

Teaching Controversial Topics: Teachers' Pedagogical Approach Using The Class Discussion Method In South-African Primary Schools

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Abstract

While researchers have not reached a common consensus on how to handle controversial topics in the classroom setting, little is known about teachers' pedagogical approaches to teaching these topics in South African primary schools through small-group class discussions. This study examines the teaching of controversial topics in South African primary schools through small-group class discussions. It reports using a qualitative approach underpinned by critical social theory as the theoretical framework. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 5 social science History teachers in a Grade 6 primary school. One of our findings suggests cultural variations in the controversial topics taught by Grade 6 teachers in the primary school Social Sciences. Teachers mostly use avoidance, denial of the controversial issues, and eliciting empathy rather than engaging in class discussions. We also found some division among learners in the small group: some sought to downplay certain topics, while others aimed to highlight and emphasize the controversy using small-group class discussion. Our findings appear to challenge discrimination in South Africa's educational system; however, promoting empathy should be considered for the sake of children's academic performance and attitudes. The findings of this study have global implications for the teaching of controversial topics; teachers should approach these topics through small-group class discussions rather than direct instruction.

Keywords: Controversial topics, Curriculum, class discussion, History, Primary school, Social Sciences

INTRODUCTION

Controversial topics in Social Sciences spark strong opinions and disagreements among people with different beliefs and values (Parker, 2022). These topics can cover social, politics, ethics, and culture, challenging traditional norms. The challenge lies in their lack of consensus, leading to debates and disagreements, as each person has their own interpretation of facts or values, making it difficult for everyone to reach a resolution. Nordic countries value discussing controversial topics in Social Science education to strengthen content knowledge and encourage critical thinking (Kjøstvedt and Jøsok 2024). Classrooms should serve as shared spaces for discussing such topics, especially in an increasingly individualistic society. Research indicates that teachers play a crucial role in facilitating these discussions, integrating societal topics with curriculum objectives (Lecusay and Nilsson, 2024). However, some teachers avoid sensitive topics, such as global inequality, and prioritize creating a safe learning environment. It is further argued that Social Science can enhance youth's political efficacy through discussions and social learning experiences. Still, socioeconomic status and gender play significant roles in determining access to this subject (Larsson and Larsson, 2021). In Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore, and Korea, the context and milieu significantly influence the teaching of controversial topics. Teacher judgments are influenced by social, cultural, and educational contexts, and school policies can provoke resistance (Le, 2024). Classroom climate is a key determinant of discussion, but it's not a solution. School environmental factors such as context and milieu mediate these effects (Wanget al., 2020).

Researchers have used several pedagogical approaches and methods in the literature to teach controversial topics in the social sciences. For example, Hand & Levinson (2012) have used whole-class discussion as a pedagogical approach to teaching controversial topics. Rivers (2015) used personal narratives, Koukounaras-Liagis (2011) used role-play, while Ljunggren & Unemar Öst (2011) concerned themselves with teacher attitudes and the formulation of pedagogical approaches. While researchers have not yet reached a common consensus on which of these pedagogical approaches and methods is most effective, little is still known about teachers' pedagogical approaches to teaching controversial topics using small-group class discussions, especially in the context of South African primary schools.

The small-group class discussion method effectively engages learners in discussions of controversial topics by establishing clear rules and fostering openness (Parker, 2022). It promotes critical thinking, explores diverse viewpoints, and enhances understanding of complex social topics (Bean and Melzer, 2021). Implementing structured small group-class discussions empowers learners to engage meaningfully with sensitive subjects and validate their experiences within the classroom context.

