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## Deliberation on the Public Good during COVID-19: A Case Study Examining Elementary Students' Use of Civic Perspective-Taking

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## Deliberation on the Public Good during COVID-19: A Case Study Examining Elementary Students' Use of Civic Perspective-Taking

### Cover Page Footnote

Note: This is the full article submission following our 250 word abstract (expression of interest) for the upcoming Special Issue focused on education in the era of COVID-19.

**Deliberation on the *Public Good* during COVID-19: A Case Study Examining Elementary  
Students' Use of Civic Perspective-Taking**

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**Abstract**

Building on prior research on place-based social studies instruction (Toledo, 2017; 2020), this study specifically looks at data from six third-grade teachers who designed and implemented a civics curriculum focused on engaging students with a unit on locally-relevant public issues. The ten-lesson unit that the teachers and research team collaboratively developed was taught in six classrooms across a large school district. A central public issue in the unit was travel across borders during COVID-19, or simply the coronavirus as it was commonly referred to at the time. Students also considered tensions between immigration and containment of contagious illnesses through a historical lens, for example studying immigrant screening on Ellis Island and related health protocols. This article focuses specifically on how third-grade students across these classrooms conceptualized, discussed, and wrote about the civic tensions surrounding COVID-19 before the crisis was declared a global pandemic. We analyzed data on student contributions from videos of class discussions, observational field notes, and student writing samples. Findings indicate that students applied the concept of the public or common good in three contexts: local, national, and global. We discuss the implications of varied understandings and applications of the common good, particularly as it pertains to quickly evolving public issues and topics.

*Keywords:* COVID-19; global pandemic; elementary social studies; deliberative classroom; public good; curricular intervention; civic perspective-taking

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**Deliberation on the *Public Good* during COVID-19: A Case Study Examining Elementary Students' Use of Civic Perspective-Taking**

Helping students make sense of current events is an important part of social studies instruction in the elementary school years. In Nevada, where this research was conducted, the social studies standards call for students to learn to “identify and discuss examples of rules, laws, and authorities that keep people safe and property secure in societies throughout the world” and “list and discuss group or individual action to help address local, regional, and/or global problems,” which ask teachers to engage students in examinations of contemporary structures and issues, as well as call for students to “compare and contrast conflicting historical perspectives about migration and immigration,” clearly requiring historical lenses (Nevada Department of Education, 2017, p. 4). While these standards are meaningfully connected, they require teachers and students to move between the distant past and the *specious present*, which can be defined as “the ‘now’ we experience as present at any time is not punctate, but rather includes a small but extended interval of time” (Andersen & Grush, 2009, p. 2). In this article, we argue that this movement between the past and present is not only possible in social studies curriculum, but also important to student learning. We, however, claim that teachers need to be conscious of the differences in pedagogical approaches, in particular when supporting students’ perspective-taking, a concept with a long history of importance (e.g., Dewey, 1902/1966). In this article, we illustrate how intentional shifts between civic and historical perspective-taking helps deepen students’ understanding of the public good, especially in global, national, and local contexts when discussing the emerging COVID-19 or coronavirus threat to safety.

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Extending prior research on place-based, elementary social studies instruction (Toledo, 2017; 2020), this study specifically examines student data from a curricular intervention. To develop the unit, a university-based researcher collaborated with a group of six teachers to design and implement a third-grade civics curriculum on locally-relevant public issues. The teachers and research team collaboratively developed a ten-lesson unit that the teachers then taught in six classrooms across a large school district in Spring 2020. One of public issues covered in the unit was the regulation of travel across borders during COVID-19 or coronavirus, which was unfolding at the time. Students also considered tensions between immigration and containment of contagious illnesses through a historical lens, for example studying immigrant screening on Ellis Island and related health protocols. This article focuses specifically on how third-grade students across these classrooms conceptualized, discussed, and wrote about the civic tensions surrounding COVID-19 before the crisis was declared a global pandemic.

