process in things where students don’t necessarily think of it being a social studies activity, like integrating different aspects of following rules and understanding those rules and consequences, maybe as part of your classroom management plan” (interview).

With regard to diversity, Linda claimed it was important to make sure “that all students are tolerant of all other cultures” (interview). Although tempting to consequently define her thinking in terms of the tolerance level of support for multiculturalism—especially in light of her reductionist conception of democracy described above—Linda nonetheless clearly extends on that understanding in one of her reaction papers when she claimed that:

proactively engaging and incorporating the non-school society of the student is a critical aspect in the success of culturally diverse learning. To ignore this segment of the child’s life is to ostensibly negate the impact and importance of family life. Therefore, as teachers, we need to ensure we are taking appropriate action to be as inclusive as possible for the students and their community of practice outside of the school. (reaction paper)

Here, Linda makes it known that the students’ home cultures matter and ought to be considered in planning for their learning. When coupled with her earlier statements, however, it seems that she is mostly thinking about student learning within the confines of the existing curriculum and established benchmarks for success. Linda struggled to articulate any relationship whatsoever between democracy and diversity. When this question came up explicitly during the interview, Linda opted not to answer, claiming that she felt she already discussed the relationship when she expressed her views on democracy. This directs us back to Linda’s basic idea that providing all students with an equal chance to learn from a curriculum in which they might be able to gain insight from past mistakes and better understand their global neighbors is the primary way democracy and diversity powerfully merge. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this understanding of the relationship between democracy and diversity, per se. It does seem, however, to mostly ignore the social dimensions of democracy, and offers little more than the acceptance level of support for multiculturalism, if even that.

In terms of putting her thinking into action in the course, Linda planned a “Flag Mini-Unit Plan” for use in the 2nd grade. This unit began with an introduction to the concepts of a flag and symbols via an examination of the United States flag and the Pledge of Allegiance. The next lesson in the unit was designed to expand the concepts of flags and symbols to other countries. Following short periods of direct instruction, this lesson required students to interpret and explain the symbolism of the flags of Mexico and Canada. From there, it was explained how the teacher would discuss the United Nations as an assembly of all the world’s nations, followed by instructions for each student to create their own personal flags as if they were a sovereign country. The final lesson in the unit required the students to personalize the experience by creating a classroom flag.

Although deliberation over the symbolism contained within these classroom flags may have represented a place in the lesson for students to live the messiness of democracy, the instructions provided by Linda seemed designed to curtail any such risky behaviors. While she
planned to put students into groups to make their decisions, she also planned to impose constraints on their options or behaviors (i.e. all students must ultimately pick just one symbol and one color for the flag, and the final decision would be made based on a simple majority of student votes). An insightful analysis of this mini-unit, was provided by Linda herself (within her philosophy statement) when she claimed:

I was pleased with the ability to incorporate each student’s culture into the unit by having them used in their personal flags. This also gave the student the opportunity to share a little bit about their culture with the class during the ‘show and tell’ portion of the unit.

(philosophy statement)

Despite her thinking, which seemed to mostly be in line with the acceptance level of multicultural support, this mini-unit (especially its conclusion) suggests Linda planned her lessons thinking according to the tenets of tolerance. There was some allowance in her teaching methods for cultural diversity; however, that allowance was overridden through a simple understanding and exercise of democracy as majority rules.

**Morgan: From Respect to Acceptance**

Participant 3 also is a 24 year old, white, female student who enrolled in the initial licensure master degree program of elementary education immediately after earning her undergraduate degree. We shall call her Morgan. In contrast to Angela, Morgan seemed to have given more explicit attention to how she conceived of her role as a social studies teacher of elementary school children. In her interview, Morgan stated that the purpose of a social studies education was “to understand your own culture and history so then you can understand the cultures and histories of other people or countries” (interview). Although this description requires significant unpacking, it still appears to stress certain themes—such as global citizenship, interdependence, and multiculturalism—that were absent from the various responses offered by Angela. Similarly, Morgan seemed a little more comfortable expressing her views on democracy. On top of recognizing that it is important to study the political dimensions of democracy, Morgan also seemed to understand that it is important to prepare students for the social dimensions of democracy. This was revealed in one of her reaction papers when she wrote: “It is the responsibility of teachers to instill a healthy view of democracy, promoting competency and reflection in students about our society” (reaction paper). Both the terms “competency” and “reflection” convey something of a participatory nature and suggest a sense of action. While this is not the same as actually practicing democracy in the classroom, it is more oriented toward future action than some other approaches.

Consider the following excerpt in which Morgan expands on how she might facilitate certain democratic understandings with her students:

I think teachers can make the ideals of democracy real for students through focusing on both positive and negative parts of history. This will help students to actively think about these ideals and how what we learned through conflict can better society and ourselves as citizens. (reaction paper)

The approach Morgan describes for her instruction demands a more critical perspective than what is usually brought to bear on the standardized curriculum. If actually attempted, such an approach would require some reworking, if not some overhauling, of the typical social studies curriculum provided in the elementary classroom. Morgan acknowledged in her interview how diversity “shouldn’t just be a throwing in of… this is a subculture or different culture’s
perspective…but, you know, keeping that kind of learning in mind throughout all of the lessons as part of the norm” (interview). She also talked about the importance of having the “mentality that you’re open to talking about diverse perspectives and diverse cultures” (interview). In these examples, Morgan seems to be expressing both her genuine admiration of diversity and her understanding of its importance in our society. In a reaction paper, Morgan additionally disclosed how “focusing on the diverse values of nonmainstream groups, such as cooperation and harmony with others, are values I personally feel every child should learn” (reaction paper).

