



Teaching Controversial Issues: Helping Social Studies and Civic Education Teachers Navigate the Challenges in the Classroom

Njoku Chimezie (PhD)

Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt

***Corresponding Author:** Njoku Chimezie (PhD), Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt

Abstract: The paper tried to provide Social Studies teachers with resources and pedagogical tools that can help them feel more prepared to address controversial issues in the classroom. It started by helping the teachers understand why it is important to discuss controversial issues with their students. The writer looked at the crucial role education plays in national development then looked at how discussion of controversial issues can be deployed more widely in a manner that every student will have access to useful and constructive discussions that affect our society. Then she focused on how Social Studies teachers can be helped to navigate the challenges associated with teaching controversial issues in their classrooms. The paper adopted the Strategies suggested by Pace (2015). These were analyzed and discussed under five sub headings. The opinion of the writer is that Teaching controversial issues in the classroom especially in the Nigeria's classroom is now more critical and urgent than ever because we are faced with a lot of issues and crisis and if urgent steps are not taken, we will encounter more dangerous crises. Researches have shown that teaching controversy is vital for the development of democratic civic citizens and most times our teachers avoid teaching them in our schools, we must find ways to help, prepare, and motivate them to take up this vital but challenging work. The writer concluded by suggesting among other things that the teacher educators' approaches to preparing our student teachers for teaching controversial issues in civics and Social Studies must be reviewed.

Keywords: Controversial issues, Teachers, Skills, challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' vital role is to help students navigate their complex world, and the classrooms should be places where students become more enlightened about controversial issues to be able to consider different viewpoints. It is very important for students to be able to interact with peers who hold views that are different from theirs, this will enable them understand other people's positions which will lead them to practice civil discourse skills.

Because our world today is increasingly politicized and polarized, many teachers are reluctant to teach controversial issues in their classrooms. Some who want to employ conversations about controversial issues may have anxiety over animosity or bickering or even over losing control of their classrooms. Others may fear about parents and students and school administrator's feedback that may not be favorable, that may be interpreted as they are seeking to indoctrinate students.

Teaching controversial issues is both important and problematic in our world today. Many teachers also fear that these issues may start classroom rivalry, disagreement, or even cause harm to students. But it is still achievable to construct teaching and learning in ways that students will be helped to acquire critical thinking and civil discourse skills.

Earlier research like, Anker & von der Lippe, (2018); Pollak, Segal, Lefstein, & Meshulam, (2018) has shown that teachers find teaching controversial issues in their classrooms challenging and because of that sometimes avoid them. The importance of schools as well as teachers dealing with these issues is being stressed, especially recently. An example is, the Council of Europe created a professional development programme for teachers to 'support and promote the teaching of controversial issues in schools in Europe' (Council of Europe, 2015). Teaching for Democracy Alliance (TFDA) co created a

2018 toolkit to help teachers champion strong civic-learning experiences for all students. The toolkit presents concrete ways for schools to assess themselves which of their practices are compatible with research-based best practices to advance civic learning. It is designed as a dialogue tool for teachers, school administrators, parents, and other people who have interest in advancing civic education of students in their environment.

The TFDA toolkit crucial role is to help teachers and stakeholders have more confidence when engaging in controversial-issues discussions and eventually to support student's civic learning and engagement in ways that advance creative contributions to the society.

Dealing with controversial issues in class can be highly emotional, especially when they involve values, beliefs, and ethical principles. Controversies about such issues should not be avoided rather, teachers and students must understand that it is the value of the argument that is vital. It is only when the argument is creative and the environment is non-threatening that rigorous debate is promoted and deeper understanding of the issue is achieved.

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), Social Studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence, according to them, the primary purpose of social studies is to equip young people with the skills that will enable them develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions that will benefit the society as citizens of a culturally diverse and democratic society in a free world.

The above definition is usually looked at from two sides; the subject matter (curriculum) and the purpose. The subject matter which is what is being taught includes what Hess (2009) explained as the following; the facts (information or data), skills, issues, ideas, (controversial issues), and methods of inquiry drawn from the seven social sciences: history, geography, civics, government/political science, economics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. These fields of study serve as assets. Social Studies curriculum taps on them, infusing and integrating them with yet other ingredients, students' cultural experiences and the needs of the society.

The second side of the definition; the purpose, is about civic competence or democratic citizenship, which is the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in a free world. Civic competence is the willingness to assume citizenship obligations.

In summary therefore It can be deduced from the above explanation that, Social Studies education has two important goals: social understanding (knowledge of human societies) and civic proficiency (democratic citizenship). Democracy is not just a political system but a way of life. It is the ability to live with everybody, friends, family, and strangers. When there is no democracy there is always a problem and it is the main motive behind social movements that try very hard to close the gap between the real and the model. Hence, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his 1963 March on Washington address demanded for the fulfilment of democracy instead of an alternative to democracy. In the same manner, on October 11 2021, the Nigerian youths took to the streets of Nigeria demanding for this democracy fulfilment ("END SARS" movement)

What role should Social Studies play in helping students deal with controversial issues. This paper aims to provide Social Studies teachers with resources and pedagogical tools so they can feel more prepared to address controversial issues in the classroom. It begins with helping the teachers understand why it is important to teach controversial issues to their students.

