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# Applying a Critical Lens to Teachers' Use of Social Media for Civic Education

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Traditional civic education in the U.S. often does not meet the needs of students. Whether through outdated or uninspiring methods or by functionally disenfranchising students who are not part of the predominant power structure, mainstream civic education maintains hegemonic structures and, in turn, systems of oppression. Scholars have argued that reconceptualizing citizenship is an important component to addressing these shortcomings. Further, an increased use of social media as a tool for new forms of civic participation has been observed, but little research has been done to examine how teachers are using these platforms in their teaching of civics. This study explored high school social studies teachers' conceptualizations of citizenship and their use of the social media platform, Twitter, with their students for civic education. Findings showed that teachers' conceptions of citizenship were influenced by their local context: teachers observed geographic or racial barriers for their students' civic participation, which informed how they understood and taught about civic participation. Teachers' use of Twitter was intended to provide ways for students to disrupt the systems that established these barriers; however, teachers' practice of using Twitter did not always align with their intentions.

An important goal of education, and civic education more specifically, is to prepare citizens to inherit democracy (Krutka, 2014; Mann, 1842). Traditionally schools have been spaces where students learned the requisite knowledge and skills to be active citizens (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2002; Marri et al., 2014; Parker, 2003). Although research suggests that participatory models of civic education are most effective, these models have not often been emphasized in civics classrooms (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Torney-Purta & Wilkenfeld, 2009), especially where teachers' civic ideologies conflict with the authentic, collaborative, and student-centered instructional practices reformers advocate (Knowles, 2018).

To help realize this vision, the field of social studies education needs more in-depth understanding of the perspectives and practices of civics teachers on the front lines of change, such as teachers who are critically reflecting on their pedagogy and innovating their civics teaching with social media: sites of new civic actions and contestation (Krutka et al., 2019). Thus, this qualitative phenomenological case study explored how three civics teachers conceived of and implemented civics education with Twitter. Specifically, we inquired, “What are the experiences of high school social studies teachers who use Twitter to teach civics?”

This work contributes to the nascent but expanding knowledge base on social studies education with social media. It illuminates the extent to which teachers’ experiences in teaching civics with social media reflect contemporary citizenship ideals and facilitate students’ civic engagement. A select review of relevant literature on citizenship theories within civics education, teachers’ related conceptions and practices, and social media in education is provided next, followed by a presentation of methods and results.

## **Literature Review**

### **Conceptualizations of Citizenship**

Conceptualizations of citizenship are varied and overlapping in the civics education literature. Westheimer and Kahne (2004), for instance, in their study of civic education programs, found that teachers prepared students to be one of three types of good citizens: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented.

A personally responsible citizen promotes the civic good through individual efforts and is attentive to the community but not to the point of organizing collective actions or changing the structures of society. Teachers who prepared students for this type of citizenship emphasized character development, particularly honesty and integrity, to teach students how to be a good person in a community (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

The participatory citizen seeks to engage in civic affairs and organize collective responses to community needs. A participatory citizen is involved and invested in civic life at local, state, and national levels. Teachers who prepared their students for this type of citizenship emphasized volunteering and how to participate in the political process (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Justice-oriented citizens are those who seek to change the underlying structures that cause or contribute to injustices. Teachers prepared students to be justice-oriented citizens by asking them to examine issues and social structures critically and presented participation in social movements and actions which aimed to rectify the root causes of injustice as methods of civic engagement (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Although Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argued that there is no hierarchy to these three types of citizens, they also noted that focusing on personally

responsible citizenship limits civic engagement. Education that emphasizes personal responsibility like recycling does not foster examinations of systemic injustices. Participatory citizenship, such as making contributions to charity, is a more robust form of citizenship, but without more of a justice-oriented frame, it also continues to work within traditional power structures. When students are asked to participate in, rather than to question, hegemonic structures, they often disengage from civic participation. In either case, those inequitable systems remain in place (see also Heath, 2018).

Extending conceptions of justice-oriented citizenship, critical citizenship asks students to question and understand what is wrong with the world, to examine *their role* in unjust systems, and to develop the skills to change those systems. Sant (2019) described critical civic education as an epistemological approach to education that seeks social change to create more equitable societal systems. She found critical educators to believe that current systems uphold existing power dynamics, thereby maintaining an unequal society.

Similarly, other critical scholars and teachers have foregrounded their concept of critical citizenship in the examination of power, privilege, and access within societal systems (Durham, 2019). Critical civic education seeks to remedy this inequity by teaching students to understand these existing systems as the first step in changing them. From this epistemological approach, part of the teacher's role is to support students in challenging what knowledge is normalized (Sant, 2019).

Critical citizenship rejects the notions that teaching and learning are apolitical actions and asks teachers and students to critically evaluate systems of oppression and their role in them (Andreotti, 2014; Johnson & Morris, 2010). The purpose of critical citizenship is action: The understanding of oppressive societal structures and one's role in maintaining them is to prompt the dismantling of these unjust systems (Durham, 2019). Critical civic education emphasizes the experiences of those who have been marginalized and teaches students to understand and address the systems that have created an inequitable distribution of power. This type of civic education teaches students to interact with others in ways that allow them to understand another's experience and to use their voice to create a more just society (Andreotti, 2014; Johnson & Morris, 2010).

Scholars have taken a critical approach to examining citizenship conceptions, and civics education in communities has worked to reimagine a more inclusive civic participation (Vickery, 2017). Members of communities historically excluded from full civic participation have developed new conceptions of civic engagement (Sabzalian, 2019; Vickery, 2016, 2017). Vickery (2017), for instance, showed that Black social studies teachers reimaged civic education by designing "free spaces" where students of color were affirmed and empowered, as the traditional understanding of citizenship did not align with their identities or experiences (p. 339).

Sabzalian (2019) argued that these turns toward more inclusive civic education have not yet included Indigenous communities. Because they

continue to be focused on inclusion, which is antithetical to Indigenous civic goals of sovereignty, they result in “ongoing colonization” (p. 316). These different ways of conceiving citizenship prompted teachers to adopt new pedagogies to include and affirm their students’ belongingness and right to participate in the life of the community.

Civic education, however, largely remains focused on upholding the nation-state and American history (Lopez et al., 2006). This approach is problematic, as American history is often dominated by White history, leaving unacknowledged the ways in which the U.S. has stood for freedom while systematically violating the right to freedom of many within its borders (Epstein, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2004).

