

Teaching about controversial issues: Rationale, practice, and need for inquiry

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Introduction

The work of developing tolerant, reflective, and engaged democratic citizens with knowledge of and commitment to fundamental human rights hinges upon the full release and discussion of controversial issues in the classroom. Without this educative mandate realized, students are ill-prepared for their exposure to prejudicial and propagandistic entrepreneurial efforts. With a teacher fortified with a strong philosophical rationale for teaching about controversy and armed with appropriate instructional strategies, curriculum, and a supportive and a supportive context, students will have the opportunity to develop understandings of nuanced normative issues and confront prejudice. Every free society, as well as those who aspire to be, struggles with this most critical and foundational educative enterprise.

This article explicates what controversial issues are, the conditions under which they are broached in classrooms, the educational benefits of their use, and the role of variables influencing their treatment, including students, teachers, the subject matter, and the milieu. This article provides a point of departure and framework for country-specific case studies that reveal how controversies are determined, the ways educational systems broach or avoid those issues, and the extent to which educational commonplaces shape their instructional use. Collectively, these case studies can provide a unified understanding of currently divergent research efforts on teaching controversial issues. The synthesis of these international perspectives and grounded theoretical propositions provides a multi-voiced and post-positivistic direction for policy makers and curricularists interested in cultivating democratic dispositions and habits of mind through controversial issues, as well as inservice and preservice teacher training.

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Controversial Issues

Controversial issues are integral to democratic education (Camicia, 2008; Engle, 1960; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Graseck, 2009; Hahn, 1991; Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Hess, 2008; 2009; Hunt & Metcalf, 1968; Lee, 2004; Ochoa-Becker, 2007; Oliver & Shaver, 1966). Controversies constitute a normative anchor within citizenship education curriculum and the degree to which controversial issues are subjected to reflection has profound implications for the vibrancy of a democracy. When students broach difficult issues and work toward their resolution, including the “normative possibilities” that flow from conflict, they have opportunities for social change beyond local communities (Ettlinger, 2004; Fluckiger & Wetig, 2003). Dewey (1933) situated controversy as a central fulcrum in the reflective thinking process. Without doubt and controversy, there is no judgment—only perception and recognition. Doubt, found in controversies, fuels the active search for answers and prompts judgment to filter and weigh the reasonability of meanings, ultimately leading to decisions based on reasonable grounds.

In a pluralistic democracy, the means of education has exceedingly significant implications for developing skills and dispositions that perpetuate free, active, and harmonious social life. Students need to engage in judgments concerning societal values and evaluating how standards, which some perceive

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as established and uncontested, originate and perpetuate (Griffin, 1942). As societies continually renegotiate the degree to which students will rationally grapple with closed and gray areas, they are also shaping the larger enterprise of education as fostering democratic or totalitarian attitudes (Hunt & Metcalf, 1968). In the former, students require the chance to deliberate on controversial matters (Parker, 2003; Ross & Marker, 2005), but an often narrow focus on content knowledge is divorced from controversial topics, leaving little room for experiences to develop that promote and contain considerations for the common good. Ultimately, the avoidance of controversial issues leaves disciplines isolated and removed from their social bearings, thereby compromising their utility (Dewey, 1938).

What is controversial?

Controversies are dynamic and they weave throughout time. Although they often appear in variegated and unique ways, they have underlying and universal qualities of being normative, relevant, and contested. Controversial issues are those where “significant numbers of people argue about them without reaching a conclusion” typically based on value judgments located within individuals and their moral and ethical principles (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004, p. 411). Alternatively, we can think of controversial issues as those without a fixed or universally held point of view that divide society and have conflicting explanations and solutions (Crick, 1998), “if contrary views can be held on it without these views being contrary to reason” (Drearden, 1981, p. 38). Often controversies bring forth personal involvement and a belief that reasons for holding one position is because it is better than those held by others (Gardner, 1984). Simply put, controversies are “reasonable disagreements” (Levinson, 2008, p. 1217) that have two legitimate opposing viewpoints (Stoddard, 2009), where people are divided and have different opinions of “pertinacity and vehemence” (Thorndike, 1937, p. 1). Differences in values, divergent interpretations of the same value, or variable weights placed on values give rise to intellectual and emotional controversy (Bridges, 1986).