### **Literature Review: Making Space for Civic Perspective-taking in Elementary Social Studies Instruction**

In this review of the literature, we discuss civic perspective-taking. First, we review theoretical and empirical underpinnings of perspective-taking. Second, we introduce the more established, subject-specific strategy of historical perspective-taking. Third, we make a case for including civic perspective-taking (CPT) as a separate, but related, social studies practice to its counterpart in history education.

Through this review of the literature, we argue that CPT is a complex practice and teaching this practice should be seen as an essential goal of elementary social studies instruction. Drawing from prior research, we conceptualize CPT as process wherein students examine multiple perspectives on public issues and form their own stances on these issues using fact-

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based reasons with a consideration for the public good (Bickmore & Parker, 2014; Hess, 2004; National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013; Selman & Kwok, 2010; Toledo, 2017, 2019, 2020; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Perspective-taking has been used as an instructional intervention as early as preschool, indicating in one study that children's perspectives about environmental harm are malleable and linked to their moral judgments (Hahn & Garrett, 2017). Next, we discuss the benefits of *perspective-taking* and make a case for explicitly utilizing it as a practice in history and civics instruction.

In their review of experimental research, Andrew Todd and Adam Galinsky (2014) suggested that perspective-taking can shape thinking and affective development. Moreover, practicing perspective-taking may foster positive experiences with intergroup interactions and increase the frequency of helping behaviors. Evidence indicates that engaging in perspective-taking can encourage these positive outcomes without obscuring intergroup disparities, such as awareness of racism. Experimental research shows that perspective-taking can reduce biases that abound in "*intergroup* encounters," especially with social identity differences present (Todd & Galinsky, p. 201). Lala Muradova (2020) built on Todd and Galinsky's argument by linking thinking and emotions, in particular empathy. Her research suggested that formats, such as storytelling, are particularly constructive in teaching perspective-taking and that children might learn the skills involved in perspective-taking from watching peers practice. Now that we have laid out the case for why perspective-taking is important to teach, we turn to arguing for moving beyond historical perspective-taking activities in social studies instruction and explicitly teach CPT as well.

Historical and civic perspective-taking differ meaningfully from one another. Katherine Perrotta and Chara Bohan (2018) argued that historical empathy (later used interchangeably with

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the term historical perspective-taking) has been a curricular goal since the progressive era at the turn of the twentieth century. Sarah Brooks (2009) noted in her review of historical empathy that, while there is substantial interest in the construct, there is no consensus around a definition among scholars. In this article, we draw on Juliane Brauer's (2016) definition in which she called into question the conceptualization of historical empathy as a moral practice and argues for scholars and educators to,

...conceive of empathy as an emotional practice, and that we discuss the ways empathy and the experience of alterity are related to one another in historical pedagogy and historical learning. In this sense, empathy should not just be understood as an imitation of the other's feelings or as a way of experiencing what the other experiences. Rather, it should be understood as a way of forming an idea of the inner life of others, which is bound up with the concomitant demand that one try to relate to it.... Having an encounter with history thus demands that one bridge a spatiotemporal gap. Spatial, because the historical encounter not only takes place with people who lived in the past, but also with people who lived in different geographical areas. This double alterity makes for a particularly difficult challenge for the disciplines. The encounter with the past is never immediate, but always mediated. Media like history text books, documentary films, and historical exhibits and memorials serve the function of helping people overcome this distance. (p. 29, 32)

Brauer highlighted a clear distinction between the definition of empathy that emerged from psychology and the neurosciences and the one used in history. Empathy or perspective-taking in history is always mediated by historical artifacts and accounts, creating temporal and spatial distance as well as introducing other perspectives to the application of those skills. In other

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terms, we interact with history through artifacts and accounts created by distant others, which creates unique disciplinary challenges when teaching and applying empathy and perspective-taking. Nancy Dulberg (2002) argued this point as well, stating that “perspective taking is not a unitary concept that one either 'has or doesn't have,' but that it may be taught and developed as part of a history curriculum” (p. 8). These disciplinary differences are critical to understanding and applying historical empathy in instruction, and thus the teaching of historical perspective-taking.