2. WHAT ARE CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

Cambridge dictionary defined controversy as 'causing disagreement or discussion, causing or likely to cause disagreement.' Controversial issue therefore can be said to be any public issue that frustrates a simple solution and may dispute passionately held beliefs or interests. Mostly, controversies arise when conflicting views on a social problem are protected or guarded.

There are different types of controversies; behavioral, political, epistemic, and scientific. Behavioral controversies are controversies that arise as a result of conflicts among groups of people, when people disagree and argue on issues. This type of controversy can occur even though there are evidence that the defended positions can be wrong, this usually happens when people are not adequately informed.

Political type of controversy can be explained using Hand's (2007; 2008) contrast between private values, which are individual and embodied, and public values which are foundational moral values on which governments in progressive democratic states strategize and implement policy. Epistemic controversy which is the third type of controversy occurs when each of the opposing views can be defended through realistic reasoning, while Scientific controversies occurs over correct interpretation of conflicting findings.

3. TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

In this 21st century a greater proportion of youth get their news online than any other age group, and they use social media more than members of other age groups. Because they get their news online, they usually choose media outlets that are ideologically similar and barely read news from the opposing side. The consequence is that these individuals are barely exposed to moderate viewpoints. The effect of online interactions in these reverberation chambers reflects the research showing how offline deliberation with like-minded individuals produces further polarization. The aftermath of online interactions with like-minded individuals is, it will produce cloistered communities in which individuals cleave towards the prevailing community narrative.

A very good civic skill is the ability to embrace creative disagreements based on genuine consideration of fact models, and on the opinions that emerge from these realities, these often leads to concession or accommodation. In these communications, individuals with differing views have conversations about their own positions with the goal of understanding the other's position and increasing tolerance. Cross-cutting discussions of contemporary controversial issues are important in helping students understand, instead of criticizing people with different views.

Helping students engage in controversial-issues discussions in schools gives them opportunity to a powerful counterbalance to the numerous negative political discourses that young people experience. When they engage in more discussions of controversial issues, they have high level of civic knowledge.

It is crucial to help young people cultivate the habit of engaging in a constructive, crisscross discussions about contemporary social issues during their secondary school years before their political identities become firmly established and rooted to alternative views. If they do not develop the required skills for creative discussions of controversial issues, the consequences might even lead them to avoid politics entirely. They will not be willing to participate in even electing their leaders.

Nigerian youths are reluctant to engage in normal and legitimate political conflict. They have this reluctance to conflict because they lack experience engaging with people with whom they disagree, a growing number of them are less likely to participate in the politics. People in general become entrenched in ethnic politics and embrace a fact-pattern that is in conformity with a pre-existing view. They are then more likely to express negative emotions when discussing issues.

Teaching controversial issues relates specifically to the following National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) theme: culture; time, continuity, and change; civic ideals and practices; power, authority and governance and Nigeria Social Studies Curriculum (NSSC) themes: culture; traditional practices; Social conflicts;

When teachers teach about controversial issues, students learn about topics that are important to their lives, and it also helps them expand their understanding of complicated issues, and seek diverse views. Students also have opportunities to share ideas, and meaningful conversation with their peers, where everybody's viewpoints are being respected. Instilling in them knowledge and civil discourse skills are crucial for effective participation in our democracy.

Nigeria is a society where our classrooms are increasingly culturally diverse, different ethnic groups and religion, so public debate are becoming more antithetical, it is vital therefore that teachers develop instructive knowledge about ways to teach and learn controversial societal issues. Democratic self-government requires frequent deliberations about controversial issues. Discussions of controversial societal issues and the health of democracy are intrinsically connected, for our students to become informed and committed citizens, we must teach them the skills of democracy by practicing the skills of discussing controversial issues in the classroom. Controversy is a useful and crucial tool to promote learning.

Diana Hess (2009) summarized the importance of teaching current controversial issues in our classrooms as;

- It is authentic and relevant
- It improves sense of political efficacy
- It enhances critical thinking skills
- It increases students' comfort with conflict that exists in the world outside of classroom
- It helps students develop political tolerance
- It results in student's motivation.
- It helps students gain greater knowledge of the content.

With the numerous benefits of discussing controversial societal issues in our classrooms, why then are teachers most times reluctant to incorporate them in their classrooms. The increase in polarization in Nigerian today make teachers fear criticism from parents when they incorporate anything that can be viewed as 'political', 'ethnic' or 'religious' bias into their teaching. Because of this, many teachers choose to avoid talking about controversial issues altogether because they fear that doing so will let loose opposition that could affect their career and livelihood.

How can we deploy the discussion of controversial issues more widely in a manner that every student will have access to useful and constructive discussions about belligerent topics that affect our society. How can Social Studies teachers be helped to navigate the challenges associated with teaching controversial issues in their classrooms.