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Any critical treatment of social aims may enliven controversy in the classroom (Thornton, 2005) and what constitutes a controversial issue changes over time and is highly contextual. For example, in the United States, Dewey (1908) pointed to fair wages, monopolistic enterprises, and the relationship of government and commercial interests. Thorndike (1937) cited “tariffs, government ownership of public utilities, international court, the New Deal, divorce, sterilization of idiots, insane, and criminal sorts” as controversies of his era and witchcraft, slavery, and the divine right of kings as controversies of the past (p.1). Oliver and Shaver (1974) put forth a set of perennial controversial problems concerning race and ethnic conflict; religious and ideological conflict; security and the individual; conflict among economic groups; conflict over health, education, and welfare; and national security. Parker viewed domestic abuse, sexual harassment, urban homelessness, racism, racial inequality, and citizen apathy as controversial issues in 2003. Yet, even within a specific culture and era, teachers and students have divergent ideas about which issues actually are controversial (Hess, 2002).

The extent to which an issue is controversial is highly contextual. For example, in teacher education classrooms of South Africa, the current identified controversies are HIV/AIDS, sex education, sexuality, rape, race/ethnicity, xenophobia, religion, and corporal punishment. In England, preservice teachers mention climate change, drugs, divorce, war, immigration, racism, religion, poverty, gender, sexuality, population migration, crime, and bullying in school (Chikoko, Gilmour, Harber, & Serf, 2011). In Turkey, pre-service teachers identified hijab, mandatory religious education, and conflicts among religious sects and ethnic groups (Ersoy, 2010) while in Chinese high school classrooms, students suggested that beggars, corruption, pollution, food safety, culture, economic disparity, human rights, and Taiwan constitute the main controversial issues (Misco, 2011).

As issues change their underlying controversial nature, they “tip” and their status as controversies change at both local and societal levels (Hess, 2009). It is often difficult to determine whether an issue is open, closed, or in the process of tipping (Hess, 2009) and multiple stakeholders in different contexts may view the current controversial state of an issue differently. Therefore, in order to determine the degree of controversy an issue contains at a particular time and place we need to understand ideological

context and the dominant or prevailing ideology (Camicia, 2008). We also need to gauge the degree to which stakeholders even find value in broaching controversies as a part of citizenship education (Misco & Patterson, 2007; Misco, 2010). How stakeholders frame issues, for they ultimately decide whether issues are controversial, and how the “contexts of historical and contemporary events, the interpretation of these events, ideologies, and power relations mediate these negotiations,” helps to inform the degree to which an issue can be considered controversial (Camicia, 2008, p. 311).

Benefits of discussing controversial issues

Engaging controversial issues pays a democratic dividend for student-citizens by increasing civic participation, critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, content understanding, and political activity. These judgments also elevate interest in current events, social studies, social issues, and increase the development of tolerance while developing democratic values (Curtis & Shaver, 1980; Goldensen, 1978; Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Hess & Ganzler, 2006; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Hess, 2009; Remy, 1972; Torney-Purta et al., 2002). Students who engage in discussions involving controversial issues are well-positioned to become agents of change and recognize, celebrate, and embrace diversity among and within groups, as well as expand content knowledge through the consideration of other perspectives and develop understandings of justice and the common good (Crossa, 2005; King, 2009; Young, 1996). In addition, opening heretofore closed areas and entering into polemical discussions helps to make political issues become meaningful and relevant for students (McGowan, McGowan, & Lombard, 1994). Challenging assumptions and addressing prejudices (Gaughan, 2001) fits within the aims of prejudice reduction and democratic citizenship education and reflective pedagogy, where “right” answers are not sought (Graseck, 2009; Hunt & Metcalf, 1968).

