Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers (ASSERT)

Practice requires rationale: Lessons from global contexts to ensure controversial issue education

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I serve as Professor of Social Studies Education at Miami University. My ultimate goal is to better understand the pathways and obstacles to student discussion of controversial and normative topics in various contexts in order to develop more free, open, rational, and just societies. I am primarily interested in cross-cultural contexts related to this goal as they often offer diverse, innovative, and divergent ideas. Recently, I have been spending my time learning more about unincorporated U.S. Territories and how social studies education is mediated and enacted in these contexts. I earned my B.A. in history and geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and began my career teaching history, geography, and philosophy at Terra Linda High School in San Rafael, CA. After earning my M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of Iowa I joined Miami University where I have spent my career in higher education.

Accepted August 2020
Published September 2020

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Pages: 58-62

Keywords Controversial Issues, Teaching Context, Cross-Cultural, Gatekeeping, Rationale

INTRODUCTION

I contend that controversial issues involve connecting the past, present, and future, and that they are saturated with normative and moral issues, as well as elements of justice and injustice. I assert that although this construct is universal, its ultimate application is highly contextual Misco (2012, 2018).

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THE RESEARCH

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to study the contextual forces that influence controversial issue education in cross-cultural settings, primarily by using interviews and questionnaires. This qualitative inquiry helped reveal the multiple, overlapping, and entangled variables that influence controversial issues instruction in terms of teacher decision-making, student and administrator receptivity, availability of appropriate content and topics, and the general milieu of the school within community contexts. For example, in China (2013), Guam (2014), Japan (2018), Korea (2016), Latvia (2010), Taiwan (2018), and the United States (2007), I asked administrators, teachers, and teacher educators questions that fit within the five domains of rationale, topic, treatment, obstacles, and pathways that stemmed from the interview questions for these studies:

Rationale: What kind of citizen do you seek to develop? To what extent do teachers broach controversial issues? Why? To what extent do teachers find value in broaching controversial issues? If they do, what is their rationale for doing so? What benefits do you see? To what extent do you feel responsible to teach controversial issues? To what extent do you feel prepared to teach about controversial issues? Should social studies educators broach controversial issues in their classroom?

Topic: What issues are controversial in this country? Community? School? Classroom? What kind of controversial issues and topics do you uncover in class? To what extent do these exist within the textbook? To what extent does that matter? Which controversial issues are not appropriate for your class? Why? What do you think we should be teaching students based on these controversial issues?

Treatment: To what extent do you broach these issues in the classroom? What instructional strategies do you typically employ to do so? To what extent do you believe students find controversial issues meaningful and engaging?

Obstacles: What kinds of challenges do you encounter when you address controversial issues in your classroom? In what ways have the following stakeholders influenced your implementation of controversial issue education in terms of incentives, encouragement, and discouragement: administrators, community, Ministry of Education, NGOs, parents, students, and teachers? Are there any issues you actively avoid discussing in your classroom? Why these?

Pathways: To what extent do you use, manipulate, or subvert the official curriculum in order to teach about controversial issues? What pathways do you encounter when doing so? What do you need to do with your curriculum plan to address controversial issues? How has your approach changed over time? How do you reconcile different cultural interests and beliefs about what "should be" relative to these issues and larger societal questions? What pathways and obstacles do you encounter when attempting to do so?

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The answers to the questions within these five domains can be distilled into conditional form: If a teacher has a developed a rationale to teach about controversial issues, then they

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will be aware of and find value in their use. If they view themselves as empowered to manipulate the curriculum as a curricularist and have the support of administrators, colleagues, students, parents, or community members, then the likelihood of use is increased, even despite the presence of real and perceived obstacles. But if the rationale is missing, then all other variables are irrelevant and controversial issue education does not occur.