Scholars like Westheimer and Kahne (2004), writing before the mainstream adoption of social media in the mid-to-late 2000s, did not conceive of citizenship online, but their conceptualizations of citizenship might be extrapolated to the current context. For instance, today’s personally responsible citizens might practice responsible, ethical, and legal use of online information and help prevent the spread of misinformation in a community. Participatory citizens might engage in civic discourse online, registering their responses to candidates and campaign rhetoric, and creating political content to share and debate with others digitally. Justice-oriented citizens might harness today’s social media to protest causes of injustice, and critical citizens might interrogate systems of oppression, examine their role in perpetuating them through online behaviors, and develop skills to counter or change those systems.

### **Teachers’ Conceptions Can Influence Their Teaching**

Whether and how students are prepared to enact any of these types of citizenship is shaped by their teachers (Knowles, 2018; Knowles & Castro, 2019). Understanding how teachers conceive of citizenship and civics education is vital, therefore, because teachers’ conceptions influence their pedagogy (Marri et al., 2014; Thornton, 1991).

Knowles (2018), for instance, examined relationships between 735 U.S. middle or high school teachers’ ideology and their self-reported instructional practices and found connections between teachers’ beliefs and their preference for certain instructional strategies. Teachers’ conservative civic education ideology was positively linked to their preference for traditional, teacher-centered, textbook-oriented instruction. Teachers’ liberal civic education ideology related to, although not consistently, their preference for collaborative-research-based pedagogies. Teachers who strongly supported critical civic education ideologies were those most likely to prefer collaborative-research based pedagogies (e.g., debates, role-playing, and student-led discussions) deemed most likely to result in engaged citizens (Knowles & Di Stefano, 2015). The authors concluded, “Any assertion of what social studies teachers do, or do not do, in regards to instruction should include teacher identity and contextual considerations” (Knowles, 2018, p. 92).

Furthermore, Knowles and Castro (2019) demonstrated that both conservative and liberal ideologies were positively related to justifying

existing systems and that critical ideology was negatively related. Their findings align with what others have found (e.g., Patterson et al., 2012), namely, that responsible and participatory citizenship behaviors are emphasized by the vast majority of teachers, conservative and liberal, in support of the status-quo. Critical citizenship conceptions and pedagogies among teachers are less common within schools. Their findings beg the question, “If teachers are not teaching social critiquing behaviors and related skills of activism and protest, then where do citizens learn to transform their society?” (Knowles & Castro, 2019, p. 236). Social media, when integrated into K-12 classrooms, can disrupt established pedagogies, forcing teachers to reaffirm or revisit foundational assumptions and practices (Greenhow et al., 2009, 2020).

### **Social Media and Citizenship Conceptions and Actions**

Conceptual and empirical work has shown that social media can play a role in shaping people’s citizenship conceptions and actions (Bennett et al., 2012; Gleason, 2013); it has been used both to maintain and to disrupt unjust systems and provide avenues through which people have challenged the dominant power structures of society (Khondker, 2011; Mozur, 2018;). Moreover, social media are not neutral (Krutka et al., 2020), and examining how social media have been or could be used to support or squash local change or systemic reforms could shift civic education toward more critical citizenship ideals (Durham, 2019).

Furthermore, scholars have argued in favor of teaching *with* social media as well as teaching *about* social media because of the importance of social media in the lives of young people and its power to manipulate behavior without users even knowing (Durham, 2019; Krutka & Carpenter, 2016b;). Durham argued for the incorporation of social media in education to teach critical citizenship specifically. As social media have been used for civic participation among youth, particularly in ways which are not often measured by traditional assessments of civic engagement (Chapman, 2019), teaching critical civic participation through social media takes on a heightened importance.

Durham (2019) theorized that the use of social media could support students’ critical civic education and participation by increasing student voice, diminishing echo chambers, encouraging hashtag activism, and increasing networking. First, Durham argued that teachers could teach with social media to promote student voice. When students are invited to share their opinions and work on social media, they can find an authentic audience, which could be empowering.

Second, he argued that teachers should teach students to recognize echo chambers, or environments where a person encounters only information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own and which prevent some voices from being heard. Teaching about echo chambers should include teaching students to ensure a cacophony of views are voiced within their expanded space.

Third, social media affords teachers the opportunity to teach about hashtag activism, that is, to teach about the ways in which participating in

tagged streams of social media content can disrupt or reify hierarchies of power. Teaching students to understand traditional power structures, how they can be disrupted or maintained, and their role in doing so, are all aspects of critical citizenship. Finally, posting on social media may be a way to engage with the world, but students must also learn to analyze the content, rationale, and intended audience of their networked posts to identify who may benefit or be harmed for this activity to be congruent with critical citizenship.

### **Social Studies Teachers' Use of Social Media**

Although K-12 teachers' most common professional uses of social media are for their own professional development (Greenhow et al., 2020), teaching with social media in formal K-12 education is a nascent but growing area for educational research and practice (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020; Greenhow et al., 2019, 2020). Social studies teachers, for instance, have used social media with their students in both beneficial and challenging ways. High school students who blogged about the 2012 presidential race for a class assignment reported increased engagement with, efficacy, and understanding of political issues, even as they reported disappointment with the lack of interaction with others over that medium (Levy et al., 2015). Krutka and Carpenter (2016a) found that social studies teachers used Twitter specifically to communicate with students and parents; to offer a text-based space for discussion; to share projects and resources; and to connect students with information or activities outside of the classroom.

Scholars have also argued that teachers should incorporate social media into their teaching of civics because it provides students with the opportunity to engage in civic participation through tools they are already using (Bennett, 2008; Gleason & von Gillern, 2018; Kahne et al., 2016; Kenna & Hensley, 2019). Gleason and von Gillern (2018) supported their argument that teachers could use social media to increase students' civic engagement and participation with empirical data about students' out-of-school use of Twitter for these purposes. The students in this study used Twitter to share information about social issues, participated in political discourse, and engaged in "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) by channeling in- and out-of-school learning into online and offline civic participation.

In a case study of one Civics and Economics class, students used Twitter to take part in the 2012 presidential election (Journell et al., 2013). Students engaged in live tweeting (a practice of tweeting while participating in an event) during the major parties' National Conventions as well as the presidential debates; in this way, students were actively participating in political discourse. Although the teacher did not actively monitor their tweeting, students' tweets were often substantive and issue based.