Controversial issue instruction is consonant with human rights education. Many of the benefits of controversial issue instruction supports UNESCO educational goals, including promoting pluralism and human rights, promoting empowerment and participation, developing students who are respectful others, and learning within an atmosphere of tolerance, international understanding, practicing democracy, and diversity of cultural identities (Osler, Starkey, & Vincent, 2002). The normative and moral nature of controversial issues also interlocks with general human rights questions (Lockwood, 2010; Waterson, 2009) and investigating values reflected in public policy leads to dealing with controversial issues in a manner that contributes to improving research skills, critical thinking, deductive and inductive reasoning, persuasive writing skills, and interpersonal skills in students (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009; Hess, 2002; Lockwood, 1996). Addressing controversial issues allows for developing higher levels of moral reasoning (Flinders, 2005) and promotes self-reflection over preconceived beliefs and an awareness of multiple perspectives necessary for civic learning (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009; King, 2009). Through controversial issues education, students are more critical of accepted views (Oulton, et al, 2004) and having the academic freedom to discuss controversial issues reflects the values of a democratic society (Hess, 2008; McCully, 2006; Nelson, 2003).

The Role of Context in Teaching Controversial Issues

Schooling is supposed to challenge local traditions (Hlebowitsh, 2005) and unearthing controversies can help shift student focus from authoritative narratives and perspectives to heterogeneous micronarratives that draw on and challenge local and individual knowledge (Levinson, 2008). Controversies widen and enlarge student experiences both in terms of the normativity of topics, but also the multiple perspectives entertained among their teacher and peers to establish understandings and formulate solutions without succumbing to the tyranny of forced meaning (Giroux, 1983) and the often seductive appeal of prevailing belief and opinion. Discussing controversial issues can overlap with ideological battles outside the school, or within it, but it trumps those given the essential mandate for students to deliberate about the common good, take a stand on issues, and look at issues with multiple sources and perspectives (Hess, 2004; Marcus & Stoddard, 2009).

Dewey (1940) eloquently warned of the dangers associated with avoiding controversial issues and the consequences for both individuals and society:

The discussion of a wide variety of opinion, unorthodox and orthodox, with an intelligent teacher in the classroom, is the best protection the schools can afford against our students being later misled by unscrupulous propagandists of one doctrine or another. It is surely better for our young people to face controversial issues in the open atmosphere of the schoolroom, than to seek out what is forbidden in some dark, unwholesome corner. No thought is so dangerous as a forbidden thought.

Schools therefore serve as a unique and venerable role as a sanctuary for the free release of divergent ideas and how to move forward through distrust and disagreement (King, 2009).

The context of controversial issues matters in a degree that is “not always obvious in other Western nations” and we need to be wary of “too-facile application of policies and ideas that are well-suited for other contexts” (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 127). There are no nomothetic prescriptions for teaching controversy and certainly no “easy answers” (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 127). Sometimes a critical obstacle hinges on the “social and political winds” that blow through the school and “grab hold of the curriculum in a way that limits the range of expression that can emerge” (Hlebowitsh, 2005, p. 222). The antiquated and decontextualized fidelity approach to curriculum implementation has enjoyed resurgence within a measurement and high-stakes era of teaching, whereby context, or milieus, can overpower other commonplaces to stymie the discussion of controversial issues. When teachers subscribe to a fidelity model, controversies are often no longer important or are rendered independent of social context and milieus which also risks enactment. Yet, pushing too far into the discomfort zone can often invite rejection of enactment (McCully, 2006; Patrick, 2005). The sociohistorical location of the teacher is therefore critical for the normative decision about what should be done about an issue, which is typically underpinned by the differences in “key beliefs or understandings about the issue held by the protagonists” (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004, p. 411).

Milieu

Schwab (1973) distilled educational phenomena into four *commonplaces*, where someone is teaching something to someone, somewhere (teacher, subject matter, learner, and milieu), all of which demand coordination when we focus on the ultimate goal of doing what is best for the learner as a human being, child, and citizen. It is the final commonplace, which Schwab referred to as “the milieus,” which include the school, classroom, and relations of students to each other. The relations of students to subgroups, students to structures of authority, teachers to educational leaders, as well as student to student, teacher to student, and teacher to teacher all help shape not only what is taught, but how it is taught. Other relevant milieus include the “family, community, the particular groupings of religious, class or ethnic genus” (p. 367) and the aspirations of these groups. Milieus also include the relations of these groups and individuals within town, city, country, and locale as “represented in miniature” by the students of each genus (p. 367). Many of these milieus, in the form of school structure, community members, and parents who want students to reflect their views, undermine a marketplace of ideas and act as barriers to discussion of controversy (Hess, 2009).