In African countries like Zambia and Kenya, controversial topics are taught through real-life situations, promoting reflection and critical thinking (Machila, 2023). This shift in teaching strategies rejects top-down educational reform, focusing on praxis and active learning (Khader, 2014). Political topics are crucial in the Social Science curriculum to teach democracy and democratic participation. However, teaching controversial topics can be challenging due to factors such as the social climate, parents' views, media, teacher and pupil backgrounds, and school ethos. Teachers face challenges in teaching controversial topics due to policies, discomfort, inadequate teacher education programs, lack of support, and fear of retribution. Teaching controversial topics in History enhances understanding and respect for cultures and societal moral demands. However, Kenya has experienced rising cases of cultural disrespect, such as hate speech, violence, and killings, leading to increased indiscipline among secondary school learners. Bianchi (2024) suggests that discussing controversial topics in the classroom benefits meaningful learning and discussion. Researchers argue that controversial topics like race, religion, and politics can create classroom tension and require teachers' careful handling (Santoro, 2021; Rubin, et al., 2021)

In the South African context, mathematical problems are not ideal for discussion, but controversial topics encourage inquiry and understanding. The debate on teaching controversial topics in schools revolves around determining criteria to distinguish them from non-controversial ones and the reasons behind teaching them. Some argue for non-directive teaching, while others suggest directive teaching with a clear intent to compel belief. The discussion method is a teaching technique that promotes an interactive exchange of ideas and opinions among individuals or groups, fostering a deeper understanding and exploration of new ideas (Ferreira, Martinsone, & Talić, 2020). In today's digital world, the art of discussion is becoming increasingly rare, but teachers should encourage it in their classrooms. To implement the discussion method, set clear objectives, create open-ended prompts, and select appropriate materials. Ensure a safe and respectful learning environment by setting ground rules, monitoring the discussion, and encouraging diverse perspectives. As the teacher, create a supportive environment, use active listening skills, guide the conversation, and provide constructive feedback (Weinstein, Itzhakov & Legate, 2022). Positive reinforcement is also essential for good participation and critical thinking skills. The discussion method fosters deeper learning, communication, and community building, allowing learners to learn from one another and appreciate different perspectives (Salamondra, 2021).

Teaching controversial topics, such as politics, gender, and racism, through small-group class discussions fosters courteous discourse and critical thinking (Bianchi, 2024). Effective administration entails establishing a space where learners can voice their opinions without fear of being mocked, using open-ended questions to encourage inquiry, setting clear ground rules, and preparing learners for contentious debates, which are some key strategies (Hensley, 2024). In South African primary schools, teaching History is critical for fostering understanding of democratic values and social cohesion among young learners (Mkhomi, 2023). Despite reintroducing History as a compulsory subject in higher grades, its presence in the Foundation Phase remains limited. The Curriculum and Policy Statement emphasizes the importance of teaching democratic values, but teachers face challenges such as biases in historical narratives and misinformation (Levy, Busey, Cuenca, Evans, Halvorsen, Ho, Kahne, Kissling, Lo, McAvoy and McGrew, 2023). The small group-class discussion method can be particularly effective in fostering critical thinking and building community within the classroom.

In South African primary schools, teachers often lack training and resources to facilitate discussions on sensitive topics, leading to discomfort and missed opportunities for critical engagement (Chavula, Zulu and Hurtig, 2022). Teachers frequently pretend they have no opinions on controversial topics, deteriorating the safe environment for discussion (Geller, 2020). In South African primary schools, teachers struggle with sensitive topics like race, religion, and politics, leading to discomfort and missed opportunities for critical engagement, limiting discussion and marginalized learners' experiences (Andrews, 2020; Francis, 2024). The research question posed to address the problem of this study is:

Are there cultural variations in the controversial topics taught by Grade 6 teachers in the primary school Social Sciences teachers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

For several reasons, international scholars argue that small-group class discussion is the preferred method for teaching controversial topics. First, the class discussion is conducive to an appreciative understanding of different positions in controversy and empathy with those who hold them (Warsah, et al, 2021). Controversial topics are challenging to understand through instructional or expository means, but they offer valuable opportunities for engaging students in discussion (Eli, 2021). Cultivating students' ability to engage in small-group class discussion is an important educational goal, and teaching controversial topics can help achieve this. Rozali and Lubis (2024) also note that educational institutions exist to prepare students for the future by bringing them up to speed on the epistemic, artistic, and technological achievements of their predecessors. Teachers are responsible for selecting and imparting the best thoughts and sayings in the world. Still, they have two options: use discussion-like interaction to lead students to knowledge or act as a neutral chair of discussion (Kitcher, 2022).