Few studies have explored social studies educators' teaching students about social media use. For instance, in a sample of 755 K-16 teachers who were Twitter users, Carpenter and Krutka (2014) found that few teachers used Twitter to teach students about their use of social media. In the Journell et al. (2013) study of students' use of Twitter to engage with the

2012 presidential election, a small number of the students' tweets were ad hominem in nature, offering negative, personal commentary about an individual rather than about the issues being discussed, which their teacher could have avoided by teaching his students about productive political discourse. If teachers' conceptualizations of civics impact students' civic engagement, whether social studies teachers understand and teach their students *about* social media may also be influential.

In summary, in-depth understanding of how social studies teachers conceive of and implement civics education with social media is key to advancing understanding of how to innovate civics pedagogy toward the preparation of more engaged and critical citizens. To advance this agenda, we conducted an exploratory case study of three social studies teachers who were teaching civics with Twitter.

## **Methods**

We framed our study with the following research question: What are the experiences of high school social studies teachers who use Twitter to teach civics? Specifically, we were interested in how teachers conceived of teaching civics and how they conceived of and enacted teaching civics with Twitter. We chose to explore these questions to identify how and to what extent a teacher's conception of civics and their use of Twitter supported or disrupted traditional power structures and issues with civic education.

We examined teachers' views of citizenship through the lenses of personally responsible, participatory, justice-oriented, and critical citizen types (Durham, 2019; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). We examined teachers' views of social media broadly and of Twitter specifically, and we explored the forms of civic engagement they implemented with Twitter.

To explore teachers' experiences of teaching civics with Twitter qualitatively we combined phenomenology and qualitative case study methodologies. Phenomenological research examines a phenomenon of interest (e.g., teachers who teach civics with Twitter) for meaning and experience from the point of view of several individuals (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Case study enables in-depth examination of a contemporary phenomenon in the context in which it occurs (Yin, 2014). Combined, the phenomenological approach allowed us to process the meaning of using Twitter in the teaching of civics, while qualitative case study allowed us to evaluate a teacher's pedagogical choices and their reflections on those choices within individual cases and conduct cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014).

## **Participants**

Participants for this study were purposefully selected based on variation in aspects related to our phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013; Palys, 2008; Shaw, 1999). Participants had to be high school (grades 9-12) social studies teachers currently teaching civics who had been teaching for a minimum of 3 years. Teachers with this level of experience are more likely to reflect on substantive pedagogical issues beyond classroom management.

Participants were required to be regular Twitter users themselves, defined as using Twitter at least once per week and having at least 1 year of experience with the platform. They also needed to have used Twitter as a tool in their teaching of civics, not just for their own personal or professional reasons outside of classroom teaching (Greenhow et al., 2020). Finally, participants had to be teaching in a school where the majority of the student population fell into either a low or a high socioeconomic status (SES). This requirement was based on literature identifying differences in civic education among different SES areas (Bennett et al., 2009; Gould et al., 2011; Hahn, 1999; Niemi & Junn, 2005; Torney-Purta & Barber, 2004) and was determined both by publicly available data about each of the schools' populations and from descriptions from the teachers themselves about their students.

Teachers were recruited to participate in this study through individual emails and outreach to schools, universities, and civic education organizations (e.g., iCivics or Generation Citizen) as well as through requests posted on Twitter. Based on our criteria, five teachers were initially interviewed for this study. The three teachers described in Table 1 represented the teachers who had been the most engaged in using Twitter in a variety of ways. All names are pseudonyms.

**Table 1** Profile of the Participants

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### **Researcher Positionalities**

As research interpretations are filtered through the researcher's experiences following is a brief description of our positionalities in undertaking this work (St. Louis & Barton, 2002). The first author is a white middle-class woman, who holds a Ph.D. in educational psychology and educational technology. She is a former middle and high school social studies teacher, who is now a postdoctoral researcher at a private research university, where she researches the impacts of spirituality and digital media on civic participation and teaches qualitative methods. She has worked in education as a teacher, administrator, and teacher educator since 2004.

The second author is a white middle-class woman, who is a tenured associate professor of educational technology at a large public research university. She holds a Ph.D. in learning technologies and has worked in educational technology since 2006. A former high school English teacher, she studies learning and teaching with technology, with a particular interest in people's formal and informal learning with social media in a variety of settings.

### **Data Collection**

Semistructured, phenomenological interviews with each teacher provided the main source of data. Each interview began with a grand-tour question, a broad yet central question that allows the participants openly to describe

their thoughts and experiences of a phenomenon or experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Spradley, 1979). The grand tour question asked about participants' experiences in using Twitter for civic education.

Subsequent interview questions flowed in response to each participant's comments, rather than as a list of predetermined questions to be answered in a specific order. Additional prompts near the end of each interview were designed to probe for the participant's responses to topics of interest to this study that had not naturally occurred in the interview conversation (e.g., "What surprised you during the time when your students were using Twitter for class? If you were to talk to other civics teachers about using Twitter with students, what would you most want them to be aware of?). Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. All interviews were conducted via videoconferencing software, then recorded, and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis of interview transcripts followed a two-step process: open coding and a priori coding. Open coding describes a process whereby codes derive only from what is seen in and understood from the data, as opposed to using a priori or preestablished codes (Creswell, 2013). Initially analyzing the data through open coding was important from a phenomenological perspective, which tries to understand the nature and meanings of a particular phenomenon, because phenomenology requires openness to our everyday lives and experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Phenomenology assumes that preconceptions can only be tested through dialogue. Our process of analysis was informed by this perspective because we returned to the raw data frequently, both in video and transcript form, to understand the meanings of the phenomenon of teaching civics with Twitter.

Following the open coding phase of data analysis, theory-based coding, which examines data and assigns codes to data based on a comparison to a particular theory, was applied (Glaser, 2012). This phase of data analysis was used to put our phenomenology findings in dialogue with prior literature to determine how our findings fit into the literature base. It was also important that the data be coded using theory-based coding to examine how the collective perceptions and experiences of the participants in this study connect with existing theory and knowledge. For instance, related to conceptions of citizenship, a number of the codes which emerged identified how teachers thought they were using social media to teach citizenship, such as "breaking barriers," "inclusion," and "civic action." Other codes were related to teachers' choices about using the social media, such as "fake news" and "relevance." Additionally, there were codes that spoke to how teachers understood their role in contributing to students' civic development: "the value of work," "student worth," and "hopes for participation" are examples.