Schwab (1973) suggested that connected to these milieus are what teachers will know, the degree of flexibility they bring to teaching and learning new techniques, as well as the “biases they bring” (p. 367). When considering controversial issues within overlapping milieus, Schwab emphasized whether learning experiences will not only lead to the improvement of the community, but also if they will be acceptable to the community and if not, what steps can be taken to facilitate acceptance. Teacher preparation, student relations, and the juxtaposition of multiple layers of incommensurable values suggest that these milieus are of paramount consideration for designing learning experiences that address controversial issues. Even with a provocative curriculum, eager students, and well-prepared teachers poised to confront controversy, the milieus act as pathways and obstacles to opening and

discussing closed areas. Controversial issues span both societal and educational knowledge domains and learning about these issues is a negotiation between the individual and their social milieu (Barnett & Hodson, 2001).

Context and the milieus are therefore of paramount concern for teaching controversial issues as they influence and acts in conjunction with prior knowledge to influence reticence (Ersoy, 2010; Leib, 1998). Employing Pedagogical Context Knowledge (PCK) (Barnett & Hodson, 2001) is instructive here as it focuses our attention to the knowledge of learners' understanding, knowledge of effective teaching strategies for particular content, alternative ways of representing the subject matter, and curricular saliency. Part and parcel of saliency is teacher judgment of matters of depth and treatment within a context as "teacher's classroom decisions are located in, and contingent upon, a specific social, cultural, and educational context" (Barnett & Hodson, 2001, p. 433).

Because controversies change over time, as personal narratives are interpreted and mediated with local knowledge to create new knowledge (Levinson, 2008), context is a critical lever for how an issue is filtered, rendered, or avoided. Controversial issues are *controversial* because they ultimately speak to normative value judgments, which individuals frame within their ethical principles (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004), but also historical, social, political, and ethnic contexts. Often, it is not the issue itself that prompts the type or degree of treatment in a classroom, but the dynamics as shaped through the attitudes and experiences of participants (McCully, 2006). It is not the teaching controversy which raises concerns typically, but the moral, social, and political substructure and the ways that schools handle these issues that provokes resistance and brings about teacher protection-oriented postures (Bridges, 1986; Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009). For example, Taiwanese curricula focuses on "harmless" social and cultural issues instead of controversial political ones (Meihui, 2004) while only the top schools in Singapore provide students with the opportunity to debate controversial issues (Gopinathan & Sharpe, 2004). Conflicting beliefs about issues reflect "contested terrain supported by deeply embedded cultural values" (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000, p. 298) and these can be recondite or readily apparent. There are "multiple tensions" and "conflicting demands" that inform classroom life, including school policies directly relating to the treatment of controversial issues (Barnett & Hodson, 2001, p. 434).

Of the numerous variables influencing the discussion of controversial issues, a key determinant is the extent to which the classroom enjoys an "open climate" where students are encouraged to examine competing views of controversial public issues. But classroom climate, while important for a flow of diverse ideas among teachers and peers (Hahn, 1998), is not a panacea. Teachers are not the sole condition of climate as student perception of peers has such a profound influence leading to self-censure (Hess, 2002; King, 2009). School environmental factors, pointing to context and milieu, are significant variables where the "wider cultural milieu also mediates the effects of classroom climate" (Hahn & Tocci, 1990, p. 358) and an intractable web of "social, cultural, and historical relations in which students themselves are situated" (King, 2009, p. 240). In some communities, issues simply take on more controversy if they are perceived as "inappropriate for the curriculum or because there is pressure to deal with only one perspective on an issue" (Hess, 2002, p. 14).