4. HELPING SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS MANEUVER CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THEIR CLASSROOMS

The need to integrate controversial issue discussions in the Social Studies classroom in Nigeria's secondary schools has become even more pressing now than ever as more young people rely more on social media for information making it rare for them to have opportunities for this foundational means of democratic engagement.

Pace (2015) noted that controversial issues have to do with open questions that are vital in terms of society or its past on which it is necessary to explore different perspective that have genuine sources of information. She went further to explain that being able to formulate these types of questions and helping students navigate through open and impartial discussions requires experienced teachers.

In other to help teachers navigate these challenges, Pace (2015) in her book provided some instructional resources, strategies, and practices teachers can adopt to help them teach controversial issues in their classrooms. These are discussed under five sub headings below;

4.1. Understand Your Students and the Community

Here she is of the opinion that It is important for teachers to develop the culture of trust and respect with their students, according to her, when the students have supportive environment, it provides a foundation for a classroom where they feel they can express themselves, discuss and explore ideas.

Based on established research, she advocates teachers use preliminary surveys to get to know student's opinions on issues and the issues they are most interested to help them prepare for discussions and know what expressions and views to bring into the conversation.

4.2. Conspicuous Communication

She said that teachers should be plain about their motive for teaching a particular issue and explain to the students the approach and the reasons for a particular approach. Pace emphasized that teachers should bear in mind that the goal is not to get students to adopt a particular viewpoint but to get them to think critically. Parents and the school administrators should also be carried along, in other words awareness is key, let them have an awareness of what's going on. If there is an awareness and teachers are transparent about the why and how they are teaching a particular controversial issue and keep the lines of communication open, people will feel less threatened and less likely to react negatively about what is going on in the classroom.

4.3. Selection of Issues Thoughtfully

Pace maintained that teachers should select their topics carefully and that they must be related to the curriculum. He reiterated that teachers should understand that controversial issues are different from controversial topics. The controversial issues discussions should be drawn from valid information sources, and should be framed as open questions. In addition, he advised that the teachers should not lead the most charged discussions but consciously build up student capacity for these issues as the year advances.

4.4. Use of Appropriate Strategies

The teachers should guide the discussions by making use of appropriate approaches. Remember you are the teacher, so try to consider your role as a teacher says Pace. she asked a question which every teacher should try to answer, "will a teacher step in to play devil's advocate if the class is showing signs of groupthink or jump in as an ally"? Pace then suggested the following strategies; a. teachers should not disclose their own viewpoint, b. they should make sure students pay attention to one another, c. they should consider the format of the discussion, and emphasized that discussion formats, thinking routines, and learning strategies help specify structure so that conversations and discussions do not derail too far off the rails, teachers should make sure they make use of reliable sources, and consider different viewpoints, opinions, and ideas. She then suggested the following formats below as useful formats that teachers can incorporate into their teaching;

a. Structured Academic

In this format, students take turns in trying to understand different perspectives presented by sources before coming to a concession or consent.

b. Town Hall Meeting

Students are put into groups and the groups of students present differing opinions and then entertain questions before reflecting on their own position.

c. Walking Debates

Students in this type of format take position physically whether they agree or disagree with a particular statement before discussing on the issue.

4.5. Room for Reflection

Pace finally advised that teachers must try to leave time, either at the end of the class or at the end of the week, for students to address emotions, reflect, and interrogate. This is better done using writing as a mechanism for individual mirror. This is valuable for both the teachers and the students. It is beneficial for teachers to engage their colleagues they can process and reflect with. In addition, she cautioned that teachers should pay attention to their limitations, blind spots, or their preconceived opinions. Teachers should consciously seek for professional development to help them with additional support that will help them get more skills she admonished.

5. CONCLUSION

Teaching controversial issues in the classroom especially in the Nigeria's classroom is now more crucial and urgent than ever. In Nigeria today we are dealing with a lot of issues and crises, our value system is badly damaged, we have issues of religious intolerance, ethnicity is dividing us instead of uniting and the gap is widening each day, if urgent steps are not taken, we will encounter more dangerous crises. Researches have shown that teaching controversy is vital for the development of democratic civic citizens. But most times our teachers avoid teaching them in our schools. The question that needs answer is how can we then help, prepare, and motivate our teachers to take up this vital but challenging work? The teacher educators' approaches to preparing our student teachers for teaching controversial issues in civics and Social Studies must be reviewed. Also, the reviews should include their curriculum review that will trace the student teachers' learning from coursework to their teaching practice placements and, their actual teaching placement where they are supposed to put what they have learned into practice. This will help have knowledge of their challenges, evaluate the factors that promoted their efforts to teach controversial issues and those that hindered them, to help us find the way forward.

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AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Chimezie Njoku, is an Associate Professor of Social Studies (Social Capital and Value Development) in the Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. She is an innovative teaching professional with interest in coaching and mentoring students to achieve their potentials. I teach students how to integrate classroom teaching with real world situations (Innovations in Teaching and learning). I love providing mentoring services to students, young researchers and colleagues through teaching, co-authorship and other collaborative activities.

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