The phenomenological data analysis was an iterative process, moving between the different parts in order to rigorously analyze the data and to identify the meanings participants took from their experiences with our phenomenon of interest. Here, we understand "experience" to be anything that was shared by participants as part of the context of their teaching civics with Twitter (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). The first part of data analysis

was to read through each of the transcripts thoroughly in order to gain a holistic sense of the data (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Re-reading of the transcripts, as well as re-watching of the interviews, occurred throughout the data analysis process. A second aspect of the data analysis was to draft a description of the participant's experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Writing and revising descriptions of each participant's experience clarified understanding of each participant's experience, and was a key aspect of the data analysis. The aim here was not to describe the events discussed by each participant, but to analyze the meanings behind those events in order to arrive at the overall meaning of the experience of using Twitter in civic education for these teacher-participants. Throughout the process of writing about the meanings of each participant's experiences, the participants' experiences were examined collectively and analyzed for common themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

This engagement with the data allowed us to extrapolate the meanings that our participants took from their experiences of teaching civics with Twitter. It also allowed us to then compare the meanings gleaned from each transcript with the research on civics education to evaluate how the lived experience of each teacher compared with the literature base. Part of this process was to compare each of the transcripts, along with the analysis of them, to evaluate the data for any common experiences among the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Common experiences and meanings were then synthesized, and the findings across participants are presented as emergent themes of the data.

## **Results**

Teachers' experiences are filtered through their own lived experience. In answer to our research question, this section provides a brief overview of each teacher's experience of teaching civics, highlighting unique experience-shaping aspects, views of teaching, and purpose for teaching civics, as well as common themes in their conceptions and enactment of teaching civics with Twitter.

Two findings are highlighted. First, teachers' conceptions of civics were influenced by their students and community contexts. Teachers felt their students were, to some extent, isolated, which stood in contrast to their belief in students' belongingness and right to civically participate in their community and the world beyond. Their views of civics teaching were oriented toward fostering social connections, which allowed students to participate civically as informed citizens, have a say in shaping their own lives, or help change underlying social structures.

Second, teachers' conceptions of civic engagement shaped how they taught civics with Twitter. For each teacher, civic engagement meant interacting with others, and although the specifics of this interaction varied by teacher, they all conceived of and utilized Twitter with their students to network beyond their classroom. Additionally, teachers saw Twitter as a means of empowering their students to take a more active role in their civic participation.

Finally, Abbey and Josh conceived of civic engagement as making structural changes to society. These teachers saw Twitter as a disruptive tool that could be used to foster change within unjust systems. Next, the complexities of each teacher-case are described.

### **Matt Lyman**

Teaching social studies in a large high school in a Midwestern city, Matt Lyman saw himself as a change agent. He used his influence as department chair at the end of his career to “redo this, fix this, change the whole system” and saw himself as effecting change on an entire school. He believed the best way to engage students was to include a multiplicity of voices in his classroom, because it affirmed students, taught them to respect others, and engaged them in discussion and debate with those with whom they disagree.

Matt’s decisions as a teacher were influenced by his belief that learning should relate to life. His openness to exploring new technologies, his use of social media to follow current events as they were unfolding, his inclusion of parents and others’ voices into class discussions, and the freedom he allowed students in assignments all stemmed from his belief in the value of connecting learning to life. Matt did not require his students to use Twitter but said that 80% of his students were already on the platform. Students used their own devices for participation; those who were not Twitter users were allowed to collaborate with a classmate who was on the platform. These practices, as well as his regular outreach to parents about his social media use and lack of social media prohibition by his school district, allowed Matt to use Twitter freely with his students.

Matt’s purpose in teaching civics within social studies education was to convince students that they were worthy of participating in civic life and needed to develop skills to do so. He believed that a necessary component of student engagement in civic learning was meaningful interaction between students and members of the community. Matt saw himself as the lynchpin of his students’ civics education, creating an environment in which students were expected to share their work with the wider community because it needed their participation.

### ***Matt’s Conceptions of Civics Education***

As shown in Matt’s case, his conceptions of civics were influenced by his students and community context. He believed in students’ belongingness and right to participate civically in their community and the world beyond. That is, Matt conceived of civics education as a way to convince students that they were worthy and capable of participating in civic life. His teaching focused on preparing students to be informed, engaged, and civil members of society similar to personally responsible citizen ideals (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Matt wanted his students to believe that what they did in his class was important and valuable, both because he believed that they could produce work that matched those expectations and because he wanted them to know their own value. Matt realized that, without offering students the

freedom and creativity to construct and express their learning in ways of their choosing, he was limiting what students could do. Matt compared the transactional methods of some teachers to the predictable outcomes of a machine: “Sometimes we like Coke machine transactions in education. We want to go and drop our dollar in and get a clearly-defined and expected outcome.” In contrast, Matt found he preferred the experience of allowing students freedom to explore and use technologies in ways that he did not anticipate or design.

Furthermore, Matt saw no distinction between online and offline citizenship, and this perceived framed his teaching. He wanted students to see ways of participating in society both online and off. As Matt said to his students,

You have a voice. Where do you want people to hear that voice, and what medium must you create in order to have that message heard? And if it’s just a paper, you’re limiting who’s gonna hear that. So where are the people at and where can you meet them with the story that you want to tell?

To encourage students to use their voices, Matt thought the most important factor in his teaching of civics was creating a learning environment where students felt engaged in work that had value beyond the class. He explained this by saying,

If you’re doing your work for an audience, that’s fake. Like if you’re giving a fake speech about something, the kids are gonna treat it fake. There’s no validity in it. But when you tell them that the world will see this work that you’re going to do, they achieve a different standard. Even if you just let your class see it.

Matt intentionally included the voices of parents, extended family members, subject-matter experts, students in other schools, and anyone who reached out to the class via online methods to facilitate students’ engaging in civic discourse with people who held conflicting opinions. By encouraging varied opinions, Matt affirmed the diverse experiences of his students. Matt worked to create a space in which all students felt seen and valued, not only as themselves, but also as members of families and extended communities.

### ***Matt’s Experiences of Teaching Civics With Twitter***

Matt conceived of civic education as a way to prepare informed, personally responsible citizens; he began using Twitter with his students because he thought it gave them greater freedom to construct and demonstrate their learning and because it provided a means for his students to connect to others in a real way. He shifted his teaching to be more student centered and found that when he “knew [his] kids better,” he “spent more time helping them rather than telling them everything.”