Teachers

Despite evidence supporting the teaching of controversial issues, they often receive little attention in schools as teachers avoid addressing the belief systems of cultures and societies, including their own (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000). Whether implementation of controversial issues occurs decisively depends upon the teacher and their beliefs about the relevance of the issue, knowledge of the issue, confidence, fear of community or administrative reprisal, and conviction (Hess, 2002; Lee, 2004; Reis & Galvao, 2008). Teachers' perceptions of compromised academic freedom results in avoiding controversies, which minimizes opportunities for students to examine or overhaul their beliefs and assumptions, as well as analyze those of their society. Content coverage for the purposes of testing, the difficulties of engaging students, lack of pedagogical confidence, and feeling they are too emotionally

invested in the issue also undermine time spent on controversial issues in classrooms (Hess, 2002; 2005).

If teachers do broach controversial issues, they tend towards local issues or those with low-sensitivity (Asimeng-Boahene, 2007; Gayford, 2002; McKernan, 1982; Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004; Wilson, Hass, Laughlin, & Sunal, 2002). Teachers generally believe students want to engage controversial issues (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009), but they often lack confidence to respond to divisive issues and therefore avoid them or divert them from the present (Barton & McCully, 2005), want to avoid indoctrinating students into a particular viewpoint (Hess, 2008), or defer to the school context and culture for determining whether they will broach controversial issues (Misco & Patterson, 2007). The milieu therefore shapes what teachers view as appropriate and controversial, leaving teachers with many disincentives, including fear of isolation, censure, and recrimination (King, 2009; McCully, 2006). When located within a fidelity paradigm of curriculum implementation, the milieu serves as a powerful factor in minimizing opportunities for teachers to engage students in controversial issue discussions (Misco, 2010).

Although teaching controversial issues needs to be carefully planned and executed, being mindful of student views and feelings, the community environment, and current political debates (Marcus & Stoddard, 2009), these considerations need to be balanced with the normative mandate of the public school to create a widening and enlarging experience (Hlebowitsh, 2005). Because no classroom exists *sui generis*, with each teacher and student an aggregation of a new permutation, the *particular* is of great concern rather than a nomothetic implementation. Teachers are critical levers, for they act as gatekeepers to student interests and curricular choices (Graseck, 2009; Thornton, 2003) and their ideologies can determine curricular and pedagogical decisions (Stoddard, 2009).

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But these decisions and ideologies are situated and located within larger group ideologies and contexts (Apple, 2004). They are therefore somewhat epiphenominal to the characteristics surrounding the controversial issue as situated and embedded within particular subcultures. Teachers often consider controversial issue instruction to be counterproductive, yet they do view them as important so long as their professional career is not endangered (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009), due to their “subversive hew” (McCully, 2006, p. 58). Theoretically and holistically teachers see value of controversial issue instruction, but pragmatically problems and obstacles undermine their effective instruction (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009) and other teachers are more “pragmatic and resilient to institutional buffeting” and more prepared to work with and challenge irrational thinking from any quarter (McCully, 2006, p. 63).

A chief consideration for broaching controversial issues is the strong emotional response that results in those societies experiencing religious, cultural, or ethnic conflict. This emotion is critical for understanding how teachers can engage students effectively within the issue (McCully, 2006). The prior exposure to controversial issues in their educational background also influences teacher attitudes about involvement of controversial issues in their teaching (Ersoy, 2010). Teachers therefore need a sound rationale for their role with controversial issue discussions for it is the teacher that plays a pivotal role in treatment including points of view, time, sides, plurality, student discussion and they need the confidences of the milieu, a support network, and a flexible curriculum in order to take these risks (Barton & McCully, 2007; Lockwood, 1996).

Instructional Practices

Engaging controversial issues does not fit well within classrooms that emphasize a producer-consumer model employing direct instruction and teacher as curricular fountainhead. Rather, controversial issues are best broached within democratic classrooms that emphasize student-centered learning and constructivist pedagogy consistent with reflective inquiry. For example, Structured Academic Controversies (Hess, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 1988; 1993; King, 2009) offer students the opportunity to reconceptualize their own position and perspective through authentic multiple perspective taking.

Although the practice of discussion is highly nuanced, it broadly interlocks with democratic education and both small group and large group discussions are well-suited for exploring controversial issues (Hahn & Tocci, 1990; Hess, 2002; 2009; Oulton, et al., 2004; Waterson, 2009). The use of documentary film (Marcus & Stoddard, 2009; Stoddard, 2009), Socratic seminars (Mangrum, 2010; Polite & Adams, 1997), and deliberation (Cohen, 1999; Dewey, 1922; Parker, 2003) are also well-positioned to foster multi-perspective, openminded, and rational educational experiences with controversial issues.

