

Social Studies Teachers' Perceptions on Teaching Contemporary Controversial Issues

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Abstract

The aim of this descriptive study is fourfold: (1) to illustrate how social studies teachers perceive teaching the contemporary controversial issues, (2) to investigate the support and opposition faced by social studies teachers when handling controversy, (3) to review the theoretical aspect of controversial topics; and (4) to delineate research-based pedagogical practices for instruction. Teachers' perceptions concerning the circumstances of teaching controversial issues were captured by applying qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were gathered from 10 middle basic cycle schools through survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Following the survey questionnaire, teachers were interviewed and allowed the researchers to observe their classrooms and collect field data. The three tools were administered among a cohort of 24 social studies school teachers (14 females + 10 males) in Amman/Jordan. Member checking and peer-debriefing were strategies used by the researchers to ensure validity. The data obtained were categorized and analyzed in terms of teachers' perceptions and classroom practices. The results of the study have shown that although teachers have favorable perceptions toward teaching controversial issues, a disparity between their perceptions and practices exists. Most teachers shared feelings of uncertainty and caution about discussing controversy in the classroom. Furthermore, the results have shown that teachers had some reservations and were not inclined to take on hot topics due to several constraints. Results were discussed followed by relevant implications and suggested recommendations for further studies and solutions.

Keywords: Social Studies, Teachers' Perceptions, Contemporary Controversial Issues

1. Introduction

1.1 Social Studies

The social studies classroom is an ideal platform from which students can establish a foundation of critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, global awareness, civic knowledge and empathy. In classrooms, social studies teachers must approach controversial issues in a spirit of critical inquiry and expose students to a variety of ideas. It is through social studies that students are expected to gain knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them to effectively deal with issues in our contemporary society (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Garcia & Michaelis, 2011). Without the study of contemporary controversial topics, social studies will be less interesting and fruitful. Therefore, when schools maintain a separation from the social world in which they serve, the separation limits students' learning (Sunal & Sunal, 1999). Schools may be the only forums where students are able to encounter a balance of views in a safe environment that is conducive to learning.

Some social studies teachers simply do not include controversial issues in their classrooms, or prefer certain issues with low public sensitivity. Some issues are altogether ignored or briefly skimmed over without delving into their dynamics and complexities (Wilson, et al. 2002), whereas identifying the dynamics and complexities of the issues empowers students with an awareness of depth and breadth of these issues.

Therefore, incorporating controversial issues in the school should presume a planned inquiry into such issues and not impromptu or incidental classroom discussion (Milkow, 2006). It should involve planning on the part of the teacher and preparation on the part of the students. These issues could arise spontaneously in classroom discussion or be part of a planned classroom lesson. The absence of discussing controversy in classroom is a negation of participation as citizens in a democracy (Hahn, 2001; Hess, 2004; Ajiboye, 2009).

Controversy, conflict and disagreement are integral elements of teaching; therefore, all teachers must anticipate controversy and plan to incorporate it constructively.

Although teaching students controversial issues can be rough terrain, it helps them understand that there is a bigger world out there, and gives teachers countless opportunities to make the curriculum relevant to society. Students retain knowledge better when they see that it is relevant and vital to their contemporary society. However, according to Werner (1998), addressing controversy has real cost factors for teachers which include time, commitment, energy and risk. In a society where conflict is evident, teachers often do not want to dump further burdens on them or add oil to the fire (Loeb, 1995). John Dewey (1916) once noted that conflict is the gadfly of thought. Straddling (1984) indicated that controversial issues deeply divide the society and generate conflicting explanations based on alternative value systems.

Given the dearth of discussions in today's classrooms, teachers must be willing to invest time to train their students in discussion techniques and to encourage them to participate whenever needed. To achieve a level of balanced participation, it is often necessary to actively draw reticent students into the discussion. An excellent way to promote discussion is to provide opportunities for various kinds of group discussions, such as pairs, conversation circles, panels, fishbowls and cooperative learning. This by itself has particular imperative within a democratic society (Barton & Levstik, 2011; Awan, 2014). Therefore, knowing how to handle controversy in the classroom productively is an important skill for social studies teachers.

Furthermore, a classroom filled with an open format of discussion and awareness is the key to a productive learning experience. It helps students craft informed personal beliefs and develop tolerance for others who possess different perspectives (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Barton & McCully (2007) note that students who are actively involved in classroom discussions are likely to vote later on in life, follow news in the media, and have confidence in their ability to influence people.