Matt observed that students were more proactive in their learning because they found that in doing their projects they needed to learn skills or information to do them well. As Matt said, “[Students] realize, ‘I want to

do this, and I need to know things.’ And just that simple idea — suddenly they need to know something to do — it changed everything.”

Matt used Twitter in his civics teaching to create student-centered learning experiences that allowed them to network in meaningful ways. Students tweeted their work to lawmakers and industry leaders; parents and other community members were asked to weigh in on student debates; and students shared their work online via websites and YouTube for comment from others around the world.

Matt asked students to “tweet work that they did that involved a certain lawmaker and have the lawmaker try and contact them back” as a way of teaching them how to interact with elected officials and showing students that their work had value. Similarly, Matt mentioned an instance in which a student shared her work on the development of chemotherapy drugs for children via Twitter and tweeted to the pharmaceutical industry for a response to her work. Matt described this experience:

We had a person who tweeted out her video about medical [issues]. She was criticizing the cancer industry for not producing chemotherapy drugs for children because the adult drugs that they’re giving kids are devastating their bones, wiping out their teeth, and destroying their hair. And she was like, “And the only reason they don’t is ‘cause it’s not cost-effective ‘cause not enough kids get cancer.” And so we just tweeted that out and she got replies back from the [pharmaceutical] industry.

Matt’s conceptions of civics, conceptions of using Twitter, and the ways in which he used Twitter were aligned. He thought deeply about how his methods in the class supported students to cocreate their learning through meaningful projects, and he found that Twitter was one of the tools that his students used for both learning and sharing their work with the wider community. Matt provided a great amount of freedom to his students in making choices about their work, which respected who they were as individuals and empowered them to invest in their own learning. Through his inclusion of parents’ and others’ voices in the classroom and his use of Twitter, all for the purpose of civic discourse, Matt was teaching students to analyze information critically so that they could contribute to conversations happening in society (as suggested by Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

### **Abbey Bailey**

Teaching social studies in a small high school in a rural, Midwestern town, Abbey Bailey’s identity as a teacher was tied to advocating for her students. She fiercely believed in her students, their abilities, and potential. Thus, she taught aspirationally, approaching the content and pedagogical and technological decision-making based on what she believed her students *could* know and do beyond their time in school. For example, Abbey introduced an elective course on Women’s History to provide examples of alternative career paths to young women in her community. Abbey saw teaching civics as a way of introducing students to life possibilities beyond what they might imagine for themselves.

Abbey's experiences as a civics teacher were shaped by her hope in education as the means to cultivate student agency. This hope was in response to her geographic isolation and the culture of her remote community, where people experienced limited economic opportunity and mobility. Abbey believed that participation in civic life — whether through learning more about the world to find opportunities elsewhere or making informed choices to remain local with the skills needed to participate in local governance and prompt necessary change — was essential for personal and political agency.

To further these goals, Abbey incorporated Twitter into her teaching. She required students to use the platform on their own devices and devoted the beginning of each semester to teaching students "Twitter basics" as some students were regular Twitter users, and others were entirely unfamiliar with the platform. Abbey's district did not have a policy related to social media.

For Abbey, the purpose of teaching civics was to increase students' civic engagement, by which she meant teaching students to interact with the world outside of their isolated community and increasing the value students assigned to their experiences and opinions. Abbey's teaching was shaped by her fervent belief that her students have voices worthy of attention from elected officials. Part of her vision for civics teaching with Twitter, then, was tied to this belief: students could improve their community if they had access to governmental officials.

She saw teaching with social media as helping her overcome geographic and economic barriers between her students, her community, and the rest of the world. As she reflected, "It seems that [using Twitter] is the way, if you want to communicate [with political leaders] ...Twitter gives you that you can message this person [government official]." Abbey wanted her students to "have a seat at the table" and be heard, and she felt that Twitter provided her students with that opportunity.

### ***Abbey's Conceptions of Civic Education***

In contrast to Matt, Abbey conceived of civics education as a means of liberation: overcoming geographic, parochial, and political constraints. Her civics teaching focused on preparing students to be participatory citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), involved and invested in civic life at the local, state, and national level.

Through her civics teaching she hoped students would see their opinions as valuable to their local community and to governmental officials. She hoped students would feel part of a community that reaches beyond their remote town and the time in which they were living. For example, in her discussion of her approach to teaching female students, she said, "We have a lot of girls in our community that need to understand that there's more out there than getting married and having babies, and you know, never really doing anything for herself." Abbey wanted her students to thrive, which included being made aware of possibilities that extended beyond whatever role or life students felt had been predetermined for them.

Abbey also felt the people in her town were underrepresented, ignored, or discounted by those in government because of their geographic isolation. Her views aligned with justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Khan, 2004), in that she wanted her students to change the structure of their local community to provide access to greater opportunity. Therefore, she sought to provide students with tools to make their concerns known to those in power. Teaching civics for Abbey meant convincing her students that they mattered, that their futures were not already set for them, and that they had the right and power to form and share their own opinions. Abbey believed that student engagement with elected leaders was the best way to enact social change. She did not teach her students to understand oppressive systems, to question their role in maintaining them, or to dismantle them.

### ***Abbey's Experiences of Teaching Civics With Twitter***

In this second case, Abbey conceived of civic education as a means of increasing access to people in power and career or economic opportunities for her students. She conceived of using Twitter as a means of increasing agency and self-advocacy. Similar to Matt, Abbey thought Twitter could broaden her students' view of the world, both in finding ways to engage them with current events and by connecting them with governmental leaders. Abbey found that Twitter provided her with a way to mitigate the geographic isolation of her students so that their voices could be heard. In describing particular uses of Twitter, Abbey said that sometimes she would

throw something up on the whiteboard, a tweet from this or that person. Then we'll talk about it for a few minutes, and it might not necessarily have anything to do with what we're going to be talking about that day, but it's just maybe like a current event.

Abbey thought that she could more fully engage students using Twitter, rather than sharing current events through more traditional news sources. She thought viewing a tweet in class could capture attention because of who had posted the tweet or that it could spark discussion because of the content. It was a way for Abbey to introduce current events, demonstrate to students how to find them on Twitter, and tell students that connecting with the world on a regular basis was important.