Attending to the disciplinary differences between psychology and history is critical, yet insufficient, when considering the uses of perspective-taking as a pedagogical approach in social studies. Since social studies is a multidisciplinary space, the nuanced understanding and application of historical perspective-taking do not translate into other disciplines within that instructional space. CPT differs from historical perspective-taking in disciplinary and pedagogically meaningful ways. These differences emerge, in part, because people’s understandings of civic concepts evolve quickly due to the dynamic nature of sociopolitical contexts in the present. In contrast, research has demonstrated that historical understandings change (Graber, 1999); however, these understandings change more slowly than those of current events - for example, understandings of COVID-19 changed rapidly and drastically day-to-day and week-to-week (Pennycook et al., 2020). In other words, not only our perceptions of current events change, but the events themselves are unfolding. Names, language, information, and other contextual factors evolve quickly, which creates unique challenges for deliberative classrooms discussing current events. Yet, regardless of whether the focus of discussion in a social studies classroom is historical or contemporary in nature, fostering social perspective-taking in students is critical to the development of their critical thinking, empathy, and motivation to engage with

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content (Gehlbach, 2011). Teaching and giving students opportunities to practice CPT in early elementary instruction is important to building students civic proficiencies for their present and future civic engagement. We argue for the inclusion of both historical and civic perspective-taking in social studies instruction, while cautioning scholars and practitioners that a nuanced understanding of each and the differences between them is critical to their successful application in instruction.

Elementary social studies researchers have argued that schools serve as spaces where teachers can foster students' civic thinking and understanding of civic concepts (Hahn, 2010; Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004; Mitra & Serriere, 2015). In particular, research has shown that students should be supported in their development of civic proficiencies, the skills and capacity required to engage in civic decision-making when they reach adulthood (Hauver, 2019; Lopez, 2006; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Yet, for this development to occur, students need rich opportunities to engage with civics content, particularly content relevant to their lived experiences and communities (Hess, 2004; Watras, 2010). Elementary social studies standards also call for students to develop their understanding of public versus private issues, fostering an understanding of *the public good*. To more fully engage with civics content, in general, and conceptualize the public good, in particular, students must have opportunities to learn and practice CPT, which the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework points to as a key component in the content area of civics education (NCSS, 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this article, we conceptualize civic perspective-taking (CPT) as a process through which students take up multiple perspectives on public issues and establish their own positions on the issues citing fact-based evidence with a consideration for the public good (Toledo, 2019).

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Figure 1 illustrates the seven foundational components within the civic perspective-taking process. In this study, the curricular design team drew on this conceptual framework to inform our understanding of CPT and integrate opportunities for both civic and historical perspective-taking in the curriculum. In this article, we continued to develop and refine this framework by focusing on one component of the framework - *considering the public good*. Examining this component in greater detail is important, since it is the element that distinguishes CPT from other forms of perspective-taking. A better understanding of how to support students' learning to *consider the public good* will help advance researchers' understandings of civics curriculum design and teachers' professional development.

### **Figure 1**

*The Civic Perspective-taking Process, Highlighting the Component, Considers the Common or Public Good (adapted from Toledo, 2019)*

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Towards these purposes, we posed the following research questions:

1. How did students engage in civic perspective-taking when deliberating on the public issue of crossing borders with the COVID-19 threat?
2. How did students conceptualize two of key civic concepts in the unit, *public issues* and *public good*, when engaging in civic and historical perspective-taking on immigration and contagious illnesses?

### Methods

We worked with six teachers teaching within different schools across a large school district in the state of Nevada. We use pseudonyms in place of the teachers' real names

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throughout this article to maintain confidentiality. Three of the six teachers (i.e., Ms. Torres, Ms. Evans, and Ms. Parnell) taught at Title I schools that served predominately non-white Latinx students. The other three teachers (i.e., Mr. Warren, Ms. Montgomery, and Ms. Benice) taught at schools that served predominately white middle class families. With these teachers, we collaboratively designed 10-lesson units focused on CPT. The units were largely similar; however, due to the localized nature of civics, each unit had unique features and content suited to each teacher's classroom and school site.