1.2 Contemporary Controversial Issues

A controversial issue is any issue of public debate about which there is an argument or disagreement, and in which values and emotions are invested. It creates reflective dialogue between people having opposing points of view. The issue of defining exactly what is considered controversial has been presented in the work of many researchers such as Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Milbrandt, 2002; Philpott et al., 2011 & Kruger, 2012.

Controversial issues are highly disputable in nature and are viewed as a vehicle for preparing students to avoid and resolve conflict and to look for peaceful solutions (Hedley & Markowitz, 2001).

An issue becomes controversial when conflict is generated between proposed solutions and strong interests (Soley, 1996 & Evans, et al. 2000). Subjects typically become controversial when students have competing values, and when the subjects touch on some particular sensitivity like religion, politics and cultural bigotry. These heated subjects force students to choose a side and by nature can arouse conflict between students (Parker, 2001). They make teachers and students ill at ease (Byford, Lennon & Russel, 2009).

Moreover, some believe that controversy is likely to divide the community along racial, ethnic or religious lines, and it can disturb the peace and stability of the scholastic environment and set students against each other.

On the other hand, research indicates that incorporating a regular dose of controversial issues have a multitude of benefits to help the students to:

- Develop critical and informed decision making skills
- Learn to be tolerant and respectful to different views as well
- Develop empathy to others
- Learn to communicate effectively
- Develop global awareness
- Become self-knowledgeable
- Think critically about difficult and divisive issues
- Build language, vocabulary, oral expression and listening skills
- Acquire problem solving skills

The following represent guidelines for social studies teachers when teaching controversy in the classroom:

- Solicit clear ground rules for handling differing perspectives in discussion, these ground rules should be established early in the year and reinforced on a daily basis.
- Help students to recognize rhetoric and detect style over substance.
- Listen carefully to the contributions of others without put-downs or making fun. Sarcastic remarks and gestures must be avoided.
- Critique ideas or positions, not persons.
- Articulate their own point of view on the topic.
- Create a safe, respectful, and supportive tone in the classroom.
- Use a range of credible resources that cover a multitude of viewpoints.
- Model civil behavior through actions.
- Discuss the moral and social implications of the issue.
- Ask for clarification when they do not understand a point someone has made.
- Encourage students to refer to evidence when defending their stance.
- Make connections between the topic at hand and the students' own lives.
- Help students to distinguish opinions and value judgments from facts.
- Give equal importance to conflicting views and opinions.
- Establish a classroom environment where all students are free to express sincerely held views without fear.
- Encourage students to recognize the difference between what they believe, what they feel, and what they know.
- Be aware of institutional policy regarding issues to be avoided.

Some examples of the contemporary controversial issues that might be discussed in the social studies classrooms include: child labor, domestic violence, global warming, racism, terrorism, money laundering, honor killing, nepotism, ethnic discrimination, the Arab-Israeli conflict, democracy, unemployment, co-education, internet privacy and sex education.

1.3 Teachers' Perceptions

Teachers' perceptions are the thoughts or mental images that teachers have regarding teaching contemporary controversial issues in the classes, which are shaped by their background knowledge and life experience. It is a way of regarding situations and judging their relative importance.

1.4 Methods and Strategies of Teaching

Teachers who deliberately teach controversial issues in the classroom may use honestly and constructively a number of methods and instructional strategies, each of which yields different outcomes (Payne & Gainey, 2000). Conducting beneficial discussions of controversial issues is an art that requires skill and practice. Much debate exists over the role teachers should assume in the discussion of controversy. Hess (2004) outlined four perspectives teachers take when teaching controversy. These are:

- Denial – when teachers do not perceive an issue to be controversial. It indicates to students that they are not trusted to deal with the diverse issues present in their own community.
- Privilege – where teachers teach toward a particular view point and might promulgate a biased view.
- Avoidance – when teachers avoid talking about the issue due to acknowledging a strong personal bias influencing their teaching.
- Balance – when teachers make sure to include different perceptions about the issue, and where the controversial issue is thought as truly a controversial issue.

On the other hand, Kelly (1986) presents and critiques four perspectives on the role teachers should assume in controversy. He argues that teachers have a responsibility to disclose their position in the discussion of controversial issues. He identifies four perspectives: exclusive neutrality, exclusive partiality, neutral impartiality, and committed impartiality. He proposes that teachers should assume the role of committed impartiality when discussing controversial issues.

2. Review of Related Literature

A large body of research supports the incorporation of controversial issues into the curriculum as a teaching tool. The tool revolves around teachers' personal perspective of controversial topics, their own comfort level, and their own instructional strategies.

After conducting a somewhat comprehensive survey of the related literature, the researchers found that principles, methods and techniques of teaching controversial topics are themselves controversial.