Yulisinta et al. (2023) further argue that teachers and students are full and equal participants in the communal discursive quest for understanding. However, Kauppi and Drerup (2021) argue that not all ethical questions should be presented as controversial, and many topics are not inherently related to viewpoint. Initiating students into the practice of discussion is a crucial educational goal, and embracing controversial topics is essential for fostering a more inclusive and meaningful learning environment.

African scholars (Williams, 2020; Edor, 2024) argue that discussing controversial topics is essential for promoting active participation in democratic citizenship roles and helping students internalize democratic values. However, Facal and Schugurensky (2022) state that many teachers avoid these discussions, and students rarely engage in them. Research shows that 36% of teachers are not well-prepared for handling controversial topics in classroom discussions, while only 12% are very well-prepared (Gindi, Sagee, and Gilat, 2021). Teachers often hesitate to discuss controversial topics due to inadequate teaching skills, instructional materials, emotional unease, and societal norms (So-San Lim, 2020). Social Sciences teachers hesitate to initiate discussions on controversial topics unless they are part of the curriculum.

Teachers view controversial topics as essential for good teaching, but do not include them without explicit prompts. Teachers may stipulate conditions before discussing controversial topics, such as feeling comfortable with the class, being from the same community, having experience, and feeling supported by parents, teachers, and administration (Gindi, Sagee, and Gilat, 2021). Controversial topics are included in the curriculum for three primary reasons: to prepare students for their roles as citizens in a pluralistic democracy, to improve critical thinking skills, and to enhance interpersonal communication skills (Solomon, 2021). Teachers play a crucial role in teaching controversial topics, and the revised Social Sciences curriculum emphasizes the importance of teachers helping students investigate controversial topics (Solomon, 2021). Teachers' knowledge, perception, and preferred approaches to teaching controversial topics influence their teaching methods. Kelly's four positions model helps understand teachers' opinions and practices. Amerstorfer and Freiin von Münster-Kistner (2021) emphasize that controversial topics are also related to students' lives and can affect them personally. Research also highlights that schools should provide a supportive environment for students to explore and discuss controversial topics in a positive and respectful manner (Iksal, Hayani, and Aslan, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

This study employed critical social theory. This theory aims to challenge societal assumptions and promote true democracy. Critical social theory originates from Habermas and Ardon of the Frankfurt school (Renault, 2020). This study uses critical social theory to address social injustices in South Africa. It encourages learners to engage with controversial topics, fostering critical consciousness and challenging oppressive structures. This approach promotes a dialogical approach, allowing learners to voice opinions and learn from diverse perspectives. Critical social theory enables learners to analyze socio-political contexts and connect their personal experiences with broader societal issues.

Critical social theory seeks to transform schools, institutions, and society by attending to the needs of individual learners who are oppressed (Giroux, 2024). It promotes democratic pedagogy in South African

schools and higher education, fostering critical consciousness, transforming society, and promoting learner involvement. Critical social theory promotes responsibility and activism by empowering learners to take ownership of their educational experiences. It supports culturally relevant teaching practices that value learners' backgrounds and experiences, engaging them in discussions about controversial topics that resonate with their lives and identities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed narrative analysis and qualitative research (Cantelmi, Di Gravio, & Patriarca, 2021) to understand the experiences and perspectives of six Social Sciences History teachers in Grade 6 primary schools regarding the teaching of controversial topics in the Intermediate Phase Social Sciences curriculum. Narrative analysis interprets teachers' narratives, while qualitative research explores their social reality, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations, providing deeper insights into experiences and contexts (Tekin, 2021). The study aimed to define and identify these controversial topics and explore cultural variations in their teaching.

Data collection instrument: Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection instrument (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This method ensured the reliability, trustworthiness, and transferability of the findings (Ahmed, 2024). The interviews were designed to elicit in-depth responses from teachers about their experiences and views on controversial topics. The interviews were tape-recorded, and field notes were taken during the sessions to capture additional insights.