As we designed lessons, we utilized the lesson-iteration framework (Lewis, 2000, 2002; Lewis & Tsuchida, 1999) to develop the unit, meaning that the implementation and analysis of a lesson influenced the design of the subsequent lesson. This design allowed the design team to consistently examine students' understanding of key concepts, and to develop subsequent lessons to meet students' needs with readjustments to the curricular unit. Additionally, the framework allowed us to work collaboratively with teachers as partners in the design and implementation of the curricula, a key feature of this research.

To analyze student thinking, we used data from classroom video footage and observational field notes to examine student thinking and verbal argumentation. We focused specifically on analyzing whole and small group work and discussions present in video footage and field notes to determine how students collaboratively worked together to understand concepts related to CPT. For this article, we focused specifically on student interactions related to the concept of the common or public good as it pertained to COVID-19. Researchers and research assistants recorded detailed field notes during each lesson in all classrooms (n=54 field notes). During data collection, the design team analyzed these data to determine how different concepts related to CPT emerged in students' collaborative discussions and activities. After data

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collection, we independently analyzed these data to examine students' understandings of concepts in collaborative settings.

We analyzed field notes and video data using qualitative methods, specifically emergent coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify themes within the data. First, we engaged in open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Maxwell, 2012) to identify the ways in which students conceptualized the public good in relation to COVID-19. In open coding, we did not use a previous coding scheme in order to allow us to extrapolate codes from the data itself. We then engaged in axial coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify links between emerging themes in the data. During this phase, we examined codes that we found in the data alongside our conceptual framework for civic perspective-taking to examine these themes in our data. After this, we engaged in selective coding (Maxwell, 2012) to triangulate our findings, looking across classrooms and data to validate our coding process and themes. Collectively, our analyses of these data allowed us to examine student thinking related to the key concept of the public good in the unit and its application to the current issue of COVID-19. We identified thematic patterns within students' application of the concept to relevant topics in the unit, and we discuss these varied applications in the findings section of this manuscript.

### **Context**

It is important to note that this research was conducted during very unique and significant contexts in the year 2020. Data was collected in schools from January 2020 through March 2020, at which time schools across the world were shut down due to COVID-19 concerns. At this point in time, much less was known about the virus; its origins, its symptoms, its causes, and how it was transmitted were not clear. Particularly, COVID-19's airborne nature was not yet identified. As a result, students' conceptualizations of COVID-19 were based on the evidence available at

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the time. During the analysis of the data and the writing of this manuscript, the characteristics of COVID-19 became clearer, as did the severity of the virus. We anticipate that global understandings of COVID-19 will continue to evolve as scientists and viralists continue to study the virus, and learn more about its causes and origins. In this article, we utilized the most current information from the World Health Organization (WHO) to inform our own understandings of the virus, as well as recent scholarly research in the form of recently published academic sources (e.g. Mehta et al., 2020).

### Findings

We found that there were distinct divisions in students' thinking about COVID-19, and what the best practices were for dealing with the virus. This division was linked to the different ways in which students conceptualized the *common* or *public good*. The common or public good, as it was defined by the design team in collaboration, referred to a solution that would benefit the most people within a community. As a design team, we did not explicitly define the scope of community within the definition of the common good; we designed lessons that focused on different communities and their tenets, but did not ask that students consider a specific community, global, national, or otherwise, as they engaged with the common good. In their discussions, some students conceptualized the public good as a *national or local concept*, prioritizing the United States and the interests of people living in the country, or the people in the state and city regions. Other students conceptualized the public good as a *global concept*, considering the needs and well-being of individuals around the globe.

#### Local and National Conceptualizations of the Common Good

Some students conceptualized the common good as a concept that related to their local communities, or to the United States as a society. As they debated COVID-19 and whether

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individuals who tested positive for it should be allowed to travel or come to the United States, they considered its potential impacts on their communities or the country.