A growing research effort relating to teaching controversy in educational structures began in the 1960. McAulay (1965) surveyed 648 social studies teachers and found that over half (52%) felt they would be reprimanded if they discussed controversial issues. The significance of teaching contemporary controversial issues has been articulated by a number of scholars (Barton & Levstik, 2011; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Oulton, et al. 2004; Hahn, 2001; Davis, 2007; Werner, 1998; Scott-Little, et al. 2006; Evans, et al. 2000 & Brown, et al. 2012) These prominent scholars and others have advocated for curriculum reform with greater emphasis on controversial issues. However, there is scant research concerning how teachers use the pedagogical methods when teaching controversial issues.

Wilson, et al. (2002) discuss the perspectives of social studies teachers and their relationship to the teaching of current controversial issues. Milbrandt (2002) tackles the same feature and examines the attitudes and practices of public school art teachers regarding controversial issues, where teachers point out the following factors as the inhibitors in teaching controversy: meeting objectives, parental reactions, school officials, lack of information, and lack of appropriate experiences. Griffith & Brem (2004) take a specific subject and collect data on teachers teaching evolution as a specific subject and note the stress they were under and the precise strategies they used to alleviate the stress. They conclude that a number of constraints lead to teachers being apprehensive about the concept of teaching controversy.

Oulton, et al. (2004) address the constraints that teachers face when teaching controversy and list out the following: time, length of instructional periods, lack of appropriate teaching material, and lack of training.

Dube (2009) uncovers the instructional strategies used by the primary school teachers in Botswana and explores the various ways in which primary school teachers can address current controversial issues through the teaching of social studies curriculum in order to make it as lively and interesting as possible. Byford, Lennon & Russel (2009) take a different approach and examine the views of high school teachers regarding incorporating controversy in their classrooms and conduct a study related to the views of high school teachers. They note that teachers believe in developing informed and enlightened citizens but are less assured about teaching controversy. Figen (2010) tackles the same subject and explores social studies teacher candidates' views on the controversial issues involved in their courses in Turkey. He finds that controversial issues are not sufficiently included in teacher candidates' courses and that teacher candidates have difficulty in discussing critical issues in the classroom. Mhlauli (2011) discusses the barriers of teaching controversial issues and points out that teachers acknowledge the merits of teaching controversial issues but find it difficult to discuss some of the issues with their students. Philpott, et al. (2011) disclose the perceptions, beliefs and practices of six teachers related to the teaching of controversial issues in the social studies classroom. They indicate teachers' discomfort in preparation and support for teaching controversial issues. The same subject was addressed by Kruger (2012). He explores with four secondary social studies teachers their experiences teaching controversial issues, the success and challenges they experienced, and the instructional strategies they utilized.

In general, researchers who dealt with controversial issues concentrate on the five following aspects:

- Definition of the term
- Methods and techniques used in teaching
- Perceptions of the teachers
- Constraints that teachers feel when teaching controversy
- The merits and drawbacks of teaching controversial issues

Analysis of the related literature reveals that the literature has gone over the various definitions of the term "controversial" and provided a bleak view of the term. It is not yet clearly defined as to exactly what is considered "controversial".

The present study focuses on the social studies teachers' perceptions on incorporating controversial issues into the classrooms. It looks at the perceptions that cover all circumstances surrounding teaching controversy in the middle basic cycle in Amman / Jordan.

3. Aim of the Study

The aim of this descriptive study is fourfold: (1) to illustrate how social studies teachers perceive teaching the contemporary controversial issues; (2) to investigate the support and opposition faced by social studies teachers when handling controversy; (3) to review the theoretical aspect of controversial topics; and (4) to delineate research-based pedagogical practices for instruction.

4. Limitations of the Study

- The study is limited to 24 social studies teachers who were randomly selected in 10 public schools in Amman / Jordan, to ensure focused semi-structured interviews.
- The study is conducted in the classrooms of the middle basic cycle.
- The results are reached based on data collected in one semester.
- The results of the study are not generalized to other settings.

5. Significance of the Study

The inclusion of controversy in the teaching of social studies has been on the agenda of curriculum reform in Jordan for at least three decades. A variety of topics that did not exist before the adoption of the agenda, have surfaced.

Teaching of controversy is a fundamental necessity for Jordan, which is ensuing pluralism, tolerance, multiculturalism, and the spread of democratic values. Young Jordanians today know less and care less about what is going on in the world than young students of previous generations. At the same time, the contemporary Jordanian society is characterized by differences of opinion arising from conflicts and values due to the various events that are taking place nowadays in the Middle East, in general, and Jordan, in particular. Through social studies, teachers can raise students' interest in and awareness of the stories making news headlines. Needless to say that social studies domain is robust with many historic and current controversial issues.