Abbey spent time at the beginning of the year teaching her students to use Twitter, noting that it usually took students 3 or 4 weeks to get into using the platform. During her "Twitter Basics" lessons, she "reinforced with kids ... how to be careful and how to be smart and how to not get tricked [on social media] into giving away too much information or doing something that ordinarily they wouldn't do in real life."

To illustrate the need for safety, Abbey included in her initial Twitter lesson the story of a former student who had been a victim of a phishing scam to gain more followers for a business. Although Abbey had several pedagogical uses for Twitter within her teaching of civics, she said that her "biggest takeaway is that if I can keep them safe and smart while they're using Twitter or whatever kind of social media they're using, that's a win for me as an educator."

Abbey used Twitter to increase students' awareness of current events and to connect students with governmental officials. Second, reaching out to political leaders through Twitter "put[s] it out there in a public forum," which created greater accountability for political leaders, even by "people who might be electing them in the future." By using Twitter, students could gain access to government officials, but they could also ask questions and expect to be answered, as in Abbey's hypothetical example:

"Hey, why did you vote this way on this bill? Please explain yourself because this is not good for our county, our people, our district" That it [Twitter] does sort of force them [politicians] to defend themselves a little bit more, that they have to really think like, "How are people going to respond to this and are they going to respond good or poorly," in that sort of a public forum where other people can be like, "Oh, wow, that's you know, who is this person calling them out?" and then look it up and be like, "Whoa, that's a high school kid!"

Both Abbey's purpose in showing her students how to interact with government officials and her invitation that they should interact with elected leaders were connected to her conceptions of participatory and justice-oriented citizens and were well served by using Twitter.

### **Josh Young**

Teaching social studies in a large high school in an industrial Midwestern city, Josh's identity as a teacher was centered on being a champion for his students. As he said about his teaching, "I feel like I can ... build that relationship [with and between students] and improve that culture [of the city]." He thought that teachers, through civics education, could prepare students to change unjust systems.

In his view, the biggest advantage of using social media for civics education was in building and maintaining *connections* with and between students in his classroom; within the school and across the segregated school district; and outside of the district, to other students throughout the state. Josh believed that Twitter provided a means through which he could achieve these goals, based on his own Twitter use and discussions at social studies department meetings about the relative applicability and usefulness of various social media platforms. Josh's students used their own devices to access the platform, though he did not require them to use it.

Josh Young's experiences as a civics teacher were shaped by his guilt, his idealism, and his reactions to the racial tensions in his community and school district. Josh lived and taught in a city that continued to operate with de facto segregation: Black students lived on one side of town, White students on the other; consequently, the two high schools were also segregated. Josh's teaching was significantly influenced by these racial demographics, and he saw himself as working to break down the barriers that existed because of the community's history of segregation.

Additionally, his teaching of civics was impacted by his leadership of his school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) because he was working with a group of students who felt isolated and yearned for connection with others. These facets of Josh's life were essential to his experience of teaching civic education with Twitter. He saw the social media as providing a way for his students to find and interact with people like them and who helped them to feel a sense of belonging to the broader community.

Josh's vision and purpose for teaching civics with Twitter was to seek out and address areas of injustice. He worked to understand his own role in the systemic injustices he observed, and he taught with the hope that students would question their roles in these unequal systems. However, Josh also lamented that his students, for the most part, did not examine their thoughts or actions, nor did they act in ways which changed these unjust systems.

### ***Josh's Conceptions of Civic Education***

Josh, like the other teachers, grounded his ideas about teaching in his students' needs and identities and the context in which he found himself. Unlike Matt and Abbey, he conceived of civics education as the appropriate site for community-building across local and societal divides (i.e., racial and sexual). Like Abbey, his conceptions of civics education were oriented toward preparing students for participatory and justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). He wanted his students to be involved and invested in civic life at the local, state, and national level and wanted to end the segregation in his city.

Josh thought civic education could help his White students to learn about Black history, which he saw as a necessary precursor to changing the racially segregated school district. For Josh, this meant developing relationships between his students from a high school with a predominantly White population, and students at the other high school in the city with a predominantly Black population. It also meant increasing students' participation in activist organizations like the GSA, for whom Josh was an advisor.

Through their involvement in the GSA, the students were trying to change and improve society (e.g., eradicate homophobia), whether on the local, school level or throughout their home state and beyond. In addition to these larger, systemic goals, Josh also emphasized that a goal of civic education was teaching students the "little things," or "simple" community-organizing acts they could take to influence change:

It doesn't have to be like the grandiose thing where you go out and change the world kind of mentality. It can be something simple too. You know, going to a food bank or anything like that, contacting your officials, starting up a recycling program at your school – all those little things.

Each of these aspects of Josh's conceptualization of civic education were based on who his students were and teaching them how to interact with others in their community.

### ***Josh's Experiences of Teaching Civics With Twitter***

In this third and final case, Josh conceived of civic engagement as changing structures within communities to disrupt injustices. He conceived of using Twitter as a means of connecting to social movements and increasing student voice for the purposes of disrupting an unjust system. He believed Twitter could help students to examine the city's racial tensions through current events, such as using the platform to explore different responses to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014.

Josh thought that in using Twitter, he could deepen students' understanding of racial injustice and build connections between students. Additionally, Josh thought Twitter could help build relationships, including those that could reduce isolation for his students in the GSA and break down barriers between Black and White students in his city.

Josh taught his students how to use Twitter by framing it as "an extension of their classroom." In addition to teaching students how to use Twitter's features, Josh set particular boundaries for student behavior on the platform, such as only tagging Josh or including class or district hashtags with content that was topical and appropriate for the course.

These boundaries came with consequences: As Josh told his students, "If you're not respecting the rule set, I'm going to block you." For Josh, using Twitter for class came with an expectation of seriousness and purpose, and the few students who did not understand his reasons for using social media, such as the "jokesters" who posted "inappropriate classroom fight vines" were blocked by him.

Josh's actual use of Twitter aligned with but did not fully realize his goals for civics education. Josh wanted to change the entrenched segregation that existed in his community, and he wanted his students to be able to see, understand, and work against that systemic racism. Josh used Twitter to try to change the long-standing systemic racial segregation that existed in his city.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the city in which Josh lived and taught had been segregated, with Black families living on one side of town and White families living on the other. For multiple economic and structural reasons, this de facto segregation continued to exist; consequently, the schools in Josh's district were also segregated. This issue was a significant concern for Josh, and one that he thought Twitter could help him to address. Josh wanted to use Twitter to build relationships between his students, who were predominantly White, and students who attended the other high school in the district, who were predominantly Black. He believed that the first step to building these relationships was for his White students to learn Black history and understand systemic racism.