In Ms. Evans' class, her students physically "took a stance" on the issue, going to a side of the room to represent their personal perspective on whether the U.S. should restrict travel during COVID-19. Of the twenty students, six went to the side that represented, "Yes, we should restrict travel," and fourteen students moved to the side that represented, "No, we should not restrict travel." The six students who believed that yes, travel should be restricted, conceptualized the common good on local and national levels rather than as a global concept. For example:

Ms. Evans: Now, Jessica, tell me, why did you move where you did?

Jessica: Well, I say no travel because the sick people could come to our community and good everyone sick.

Ms. Evans, Okay, so Jessica believes that we need to protect our community. What parts of our community are you thinking about?

Jessica: I think our school, our neighborhood. And the whole city.

Ms. Evans: All of [city name]?

Jessica: Yes.

Ms. Evans: Can you use our new vocabulary to think about this? What about the common good?

Jessica: Yes, for the common good I say no travel because the common good is our community being protected.

Here, Jessica considered the common good on a more local scale, considering the impacts of travel during COVID-19 on the local community. Although the grade-level standards were

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focused on global economies and issues, Jessica and other students often considered the common good more locally, putting the needs of their direct community at the forefront of their decision-making processes.

Other students in Ms. Evans' class thought a bit broader, and considered the common good as a national concept in the same part of the lesson:

Ms. Evans: Why might this be a problem? Why could travel be bad during this time?

Alan?

Alan: Think about the whole country, the United States. We have the other countries coming here and then we could get all the people sick.

Janie: Yes, we have to keep it safe here for the community.

Ms. Evans: And who is that? Who is our community?

Janie: That is the country, people here but people in the other states too. We have to think about their good, too.

In this moment, Janie considered the common good more broadly than Jessica. She considered people across the country, and how they might be impacted by travel during the COVID-19 outbreak. This was evident as Janie directly expressed the importance of considering the needs of those outside of the local or direct community. Although she did not consider the common good globally, she had a more complex, or wide-reaching, understanding of the concept.

### **Global Conceptualizations of the Common Good**

Other students considered the concept of the common good even more widely. They considered communities in the greater world, beyond their own and beyond the United States. As noted, the grade level standards focused on global issues; however, the concept of a global world for many third graders seemed daunting to teachers. "Many of these students haven't left the

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state, let alone the country,” Ms. Evans said after one of the lessons. “I don’t know how they will get there, or if they will get there, but we can try.” As we saw in previous data, some students conceptualized the common good more locally based on their own experiences and lives; however, some students applied global perspectives from the standards when considering the common good.

A particularly interesting example of this occurred during Lesson Five in Ms. Torres' room. During Lesson Five, teachers focused on engaging students with the concept of *the common good*. Teachers connected the idea of the common good as it related to public health to the past. Specifically, teachers built background knowledge on Ellis Island, and the screening process for immigrants entering the United States. Teachers used written and visual texts to do so as they made explicit connections between health and immigration in the past to today’s world. In this lesson, students considered the compelling question, “Should the United States have screened immigrants for health?”

As Ms. Torres' class engaged in small and whole group conversations, JD, a student in the class, was the only student who believed that travel should not be restricted. He engaged in discussion with his peers, and eventually influenced some of their views. Below, we present a partial transcript of a whole class discussion that occurred as students physically “took a stance” and went to a side of the room to represent their response to the compelling question:

Ms. Torres: We need to think about what is the best for the most people; both sides might have evidence that make sense, but we have to think about what is the best for the most people. You are going to think about the health screening – did anyone see how long it was?

Carly: 6 seconds – short!

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Ms. Torres: Yes. They are looking at them quickly because they have so many people, but they want to make sure they are healthy enough to stay. Remember, our question today is, “Should we have screened immigrants for health?” It is time to go to your side, now.

[Students move to a side of the room to represent their stance on the issue.]

Ms. Torres: Okay, so it looks like most people fall on one side, that yes, we should have screened immigrants for health. But we can all feel differently, and might have different opinions. JD, can you tell us why you feel the way you feel?