The focus of this study is to uncover the social studies teachers' point of view in relation to incorporating contemporary controversial issues in the classrooms of the middle basic cycle. It explores all the circumstances surrounding the instructional strategies and the major constraints many teachers feel in tackling controversial issues. Therefore, this study provides significant implications and practice for teachers, educators, school principals, parents, and curriculum reform and innovation. It also provides an argument with supporting empirical evidence that the teaching of controversy in the classrooms can be significantly approved. The study is the first of its nature regarding the teaching of controversial issues among the social studies teachers in Jordan.

6. Methodology

Teachers' perceptions were identified by utilizing the sequential exploratory design method. Both the quantitative and qualitative approach were implemented to achieve the aims of the study.

Creswell (2014) reports that the added value of the mixed – method approach has been well documented in the literature; hence, the use of multiple methods in a study secures in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. The perceptions of the social studies teachers have been investigated via the use of the triangulation technique.

The researchers used the descriptive analytical method through a survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and a series of classroom observations to explore and describe incorporating controversial issues into the syllabus. Following the survey questionnaire, teachers were interviewed and allowed the researcher to observe their classrooms and collect field data. Data analysis was an ongoing and recursive process, and the data were collected in the spring semester of the 2013 / 2014 academic year. The data were analyzed using hand code. Permission to conduct the study was requested and obtained from the Amman Fifth Directorate of Education.

The quantitative approach involved a survey questionnaire which was given to 24 school teachers in the middle basic cycle (14 females and 10 males). The teachers worked in ten public schools and the questionnaire covered specific features of teaching controversial issues.

The questionnaire consisted of 32 closed questions and 10 open-ended questions. It was examined by a panel of experts and was edited according to the feedback received. 8 items from the original questionnaire were deleted because they were viewed by the panel of experts as ambiguous and / or redundant.

Participants responded to statements of the questionnaire by making one of five possible choices: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD). The researchers used Cranach's index of internal consistency to test the reliability of the scale. The reliability coefficient was (infinity) = 0.84 which is an acceptable reliable rate.

The open-ended questions were included to capture teachers' perceptions that would verify qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews. The open-ended questioning format was chosen so that participants could freely construct their responses. A coding frame and verbatim reporting of responses were used, and the statistical data indicate that the questionnaire enjoyed good construct validity.

Social studies teachers in Amman Fifth Directorate of Education constituted the target population of the study. Within this population, the sample was selected using the purposeful sampling method. The researchers chose to keep the sample size of participants low so that focus would dwell on in-depth interviews and genuine classroom observations. The teachers ranged in age from 24 to 40 years old. 16 of the teachers have a bachelors degree, and 4 hold the masters degree. The years of teaching experience ranged from 4-14 years.

Teachers' answers on the questionnaire were analyzed in order to find common themes related to their perceptions concerning teaching controversy in the classroom. The interviews lasted approximately 30-40 minutes each and were all audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded. Member checking and peer-debriefing were strategies used by the researchers to ensure validity.

In order to investigate the circumstances surrounding teaching controversial issues inside the classroom, the researchers conducted classroom observations to ascertain the classroom environment, teaching and learning, behavior management, and challenges. The total number of classroom observations was 24. Only one classroom observation was conducted for each teacher because teachers were not comfortable with observations for various reasons. Questionnaire responses were presented in juxtaposition with responses from group interviews and classroom observations in order to bring wholesome to the data instead of presenting data as discrete units.

Sample of the questions that the researchers asked the teachers in the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews, as well as the concerns of the researchers during class observations were the following:

- What are your personal perspectives on choosing to teach or not to teach controversy?
- What are the reasons for or against teaching controversy?
- What are the methods or techniques of teaching applied in the classroom?
- What are the resources used?
- Do you value teaching controversial issues?
- What is the teachers' understanding of controversial issues?
- What is the school system's policy?
- Why are controversial issues important?
- Do you have an anxiety toward discussing controversial issues?
- What are the problems encountered?
- What are the recommendations suggested to encounter the challenges?
- What controversial issues does the teacher discuss in the classroom?
- Do you like to be challenged?
- Are you an objective person?
- In what ways are controversial issues taught in the classroom?
- Do you think students need to study controversy?
- Are you adequately prepared to teach controversy?
- Do students feel that they can talk to you about different topics?

7. Results and Discussion

The results of the survey questionnaire, the semi-structured interviews and the classroom observations, reveal the following:

- The surveyed social studies teachers believe in the importance of using controversy in the classroom environment. They use the controversial issues at different times, using a variety of sources, and face difficulties in teaching these issues. Social studies teachers have favorable perceptions toward teaching such issues, felt confident in their ability to teach and were knowledgeable about the repercussions and responsibility.