Participants

The study purposively selected Intermediate Phase Social Science teachers to ensure that information-rich participants contributed to the research (Andrade, 2021). A total of six teachers participated in the study. The following table summarizes the key characteristics of the participants.

Key characteristics of participants

Semi-structured interviews	Age	Gender	Qualification	Teaching Grade	Teaching Experience
Teacher 1	38	Male	B.Ed. (Hons)	Gr. 6	6 years
Teacher 2	35	Male	B.Ed.	Gr. 6	8 years
Teacher 3	47	Female	B.Ed.	Gr. 6	25 years
Teacher 4	28	Male	Advanced Certificate	Gr. 6	5 years
Teacher 5	60	Female	B.Ed. (Hons)	Gr. 6	30 tyears

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Data was read, coded, and categorized into themes through the data analysis process. Member checking was employed to ensure trustworthiness in the study. Data were sent to the participants before it was used in the study to confirm accuracy (Yildiz, 2020). Secondary research questions served as the basis for the analysis. The manual categorization of the interview transcripts produced the themes shown below.

RESULTS

Cultural influences on teaching controversial topics

Following interviews with Teachers 2, 3, and 4, all agreed that different cultural contexts influence the teaching of controversial topics. According to Teacher 2, "Different cultures influence teaching controversial topics like tribal discrimination, gender roles, and religious diversity in South Africa. Incorporating cultural socialization and coping skills can effectively address these topics. Different

cultural backgrounds have different preconceptions and biases regarding gender roles and stereotypes". Teacher 2 emphasized the importance of cultural influences in addressing sensitive topics such as tribal discrimination, gender roles, and religious diversity. She suggested incorporating cultural socialization to create an inclusive learning environment. Teaching learners how to handle discomfort or conflict from discussions about discrimination can empower them to engage constructively. The researchers acknowledged the complexities of teaching sensitive topics and the role of culture in navigating these challenges in diverse classrooms.

Teacher 3 indicated, "There are definitely cultural variations in the controversial topics that Intermediate Phase Social Sciences teachers choose to teach. In South Africa, for instance, teachers in urban areas might focus on topics like immigration and xenophobia, reflecting the diverse populations and the complexities of urban life". Teacher 3 emphasized the significance of cultural context in education, particularly in urban areas such as South Africa. Migration tensions and economic competition in urban areas have exacerbated xenophobia, especially in job-scarce areas. Cultural backgrounds and experiences influence the choice of controversial topics, fostering critical thinking and engaging learners. Acknowledging cultural variations allows for a more inclusive classroom environment. Teachers who incorporate local topics into their curricula are more effective at fostering critical engagement among learners. Culturally relevant pedagogy validates learners' identities and encourages critical thinking about societal topics.

Cultural background

Teacher 4 boldly said, "Cultural background influences the prioritization of a certain controversial topic". For example, traditional practices and customs such as polygamy and female circumcision are more prominent. Additionally, language barriers can affect the choice of controversial topics as the topics require advanced literacy skills in English". Teacher 4 discussed the challenges faced by educators in addressing controversial topics in diverse classrooms, such as traditional practices, polygamy, and female circumcision. Cultural background plays a significant role in prioritizing controversial topics, as learners are more likely to connect with topics reflecting their cultural realities. Culturally responsive teaching practices can enhance learner engagement and promote critical discourse, leading to more meaningful learning experiences. Prioritizing topics that resonate with learners' cultural backgrounds creates an inclusive environment, validating their experiences and encouraging critical thinking. Language barriers can also impact discussions on controversial topics, so teachers should employ differentiated instructional strategies. Engaging with complex topics can also encourage language development.

Discrimination and its impact on education

Teacher 1 highlighted the negative impact of discrimination, particularly tribal and gender roles, on children's academic performance and attitudes. Such experiences can lead to negative attitudes towards school and lower academic motivation. Teacher 2 emphasized the importance of empathy in discussing sensitive topics, such as sexual orientation and racial discrimination, highlighting its role in fostering inclusive classroom environments and promoting social cohesion and individual development. Addressing these themes is crucial in educational contexts to combat systemic inequalities and harmful stereotypes.