In attempting to address the relationship between democracy and diversity during the interview, Morgan asserted:

I think, you know, diversity is the difference from person to person. We’re all diverse in a sense. And then understanding that we’re all the same on certain levels, in a basic way, makes us be able to see that we’re all human beings and we’re all similar. So I think understanding diversity is important in that way, but then that connects to democracy in that everyone has a value and everyone has an opinion and everyone’s value—or opinion—is valued and should matter. So that’s how you could connect the two: that everyone is different, but everyone is a person that should be heard. (interview)

Morgan continued by stating that elementary students can become better citizens primarily if they learn “not just tolerance but respecting what people believe and being able to respect other people whether you agree with them or not” so that when they become adults they are more “open to different perspectives instead of being very closed off” (interview). These sentiments all seem to indicate that Morgan mostly falls in line with the respect level of support for multicultural education.

Despite the focus on fostering respect in her thinking, Morgan seemed to mostly engage in planning that was in line with the acceptance level of support for multiculturalism. Her mini-unit plan on “Holidays Around the World” for 3rd grade was primarily comprised of a series of student-centered lessons focused on the summer, fall, winter, and spring holiday traditions that are enacted and celebrated in students’ personal lives. In this way, and to Morgan’s credit, space was made in the curriculum for diversity. Instead of seeking to engage her students in discussions around these differences or to actively reduce racism via these investigations, however, the main purpose of the lessons appeared to be simply to share the different holiday traditions in a way that neither denied nor belittled their importance. This is an important distinction. While Morgan facilitated a learning environment in which students would be exposed to topics outside of the dominant culture and begin to see connections to their own communities, there was little push for them to do more than to take notice. This lack of authentic engagement renders a more distant kind of learning in which students are able to stop short of respecting diversity, thereby preventing them from being willing or able to affirm and critique the diversity they encounter.

Discussion

Although the design of this study precludes generalizability, several findings emerged from the analysis of the data that seem worthy of consideration. The overarching hope is that these findings may be used to inform the thinking of individuals with an interest in the preparation, induction, and professional learning of teachers and teacher educators. More specifically, it is expected the findings will prove recognizable and useful to other teachers and
teacher educators as they consider ways to close the gaps between their own beliefs and practices; thereby hopefully triggering discussion and examinations of similar issues, and providing the catalysts for change in other contexts.

It seems important to note how the participants, ostensibly similar, did not share identical viewpoints on any of the issues explored as part of this study. The analysis revealed how the participants displayed a certain measure of variance in their thinking on the relationship between democracy and diversity that ranged from a relatively low level of support for multiculturalism (tolerance) to a relatively high level of support for multiculturalism (respect). This variance suggests differences in how the participants understood the importance of diversity, as well as their likelihood in harnessing that diversity to practice democracy in the classroom. It also lends credence to the assumption put forward in the research frame that preservice teachers are not blank slates upon their entry to teacher education programs, and that they already possess, and continuously reform, a cache of beliefs about teaching derived from their personal experiences, experiences with schooling, and experiences with formal knowledge. For this reason, it is important for educators to resist the temptation to view any group of students as a single entity likely to embrace the same set of static beliefs.

Another interesting finding from the analysis was how all of the participants planned their social studies lessons for the methods course at a slightly lower level of multicultural support than their views indicated they should. Angela moved from tolerance in her thinking to monocultural in her planning. Linda moved from acceptance in her thinking to tolerance in her planning. And, Morgan moved from respect in her thinking to acceptance in her planning. As such, even though beliefs are thought to drive actions, this does not eliminate the possibility of experiencing oneself as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1993). This is especially true in a profession as complex as education; which causes one to wonder if the participants might move toward even lower levels of support for multiculturalism in their planning when actually confronted with the realities of the classroom.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, amongst the three graduate-level preservice elementary teachers who agreed to participate in the study there was a considerable lack of understanding regarding what it might mean to teach democratic citizenship through its practice as well as its study. The lack of understanding regarding how students can learn democracy through its practice seemed connected to the views each of the participants had on the importance of democracy and diversity in educational settings. The participants’ views on democracy varied across a spectrum from not recognizing its importance at all, to viewing it strictly in terms of a political process and structure, to trying to allow students to have more of a say in their education. Regarding their views on diversity, while all of the participants claimed it was important, its relevance was primarily understood in terms of content selection and being sensitive to the needs of individual students. None of the participants seemed able or willing to conceive of schools—public places comprised of students from diverse backgrounds—as laboratories for democracy where students could actually experience the concept rather than just learn about it.

Although preservice teachers are influenced in a myriad of ways from multiple sources, it is my contention that this research mostly directs us back to the potential influence of university-based teacher education courses and programs. After all, it is here where candidates are explicitly asked to become students of teaching, and to trouble their previously formed
understandings. Unfortunately, it is also here where the existing research indicates an unclear and uneven influence on preservice teachers’ beliefs and practices (Clift & Brady, 2005; Korthagen, et al., 2001; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). This is not to suggest that teacher candidates necessarily learn little as a result of their formal preparation in university-based courses and programs, as Avner Segall (2002) rightfully noted, “whether by challenging or affirming what prospective teachers already believe, teacher education is always active in organizing, facilitating, and promoting particular notions about what it means (and what one must undergo in order) to be considered a teacher” (p. 4). As it relates to this study, while my own teaching is certainly implicated in the findings, the larger issue relevant for teacher educators centers on what exactly we are challenging and possibly affirming in our courses to facilitate preservice teacher understandings on teaching democratic citizenship. There is a pressing need to develop strategies that are designed to engage all students in ways that challenge their previous ways of being and knowing.

References


**Author’s Bio**

**Jason K. Ritter** is Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with research interests in social studies, teacher education, and democratic citizenship. He teaches undergraduate and graduate methods courses for preservice teachers interested in the preK-4, 4-8 and secondary levels. Email: ritterj@duq.edu.