Josh used Twitter to introduce students to the Black Lives Matter movement, as a way of showing students the continuation of the struggle for racial equality. However, Josh did not encourage his students to

participate in hashtag activism; at most, he encouraged his students to be aware of the Black Lives Matter movement, but not to participate in its work or examine their role in systemic racism.

One of the ways in which Josh used Twitter for civic participation more successfully was through his work as the advisor for his school's GSA. One of the group's goals was to connect with other GSAs throughout the state; they used Twitter for this purpose. Josh and his students in the GSA tweeted to other GSAs to find out what they were doing and to check in with them. Several of the GSAs made and exchanged videos over Twitter with each other, allowing an even more personal connection between the different groups. Josh said that because of these connections from using Twitter, the GSA was able to grow and to do more than it otherwise would have been. He said Twitter made it possible for the GSA to be "able to make [this] a lot larger thing and then from there we've been able to go to different conferences, because we've been able to make that contact."

## **Discussion**

### **Conceptions of Civics and Civics Teaching**

They ways teachers understand and teach civics have bearing on the type of citizens that emerge from schools (Knowles, 2018; Knowles & Castro, 2019). Teachers' conceptions of civics education overlapped with Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) notions of personally responsible (i.e., case of Matt), participatory (i.e., cases of Abbey and Josh), or justice-oriented citizenship (i.e., cases of Abbey and Josh), and these categories overlapped where teachers oriented toward more than one citizenship type.

Examining teachers' conceptions of civics through a more critical lens requires asking whether teachers engaged such questions as, "What is wrong with the world, and why is this so?" "What is my role in maintaining this difference?" and "What can I do to eliminate the gap in experience?" (Durham, 2019). The teachers in this study varied in whether they asked these questions. Matt wanted young people to participate in legitimate ways as citizens on social media and integrated this participation into his teaching. He did not, however, question what was wrong with the world.

Both Abbey and Josh posed this question but at a local, community level rather than the larger societal level. Josh asked students to examine the state of race relations in the U.S. and to consider their role in perpetuating racial injustices, though his emphasis was not on their individual role but on their collective role in their city's history. Both Abbey and Josh asked their students to consider what they could do to change the unjust structures that presented barriers to members of their communities. Thus, in conceiving of civics education, and citizenship as a component of it, teachers were focused on local, community participation and change rather than on disrupting hegemonic structures and history narratives, as critical citizenship agendas espouse (Durham, 2019; Sabzalian, 2019; Sant, 2019; Vickery, 2017).

## **Civics Teaching With Social Media**

Teachers' conceptions of civics prompted them to adopt pedagogies that affirmed their students' belongingness and right to participate in the life of their community. Their teaching of civics with Twitter amplified student voice and student agency and involved networking beyond the classroom, practices that partially aligned with the kinds of social media use for critical citizenship that scholars advocate (Durham, 2019). However, teachers' conceptions of civics education never went this far; they were oriented toward preparing personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented rather than critical citizens.

Fostering students' voice, or allowing students to share their own thoughts and opinions, has long been understood as a key component of critical citizenship (Giroux, 1980). Twitter has been shown to be a place where students can share their voices with others in meaningful and authentic ways (Krutka & Carpenter, 2016b). The teachers in this study were convinced that students' opinions and works were valuable and needed to be recognized as such. Twitter provided teachers with a way of communicating this belief to students and to others. In addition, it provided a way of fostering student agency; via social media students could share their ideas broadly, participate in community action, and make their concerns known to government officials.

Both student voice and student agency are advocated in the *U.S. National Educational Technology Plan* (Office of Educational Technology, 2017) to personalize learning in ways that promote equity and accessibility. Because Twitter can amplify student voice and foster student agency, it has the potential to expand learning in diverse, equitable, and accessible ways, especially for marginalized groups of students. Additionally, advocates for critical citizenship with social media argue that when students are invited to voice their opinions, they have the opportunity to cultivate an authentic audience, which can empower them to work collectively to dismantle oppressive systems (Durham, 2019). Neither the students nor their teachers conceived of or used social media to enact critical citizenship in these ways.

Another important aspect of critical citizenship is developing relationships with others which promote our interconnectedness (Chapman et al., in press; Durham, 2019). This type of relationship requires knowing others' identities as well as practicing cooperative ways of interacting. As these teachers' experiences demonstrated, Twitter proved useful for connecting to networked publics; it provided access to people outside of the classroom with whom students might not have accessed otherwise. Twitter provided a realistic and viable means through which students could communicate their opinions to those in power. However, students did not socially critique the networked publics they were entering or their role in cultivating networks. They did not analyze the content, rationale and intended audience of their posts to identify who may benefit or be harmed. Thus, their networking fell short of the social media-enabled practices critical citizenship scholars have theorized.

Although social media sites provide spaces in which people can connect, they also make it easy to ignore those who hold opposing views (Durham,

2019; Sibona & Walczak, 2011). The ways in which users curate their social media feeds can result in encountering only what appeals (i.e., echo chambers); in this way, students may only see the dominant narrative without any exposure to those who might challenge or not fit hegemonic norms.

Moreover, by participating in social media streams, students can interrogate and reflect on their role in maintaining oppressive systems and take actions online to disrupt hierarchies of power (i.e., hashtag activism; Durham, 2019). The teachers in this study did not prompt students to use social media in these ways: countering echo chambers or hashtag activism. Both practices could characterize future integration of social media in K-12 civics education.

### **Critically Teaching With and About Social Media**

Taken together, teachers' experiences revealed alignments between their conceptions and enactment of civics teaching with social media. Little evidence appeared, however, of critical civics teaching *about* social media, which was missing in all cases (as also in Krutka et al., 2019). Teachers taught *with* social media, leveraging its affordances for student voice, agency and networking, potentially moving students closer to critical citizenship ideals, even if they did not recognize this as such.

Contrary to recent literature reviews revealing that few teachers exploit social media's open characteristics, preferring instead closed networks bounded by school or classroom (Greenhow et al., 2020; Manca & Ranieri, 2013, 2016), these teachers embraced Twitter's openness. It aligned with their approach to civics education and extended open classroom climate ideals (Knowles & Di Stefano, 2015) beyond the physical space.