JD: It is selfish of the United States to not let people come here even if they are sick. Why should they go back to their own country to get people there sick?

Alex: Yes, but if there is a bigger community, we are bigger. What if they are sending the sick people to the bigger community and getting more people sick instead of taking care of them?

JD: But, it is like coronavirus here now. They don't want to be sick over there, they can come here.

Alex: But we don't want to get sick here. Our community is the common good.

In this moment between JD and Alex, we saw a distinct division between the conceptualization of the common good as a global concept and as a local or national concept. JD spoke to the connectedness of all people, and the right to be healthy. Alex held a local or national view of the common good, and JD saw the common good as a global concept, connecting all people. In this conceptualization of the common good, common applies truly to all - no one is more deserving of safety or rights based on their locality or place of origin.

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This happened in other classrooms as well. As students considered this historical context, they began to relate this to the idea of current contexts and COVID-19. In Mr. Warren's room, students discussed the common good as it related to the coronavirus, and the implications of letting those who tested positive into the United States or sending them back to their country of origin. Some students in his class also took on a global perspective related to the common good. In a whole class discussion, Sean, Jacob, Nolan, and Reiza discussed whether the US should admit coronavirus-positive individuals into the country. Jacob and Sean considered the common good on a local or national level; however, like JD in Ms. Torres' room, Nolan and Reiza considered the global implications of this dilemma:

Sean: We should send them back because a million people could get the infections because there is a lot of people in the USA and they could all get it.

Jacob: They might get everyone else sick?

Nolan: But they might die if they go back.

Reiza: Yeah, maybe the people with diseases came here because their doctors weren't good in their country.

Nolan and Reiza considered the safety of individuals from outside of the United States. Reiza even considered the conditions in the countries that people may be leaving, including medical care standards.

Students across classrooms considered the common good as a global concept, although in some classrooms it was less common than considering the common good from national and local perspectives: in Ms. Evans' classroom, a student in a small group discussion during lesson 5 asked, "What if they are unsafe? Just cause they are sick doesn't mean they shouldn't come to our country;" in Ms. Parnell's room, a student wrote in a Lesson Five writing activity, "Everyone

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from every country deserves to be safe;” in Ms. Montgomery’s room, a student said to another student during a small group discussion during Lesson Six, “We need to think what is best for all people, not just United States or [city name]; and in Ms. Benice’s room during a whole group discussion during lesson 6, a student asked, “What about people who aren’t from here, how can we do what is best for all of them too?”

### **Evolving Use of the Common Good**

As we examined students’ perceptions and applications of the concept of the common good, it also became clear that there was an evolving or shifting use of the concept as students considered it in different lessons. For example, some students would consider the common good as a local concept in regards to one issue, and then consider it more broadly as a global issue in regards to a separate issue. The fluid understanding and application of the concept is important to note in considering what happened across classrooms.

### **Discussion**

When the third-grade teachers began this unit, it was not yet clear that COVID-19 would unleash a global pandemic, in particular the implications the spread of the virus would have on travel and immigration. How COVID-19 was carried, transmitted, and its wide array of effects on humans were still unclear; as we finalize this article in fall 2020, new information about the disease becomes available each day. However, we did know that it was a serious risk to public health. Despite the acknowledgement of COVID-19 as a public health risk, we saw many students prioritize global safety and the common good of all people over the common good of people in their local or national communities.

This study confirms prior research findings (Szymanski Sunal et al., 2011) that indicate elementary students are able to conceptualize and contribute to an understanding of the concept

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of the public good. Although the students in our study conceptualized the common good differently in terms of scope and who was included, they each were able to look beyond themselves as individuals and consider the needs of a greater community to some capacity. Although some students struggled to conceptualize national or global components of the common good, they still considered the needs and safety of those in their local communities or city.