Employing these strategies responds to the suggestions and caveats about controversial issues instruction. For example, teachers should not limit impartiality towards alternative viewpoints (Hess, 2002; Lockwood, 1996; Oulton et al., 2004; Stoddard, 2009; Waterson, 2009). Because teachers may have trouble restraining from becoming overly involved in the discussion and stating their own opinions (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009) they should use “cognitive distancing” and form respectful relationships to reduce students’ perception of the risk associated with addressing controversy (King, 2009, p. 215). Within these instructional strategies, discussing controversial issues is most effective when the classroom is diverse, with students holding differing perspectives (Barton & McCully, 2007). Yet, attempting to maintain a balance of perspectives is ineffective and virtually impossible and students will not participate in discussion if they fear ridicule or penalization for their comments (Leib, 1998; Oulton et al., 2004).

The seminal categorization of teacher stances toward controversial issues (Kelly, 1986) includes *exclusive neutrality*, whereby the teacher does not introduce topics that the broader community might consider to be controversial. This position aims to construct a neutral and value-free classroom, though this method lends itself as a pure conduit to prescribed content and embedded values within curriculum. *Exclusive partiality* suggests that a correct position on any number of controversial issues exists. Not unlike a citizenship transmission orientation (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977), *exclusive partiality* attempts to limit contestation, alternative points of view, and the gray areas associated with multiple interpretations and put forth the “correct” and uncomplicated interpretations and conclusions. *Neutral impartiality*, asserts that teachers should engage students in discussions on controversial issues, but their own views should not enter into the conversation. Within this orientation, the teacher becomes one of many inquirers who does not reveal or promote their beliefs, but rather focuses their attention on helping students problematize and refine theirs. The fourth and final stance of *committed impartiality* is akin to explicit subjectivity, as it involves the interjection of teacher beliefs and an explication of their thinking on the issue. This stance claims that if teachers subsume their beliefs and opinions as citizens and legitimate participants of society, the result is a disingenuous classroom experience (Misco, 2007).

Students

Students generally have positive attitudes toward controversial issue discussions and think that they are important (Hess & Posslet, 2002). Yet, few students enjoy the opportunity for discussions within diverse ideological settings and there is a virtual absence of opportunities for students to engage controversial issues discussions (Hess, 2009; Kahne et al., 2000). Although students of the majority group typically enjoy more freedom to express their opinions (Leib, 1998) and views of non-dominant group members are more easily discredited in student minds (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994), many students are reluctant to discuss controversial issues as they presume an underlying assumption that they will suffer negative repercussions outside of the classroom. Student inhibitions include general discomfort about conflict and concerns about peer perception if they hold a position outside of moderation, as well as expectations of lower grades if in disagreement with the teacher (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994). Students are often reluctant to “say anything in class which might jeopardize their peer relationships” (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994, p. 306). Instead, they tend toward preserving the legitimacy of currently held beliefs and minimize any interrogative self-reflection (King, 2009). Students not only have only rare opportunities to confront controversial issues in schools (King, 2009; Rossi, 2006; Waterson, 2009) but also generally develop democratic habits of mind, such as deliberation and consideration of opposing perspectives (Shaver, Davis, & Helburn, 1979; Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1984; McNeil, 1986).

Students need a safe environment for expression ideas and perspectives about controversial issues and there is an expectation for alternative perspectives among students, especially to those understood outside of the school, which are often limiting or one-sided (Barton & McCully, 2007). Given variation of viewpoint about seemingly subjective issues, multiple perspectives are critical features of introducing and teaching about controversial issues (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004). We should not ignore nor discount emotions students bring to these discussions, which if ill-considered can provide outlets for students to “retreat into defensive, ‘tribal’ positions” (McCully, 2006, p. 53).