In contrast, the teachers in this study did not conceive of or enact teaching about social media as part of civics education. Scholars have argued for the need to prepare students to participate in a world in which interactive, digital media is omnipresent and frequently used by young people (boyd, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2018), particularly as social media "is at best unstable and at worst harmful" (Durham, 2019, p. 760; Krutka et al., 2019). Krutka and Carpenter (2016b) found that many students lack knowledge or deep understanding of social media and argued that teachers should include critical teaching about social media into their classrooms. The teachers in this study were focused on the use of Twitter within civic education that would promote civic participation, and in some cases, social change; however, they did not teach about social media in ways that prepared students to consider their use of it critically.

In fact, Abbey's emphasis on the responsible and safe use of social media and Josh's parameters for using the platform in class actually could be construed as reifying the status quo. Indeed, typical conceptualizations of citizenship online – what some have termed *digital citizenship* (Ribble et al., 2004) – are often based on safety and personal responsibility as necessary components of being a good citizen. This emphasis, however, can be internalized by students as needing to be polite and respectful (Heath, 2018; Jones & Mitchell, 2016). Just as an emphasis on personally

responsible or participatory citizenship may discourage young people's civic participation, as mentioned above (Heath, 2018; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), an understanding of citizenship in digital spaces which is focused on being safe and respectful may perpetuate inequality (Heath, 2018; Jones & Mitchell, 2016). Although in many circumstances being polite and respectful is appropriate or even advantageous, the ability to disrupt traditional systems of power cannot be given by those same hegemonic structures. Rather, power must come from those seeking liberation (Freire, 1970). Broadening contemporary civics education to include teaching with and about social media is needed (Choi, 2016; Kane et al., 2016).

This study advances the knowledge base in social studies education and educational technology by providing an in-depth look at the intersections between teachers' conceptions of citizenship, their teaching of civics, and their use of Twitter in their teaching. Scholars have theorized that social media can open access to civic spaces for youth (Durham, 2019). The teachers in this study illuminated the ways in which this access can occur.

By examining teachers' civic teaching through a phenomenological lens, a better understanding can be reached as to how teachers' objectives for their students and their use of Twitter to meet those objectives are tied to the ways they understand civic participation and their desire to scaffold their students into it. Furthermore, although established conceptions of citizenship (i.e., Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) predate mainstream social media adoption, this research illuminates theory by illustrating how teachers' conceptions and practices with social media can embody established citizenship types but fall short of what critical citizenship scholars advocate.

This study also advances scholarship by prompting new questions. Teachers in this study sought to expand youth civic engagement and challenge structural inequity, but they had not yet made the connection that the very nature of social media can support hegemonic structures. More research is needed as to how teachers who intend to teach critical citizenship are also teaching about social media critically.

This study also raises questions about whether and how teachers who serve, or are themselves part of marginalized communities, are teaching with and about social media for critical citizenship. How do teachers who seek to disrupt inequitable systems speak of ways in which they had personally been affected by these systems? How, then, do teachers who have been affected by the systems critical citizenship seeks to disrupt teach about them with and through social media?

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that may have implications for future research. Each of the participants in this study had positive experiences with using Twitter for civic education, and each participant intended to continue to use Twitter in his or her classrooms. Although qualitative research does not aim to generalize its findings about a phenomenon (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007), our sample was limited by its lack of representation.

Given the ways in which research has shown how citizenship is conceived of and enacted differently by women, Black people, members of Indigenous communities, and immigrants, among others, (Dabach et al., 2018; Sabzalian, 2019; Vickery, 2016, 2017), a limitation of this work is that voices from these populations were not included here. Additionally, no counterpoint is included in this study to the participants who support using Twitter in their classrooms. Therefore, a limitation of this study is that it did not include the voices of teachers who have used Twitter for civic education and who no longer do so because it did not work for them. Having these voices in this study would have presented a fuller picture of what it means to teach civics with Twitter. Including these voices should be a consideration of future research.

## **Implications**

This study advances social studies education and teacher education by contributing to our growing understanding of the complexities, possibilities, and challenges of contemporary and critical civics teaching with social media. First, this study illuminated the complexities faced by teachers using social media to teach civics. In some ways, these teachers taught civics from the community up; their conceptualizations of citizenship were strongly informed by their local contexts.

Literature suggests that this community-driven approach to citizenship better encompasses the experiences of historically marginalized communities (Dabach et al., 2018; Sabzalian, 2019; Vickery, 2016, 2017). Future research is needed on ways teachers' local contexts influence their conceptions and teaching of critical citizenship. Further, studies are needed of how and to what extent teachers' conceptions of civics and their use of social media like Twitter support or disrupt traditional power structures.

Much is left to learn from educators who are successful at challenging the predominant power structures in their local contexts with social media tools. Perhaps most importantly, this research should be conducted with teachers of color and women to examine how they teach for critical citizenship, including with social media.

Second, this study presents possibilities and implications for civics teachers in similar contexts. The teachers in this study conceived of citizenship beyond traditional understandings in the U.S. of knowing American history and encouraging voting (Knowles, 2018; Knowles & Castro, 2019). In light of the research about critical citizenship and the ways in which traditional civic education excludes both historically marginalized people and youth who are seeking alternative means of civic participation (Dabach et al., 2018; Gleason & von Gillern, 2018; Sabzalian, 2019; Vickery, 2017), teachers must reflect on their conceptions of citizenship and consider the ramifications of those conceptions.

Further, teachers who want to incorporate social media into their teaching of civics should be mindful of teaching both *with* and *about* social media. The prevalence, relevance, and complexity of social media foreground

advantages of teaching with it and necessitate teaching about it as a site of contestation.

The 2020 U.S. presidential election brought this last point into high relief as citizens working for social media companies actively worked to dial back the very technological systems they had set in motion, constructing “virality circuit-breakers” to allow “fact-checkers time to evaluate suspicious stories” and shutting down recommendation algorithms “to lessen the possibility of violent unrest” (Roose, 2020). The full potential of social media to encourage critical citizenship will only be unlocked when students can use it in self-aware, nuanced ways that account for its potential for manipulation and support of hegemonic structures.

Teaching civics is inherently political (Durham, 2019; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004); teachers must consider their conceptualizations of citizenship and students’ understanding of social media as they prepare for them to inherit democracy. In closing, we repeat the question posed by Knowles and Castro (2019): “If teachers are not teaching social critiquing behaviors and related skills of activism and protest, then where do citizens learn to transform their society?” (p. 236).

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