For example, in China, systemic forces discouraged any teacher rationale for controversial issue instruction. In addition, heavy reliance on direct instruction, indoctrination, and assumed "right" answers to normative and moral questions eliminated most possibilities. Parents typically were supportive of the teacher as purveyor of moral knowledge, and the Communist Party ultimately filtered and removed controversial issues within the state-sanctioned curriculum, thereby drawing student attention away from the "negative things." Students encountered curriculum that focused on high-stakes exam preparation and content with prescriptive guidance and deference to collective wisdom rather than individual inquiry. By focusing primarily on purported controversies, such as whether students should take a cell phone to school, that were either historical or local in nature, students often found topics to be meaningless, irrelevant, and lacking substantive social significance (Misco, 2013).

In Japan, teachers were more likely to have a rationale to teach controversial issues and often perceived that they had more agency to "open the curricular-instructional gate" (Thornton, 2001, p. 418) than those in other countries. Yet, obstacles and barriers were numerous and pervasive, including a culture of direct instruction, Ministry of Education content directives, scarcity of time, textbooks that avoid controversial issues, and the national exam. Teachers also worried that their beliefs might overly influence student beliefs or that their instruction might seem too political in nature. In addition, they did not want to engage issues that "lack consensus" and were not yet resolved, including historical human rights violations and war crimes such as the Nanjing (formerly Nanking) Massacre (Misco et al., 2018).

In Latvia, I found that the gravitational center for implementing curricular changes that would support controversial issue education was certainly the teacher. Teacher perceptions of autonomy and academic freedom very much dictated the extent to which they could, or even perceived themselves as able, to address topics that did not correspond closely to standards and exams. Academic freedom, as a point of entry for curriculum implementation, was again tied back to teacher training and development. Promoting an enhanced vision of teacher as curriculum gatekeeper (Thornton, 2005), fortified with a strong rationale, could very well assist with teaching controversial issues. If there is no tradition of agency or rationale development in teacher education, as was the case in Latvia, the importance of inservice teacher training becomes even more apparent (Misco, 2010).

In Taiwan, there appeared to be little time devoted in teacher education programs to critical and metacognitive attention to the "curricular-instructional gate" (Thornton, 2001, p. 72). Preservice teachers consistently mentioned the critical nature of approved content knowledge and its consumption by students. The role of high-stakes exams, limited time, and reluctance to deviate from the textbook ultimately led to direct instruction with

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few opportunities to discuss and deliberate about controversial issues. These forces and variables were reinforced by teachers' desire to appear neutral and non-political, within a cultural context that values harmony. Thus, there was little expectation or incentive for teachers to broach controversial issues.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

To what extent have social studies teachers developed a rationale for teaching about controversial issues? Without this rationale, I argue there will be little transfer of research to practice. Rather than focusing on the mechanics of "how to" teach controversial issues (e.g., structured academic controversies, deliberations, Socratic Seminars), social studies educators and school districts both domestic and abroad should focus on rationale first. Given the fulcrum role of the teacher – and the forces and obstacles to be mediated and negotiated by the teacher – we need to ensure that all who engage in citizenship education develop such a rationale. Without fully understanding the potential benefits of this essential component of social studies education, teachers would find little reason to modify current instructional, curricular, and structural approaches to citizenship education within the social studies. The teacher, as a "curricular-instructional gatekeeper," makes the "day-to-day decisions concerning both the subject matter and the experiences to which students have access" and determines which criteria are used to make those decisions (Thornton, 1991, p. 237). Ultimately, how teachers frame issues, context, and interpretation of events, ideologies, and power relations (Camicia, 2008) informs the extent to which an issue can be considered not only controversial but also worthy of attention in a particular classroom, at a particular time and place (Misco, 2017).

I recommend that both preservice and in-service teachers prepare a succinct rationale (no more than one page) that they can distribute to students, parents, administrators, or other stakeholders who might question the exploration of controversial topics and issues in their classrooms. The rationale could cite empirical studies of controversial issue instruction. In the U.S., the rationale could be enhanced by connecting topics to, for example, Supreme Court decisions, case or statutory law, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or the U.S. Constitution. My hope is that this kind of rationale will lead to more controversial issue discussions that are fortified and clarified with purposes and aims. Perhaps most importantly, it could be a proactive resource to have at the ready for any stakeholders who question the teaching of controversial issues (Misco, 2017).

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