Teacher 3 emphasized the importance of connecting historical contexts to current societal topics, fostering critical thinking, and empowering learners to analyze how historical events shape contemporary attitudes towards race and belonging. Teacher 4 discussed teaching local History, highlighting the complexities of addressing social constructs like race, gender, and class. This approach encourages critical engagement with dominant narratives, promoting informed citizenship. Teacher 5 highlights the impact of social media on gender perceptions, highlighting the negative impact of exposure to sexism and gender stereotypes on self-esteem among young learners. This method enhances critical thinking skills and prepares learners to navigate complex social landscapes that are increasingly influenced by digital media.

Cultural Contexts in Controversial Education

The research findings of teachers on cultural influences in education, particularly regarding controversial topics such as tribal discrimination, gender roles, and religious diversity, align with existing literature. Teacher 2 emphasized the importance of cultural socialization in creating inclusive learning environments, highlighting the potential for tension with traditional practices. Teacher 3 highlighted the significance of cultural context, particularly in urban settings like South Africa, in addressing xenophobia

and migration tensions. Acknowledging cultural variations fosters a more inclusive classroom environment, but it may also challenge educators who are accustomed to a one-size-fits-all curriculum. The need for culturally relevant pedagogy is critical, but its implementation can be complex due to varying levels of teacher preparedness.

Teacher 4 discussed the challenges of addressing controversial topics, highlighting the importance of cultural backgrounds in prioritizing discussions. Culturally responsive teaching practices can improve learner engagement and promote critical discourse. However, discomfort can hinder effective teaching and dialogue. Language barriers also complicate the situation, as language proficiency often affects learners' participation in discussions, highlighting the need for differentiated instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learners effectively. Teacher 4 also highlighted the challenge of division among learners when discussing controversial topics, as some learners sought to downplay certain topics, while others aimed to highlight and emphasize the controversy in the small-group class discussion.

DISCUSSION

The importance of cultural identities in influencing pedagogical decisions was highlighted by Teachers 2 and 3, particularly when teaching contentious subjects such as gender roles and tribal discrimination. According to research, culturally responsive teaching methods promote critical conversations and enhance student participation (Min and Orosco, 2024). In problematic subjects, Teacher 3 draws attention to cultural differences, especially in South Africa's cities where xenophobia and immigration are common. Topics like female circumcision and polygamy are given a lower priority as a result of Teacher 4's remarks on ethnic backgrounds. Research indicates that prioritizing subjects representing students' cultural realities improves participation and encourages critical conversations about social norms (Schlund, Jagers, and Schlinger, 2020). Selecting a topic is also impacted by language obstacles, which calls for diverse teaching methods. The complications of teaching controversial topics in various contexts are not entirely considered by urban experiences, which influence topic choices (Trahar, Timmis, Lucas, and Naidoo, 2020).

The detrimental impacts of discrimination on children's attitudes and academic performance were emphasized by Teacher 1, especially in relation to gender roles and tribal identity. This finding is consistent with research indicating that encounters with discrimination may lead to lower academic motivation and unfavorable attitudes toward education (Verkuyten, Thijs, and Gharaei, 2019; Barton and Ho, 2020). The need for instructors to address structural disparities in their instruction is further supported by research indicating that these topics can substantially impact student engagement and achievement (Kuchynka, Eaton, and Rivera, 2022).

The need for empathy in addressing controversial topics like racial discrimination and sexual orientation was underlined by Teacher 2. Studies that emphasize compassionate teaching methods to create inclusive classrooms and foster social cohesiveness provide support for this viewpoint (Ghosh, 2021; Comaskey and Eith, 2023). As a recurring theme in educational research on contentious topics, empathy is essential for overcoming damaging preconceptions and systematic injustices (Smagorinsky, 2024). Research has shown that historical knowledge is crucial for developing critical thinking in learners (Lee and Camicia, 2023; Joya Misra, Curington, and Green, 2024), a finding supported by Teacher 3's emphasis on relating historical settings to current social issues. According to research, learners who comprehend historical events are better equipped to analyze contemporary views on race and belonging, thereby fostering informed citizenship (Hunduma and Mekuria, 2024).