Also, they were knowledgeable with the Ministry of Education's rules and regulations regarding the teaching of controversy. Although teachers had a positive perception toward incorporating controversy in their classrooms, they had doubts about teaching controversial issues and felt uncomfortable about discussing such issues with their students. There is a clear picture that teachers' beliefs and actions may not be in synchrony and that teachers did little to implement their beliefs in class. This fact is congruent with the findings of other studies such as Garcia & Michaeli, 2000; Tobin, 1994 & Warren, 2008.

- The results have revealed a gloomy picture and tremendous contradictions, paradoxes and challenges among teachers. The teachers who participated in the present study have diverse perceptions regarding teaching controversy. Analysis of in-depth interviews, and classroom observations does not suggest congruence between teachers' perceptions stated in answering the questionnaire questions and performance in the classroom. A disparity between their perceptions and practices in the classroom exists.
- Almost all social teachers include controversial issues in social studies courses, but it was found that issues were not sufficiently taught in the classrooms. Although all teachers acknowledge the merits of teaching such issues, most of them shared feelings of uncertainty and caution about discussing controversy in the classroom. Teachers were not inclined to venture down the so-called side roads of learning.
- In spite of the social studies teachers' inhibitions with regards to addressing controversial issues, the fact remains that the teachers strongly believe that discussing controversial issues broadens the mental horizons of the students, makes them aware of the issues surrounding them, creates critical thinking and problem solving skills, and makes the students empathetic and knowledgeable global citizens.
- Teachers believe that they are competent to teach controversial issues, and that they are adequately prepared and have no anxiety about teaching such issues, yet the majority of them believe that teaching controversy would create controversy within the school system. Some believe that teaching controversy in the classroom can disturb the peace and stability of the scholastic environment and it can set students against each other. Therefore, many teachers do not feel comfortable dealing with controversial topics rather they opt for a safer environment in order to avoid contradictions with school officials, parents, students, and officials of the Fifth Directorate of Education.
- Teachers have received almost no preparation or training concerning how to deal with the sensitive topics of controversy. Therefore teachers face uncertainty on how to best teach these topics. Teachers believe that their pre-service and in service programs do not adequately prepare them for teaching controversy. Therefore, some teachers are apprehensive when considering incorporating controversial issues in the classrooms. They feel unprepared to guide their students in deep reflective conversations. Indeed, they are uncomfortable because they are not well versed. Needless to say that appropriate treatment of controversial issues needs professional competence and enthusiasm that teachers bring to the issues under discussion.
- Some teachers attribute their reluctance to discuss certain controversial issues with students to their culture, religion, political system, socialization, large class sizes, government and curriculum mandates, and lack of familiarity with the topic. This finding is congruent with the findings of Highberg, 2010; Hess & Posselt, 2006; Guyton & Hoffman, 1983 & Lockwood, 1996.
- The resources utilized to transfer the controversy into the classrooms by the teachers were various. Teachers have indicated using newspapers, television, radio, social networks, internet, smart phones, family, friends and worship places.
- Some teachers were not inclined to take on hot topics because they did not feel prepared to handle the strong feelings, opinions, and classroom chaos the discussions might stir. They maintain strict neutrality with respect to controversy to ensure fairness. Some play the devil's advocate shifting from one side of an argument to another.
- Teachers have showed concerns that teaching controversial issues would take too long to cover and the regular curriculum would be neglected.
- Some teachers believe that lack of school support for teaching controversy and a fear of retribution has remained a major concern. Therefore, they give inconsistent or inadequate attention to controversial issues in their classes.

8. Recommendations

The following is a list of suggested recommendations that, the researchers believe, if implemented would contribute positively to the instructional strategies of teaching contemporary controversial issues in Jordan:

- A thorough review of the social studies teacher education programs in order to ascertain that teachers are equipped with knowledge and instructional strategies needed for teaching controversial issues.
- The social studies teacher education programs should consider teaching hands-on pedagogical practices applicable to teaching controversy in the classroom.
- The training programs should be provided for both pre-service and in-service education programs.
- Follow up studies should be conducted to investigate ways to motivate teachers to gain more knowledge of controversial topics.
- Research needs to be conducted concerning the enhancement of strategies and methods of teaching used by social studies teachers.
- Alleviating the constraints imposed by parents and school officials regarding teaching controversy in the classrooms.
- Providing additional learning resources in the schools.
- Finding ways to motivate teachers to gain more awareness of controversial topics in the society.

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