Necessary Conditions

Paradoxically, although teachers and students often report social studies classes as containing a surfeit of controversial issue discussions, researchers rarely find any attention to controversy (Hess, 2008). To combat these perceived divergent realities, teachers must deliberately select a clear and appropriate role to play in the discussion of controversial issues (Ersoy, 2010; Lockwood, 1996; Waterson, 2009) including actively and “directly challenge students’ pre-existing assumptions,” (King, 2009, p. 219). Each student and teacher discussing controversial issues must be equally willing to allow all views to be heard and all participants to express their perspective (King, 2009; Levinson, 2008) within a classroom environment of mutual respect and trust that encourages the free release of ideas between students (Graseck, 2009; Hahn & Tocci, 1990; King, 2009; Levinson, 2008; Lusk & Weinberg, 1994; McCully, 2006; Waterson, 2009). Teachers should spend time preparing students for discussion of controversial issues, as well as debrief the discussion afterwards in order to improve the quality and the equality of the discussion (Ersoy, 2010; Hess, 2002; Oulton et al., 2004).

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Teachers also need to attend to emotions in the classroom, admitting uncertainties, allowing extreme views, and providing a chance to regroup at the end of class to create a secure environment (Barton & McCully, 2007). Teachers should be flexible and responsive to changing contexts (Barnett & Hodson, 2001; McCully, 2006) and they need detailed knowledge of the subject matter, a clear understanding of the aims of education, and a familiarity with useful strategies to be able to successfully implement a discussion of controversial issues in the classroom (Reis & Galvao, 2009). Given the prominence of state-promoted values and beliefs in some societies, teachers also require some degree of academic freedom for the teaching of controversy, as well a disposition of doubt and uncertainty (Mitchell, et al. 1997; Nelson, 2003; Parmenter, 2004). Multiple sources of relevant materials and evidence that will aid uncovering various perspectives on the controversial issue are also essential (Evans, et al., 2000).

In teacher education programs, pervasive and conscious treatment of controversial issues is needed so that teachers new to the field understand the breadth of research that demonstrates the salubrious effects that teaching controversy has for citizens in a democracy. Beginning teachers should be able to clearly articulate why teaching about controversy is a normative mandate, regardless of the school, administrators, community, and other contextual features. A good deal of time ought to be spent helping pre-service teachers find ways to undermine the spurious dichotomy of “required content” and controversial issues. This perception of a crowded curriculum coincides with the ongoing schism of public and private benefits derived from education. By framing controversial issues that are predominantly public, private, contemporary, or historic, in terms that demonstrate how they are all of these things, preservice teachers can deflate some of the controversy while remaining in alignment with content objectives. Teachers also need more opportunities to master controversial issues. As teacher education programs become increasingly generalist-oriented, whereby few have disciplinary expertise, spending more time providing content-rich experiences that address knowledge gaps of prominent, and often ongoing, controversial issues can better prepare educators for exploring these issues in their teaching (Misco & Patterson, 2007).

Conclusion and Call for Chapters

If we think of democracy not in terms of governmental structures but Dewey's (1916) "mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 87), citizenship is predicated on foundational ideas of free participation and communication. But democracy is only sustainable in societies where a significant portion of the population enacts democratic skills, values, and behaviors (Almond & Verba, 1963). An essential characteristic of these societies is the ability of citizens to discuss controversial issues in order to celebrate diversity, respect individuals and groups, extend equal rights to all human beings, respect evidence in the formation of beliefs, and be open to changing one's mind within a criticality informed by rational inquiry (Chikoko, Gilmour, Harber, & Serf, 2011).

Given the critical nature of teaching about controversial issues for the health and vibrancy of all democratic societies, the author of this article, in cooperation with Dr. Jan De Groof (Professor at the College of Europe and chairman of the European Association for Education Law and Policy), is calling for chapter proposals for an edited book in order to cinch together heretofore disconnected perspectives on the pathways and challenges to teaching controversial issues. We are seeking empirical case-based country perspectives in order to construct a synthesis of international perspectives and grounded theoretical propositions for policy makers and curricularists interested in cultivating democratic dispositions and habits of mind, as well as inservice teacher trainings. Those interested in learning about the parameters of potential chapters should contact Prof. Thomas Misco, Miami University (USA), miscotj@muohio.edu

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