Teacher 4 discussed the complexities of teaching local History and addressing social constructs like race, gender, and class. This approach aligns with research advocating critical engagement with dominant narratives to promote informed citizenship (Elmersjö and Persson, 2023). Studies suggest that addressing these constructs helps learners navigate societal complexities and develop critical thinking skills (Dill and Zambrana, 2020; Howard, 2019; Bearman and Ajjawi, 2023). Teacher 5 highlighted the impact of social media on gender perceptions and its adverse effects on young learners' self-esteem. This insight corresponds with existing research that examines how exposure to sexism and gender stereotypes in digital media influences youth identity formation (Ward and Grower, 2020). The emphasis on preparing learners to navigate complex social landscapes is echoed in the literature that advocates for critical media literacy education (Nichols and LeBlanc, 2021).

While Teachers 1 through 5 emphasized the importance of addressing controversial topics, existing research indicates that many teachers often avoid these discussions due to various constraints. Linowes et al. (2019) note that teachers may lack knowledge or confidence in teaching controversial subjects or fear backlash from learners or parents. This suggests that while the interviewed teachers acknowledge the importance of these discussions, practical challenges may hinder their implementation. Teacher 3's assertion regarding the significance of cultural context in urban settings may overlook broader societal pressures influencing topic selection. Research indicates that teachers often prioritize different topics based on institutional policies rather than solely on cultural context (Alam and Mohanty, 2023), suggesting that although cultural factors are important, they may not be the sole explanation for the difficulties of teaching contentious subjects in various contexts. Language barriers were mentioned by Teacher 4 as a significant obstacle to discussing contentious subjects. Although this supports some findings about differentiated instruction (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018), previous research has highlighted that teachers' hesitation to discuss contentious topics frequently results from worries about student responses and institutional regulations rather than language proficiency alone (Gamuzza, Leonora, Mavica, and Scieri, 2023). This implies that the motivations for avoiding contentious subjects can be more complex than the interview findings suggest.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that discrimination, particularly tribal discrimination and gender roles, can lead to adverse educational outcomes, such as negative attitudes, lower academic motivation, and poorer performance. Empathy is essential for creating inclusive classroom environments and fostering social cohesion. Cultural context and critical engagement are essential for developing informed citizens who can advocate for social justice. Culturally responsive teaching, incorporating learners' cultural backgrounds into curricula, enhances learner engagement and promotes critical discourse. However, implementing these practices may be challenging due to discomfort with sensitive topics or a lack of training in cultural competency. Language barriers and social media's influence on gender perceptions are also important considerations. Disagreements with traditional educational practices include resistance to culturally responsive teaching, a one-size-fits-all curriculum, and challenges to language proficiency. Addressing these topics is crucial for fostering critical awareness and preparing learners to navigate complex social landscapes influenced by digital media.

The findings of this study have global implications for the teaching of controversial topics; teachers should approach these topics through small-group class discussions rather than direct instruction.

This study recommends that teachers incorporate historical contexts into lessons to empower learners to analyze how historical events shape contemporary attitudes towards race and belonging. Moreover, it suggests that curriculum development should include resources highlighting historical narratives relevant to learners' lives. Differentiated instructional strategies, professional development opportunities, and a safe classroom environment are essential for teaching controversial topics. Activities such as team-building exercises and discussions about digital literacy can foster positive relationships and promote critical thinking. Teachers can prioritize critical engagement with social constructs to promote informed citizenship and help learners navigate the complexities of society.

The study further recommends that teachers receive professional development to address controversial classroom topics. Training programs can boost confidence and manage potential backlash. A supportive environment, respectful discussions, and differentiated instructional strategies can accommodate diverse learners. Partnering with local organizations can enhance understanding of local History and social topics.

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