This research also suggests that more complex and wide-reaching conceptualizations of the common good may result due to one of two factors: (a) as students age, they may be able to consider the concept more broadly, or (b) as global and national concepts shift and change, the underlying issues themselves might change. We make these assertions by comparing these data with data from our prior research. When examining prior research by the authors in second grade classrooms (Toledo, 2019; Toledo & Enright, under review), we saw that young learners considered the common good much more locally, rarely applying it to national contexts and never to global contexts. Part of this may have been the grade level standards; second grade standards focused more on national contexts and issues. However, as noted, we rarely saw the application of the common good even to national contexts in these classrooms. We hypothesized that the global nature of COVID-19 may have shifted students' thinking on the common good, and who is included, or not included, in this concept. More research is needed to examine specifically how and if this concept is shifting and evolving in schools in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, it may be possible that there is not a singular *common good*. These data suggest that instead, there may be common goods that exist, rather than one, that need to be purposefully considered and taught in social studies. We believe that common good can refer to

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local, national, and global contexts, with each version of concept becoming more complex as they grow geographically. Additionally deciding, which version of the common good is considered, or should be considered, is complex. While teaching students to think globally is important, it is also imperative to consider the risk inherent in certain situations, particularly related to COVID-19. Global travel during the pandemic is a complex issue, and as of mid-August 2020, leaders across the world have imposed strict travel restrictions on United States citizens and residents, banning them from traveling to the majority of countries (Fletcher, 2020).

Finally, an individual student may conceptualize the common good in different ways or at different levels based on the public issue or an evolving understanding of the concept itself. We maintain that concepts within CPT and civic thinking, such as public good, can shape and are shaped by sociopolitical contexts and events. In prior research (Toledo, 2019), civic perspective-taking was conceptualized more so as a relationship wherein concepts may be applied differently to different events or content based on the context of the content. However, based on these data, we believe the relationship is more complex, and that large sociopolitical events such as COVID-19 can also themselves shape or influence the meaning of concepts, creating a more dynamic relationship between concepts and content. As current events shift, so might individuals' understandings of the common or public good. Our findings suggest that the public good is not a fixed idea for students (and likely others as well) but the product of deliberation by members of the classroom community. Even on a basic definitional level, students in the classroom communities studied in this research deliberated on who should be included and excluded in their understanding of *the public*. Their understandings of public good as a civic concept shifted over time, as well as how they applied that concept to the current event being discussed, such as travel restrictions during COVID-19. The pandemic as a current event is an especially important

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context for this discovery and learning, because of the intersections of global, national, and local contexts. Moreover, the pandemic represents an event (or series of events) that impacts entire countries/societies, across different populations/communities, businesses, and economies.

### **Conclusion**

Across the U.S., public discourse on policies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 has been fraught with tension. The discourse reflects the existent polarization of society along political lines (Campbell, 2016). Passively watching conflicts unfold is antithetical to the goals of social studies education. We believe that part of the burden to resolve these tensions rests on social studies scholars and educators. Our research underscores the value of greater emphasis on teaching students to take up and consider various perspectives. Moreover, our study highlights the urgency and importance of teaching perspective-taking in civic lessons in particular.

We believe there is no ethical way to avoid controversial topics in social studies instruction. We want to recognize that addressing controversial topics in instruction may be risky and anxiety-provoking for teachers and school leaders. This is certainly the case in the geographic area where this study's data were collected. Yet, we would be failing our students if we did not teach them to consider and discuss a range of perspectives on controversial topics. First, students are perceptive and they hear, see, and notice much in their home, school, and other contexts. They bring those observations and information back with them into the classroom. Social studies instruction is the ideal place for teachers to be intentional in designing and supporting opportunities for students to learn to talk to one another with respect and empathy about controversial topics. Without teachers' intentional planning, students will still bring the issues up but without the support of a structured, discursive environment. Second, social studies instruction is an ideal space to explicitly teach students how to engage in respectful discourse.

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Whether that discourse is about COVID-19 policies or other contentious issues of our time, one of the missions behind our social studies standards is to foster citizens with the capacity and dispositions to “take informed action” (Levinson & Levine, 2013). Teaching civic perspective-taking and explicitly discussing dynamic, civics concepts in our social studies classrooms, such as the public good, is a promising strategy to push back against the increasing polarization of society.

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